

What FDR said about Jews in private

By Rafael Medoff

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In May 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt met with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the White House. It was 17 months after Pearl Harbor and a little more than a year before D-Day. The two Allied leaders reviewed the war effort to date and exchanged thoughts on their plans for the postwar era. At one point in the discussion, FDR offered what he called “the best way to settle the Jewish question.”

Vice President Henry Wallace, who noted the conversation in his diary, said Roosevelt spoke approvingly of a plan (recommended by geographer and Johns Hopkins University President Isaiah Bowman) “to spread the Jews thin all over the world.” The diary entry adds: “The president said he had tried this out in [Meriwether] County, Georgia [where Roosevelt lived in the 1920s] and at Hyde Park on the basis of adding four or five Jewish families at each place. He claimed that the local population would have no objection if there were no more than that.”

Roosevelt’s “best way” remark is condescending and distasteful, and coming from anyone else it would probably be regarded as anti-Semitism. But more than that, FDR’s support for “spreading the Jews thin” may hold the key to understanding a subject that has been at the center of controversy for decades: the American government’s tepid response to the Holocaust.

Here’s the paradox. The U.S. immigration system severely limited the number of German Jews admitted during the Nazi years to about 26,000 annually — but even that quota was less than 25% filled during most of the Hitler era, because the Roosevelt administration piled on so many extra requirements for would-be immigrants. For example, starting in 1941, merely leaving behind a close relative in Europe would be enough to disqualify an applicant — on the absurd assumption that the Nazis could threaten the relative and thereby force the immigrant into spying for Hitler.

Why did the administration actively seek to discourage and disqualify Jewish refugees from coming to the United States? Why didn’t the president quietly tell his State Department (which administered the immigration system) to fill the quotas for Germany and Axis-occupied countries to the legal limit? That alone could have saved 190,000 lives. It would not have required a fight with Congress or the anti-immigration forces; it would have involved minimal political risk to the president.

Every president’s policy decisions are shaped by a variety of factors, some political, some personal. In Roosevelt’s case, a pattern of private remarks about Jews, some of which I recently discovered at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem and from other sources, may be significant.

In 1923, as a member of the Harvard board of directors, Roosevelt decided there were too many Jewish students at the college and helped institute a quota to limit the number admitted. In 1938,

he privately suggested that Jews in Poland were dominating the economy and were therefore to blame for provoking anti-Semitism there. In 1941, he remarked at a Cabinet meeting that there were too many Jews among federal employees in Oregon. In 1943, he told government officials in Allied-liberated North Africa that the number of local Jews in various professions “should be definitely limited” so as to “eliminate the specific and understandable complaints which the Germans bore towards the Jews in Germany.”

There is evidence of other troubling private remarks by FDR too, including dismissing pleas for Jewish refugees as “Jewish wailing” and “sob stuff”; expressing (to a senator) his pride that “there is no Jewish blood in our veins”; and characterizing a tax maneuver by a Jewish newspaper publisher as “a dirty Jewish trick.” But the most common theme in Roosevelt’s private statements about Jews has to do with his perception that they were “overcrowding” many professions and exercising undue influence.

This attitude dovetails with what is known about FDR’s views regarding immigrants in general and Asian immigrants in particular. In one 1920 interview, he complained about immigrants “crowding” into the cities and said “the remedy for this should be the distribution of aliens in various parts of the country.” In a series of articles for the Macon (Ga.) Daily Telegraph and for Asia magazine in the 1920s, he warned against granting citizenship to “non-assimilable immigrants” and opposed Japanese immigration on the grounds that “mingling Asiatic blood with European or American blood produces, in nine cases out of ten, the most unfortunate results.” He recommended that future immigration should be limited to those who had “blood of the right sort.”

FDR’s decision to imprison thousands of Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II was consistent with his perception of Asians as having innate racial characteristics that made them untrustworthy. Likewise, he apparently viewed with disdain what he seemed to regard as the innate characteristics of Jews. Admitting significant numbers of Jewish or Asian immigrants did not fit comfortably in FDR’s vision of America.

Other U.S. presidents have made their share of unfriendly remarks about Jews. A diary kept by Harry Truman included statements such as “The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish.” Richard Nixon’s denunciations of Jews as “very aggressive and obnoxious” were belatedly revealed in tapes of Oval Office conversations.

But the revelation of Franklin Roosevelt’s sentiments will probably shock many people. After all, he led America in the war against Hitler. Moreover, Roosevelt’s public persona is anchored in his image as a liberal humanitarian, his claim to care about “the forgotten man,” the downtrodden, the mistreated. But none of that can change the record of his response to the Holocaust.

The observance of Holocaust Memorial Day begins Sunday night. It is the annual occasion to reflect on the Nazi genocide and the world’s response to it. In the case of the United States, it is sobering to consider that partly because of Roosevelt’s private prejudices, innocent people who could have been saved were instead abandoned.

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