

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Re-alignment. Hope everyone is having a great mid-summer period. As you all know by now, especially as we near 400 episodes, the Re-alignment publishes a whole lot of different styles of episodes. Some, like the recent ones I recorded with Neil Howe and Peter Turchin, are with big thinkers who look at our societal and global discord through the lens of big theories that they've spent decades developing. Others are like last week with MIT's Amy Finkelstein, a deep dive into a specific topic, in her case healthcare, that are at the center of the Re-alignment moment. The third style, which comes via audience request, focuses on history. In the past few months, we've covered everything from then-Senator Harry Truman's investigation of war industry corruption during World War II to President Lincoln's faith journey and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The goal of these episodes is to offer examples and perspectives from previous era's generation and figures who've faced down challenges equal to or greater than those we face today. Today's episode is with the historian Derek Liebert, author of *Unlikely Heroes, Franklin Roosevelt, and the World They Made*. Unlike previous treatments that the FDR's podcast has covered, this book not only covers the President himself, but analyzes four other figures who stood with him from America's confrontation of the Great Depression to World War II. Those figures are Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes, Francis Perkins, and Henry Wallace. If we're looking at today's challenges, it's easy to focus just on the man or woman on top. *Unlikely Heroes* is a great reminder that beneath the surface are almost equally momentous figures that are often ignored for good or for ill. So next time you're looking at your favorite presidential candidate, left, right, or center, don't just look at he or she. Look at the people that they would appoint, the people who would be the counselors, people who would be chief of staffs, those who would be cabinet secretaries, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Hearing and reading this book, you're just going to understand how key that focus is, and something which is especially played out in recent history as well. While that said, huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting this podcast. Hope you all enjoy this episode. And of course, a reminder that we have our latest up-and-coming Q&A, AMA episode with me and Saga coming up. So if you are not already subscribed to that, to be able to submit your own questions or hear the final episode,

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

go to realignment.supergas.com.

Directly Bart, welcome to the realignment.

Thank you. It's a privilege to be included.

Yeah, I'm really excited to speak with you.

As I've said to listeners, I've wanted to do more episodes focused on history and a lot of the new books that are coming out.

So you are perfectly fitting into that approach.

So first question just to ask you is why publish this telling of history, this kind of revision of our understanding of FDR's presidency right now at this moment? You've written a bunch of works of history.

I think all those works tend to maybe coincide with certain moments.

But why this book right now?

Well, two reasons. One, it's startling how little has been known about Franklin Roosevelt and about FDR's presidency, despite all the writings.

That cottage industry of books on FDR.

And two, because of the parallels between that desperate era of the depression of World War II and today.

And we can see such parallels on a range of issues, whether it's violent political extremism from the left, from the right, whether it's climate emergencies to think of the dust bowl of the 1930s, whether it's expanding the Supreme Court, or indeed whether it's America's altering role in the world.

There are lots of these parallels.

And I might want to add a third reason, because the Biden administration came to power because the Biden administration came into office with the declared intention of emulating FDR and the New Deal.

And this, to be sure, is the last president that we'll see that was even born in that era.

So for these three reasons, it struck me that the subject was ideal for this moment.

So I really appreciate this as an interviewer.

You just sort of setting up those three different buckets that we could go through.

So let's just go to the first one.

The additional work you thought was necessary to add to the FDR kit.

And I think our particularly well-read listeners will think of no ordinary time.

We had Jonathan Darman on to talk about his book about FDR last September.

What would you say is the conventional understanding of FDR's presidency and where do you diverge and add to that by revisionism?

Nearly all writings on Franklin Roosevelt.

No ordinary time is Exhibit A.

Really parrot the iconic original histories that were produced in the 1950s by the New Dealers.

The Robert Sherwood biography was the first coming out in 49,

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

winning the Pulitzer on Roosevelt and Hopkins.

Also winning the Pulitzer were Schlesinger's three volumes on the age of Roosevelt.

And the iconic biography by Frank Friedel and on and on.

These New Dealer histories really laid the groundwork which by and large subsequent historians have echoed, just adding in new anecdotes.

But the basics, the very basics of the Roosevelt presidency have been overlooked.

