

ΦΑΘ NEWS

DECEMBER 2023

A MESSAGE FROM PAT PRESIDENT MULLIGAN



Beware of the “Historic Blackout”

Conspiracy theories have been part of the historical landscape for centuries. From debates over who killed President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865 or President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, America’s fascination with intrigue has spawned several books and movies. The question for us as students of history, should be whether controversial theories and critical analyses of government agenda should be protected from a “historical blackout”?

Twenty years before the JFK assassination, in the early to mid-1940s, a group of revisionists made up of historians, sociologists, and journalists, challenged another of history’s controversial assertions. According to this theory, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt purposely duped America into world war in December 1941, all the while promising to keep Americans safe. By scheming behind the scenes during the late 1930s, they argued, the president pushed the country closer to military intervention.

While I will not attempt to prove the plausibility of this view since it is much too lengthy for discussion here, I instead hope to alert budding historians to the danger of what scholar Harry Elmer Barnes termed “the Historical Blackout.” Accordingly, he and others, labeled “revisionists,” suffered a similar fate, as the U.S. government imposed deliberate censorship against critics who called into question the integrity of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a very popular president. Arguing that these opponents compromised the public’s safety during the late 1930s and 1940s, a dangerous period in world history, the government allegedly banned books and relegated esteemed historians and journalists to the bottom shelf of America’s libraries.

However, the revisionists raised some controversial questions. Did the Axis powers pose a threat against the United States? Was the attack on Pearl Harbor unprovoked? To both questions, the revisionists answered “no.” Instead, they saw Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor as a construction, perpetrated by the interventionists to lead Americans into war. Under the guise of Japan’s unprovoked attack, the President would now symbolize the hero of democracy protecting the free world against a dastardly enemy.

First, they argued that the President knew of the attack from information gathered through cryptanalysts who painfully plotted Japan’s movements in the days leading up to 7 December. Japan’s aggressive move on that fateful Sunday prompted some American isolationists such as Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana to fall in line behind the administration. Others, however, remained steadfast in their opposition to the President.

In the 1930s as violence increased in Europe and Asia, President Roosevelt was publicly in step with American isolation, signing into law neutrality legislation aimed at protecting the United States from threats abroad. However, as the 1930s progressed leading to the German attack on Poland in September 1939, war in Europe erupted, and Roosevelt gradually called for a repeal of the neutrality laws, incurring the wrath of the vocal anti-interventionists. By March 1941, his Lend Lease Act was followed by an undeclared naval war in the Atlantic.

While most critics of Roosevelt fell in line after the Japanese attack, a few held steadfast against the American president. Seeking to undermine the credibility of the Democratic president, these scholars, among them Charles Callan Tansill, Charles Beard, William Henry Chamberlin, and Harry Elmer Barnes, argued that Roosevelt allowed naval commander Admiral Husband Kimmel and Army leader Lieutenant General Walter Short, leading strategists stationed at Pearl Harbor, to serve as scapegoats for the tragic loss of life in Hawaii. The subsequent nine investigations beginning in 1941 and concluding five years later in 1946, laid the blame for America's lack of preparedness solely at the feet of Kimmel and Short, who they allege bungled America into world war.

Harry Elmer Barnes, who in his almost forgotten polemic, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, published in 1953, argued, "in order to promote Roosevelt's political ambitions and his mendacious foreign policy some three thousand American boys were quite needlessly butchered at Pearl Harbor." Barnes, whose accusations rocked the "establishment," charged that an "historical blackout" had occurred, which in addition to closing off important archival material to the revisionists, purportedly demanded that leading publishing houses ban their work. Barnes predicted to Judge Clifton Mathews, his contact at the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, "I know I am playing with fire and expect some kind of a frame-up almost any time."

Lest you conclude that Barnes suffered from delusions, he was supported in his accusations by revered historians such as Charles A. Beard, who as a Progressive historian earned a name for himself as the author of a seminal history on the drafters of the United States Constitution.

Charles Callan Tansill, in his 1943 publication *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* contended that since isolationists in Congress refused to support interventionism, the President chose a more sinister method to dupe America into a second world war. By instigating an incident which resulted in the Japanese attack, he would then lead the beleaguered and stunned American people down a dangerous path.

