

# Correspondence

FDR, U.S. Entry into World War II, and  
Selection Effects Theory

Dan Reiter

John M. Schuessler

*To the Editors (Dan Reiter writes):*

In "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," John Schuessler argues that in 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt took actions against Germany and Japan to increase the likelihood that the United States would enter World War II, despite public hesitance to do so.<sup>1</sup> Schuessler writes, "The 'undeclared war' in the Atlantic and the oil embargo on Japan should be understood as designed, at least in part, to invite an 'incident' that could be used to justify hostilities" (p. 145). The broader implication is that if elected leaders can manipulate their countries into war despite public hesitation, then public opinion does not affect democratic foreign policy choices. More specifically, the ability of elected leaders to circumvent public opinion would damage the selection effects explanation of why democracies win their wars. The selection effects argument, which Allan Stam and I have made, claims that democracies win the wars they initiate because public opinion constrains them to initiate only those wars they are highly confident they will go on to win, and the marketplace of ideas better informs their policy choices.<sup>2</sup>

In this letter, I make three main points. First, even if one concedes the entirety of Schuessler's historical interpretation, the United States in World War II is not a case of a democracy initiating a war it went on to lose, and therefore not evidence against the proposition that democracies are likely to win the wars they initiate. Second, the evidence does not clearly indicate that Roosevelt sought to provoke war, and there is evidence to the contrary. Third, it is hard to think of a better demonstration of selection effects theory than Roosevelt's actions in 1941. He was deeply aware of public opinion and recognized that major foreign policy actions must be popular. Despite his grave concern about the imperative of U.S. aid to Britain, Roosevelt was careful not to get ahead of public opinion, taking only those actions the public supported and no more. He worked within the marketplace of ideas to influence public opinion through persuasion and public speeches. His public claims about the seriousness of the Nazi and Japanese threat and the importance that the Soviet Union and Britain not lose the war reflected his genuine beliefs, and in hindsight appear to be right. The marketplace of

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1. John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 133–165. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

ideas corrected his largest deviation from the facts, his biased portrayal of the Greer incident.

Schuessler's empirical argument does not provide evidence against selection effects theory. His argument would damage the theory if Roosevelt duped the public into supporting the initiation of a war that the United States went on to lose, but the United States defeated the Axis. And if one holds that war with Japan and Germany was avoidable and occurred because of U.S. provocation, then this is a case of a democracy choosing war and winning, the prediction of selection effects theory.

Some scholars might claim that the very attempt to deceive is evidence against selection effects theory. The theoretical assumption that elected leaders wish to manipulate public opinion to give them more foreign policy latitude is, however, not inconsistent with selection effects theory. Elected leaders pay attention to public opinion not because they share a normative commitment to democratic processes, but because they worry about the electoral consequences of unpopular policies. Stam and I argued that elected leaders engage in actions inconsistent with normative visions of democratic foreign policymaking, such as covertly undermining elected governments.<sup>3</sup> Credibly blaming the other side for initiation of the war certainly affects public opinion. I noted fifteen years ago in this journal that one reason preemptive wars are so rare is that leaders understand the political advantages of being attacked rather than of attacking.<sup>4</sup>

The historical record indicates that public opinion is not endogenous to the machinations of elected leaders. The ability of elected leaders to form public opinion is highly limited, and the constraint of public opinion dissuades them from initiating wars they will lose. The quantitative evidence demonstrating different implications of the assumption that public opinion constrains the foreign policy of elected leaders, including that democratic initiators are especially likely to win their wars, is deep, broad, and compelling. Domestic political institutions affect international crisis behavior, war initiation, war duration, war outcome, and the postwar fates of leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Consider Schuessler's Germany case. Schuessler frets that Roosevelt "could have been more forthcoming" that U.S. actions before Pearl Harbor to aid Britain, including the destroyers-for-bases and lend-lease programs, risked war with Germany and Japan (p. 154). Schuessler notes that as late as December 1940, Roosevelt pledged to keep the United States out of war. Yet Roosevelt's pre-Pearl Harbor speeches were quite bellicose, focusing on the threat posed by the Axis to the United States and the need for action. They did not reassure Americans of the protection of an umbrella of neutrality. For example, in a speech on March 15, 1941, Roosevelt declared that Nazi Germany was "far worse" than the autocratic Prussian government the United States fought in World War I. The president stated, "They [Nazi Germany] openly seek the destruction of all elective systems of government on every continent—including our own."<sup>6</sup>

More important, Roosevelt addressed this question of U.S. involvement in the war

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3. *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

4. Dan Reiter, "Exploding the Powder Keg Myth: Preemptive Wars Almost Never Happen," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 5–34.

5. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, "Correspondence: Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 194–204.

6. See Franklin D. Roosevelt, "On Lend Lease (March 15, 1941)," Presidential Speech Archive, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3322>.

directly. He argued that economic assistance to the Allies would decrease the risks of U.S. involvement in the war not because such actions were risk free, but because failure to support the Allies would ensure Axis victory in Europe. This would make U.S. involvement in the war inevitable, because it would encourage German aggression in the Western Hemisphere and against the United States itself. In his December 1940 fireside chat, Roosevelt said, "Thinking in terms of today and tomorrow, I make the direct statement to the American people that there is far less chance of the United States getting into war if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis than if we acquiesce in their defeat, submit tamely to an Axis victory, and wait our turn to be the object of attack in another war later on." Further, Roosevelt shied away from offering assurances that aid to Britain was without risks: "If we are to be completely honest with ourselves, we must admit that there is risk in any course we may take."<sup>7</sup>

Schuessler expresses concerns about secret Anglo-American war planning. Of course, such war planning reflected the realistic recognition that U.S. entry into the war against the Axis was a growing likelihood, the secrecy of such planning was demanded by obvious security considerations, and such war planning had no effect on increasing the likelihood of U.S. participation in war.

Schuessler next discusses the growing belligerency of U.S. maritime policy in the Atlantic in 1941, arguing that Roosevelt hoped to cause a naval incident that might increase public support for war. Schuessler exaggerates Roosevelt's desire to create such incidents. Indeed, the U.S. Navy used intercepted German communications to avoid rather than create naval incidents.<sup>8</sup> Roosevelt averted a major incident when, on June 11, a German submarine sank the *Robin Moor*, an American freighter, in a non-war zone. Although Roosevelt could have used this episode to justify an expansion of the U.S. presence in the Atlantic, he elected not to call this a direct attack on the United States or start a policy of escorting U.S. commercial vessels.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless, the aggressive U.S. naval stance in the Atlantic that Roosevelt eventually embraced was popular, meaning he was not (secretly) engaging in unpopular policies intended to drag an unwilling nation into war. Schuessler argues that Roosevelt hoped that the *Greer* incident in September 1941 would increase U.S. support for war, and that Roosevelt distorted the details to make Germany look more guilty of aggression. Certainly, the public supported Roosevelt's reaction to the *Greer* incident, as his new "shoot on sight" policy against all German and Italian shipping enjoyed 62 percent approval.<sup>10</sup> When Senate isolationists publicly exposed Roosevelt's distortions, however, there was no congressional or public backlash against Roosevelt or the shoot-on-sight policy.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Schuessler himself notes that the *Greer* incident "was hardly the *casus belli* that FDR had promised Churchill in August. As subsequent events made clear, naval skirmishes would not suffice to generate the kind of consensus for war that the president wanted" (p. 157).

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7. Ibid.

8. Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. xix

9. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 268.

10. Ibid., p. 288.

11. Ibid.

The Japan case is more complex. Schuessler argues that Roosevelt took actions in 1941, especially the July imposition of oil sanctions, that he knew would cause Japan to attack. Schuessler cites an essay by Marc Trachtenberg, who makes a similar argument. There is not space to give Trachtenberg's argument fair treatment, but his views have been critiqued by other historians, and Trachtenberg himself concedes regarding his own interpretation that "few historians would go that far."<sup>12</sup>

