

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 333

### “The Hand That Held the Dagger”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On June 10, 1940, US President Franklin Roosevelt was on his way to Charlottesville, Virginia, to give the commencement address at the University of Virginia Law School before an audience that included his son, Franklin Jr., when he received the news that Italy had entered the war. Disregarding the advice of the State Department, which recommended caution, Roosevelt made some last-minute changes to his speech to incorporate the news.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 333. The Hand That Held the Dagger.

[sound clip: FDR speech]

It seems to me you can actually hear his anger in those words. This “stab in the back” speech was the first time Roosevelt came out foursquare in support of France and Britain, and he did it at a time when it appeared likely France and Britain were about to lose the war. Privately, Roosevelt warned his advisors that if France and Britain fell, America would certainly be next. It might be hard to believe, he told them, but then, six years ago it would have been hard to believe that Germany would once again become the dominant military power in Europe.

Even as the French Army was collapsing, Roosevelt was reorganizing his Cabinet. Out were his Secretaries of War and the Navy, who were advocating America keep its distance from the conflict. He replaced them with two Republicans: his new Navy Secretary would be none other than Frank Knox, the Republicans’ 1936 Vice-Presidential candidate. Knox turned to his running mate, Alf Landon, for advice on whether or not to accept the job. Landon told him to take it. For Secretary of War, he tapped the now 73-year-old Henry Stimson. We’ve met him before. He was previously Secretary of War for William Howard Taft and Secretary of State for Herbert Hoover.

These appointments served to emphasize the gravity of the international situation and the need for Americans to put aside their partisan differences in the face of the emergency. They can be

seen as the American equivalent of what forming a unity government would mean in a parliamentary system. But the appointments were also announced just days before the 1940 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, and it was hard not to think that the Roosevelt Administration taking on Republican Cabinet officers was timed to undercut the Republican criticism of Roosevelt and his policies that was likely to be aired at the Convention.

Knox had asked Roosevelt to postpone the announcement until after the convention; Roosevelt pointed out to Knox that if the Republicans nominated an isolationist candidate, his and Stimson's defections, as it were, announced immediately afterward, would come across as their rejection of their own party's nominee.

At that moment, it seemed likely the Republicans would nominate an isolationist candidate. One leading contender was Thomas Dewey, the District Attorney for Manhattan who had made a name for himself prosecuting New York's organized crime bosses. But Dewey was only 38 years old and had zero foreign policy experience, making him a questionable choice to lead the nation during a world war. When asked about foreign policy, Dewey kept close to the isolationist line. Then there was Ohio Senator Robert Taft, the son of William Howard Taft, a staunch conservative isolationist who had once declared that the New Deal was a bigger threat to American values than either the Communists or the Nazis. But Taft had only served in the Senate for a year, and his high-handed attitude toward the process gave the impression he felt he was entitled to the nomination on the basis of his family name.

Then there was Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, another isolationist whose views were similar to Taft's, but who had a much longer tenure in the Senate. Vandenberg ran as a favorite son candidate, hoping the Convention would deadlock between Taft and Dewey and turn to him as a compromise candidate.

When I put it that way, it sounds as if the whole Republican Party was isolationist. It was not. The Eastern liberal wing of the Party was pro-British, as always, and in some ways the Republican Party was as divided as it had been back in 1912.

The Republican National Convention opened as France fell and Roosevelt announced the addition of those two prominent Republicans to his Cabinet. Republican delegates were bitter about that, though keynote speaker Harold Stassen, the governor of Minnesota, gleefully told the convention he was glad to hear the news and his only regret was that the rest of Roosevelt's Cabinet were still Democrats.

The following morning, Stassen declared for a candidate and became that candidate's floor manager. But his choice was none of the candidates I already named. Stassen was supporting a dark horse candidate, 48-year-old Wendell Willkie. Willkie was a corporate attorney who represented utility companies, and later became the president of one such company. And he had been a Democrat until last year. He'd served as a delegate to the 1932 Democratic convention and donated to the Roosevelt campaign.

His break with Roosevelt and the Democrats came over the TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority. Willkie's company would be a competitor to the TVA and he objected to a government agency competing with private companies. Willkie spent years litigating against the TVA while also lobbying against legislation to increase the authority of the TVA and negotiating to sell his company's assets to the TVA in 1939.

These years spent advocating for private enterprise against government projects made him into a national figure. He published articles in major magazines arguing his position and proved to be eloquent on radio. He defended his switch to the Republican Party by famously declaring of the Democrats, "I did not leave my party. My party left me."