William Henry Chamberlin, a foreign correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, who reported on events from the Soviet Union (1922-1934) and Japan (1935-1939), found himself unemployed in 1940 as the editors of the *Monitor* observed that Chamberlin "evolved away from the reporter status or even the correspondent status and has become a meditative article writer, not suited to urgent and arduous posts."

Most historiographic analyses, several of which are highly critical of the administration's foreign policy leading up to the Japanese invasion, however, refute the revisionist school for its implausibility. However, the question here is not the efficacy of the views, but whether Harry Elmer Barnes and the revisionists have a right to publicly print their criticisms without fear of reprisal. While some may disagree with the conclusions of these scholars, should we as Americans uphold their right to free speech?

In today's world, where censorship is in vogue again, where books are banned, and constitutional lines are crossed, we should take heed against another "historical blackout," which should never cross our paths again.

Debra A. Mulligan

Regional Conferences

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Feb. 22 - Dakota - University of South Dakota

Feb. 24 - Oklahoma - University of Central Oklahoma

Mar. 2 - Hawai'i - Brigham Young University-Hawai'i

Mar. 16 - California South - University of La Verne

Mar. 23 - Texas West/Central - Angelo State University

Mar. 23 - Tennessee - Tusculum University

Apr. 5 - Mountain West - Utah State University

Apr. 6 - Florida - University of Florida

Apr. 6 - Mid-Atlantic - Bowie State University

Apr. 11-13 - Pacific Northwest - Eastern Washington University

Apr. 13 - Arkansas - Ouachita Baptist University

Apr. 13 - Pennsylvania East - Rowan University

Apr. 13 - Texas East - Stephen F. Austin State University

Apr. 13 - Virginia - Virginia Military Institute

Apr. 20 - Colorado - University of Colorado-Colorado Springs

Apr. 20 - New York/New Jersey - Dominican University

Apr. 26 - California North - Cal State East Bay

Save the Date!

Mark your calendars and prepare to join us for
the Biennial Convention on January 2-5, 2025!

More details to come very soon!

Best Chapter Awards

Division I

1st : Peru State College
2nd : University of Lynchburg

Honorable Mentions:

1. Thomas More University
2. Union University
3. Dickinson State University

Division II

Nels Cleven Winners
1st : Harding University
2nd : Midwestern State University

Honorable Mention:
Francis Marion University

Division IV

Nels Cleven Winner
1st : Austin Peay State University

Division V

1st : University of Hawaii – Manoa

Honorable Mention:
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Division VI

1st : Liberty University

Nash Journal Awards

Undergraduate Online

1st: *Tenor of Our Times*
Eta Phi at Harding University

2nd: *Santa Clara University Historical Perspectives*
Lambda Upsilon at Santa Clara University

Undergraduate Print

1st: *Northwest Passages*
Rho Phi at the University of Portland

2nd: *Res Historica*
Alpha Rho Epsilon at Anderson University

3rd: *Rhodes Historical Review*
Alpha Epsilon Delta at Rhodes College

Graduate Online

1st: *The Welebaethan: A Journal of History*
Theta Pi chapter at California State University, Fullerton

2nd: *Perspectives: A Journal of Historical Inquiry*
Eta Xi chapter at California State University, Los Angeles

3rd: *Ibid: A Student History Journal*
Eta Nu chapter at Texas Woman's University

Honorable Mention: *Voces Novae*
Alpha Mu Gamma chapter at Chapman University

Graduate Print

1st: *East Bay Historia*
Alpha Rho Theta at California State University, East Bay

2nd: *History in the Making*
Alpha Delta Nu at California State University, San Bernardino

3rd: *Clio*
Rho Xi at California State University, Sacramento

Honorable Mention: *Chico Historian*
Alpha Delta Omicron at California State University, Chico

Due March 1, 2024

Doctoral Student Scholarship

Graduate Student Scholarship

Undergraduate Student
Scholarship

Gordon Morris Scholarship in
Western History

Due July 1, 2024

Book Awards

Best Chapter Awards

Paper Prize Awards

Nash History Journal

Faculty Advisor Research Grant

Prizes & Awards

Due September 16, 2024

Charles Redd Center Book Award

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