Roosevelt certainly recognized that in the event of war, it would be easier to rally public support if Japan attacked first, but Schuessler presents no evidence that the president actually wanted to cause a Japanese attack, conceding that his own evidence on Roosevelt's motives is "circumstantial" (p. 145). Schuessler asserts that "Roosevelt himself understood that an embargo could well lead to a Japanese attack," citing Robert Dallek's book (p. 159). On the pages cited by Schuessler, however, Dallek paints a far different picture of Roosevelt, remarking: "In June and July, despite his undiminished desire to avoid greater involvement in the Pacific, pressures beyond his control pushed Roosevelt toward a confrontation with Japan. . . . Though giving [his cabinet] 'quite a lecture' [on July 18] against a total oil embargo, which would be a goad to war in the Pacific, he agreed to [sanctions] . . . Roosevelt still had no intention of closing off all oil to Japan."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Roosevelt hoped that the sanctions would coerce Japan into curbing its belligerent moves, specifically deterring a Japanese attack on Soviet forces or in Southeast Asia and avert war with the United States. Waldo Heinrichs expressed it this way: "The central dynamic of [Roosevelt's] policies was the conviction that the survival of the Soviet Union was essential for the defeat of Germany and that the defeat of Germany was essential for American security. This more than any other concern, to his mind, required the immobilization of Japan."<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Roosevelt tried to make U.S. actions toward Japan less provocative. In the July 18 debate on oil sanctions, Roosevelt advocated reducing rather than ending oil exports to Japan, stating that he believed that "to cut off oil altogether at this time would probably precipitate an outbreak of war in the Pacific and endanger British communications with Australia and New Zealand."<sup>15</sup> About a week later, Roosevelt made the same point in a cabinet meeting, indicating that he "was still unwilling to draw the noose tight. He thought that it might be better to slip the noose around Japan's neck and give it a jerk now and then."<sup>16</sup> Heinrichs notes that "there were reasons for believing that an embargo might not precipitate a Japanese attack southward. [Maxwell] Hamilton [chief of the division of Far Eastern Affairs] pointed out on July 31 that Japan was weaker economically and now open to attack from all sides. . . . Roosevelt wired

12. Patrick Finney, ed., "Roundtable Review, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*," article review of "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *H-Diplo Roundtables*, Vol. 8, No. 16 (December 2007), pp. 1–35; and Marc Trachtenberg, "H-Diplo ISSF Article Review," No. 3 (April 2010), p. 4.

13. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 273–274.

14. Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 179.

15. Quoted in Irvine H. Anderson Jr., *The Standard-Vacuum Oil Company and United States East Asian Policy, 1933–1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 175.

16. Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, Vol. 3: *The Lowering of the Clouds, 1939–1941* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 588.

[British Prime Minister Winston] Churchill in satisfaction that their concurrent action seemed to be 'bearing fruit'. . . . A policy of maximizing Japanese uncertainty and insecurity seemed to be having a useful effect."<sup>17</sup> Roosevelt reiterated his preference for avoiding a severe provocation of Japan in his August meeting with Churchill at Argentia. Indeed, only with great reluctance did he agree to give Japan a severe warning. And upon returning to Washington, he backtracked and watered down the language of the message to Japan, to reduce the provocative effects.<sup>18</sup>

Schuessler states that Roosevelt's policy of provoking Japan into war was inconsistent with the U.S. policy of defeating Germany first before turning to Asia. Yet it was this very Germany-first orientation that both encouraged the oil sanctions—because the sanctions might prevent a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union, which in turn would help the Soviets survive the German invasion—and made Roosevelt prefer delaying U.S. entry into war in the Pacific to better deal with the German threat. On the latter point, he told Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes on July 1, "[I]t is terribly important for the control of the Atlantic for us to help keep peace in the Pacific. I simply have not got enough Navy to go round—and every little episode in the Pacific means fewer ships in the Atlantic."<sup>19</sup> Schuessler also quotes Mark Stoler's remark that "from a military perspective the president and the State Department seemed to be insanelly willing to provoke a second war in the Pacific," implying that the sanctions policy did not accord with U.S. military thinking at the time (p. 160). In his next paragraph, however, Stoler notes that the U.S. Army leadership supported the hard line on Japan, to prevent a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the oil embargo, there is the question of U.S. diplomacy with Japan in the fall of 1941. Schuessler argues that, to provoke Japan to attack, Roosevelt refused to discuss Japanese peace overtures. Schuessler's portrayal of Roosevelt's stonewalling in the fall of 1941 is exaggerated and undersupported. Schuessler cites a book by Paul Schroeder, and the critical paragraph in Schuessler's argument (p. 160) cites two pages in Schroeder's book that discuss only the role of the Tripartite Pact in linking Germany and Japan, not any alleged stonewalling by Roosevelt.<sup>21</sup> Schuessler writes that Roosevelt imposed prohibitive conditions on a possible meeting with Prince Konoe. However, Roosevelt himself was "prepared, even eager, to go," but the idea of the meeting died because of Secretary of State Cordell Hull's vehement opposition and demand for strict conditions.<sup>22</sup> It is also unclear whether negotiations would have succeeded with greater U.S. concessions, as Japan's true interest in peace was doubtful. In September Japan demanded U.S. trade concessions in East Asia, a commitment to halt all U.S. military preparations in East Asia, and the restoration of trade with Japan be-

17. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 142.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 154; and David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–1941: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 239.

19. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes*, Vol. 3, p. 567.

20. Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 58.

21. See Paul W. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 100–101, quoted in Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend," p. 160 n. 125.

22. Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 159–161.

fore Japan withdrew from Indochina or reached a peace agreement with China.<sup>23</sup> In mid-November Roosevelt circulated a peace plan proposal within the U.S. government and among U.S. allies that included a six-month agreement to freeze arms on both sides and permit Sino-Japanese peace talks.<sup>24</sup>

Schuessler notes that by the end of November Roosevelt had abandoned the idea of a temporary peace plan. This decision, however, came about not because of a desire to provoke the Japanese to attack first, but for other reasons, including recognition that the plan would certainly be rejected (especially given the November 22 Japanese message that Japan would not extend a deadline for successful negotiations past November 29), concern that such an agreement would deliver a severe blow to Chinese morale and resistance, and distrust that the Japanese would adhere to an agreement, as Roosevelt interpreted news of Japanese troop movements as evidence that Japan was negotiating in bad faith.<sup>25</sup> Schuessler quotes Harry Hopkins's early 1942 description of Roosevelt's "relief" that Japan attacked first, but Hopkins also reports that on December 7 Roosevelt privately "discussed at some length his efforts to keep the country out of the war and his earnest desire to complete his administration without war."<sup>26</sup>

Beyond whether or not Roosevelt sought war, his hard-line policy against Japan was popular. He was not out of step with public opinion by engaging in potentially provocative foreign policies, and therefore not engaged in deception. A State Department study in mid-1941 found that American editorials were presenting an "almost unanimous and very insistent demand for a firmer stand in the Far East."<sup>27</sup> A December 5 poll indicated that 69 percent of respondents supported U.S. efforts to prevent Japan from becoming more powerful, even if it meant risking war.<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt did not drag the United States into World War II through deception or any other means. Consistent with selection effect theory, Roosevelt's foreign policy was in step with, constrained by, and not manipulative of public opinion.

—Dan Reiter  
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### John M. Schuessler Replies:

I would like to thank Dan Reiter for his spirited rebuttal of my article.<sup>1</sup> Reiter makes three points in his letter. First, even if one accepts my rendering of the World War II case, this does not undermine the selection effects argument. Second, my reading of the

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23. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 187. One slight softening of the Japanese position was the apparent signal that Japan's alliance with Germany would not affect any U.S.-Japan deal.

24. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 307; Uley, *Going to War with Japan*, p. 167 (see also p. 157); and Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 209.

25. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 307–308.

26. Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 431.

27. Quoted in Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 142.

28. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 310.

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1. John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 133–165.

evidence is flawed: it is not clear that President Franklin Roosevelt wanted to provoke war with Germany and Japan. Finally, the policy that Roosevelt pursued—a policy of holding the line in the Atlantic and the Pacific—is actually an excellent demonstration of the selection effect. I address each point in turn.

#### THE SELECTION EFFECT AND THE WORLD WAR II CASE

Reiter suggests that my goal in “The Deception Dividend” was to damage the selection effects argument. As I make clear in the article, however, my goal was not to discredit the selection effect, but rather to specify the conditions under which it breaks down.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion I reached—that the selection effect breaks down when systemic pressures are severe—was borne out by Roosevelt’s behavior in the lead-up to World War II.