Willkie had not mounted a primary campaign. Like Vandenberg, his campaign was built on the hope that a deadlocked convention would turn to him as a compromise candidate. Unlike Vandenberg, Willkie was an interventionist. He declared France and Britain America's first line of defense against the Nazis and vocally supported aiding the Allied war effort. On domestic issues, he was generally in favor of the New Deal, but claimed his administration would manage its programs more efficiently.

With the collapse of France on the front page of every newspaper by the time the convention came to order, Willkie was an attractive choice for a party whose isolationist wing was now looking decidedly out of step with the times, not to mention the voters. The voting went to multiple ballots, a first for the Republicans since 1920. Dewey held the lead at first, then Taft, and on the sixth ballot, Willkie secured the majority. For his Vice Presidential running mate, Willkie turned to the Senate Minority Leader, Charles McNary of Oregon, who was seen as providing a helpful geographical and ideological balance to the ticket. This in spite of the fact that just days earlier, McNary had denounced Willkie as a tool of Wall Street.

The Republicans had given their nomination to their strongest candidate. Even Roosevelt thought so. The President was not campaigning for his own party's nomination, but by the time the Democratic convention met, everyone understood he would accept it if offered. The Republicans inadvertently gave Roosevelt a boost by nominating a candidate most Democrats figured could beat any of their candidates except the incumbent.

There was a distinct uneasiness about nominating Roosevelt to a third term, but the convention fell in line, giving Roosevelt a first-ballot win. Since his Vice President had run against him, Roosevelt sought a new running mate; he settled on his Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace.

Wallace was a controversial choice within the Party. Roosevelt believed he could help bring in the farm vote, but conservative Southern Democrats wanted one of their own to balance the ticket as Garner had, and settled on Speaker of the House William Bankhead of Alabama. Wallace made Democrats uneasy for other reasons. He had been a Republican until a few years ago. Recall that his father had been Secretary of Agriculture in the Harding Administration. More worrisome were some of Wallace's personal beliefs, widely labeled "eccentric." He was

what today we might call New Age-y. He dabbled in Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and mysticism. It took a speech from Eleanor Roosevelt vouching for Wallace and the President himself letting it be known that he would decline his own nomination unless the convention accepted his choice for Vice President before the convention grudgingly went along.

You can think of this as the beginning of the modern practice of party conventions deferring to their Presidential candidate's choice of running mate.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5 in C minor*.]

In the summer of 1940, after the nominations were made but before the fall campaign began in earnest, the war continued to dominate headlines. Britain now stood alone against the Axis and was being pummeled by German bombers. Those in the US who wanted to see increased American aid to beleaguered Britain focused on Winston Churchill's repeated request for fifty American destroyers.

You'll recall I mentioned Britain's need for more destroyers before. Destroyers were essential to escort merchant convoys, to provide a defensive screen for capital ships, and to patrol the English Channel as the first line of defense against a German invasion force. But the Royal Navy didn't have enough of them to go around.

The other big question of the time was the draft. In June, a bi-partisan team of legislators introduced a conscription bill that would require all American men between the ages of 21 and 35 inclusive to register, a maximum of 900,000 to serve at any one time.

The isolationists attacked the proposal. Roosevelt remained silent, although Secretary of War Stimson and Army Chief of Staff Marshall testified in favor of the bill before the House Military Affairs Committee. Public opinion polls over the summer showed rising support for conscription among the American public; by August, 86% said they were in favor. This was enough to persuade Roosevelt to endorse the bill. Two weeks later, his opponent, Wendell Willkie, also endorsed the bill. When a reporter suggested to Willkie that opposing the draft might be his best shot at winning the election, Willkie replied if that were the case, he would rather lose the election.

Willkie's endorsement clinched the debate, and Congress passed the bill two weeks later. The first soldiers were drafted in October. By mid-1941, the US Army ranks swelled from 190,000 to 1.4 million as the cap of active duty soldiers was raised.

The issue of destroyers for Britain was under debate at the same time, and again Roosevelt approached the topic with caution. The British Prime Minister had requested them multiple times. In June the British King George VI broke with protocol by sending Roosevelt a letter in which he too asked for the destroyers, "before it is too late," as the King put it.

The British were down to less than 70 destroyers. The US Navy still held 172 First-World-War-vintage destroyers and surely could spare 50 of them, but the consensus within the Administration was that Congressional action would be required and Roosevelt was reluctant to push such a bill while the conscription debate was ongoing. In July, Navy Secretary Knox received a legal memorandum arguing that the President had the authority to transfer the destroyers without Congressional authorization, but neither he nor Roosevelt accepted the reasoning.