For example, it had not even been understood how that administration was led, such as by the so-called four lieutenants, his closest associates,

who were at the top from the very beginning to the very end and who, oh by the way, were equally as crippled to use a term of the day as was the president that brought them into office.

These are the fundamentals of the Roosevelt presidency and many, many others that have been overlooked.

And who are those four lieutenants?

Well, only four hands-on operators were in this administration from its fraught early months beginning in March 1933 under the old constitutional calendar until FDR died in April 1945.

Only four at the top, whom he drew in very, very close.

Harry Hopkins, who was 41 at the beginning,

was the de facto secretary of public welfare during the 1930s

and then during the war was FDR's closest political-military advisor.

But Harry Hopkins was torn to pieces inside by ulcers

and by a cancer operation in 1937 that made him frail and often wheelchair-bound.

The pathology there was that Hopkins would throw out his medicine, flush his nutrients down the toilet,

and the sicker that Harry Hopkins got the closer he was drawn to FDR.

The second of these four pivotal advisors were Harold Ickes,

the vastly powerful secretary of the interior

and in easily the most powerful figure within FDR's cabinet.

Ickes, by any definition, was what we call bipolar

and at the time it was known as manic depression.

There were many, many days when Ickes simply could not speak.

He self-medicated on Nenbutol and whiskey

and his emotions swung between unaltered joy and terrible, terrible sadness.

Yet, like Hopkins, he was a brilliant administrator

and FDR again brought in the wounded and the so-called cripples close to him.

The third of these powerful figures was Frances Perkins,

the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet

and the iconic secretary of labor who introduced most of what we now understand as the reforms of the New Deal, such as social security, such as labor law, such as outlawing child labor.

But Frances Perkins was nearly pathologically sad and lonely.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

She would say that it pained her to even see her photos in the newspapers and she had a fraught, tormented home life with a husband who was institutionalized for mental illness and a daughter who was schizophrenic.

Herein, again, FDR recognized these vulnerabilities and brought her close as well.

And the fourth of these pivotal players was Henry Wallace.

He was secretary of the largest government department of the 1930s, which was agriculture, and he became vice president in FDR's third term.

Wallace had what the New York Times called a freakish intellect

that separated him from so many of those who should have been closest around him, whereas he could speak as an equal with Einstein and with the great economist John Maynard Keynes

and indeed with FDR, who had a keen intellect of his own.

Henry Wallace was well removed from his family and his friends

and as his family has recently revealed, it's likely that he suffered from Asperger's syndrome.

Yet these by far were the four team members to use the state of the art,

the four players who had as a group more of an impact on their country's destiny than any other such group in US history.

So a bunch of questions emerge from that, but number one, I find what's interesting here.

And you said Hopkins was the secretary of public welfare. What was the actual title he held?

Well, he held numerous titles, as really they all did, numerous functions as well,

because we can't think of cabinet officials of that era as equivalent today.

In that time, and there were only 10 cabinet positions,

each cabinet member was considered a statesman of the time.

They were known as the president's unofficial family.

There were few other contending sources of power in American life, no social media, no other vast forms of entertainment.

This was an era, for example, when Senate speeches would be published verbatim in the press.

So being a cabinet member was being a national or international figure.

And Hopkins was initially the czar of the public works welfare program.

He only became an official cabinet member in 1938 when he became secretary of commerce.

But we can't be thinking of a cabinet as simply the men and now women gathered around at Long Oak table.

Cabinet truly means the inner core, the true center of power in a presidential administration.

And this group of four was the core, enduring, tough, liberal entity of the ongoing administration.

And a final observation is that FDR would have been extremely unlikely to accomplish what he did, both on the domestic front and internationally, without these four.

So the interesting thing that comes to mind, obviously, Henry Wallace eventually became vice president,

but you introduce him as secretary of agriculture.

The three departments that we've really focused on in that introduction, secretary of the interior, secretary of labor, secretary of agriculture.

These are not in today's politics considered high prestige departments other than, you know, Elaine

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

Chao,

because she was, you know, the wife of, you know, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Most folks even in DC would probably not know the secretary's out the top of their head.