Reiter contends that the World War II case cannot be counted against the selection effect because the United States went on to defeat the Axis. The outcome, in other words, is consistent with the theory. The selection effects argument does more than predict an outcome, however. It is underpinned by a causal logic suggesting that because democratic leaders must secure public consent for war through an open process, they are constrained from starting unduly costly or difficult wars, leading to a high likelihood that democracies will win the wars they start.<sup>3</sup>

My analysis of the World War II case suggests that Roosevelt maneuvered the United States into a costly and protracted war, one whose outcome was by no means foreordained, and one that was controversial enough politically that he never felt able to ask for a declaration of war from Congress. The United States may have ultimately prevailed over the Axis, but Reiter’s effort to credit that outcome to the selection effect is a stretch. After all, if the selection effect allows for such maneuvering, then how constraining could it possibly be?

Reiter’s fallback position is that the selection effect does not preclude attempts at deception. Surely, though, it should preclude successful attempts, especially when the stakes are as high as they were in the World War II case. Reiter and his coauthor, Allan Stam, concede as much in *Democracies at War*: “An important assumption of this perspective is that consent cannot be easily manufactured by democratic leaders. If democratic leaders could manipulate public opinion into supporting military ventures, then of course public opinion would provide little constraint on democratic foreign policy, as it could be actively molded to support the foreign policy aims of the leadership.”<sup>4</sup> If Roosevelt was able to deceive the public about his intentions, the World War II case would be problematic for the selection effects argument, a point Reiter tacitly admits by contesting whether Roosevelt engaged in much deception at all.

#### ROOSEVELT’S LEVEL OF DECEPTION

Reiter devotes the bulk of his letter to challenging the particulars of my argument that President Roosevelt sought to provoke war with Germany and Japan. He contends that Roosevelt was content to hold the line in the Atlantic and Pacific—ferrying supplies to Britain while containing Japan—a policy that was in line with public opinion.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

3. My reading of the selection effects argument is based primarily on Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), chaps. 2, 6, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Here I reiterate my case that Roosevelt was well ahead of public opinion on the issue of whether to intervene in the European war and was thus forced to bring the United States into the conflict through the “back door.” In the process, I address as many of Reiter’s specific claims as possible.

THE ATLANTIC. After pledging unequivocally during the 1940 presidential campaign that the United States would not enter the European war, Roosevelt became more forceful in 1941 about describing Nazi Germany as a clear and immediate danger to national security.<sup>5</sup> That spring, he prevailed in the “great debate” with the anti-interventionists over whether the United States should remain strictly neutral or actively aid the British war effort. The results were the lend-lease program and the “undeclared war” in the Atlantic. As Reiter alludes to, increasingly large majorities of the American public supported the latter, moderate interventionist, stance, which explains why FDR was able to embrace it in his public appearances.<sup>6</sup>

Reiter, however, fails to address evidence that Roosevelt wanted the United States to do considerably more than act as the “arsenal of democracy.” By the fall of 1941, the president’s advisers were in agreement that the United States would have to enter the war in force to defeat Nazi Germany.<sup>7</sup> The military had made it clear that this would entail raising a large army to fight on the European continent.<sup>8</sup> Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, understandably, were also pressing the president to declare war.

Pinning down Roosevelt’s thinking on the issue is difficult, but the evidence suggests that he came to the same conclusion as his advisers and allies: the United States would have to enter the war as a full belligerent. Indeed, Roosevelt said as much in deliberations with them. Most famously, he explained to Churchill at the Atlantic Conference that “he was skating on pretty thin ice in his relations with Congress” and that “if he were to put the issue of peace and war to Congress, they would debate it for three months.” Instead, Roosevelt assured Churchill that “he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces.” In this way, “Everything was to be done to force an ‘incident’ . . . which would justify him in opening hostilities.”<sup>9</sup> One can only imagine the public reaction if these comments, or others like them, had been leaked.

Reiter suggests that Roosevelt was not as determined to create an “incident” as his bellicose rhetoric would imply. For support, he cites Gerhard Weinberg, who has argued that the U.S. Navy, with British help, used intercepted German communications to avoid contact with U-boat formations.<sup>10</sup> The primary source upon which Weinberg relies, however, supports a different conclusion than the one he reaches: the naval au-

5. Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 38–39.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 26

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

8. Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chaps. 2, 3.

