Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Review of Dallek, Matthew. 2016. *Defenseless under the Night: The Roosevelt Years and the Origins of Homeland Security*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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The title of this book is taken from W.H. Auden's famous poem, "September 1, 1939." There, Auden, writing at the outbreak of World War II, contrasts the fears "of a low dishonest decade" with the possible hopes of "the Just" to rise above "negation and despair" and "show an affirming flame." Here too the author, historian Matthew Dallek, captures the similar tensions of the latter years of the Roosevelt presidency where the forces of "social defense liberalism," embodied by Eleanor Roosevelt, battled with those of "national security liberalism," equally represented by Fiorello La Guardia. While the struggle between the President's wife and the Mayor of New York City took place within the seemingly narrow confines of the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD), the stakes far surpassed those walls in Dallek's analysis.

Commencing somewhat metaphorically with Orson Welles' 1938 radio production of H.G. Wells' "War of the Worlds," Dallek presents a narrative account of President Roosevelt's internationalist triumph over American isolationism—albeit depicted narrowly through the history of the OCD. For readers of this journal, his (and his publisher's) limited and underdeveloped attempt to construct an unbroken line between World War II civil defense and the post 9/11 creation of the Department of Homeland Security perhaps provides a rationale for grappling with the complexity of this largely institutional history of the short-lived OCD (1941-1944, but formally closed by Truman in 1945). While both main figures in the narrative travelled extensively to sell their versions of civil defense, the authorial viewpoint is unremittingly based in Washington and his sources are the papers of his central characters. This is political history of the old school.

But at the heart of Dallek's narrative is his depiction of the struggle between Eleanor Roosevelt's vision of an ever-expanding New Deal social activism, based on voluntarism at the community level with a triumph of economic and racial equality, versus La Guardia's hard headed and pragmatic view of a militaristic system of civil defense. While both shared a commitment to New Deal ideals and to the necessity of American armed resistance to Fascism, they could never agree on the priorities of social versus military readiness. When they studied the Blitz, for example, La Guardia focused on military response and air wardens while Eleanor concentrated on the social and morale aspects of resistance. La Guardia mobilized

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political support by creating the fear of German and Japanese air raids; Eleanor Roosevelt mobilized the citizenry by inspiring the democratic hopes of a transformed society.

In a triumph of political irony, both fell victim to their own enthusiasms and hubris. La Guardia's bluster, his overblown rhetoric of Armageddon, and his refusal to choose between his municipal and federal roles wore increasingly thin and Roosevelt removed him from his OCD role in early 1942. Meanwhile Eleanor fell victim to a congressional scandal when she tried to expand the civil defense mandate to include the arts, including dance. The salaries of Mayris Chaney, her choice to head that branch, combined with Chaney's background as a "fan dancer," provided major grist for the anti-FDR congressional mill. The scandal led to Eleanor's resignation in early February 1942. The new Director of the OCD, James M. Landis, came to Washington from his role as Dean of Harvard Law. While paying lip service to the social side of the agency, under his leadership it increasingly focussed on the needs of national security and surveillance. The OCD, for example, co-operated fully in Japanese internment. While there is some discussion here of co-operation with the FBI, the subject receives inadequate attention and there is no evidence that FBI records have been analyzed.

As the fortunes of war reversed and Allied victory became more certain, the perceived threat of German or Japanese air and sea attacks faded and the role of the OCD dwindled. Landis moved on in 1943 and his successor, John Martin, presided over the demise of the agency.

In a too brief conclusion, "National Security Liberalism," the author tries to develop the linkages to the present, post-9/11 reality. The current debates "about the proper balance between individual freedom and national security" and between nation building at home versus foreign war are placed by the author in the World War II context of guns versus butter (263). While there can be no debate about the pertinence of Dallek's choice of current debates, it is not clear to this reader that they are best framed by the United States' World War II experience. One might make as strong if not stronger arguments for the original Red Scare or for the Cold War. Indeed, it is perhaps a reflection of what I would take to be the author's own liberalism that any left beyond the New Deal coalition receives no mention.