So I guess the question to you is, were these departments more important back then?

Or is just the fact that you had the statesmanship and leadership management talent, combined with the lack of like they weren't even White House chief of staffs back then.

So there was just a different structure.

Like there was no national security council, there was no national economic council.

So the very structure of the executive branch was just so different that even if you had a less important quote unquote title,

by nature of the power vacuum, you could do more.

So how should we think about these dynamics?

You're entirely right. The structures were strikingly different.

Who today, for example, would think of giving a cabinet member a 19 gun salute when he would travel to New York,

or indeed see a cabinet member.

And frankly, I would be hard pressed to say who this current secretary of the interior is to see such a figure as a national luminary.

But a secretary of the interior in that era, Harold Ickes, was so vastly, vastly more powerful for several reasons,

because it was the Great Depression and it was the New Deal.

And this was a dozen years to include World War II of unrelenting emergency.

Also, because FDR brought these tortured trouble people in close to be his creators and executors of what he wanted to get done.

But we must think of FDR in a different way than we've gotten accustomed to seeing him on the newsreaders,

as this genial and warty and gentleman with his long cigarette holder.

From beginning to end in this administration, as he surrounded himself with wounded figures, including his valet,

who also was crippled, his legs had been scarred when he was a barber by boiling water dousing his lower extremities.

The core around FDR, the key Get Things Done operators were all wounded.

And FDR himself, as Francis Perkins observed at the funeral, was a tortured, tormented soul.

This was a precedent who would have so many screening nightmares that the Secret Service would not even barge into his room at night when hearing the screams,

as we know from his cousin Daisy Suckley's diary.

So FDR, the Prudian-Titanic leader, was himself sadly extraordinarily vulnerable.

I'd love to hear your thoughts then on whether this model, which kind of we transitioned away from for a variety of historical reasons,

whether this model of active, aggressively engaged cabinet secretaries, kitchen cabinets, lieutenants, et cetera,

was a more effective model for approaching presidential challenges and organizing the country in contrast to our much more diffuse and often decentralized version.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

And the key thing too that should also be noted here, the elevation of the vice presidency over the past half century

is by necessity changed its dynamics or two.

It's not just the White House Chief of Staff edition.

It's also just the fact that a lot of that energy could be taken up by the Dick Cheney's and Al Gore's and the Joe Biden's of the world.

Okay. Two points on that.

One, when we think of the presidency of that era, we can consider, say, the critiques today by conservative commentators

such as the author Philip Howard, about the extent to which today we're just smothered and smothered in regulations.

Those, frankly, for better or for worse, did not exist at the time, the endless permitting and zoning, for example.

It was an era when government, if it was willing, could get things done fast, again, for better or for worse.

So you could say the Lincoln Tunnel drilled beneath the Hudson in three years and Harold Icke's Secretary of the Interior overseeing that being denounced for being too slow.

The current drilling under the Hudson to build a new tunnel won't be done until the late 2030s.

So you're entirely right.

It was a different era.

But again, let's come back to think of how little is known about Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.

The vice president during the first two terms was the Titanic.

John Nance Garner, former Speaker of the House, 15-term congressman from Texas, and perhaps the most powerful vice president that has been in office until, as you noted, the current era.

There's a return through John Garner in tandem with FDR, of course, who returned the presidency to the cloud that it had in the days of Adams, Jefferson, and Burr.

Yet the historians on the Roosevelt presidency say nothing about the epic figure of John Garner, who within the cabinet, he was not officially a member of the cabinet vice president, but FDR allowed him to attend most meetings.

We have this strong, strong figure, a ferocious opponent of the Ku Klux Klan, a champion of the underdog, an outspoken enemy of lynching, which was commonplace tragically during the 30s and remained so into the 40s.

Yet John Garner is forgotten from history, and the only curiosity today is he was from Uvalde and a great figure of Uvalde politics, but Garner ran also the most potent state delegation, the Texas delegation of the 1930s that any state has ever sent to Washington.

So most anywhere we look at the Roosevelt presidency, it is misunderstood. And I come back to the cause of that because historians, by and large, are parroting the early New Deal histories, which were unadulterated glorifying of FDR and the New Deal.