9. David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–41: A Study in Competitive Cooperation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 214–215. Beginning in late March 1941, Roosevelt regularly mused to aides that he would welcome an incident with Germany. See *ibid.*, p. 347 n. 38.

10. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 240.

thorities may have exploited the available intelligence to steer convoys around German submarine concentrations—their primary responsibility, after all, was to ferry supplies safely to Britain—but that does not mean they were trying to avoid confrontations with German warships.<sup>11</sup> After all, the British, who were routing the convoys, had every incentive to maximize tensions in the Atlantic.

The “incidents” that did occur, such as U-boat attacks on the destroyers *Kearny* and *Reuben James*, did not generate the consensus for war that Roosevelt wanted. In November 1941, Congress only narrowly revised the Neutrality Act, convincing Roosevelt that winning a declaration of war would require a substantial provocation from abroad.<sup>12</sup> That provocation came in the form of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.

THE PACIFIC. The “back door” thesis—the argument that Roosevelt courted war with Japan so that the United States could enter the war with Germany—is controversial among historians. Reiter, therefore, is more than justified in challenging key elements of it. Why, then, does this thesis deserve serious consideration? The primary reason is that the conventional wisdom, shared by Reiter, that Roosevelt was simply trying to contain Japan in the summer and fall of 1941 suffers from critical flaws.

First, if Roosevelt’s goal was to immobilize Japan, why did he agree to an oil embargo, a move he had resisted in the past because it would in all probability have led to a Japanese attack on the Dutch East Indies and thus war with the United States?<sup>13</sup> Reiter suggests that Roosevelt’s intent was to impose a partial embargo, one that he could relax in the event Japan backed down. The embargo put in place, however, was total, and mounting evidence suggests that Roosevelt was not only aware of the extent of the embargo but approved of the policy.<sup>14</sup> Reiter asks why Roosevelt packaged the embargo in a relatively mild way, for example, by refusing to attach an ultimatum to it. If Roosevelt’s goal was to put the United States on a collision course with Japan without attracting unwanted attention, an ultimatum would have been counterproductive.

Second, if Roosevelt’s goal was to contain Japan, why was he not more responsive to Japan’s signals that it would refrain from entering the war against the Soviet Union, that it would stall the southern advance in its tracks, and that it would even withdraw from parts of Indochina? Roosevelt was not averse to talks, as Reiter points out: at the very least, the president needed to appear to be negotiating in good faith. The key point, however, is that U.S. negotiators came to insist on a set of demands that Japan was sure to reject, most importantly, Japan’s withdrawal from China.<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Record makes the point best: “The United States was, in effect, demanding that Japan renounce its status as an aspiring great power and consign itself to permanent strategic dependency on a hostile Washington. Such a choice would have been unacceptable to any great

11. Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 84–87.

12. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 292.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 273–275.

14. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, pp. 99–100; and Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 141–142, 246–247 n. 68.

15. As Paul W. Schroeder highlighted at an early point, “There is no longer any doubt that the war came about over China.” See Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 200.

power.”<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to explain why Roosevelt would confront Japan with such a choice unless he was seeking war.

As far as public attitudes in the United States on the issue, the hard-line policy against Japan was popular enough, as Reiter alludes to, but that does not mean the public was ready to go to war over China.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the public was generally less concerned with events in Asia than in Europe, which explains why Roosevelt had the freedom of maneuver he needed to back Japan into a corner.

#### HARD QUESTIONS FOR THE SELECTION EFFECT

To summarize, Roosevelt was certainly constrained by public opinion in the lead-up to World War II. Otherwise, he would have had no reason to resort to all the maneuverings he did to get the United States into the war. The success of those maneuverings, however, should lead scholars to ask some hard questions about the selection effect: Why, in some cases, are leaders not deterred from seeking war by the prospect of punishing costs and the political rancor that might result? What explains the deep reluctance of leaders to put the question of war and peace before the public, and how are they able to avoid doing so? That is, how are they able to bypass the marketplace of ideas? In cases where the democratic process is compromised in this way, are the results uniformly negative? Or is deception sometimes justified by the stakes and the ultimate outcome of the conflict? Not to pursue these questions is to foreclose valuable lines of inquiry.

—John M. Schuessler  
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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16. Jeffrey Record, *Japan's Decision for War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009), p. 21.

17. Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, pp. 29–30.