And, you know, the reason why particularly engaged listeners will know the name John Nance Garner is just the, you know, the famous phrase, you know, the vice presidency isn't worth, you know, a bucket of spit, which was originally, that's how it was translated in the papers, but originally he said piss and it was, you know, the 30s so they were going to censor that a little bit.

But I think your point around understanding his vice presidency is very, very important.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

Well, if I can interrupt one second, how do we think the New Deal legislation got passed in the hundred days of the initial months of FDR presidency, it was John Garner who ran it through bang bang bang.

Well, then we want to have a showdown with Japan and its predations in China. Who do you send to Tokyo? You send John Garner. No official until Gerald Ford would be in Tokyo of such seniority. So over and over again, one can see what has been missing from our understanding of this era, let alone how that era can be connected to today.

Something I'm curious about is, do you see if we're looking at our contemporary political situation, especially on the Democratic Party slots left side where there's a real urge to contextualize your politics within the lens of FDR's approach.

Do you think our political figures today are hampered by models or frameworks or even language to like, for example, every Democratic presidency, especially during crisis areas so President Obama coming into office in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and then of course Biden coming in during the initial COVID period, they're seen as we need these 100 days, we need to move, we only have this much time X, Y and Z. Is that a helpful framework to continue adopting or does that to a certain degree hamper one's strategic framework of how you should approach your initial presidency.

Well, let's be really careful about what we wish for, and that would be a caution mostly for Democrats. When we call for a new deal, we're implicitly saying that we need larger than life figures to govern us from the top down.

So there are two ways of looking at Roosevelt and the new deal. These very strong, very top down figures who are reshaping American life with lots and lots of corner cutting and indeed more than a little corruption at FDR's personal level.

We have to be cautious of what we're asking for in the new deal. And I would hesitate to exemplify that era and try to bring its emergency driven urgencies into today.

That is not how best America is governed amid such extremity amid such urgency and by such larger than life figures.

I guess the question would be then, well, I guess I here's just like, I guess the initial pushback. Why not, right? So if it's 2009, and you're coming out of the financial crisis, you've just had to bail out the audio industry, if it's, you know, the middle of COVID in 2021.

It seems like the only obvious response is that emergency aggressive approach and that any laxity will lead to missing a moment where you can actually break through log jam, inertia, etc.

Right. Making policy in the midst of emergency or perceived emergency is perilous, because by definition, it means urgency, it means corner cutting, it means breaking the rules.

So on some levels, rebuilding that bridge that collapsed on I-95 outside of Philadelphia last month, being able to rebuild a bridge within three weeks, terrific, that's an emergency.

But to what extent are you going to cut corners? To be sure. In the depression, when starvation would stalk cities such as Chicago, yes, get the money out there, pump out the money fast.

But also that compels us to be alert to what the blowback, what the externalities, as economists would call them, might very well be.

Now, the New Deal idealists, FDR and his four lieutenants, saw their reforms as the height of American individualism.

They didn't buy in for a second to the default Republican charges of socialism and communism.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

They would respond that the New Deal, New Deal policies were the best of American individualism because, in their idealistic view, this would lead to a level playing field, regardless of ethnicity, religion, in which place of origin, wealth, in which Americans now would be able to benefit from health care, labor rights, the end of child labor, and would be competing on a level playing field to use the term of today.

I would love to talk about mental illness and what has come up with a lot of these figures. Obviously, going back to the 1970s, Thomas Eagleton loses his slot as the vice presidential candidate in 1972 because he's gone through shock therapy,

has a means of addressing his various forms of mental illness. To what degree is mental illness something that we are overly guarded against, or in the sense that we have a lot of these figures where I think if today this was known to the degree it was known, this would be a severe disadvantage for our cabinet secretary.

While at the same time, the thing that really changes from my amateur historian perspective is that post World War II, not only does the United States assume a greater role over international affairs, you had the introduction of nuclear weapons, so stakes become existential the way they weren't before, and a key achievement such as innovation, the new deal is just the actual impact and size and scope and involvement in government in American life is actually just so much more bigger.

So it's one thing if you have a bipolar cabinet secretary during the last day fair in 1920s, another thing if it's the 1970s or 1980s, how would you think through these dynamics?

Eleanor said that her husband Franklin only felt comfortable around outcasts. Now the reasons for that as one of your previous guests, Darman, distinguished historian himself would have explored who knows where FDR's character developed,

but by the time he came to office he indeed did surround himself with if not outcasts, then truly truly troubled individuals such as Harold Icke's being bipolar, or Harry Hopkins extraordinarily self destructive.

But keep in mind that so much of this was hidden from the public. Indeed, that FDR himself had never recovered from polio in 1921 as he tried to convey to the nation.

And yes, the nation knew that he had suffered from polio and indeed he was straightforward and advanced the march of dimes and funded recuperation center at Warm Springs in Georgia, but it was always presented that he was recovered.

Yes, to be sure he might have to use crutches when walking to the well of the house, but it was concealed at the time that people were crippled and crippled was the term that was used and it was a devastating term, because there would be no consideration in American life that such injured people really

could perform in the workplace, let alone could be president of the United States. So by the time FDR came into office, he too was an outsider, as were the four critical leaders that he surrounded himself with most closely.

I want to kind of skip around the three frameworks you offered at the start of the show and just go to the third one you pointed out which is that Biden very explicitly went out to emulate FDR he puts FDR's portrait in the White House in a very conspicuous manner of it clearly signals things much as Trump's decision to place Andrew Jackson also signaled aims and perspectives on the crises or the

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

issues facing the country at the time. How would you assess the Biden administration's emulation of FDR efforts, not just at a policy or political level but just as a like framework for thinking through the challenges they're facing.

Well on the most general level who could object because presumably our friends in the Biden administration could point to what indeed was accomplished during the New Deal and certainly the triumph of World War two America was brought together as one nation.

In 1933, it was still commonplace to speak of these United States of America. By 1945 when America was astride the world triumphant, we were known as the United States of America.

So to be sure the nation was unified and for the first time it was acknowledged that the role of government would exist to protect the American public in peacetime against peacetime disasters as much as it would protect the nation during war.

So who could object to that. But when one starts generalizing about FDR and the New Deal, it means overlooking much that was a miss in that administration. FDR's familiarity for example with rifling the tax records of his enemies or FDR not only opposing

not only doing nothing against the anti lynching bills that came before the Congress in 1937 and 1938, but as no historian has dared report FDR on January 2 1940 personally blocking the anti lynching bill that was set to pass the Senate finally that spring,

which John Garner brought into the Oval Office and FDR for personal political reasons blocked it cold. There would not be an anti lynching act until February 2022.

There are dark sides to this administration. And again, my caution, when we talk about, oh, let's apply the New Deal today, we have to be very careful when we call for these larger than life emergency figures.

I guess the question is, are we. So, okay, here's a then kind of a narrative question. It's pretty easy to say that at a minimum, our political system is not reproduced figures of the larger larger than life figures on this level and I like your use of the phrase larger than life because you could be larger than life and be good you be larger than life and bad.

It's not necessarily a positive or negative thing. What is your kind of theory of the case. When it comes to like who's attracted to you work in the technology industry like, you know, are all the big people just going to go for companies become billionaires like there's a lot of kind of theories that are quite clearly thrown out there. I'm curious how you would think about it. Well, I would think about FDR. And I'm sure you and many of our readers would agree as a transformative president. And in my opinion, there are four transformative presidents, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, to be sure FDR and Ronald Reagan, a

transformative president is one who very little is the same after his presidency than it was before profound changes to American life, probably hopefully for the better, and to be sure FDR was a transformative president and perhaps the greatest pragmatic politician that has ever existed in US history.

But because FDR was above all a politician, he always had that voting machine counting algorithm going on in his head. And his focus on practical politics was so ruthlessly self centered that over and over and over again, he would compromise on pivotal issues.

FDR, let's recall had nothing to do with the Social Security Act of 1935. At the time is everyone knew that was all Francis Perkins and indeed he was placating Francis to use a quote of the time FDR had a very casual disdainful view of labor unions as well.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

FDR by 1940, according to Ickes and Henry Wallace was way too cautious on dealing with the totalitarians and certainly tragically by 1944 and 1945 FDR had a completely naive view of Stalin. So much changed. America was brought together by 1945. Much was done that was right and correct and we so often live in the world of the New Deal today, but there were also darker sides. And by and large, the history of the Roosevelt presidency has neglected that. Who, for instance, would think of FDR liberally using the N word in discussion. That appears in no histories, except one reference in one excellent history about Ted Morgan.

But otherwise, that just doesn't appear. It's been as erased as has been John Garner. So my point is that there has been lots of irresponsibility among the historians who have presumed to chronicle the Roosevelt presidency and who instead by and large are parroting the volumes of the 1950s.

You know, something I wonder and I'm thinking about this at a generational level. I've been doing a lot of podcast episodes focused on generational turnover.

And if I were to sum up a lot of the histories I grew up with and the ways that history is engaged with socio cultural issues, it would be that there's been a lot of deconstructions deconstruction of figures deconstruction of myths.

And I worry that as society as a society, we've just gone too far in a deconstructionist direction and have left us with the inability to build new things or even look at things like positively from out of broad level.

So I guess what I'm kind of curious as I'm hearing your point about FDR in the N word and the responsibility of historians not cataloging it.

What purpose does knowing that fact matter.

And I think and the reason why I'm distinguishing the mattering here is I think at a historical level it's deeply important to understand that part of what made FDR is Democratic Party work is FDR made a very politically pragmatic and obviously like morally not great decision to put aside like racial issues when it came to keeping his like Southern Central Coalition together.

And that aside from just the moral importance of addressing that issue brings to mind. Hey, if you're bringing a couple of lessons you have to understand that like you could be sacrificing people always have different directions so I guess my question for you is like, what is the responsibility of the historian.

When it comes to papering over inconveniences that at a certain point are just awkward like his usage of the n word.

The n word was not used even in that era by decent people.

His four close lieutenants never would have used that slur.

It was not used by decent people. And to know that he was comfortable with that word, then makes it a little clearer why he could so easily boast about he was as much a Georgian as he was a New Yorker.

So, when we look at who was actively opposing bringing African Americans into the fight as frontline warriors during World War Two, who had a well articulated disdain of the fighting qualities of black Americans that would have been FDR.

Why not acknowledge what was happening and what was being said, rather than always make excuses and create nearly hagiography of this great leader, a great leader to be sure but great leaders in a democracy don't have to be nice.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

And there was much about FDR that was not nice. And a closer, better documented look at FDR and his presidency is not done gratuitously or for the sake of tearing down an individual.

It's done for a better understanding of that time, what to admire, what to think twice about, and like most history aspires to do, how can we draw lessons for our own era?

I think the big closing question we spent a lot of time focused on the New Deal era and the way I like to think of the FDR presidency is kind of dividing it in two in terms of like the two big key issues that people tend to bring it up in.

Obviously there's the focus on the New Deal, especially when you have new programs, whether it's the great society or the new frontier, or you have the post-2008 and post-2021 periods, the other period that's becoming quite relevant today is the arsenal of democracy period.

The United States in 1939 is both not ready from a military perspective, the United States is the 18th or 19th best equipped and ready army in the world, like famously they have a massive exercise and you have tankers just walking around, simulating their tanks.

So that really puts the discussion around, do we have enough artillery ammunition today in context? We've kind of been here before at a certain degree, but I'd love for you to talk about that re-arming period, because today, if you just Google arsenal of democracy, that phrase is going to come up more.

To what degree did the players we're discussing today play a role in moving from 1939 to the real triumph of 43, 44, 45, and to what degree do you think America is still capable of achieving similar feats when it comes to ramping up production, improving the military status, etc.

To be sure, what no historian has observed is that World War II victory would have been exceedingly unlikely had there not been a new deal.

Had America during the 1930s kept limping along through Hoover tight rugged individualism, it would have been very unlikely that there would have been 10 to 15% GDP annual growth rates.

It would have been very unlikely that the country would have cohere to the extent it did during the 1930s, and Americans never would have gotten accustomed to these giant public private partnerships that characterized the 1930s.

So by the time America actually enters combat in 1941, World War II was a war that was tailored for U.S. victory.

It combined big business with big labor and with big government.

And there's another point to consider about the new deal. There was nearly a clandestine rearmament effort from the get-go in 1933. FDR with his great intellect has so often been overlooked.

He spoke fluent French, competent German. He read Spanish easily, and he spoke conversational Dutch. He was a man of the world.

And from the first cabinet meeting, March 7, 1933, when he laid out the dangers of Japan, America was on a rearmament drive.

In 1997, new warships were built during the new deal. Before America went to war, why is this overlooked? Because it had to be kept quiet.

When America at home was fighting for its life with initially starvation in the streets, FDR couldn't show that he was devoting billions of dollars in 1930 dollars to re-arming and re-upping the Navy. And then, of course, he came pretty quickly by the late 30s to building an air force. So of course there were shortages.

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

By the time America entered combat, we were destined for victory. And such a victory would have been very hard to achieve without the new deal.

Now how does that apply today? What foreign policy experts also now tend to overlook is that the United States has lost four big wars in a row.

The last unadulterated victory that we enjoyed was World War II. We have failed since then over and over again in war.

Failing at war means that what results is 180 degrees different from what you would hope to achieve at the beginning.

We have failed in Iraq. We have failed in Afghanistan. We have failed in Vietnam.

And our first tragic failure was in fall 1950 in the invasion of North Korea.

It's always overlooked that by far the highest fatalities in Korea came from a feckless invasion of the North.

And if we look at why America consistently keeps failing at war, we come back to the same reasons over and over again.

The victories are supposed to be easy. Invading North Korea indeed was going to be a snap.

It was said Vietnam would be a snap in Iraq. It was already mission accomplished and so forth and so on.

Reliance on high tech, the belief that we can convert societies about which we know nothing to the American way.

So since World War II, we have gotten into the habit of failing at war.

And that should make us truly humble amid talk of reviving the Cold War or getting into something even worse than Cold War with Russia or China.

I guess the real thing I just want to add here is, because I know there are definitely going to be some libertarians who are screaming about how, you know, in the 1930s,

like there's all these studies, all this revisionism, the New Deal didn't save the American economy.

What are you saying, Derek? 10 to 15% GDP growth, if we've done this, this, this and that, the key point that you are making is that,

and this is my just critique of the libertarian school on this issue, treating the New Deal as primarily a assessment of GDP growth and what level is the stock market program.

I think misses the transformational nature of the project itself.

And I just want to make clear that because there are going to be some people who are going to be kind of confused.

This has come up on the podcast before.

You could have had a situation where we maybe had chosen a slightly better policy or there hadn't been this form of overreach.

This, this or that.

But it's the broader national project that is very tied together into the nature of the project during the second part of his presidency.

That's key there.

So I just really wanted to highlight at that point.

Yes, indeed.

And if I could simply add, of course, it was World War II.

And the demand level economy that finally pulled America out of the depression because the New

[Transcript] The Realignment / 392 | Derek Leebaert: FDR's "Unlikely Heroes" and America's Triumph Over the Great Depression and WWII

Deal never swamped an appalling high unemployment rate of 15%.

But it doesn't take too much guesswork of alternative history to see that without the New Deal reforms coming fast in March 1933.

In my judgment, there would have been outright revolution in the United States.

This was an era of communism, syndicalism, fascism and Nazism.

America is not that exceptional that violent extremism from the left or from the right would not have occurred here.

And it could have occurred very, very easily here.

And that's what the New Deal intervention prevented, as well as getting the country sufficiently united to ultimately save civilization itself during World War II.

Very well.

But Derek, this has been incredibly helpful.

The book is unlikely heroes.

Franklin Roosevelt is one of the tenets and the world they made.

You're pretty prolific as an author.

Any thoughts on what the next book is?

Oh, I'm going to say, because I've got to pay attention to my day job in the tech sector.

So we're going to hold for now.

Well, thank you so much for joining me on The Realignment.

It's been an honor. Thank you.

Hope you enjoyed this episode.

If you learned something, like this sort of mission, or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership.

Thanks.

See you all next time.

.