Then on July 11, a group of thirty influential Americans, liberal and conservative, Democrats and Republicans, met in New York City. Among the group were retired military commanders, the presidents of Harvard and Dartmouth, *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce, and theologian Henry Sloan Coffin of Union Theological Seminary, and they joined together to call for increased aid to the United Kingdom in its hour of need. They called themselves The Century Group.

This group floated a variety of proposals, but one of the most interesting ones was a deal under which the US would provide the 50 destroyers the British government was requesting in exchange for American basing rights on British territories in the Western Hemisphere. The genius of this suggestion is that new American military bases, constructed to defend against a potential invasion of North America from Europe, were a pet idea of the isolationists, which would make the proposal hard for them to oppose.

Luce himself met with Roosevelt in late July to press the proposal; Roosevelt told Luce that he could not endorse the idea without the full support of Luce's magazines, *Time* and *Life*. Less than two weeks later, General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, the hero of the last war and the most famous soldier in America, gave a national radio address in which he endorsed the destroyer transfer. *Time* magazine published a piece on the topic. *The New York Times* ran a letter from a group of distinguished lawyers, arguing that the President had unilateral authority to transfer the ships.

The Century Group also pressed Wendell Willkie to endorse the transfer of destroyers to Britain, but Republican Party leaders, including Herbert Hoover, urged him to remain noncommittal. Willkie never endorsed the idea in so many words, though he seemed to hint at his support. He spoke on the campaign trail about the need to keep the Royal Navy strong, for the sake of America's own defense.

Finally, the Attorney General issued a memorandum opinion, also supporting the President's authority to execute the trade without Congressional authorization. By the end of August, the first of the destroyers were on their way to Canada, where Royal Navy crews were waiting to take control of them. In exchange, the United States received 99-year leases for air and naval bases in Trinidad, Saint Lucia, Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, and British Guiana. Separately, the

UK also gave the US basing rights in Bermuda and Newfoundland. These were presented as a gift to the United States, not part of the destroyer deal, for the sake of British pride.

The destroyers for bases trade proved popular with the American public. General Marshall and Admiral Stark, the chiefs of the US Army and Navy, had no trouble certifying the deal; the bases were clearly more valuable in defending the United States against attack from Europe than the destroyers would have been. Their endorsement made it politically impossible for the isolationists to criticize the trade.

It has to be said that these destroyers were not top of the line. They were First World War leftovers. One American admiral joked that their hulls were just thick enough to keep the fish out, while a British admiral dismissed them as the “worst destroyers I had ever seen.” The Royal Navy renamed the vessels; in honor of the new partnership with the US, the destroyers were given names of cities and towns common to both countries, such as Chelsea, Georgetown, Lancaster, Roxborough, and Reading.

August polls showed the two Presidential candidates in a dead heat. But opinion began to shift in Roosevelt’s favor in September; the draft and the destroyer deal were redounding to the incumbent’s advantage. But Wendell Willkie was a spirited campaigner, and could speak in a folksy style, despite his elite background. Harold Ickes joked that Willkie was “a simple, barefoot Wall Street lawyer.” But his political inexperience also showed. In one speech, he criticized Labor Secretary Frances Perkins. He vowed to appoint someone better to the post, but couldn’t resist adding, “And it will not be a woman, either.”

Yeah, that’s half the electorate he just insulted. And there is evidence it hurt him with women voters.

Democrats were still worried that Henry Wallace might prove a problem. In August, the Republican National Committee was handed some letters Wallace had written to the Russian émigré mystic Nicholas Roerich, in which he addressed Roerich as “Guru.” A second scandal arose in September, after Speaker of the House Bankhead died unexpectedly. The President and his entire Cabinet attended the funeral, but on the train back to Washington, Undersecretary of State and close Presidential advisor Sumner Welles got drunk and started propositioning the porters on the train. One of the porters reported this to his supervisor, and the news quickly became item one in Washington gossip.

But Willkie had his scandal, too. He and his wife Edith were estranged, and he had taken up with Irita Van Doren, book review editor for the *New York Herald Tribune*. They appeared together in public regularly. Van Doren introduced Willkie to literary figures such as Virginia Woolf, Sinclair Lewis, James Thurber, and Carl Sandburg. But once Willkie won the Presidential nomination, Irita receded into the background, and Edith Willkie accompanied Wendell at campaign appearances, joking to reporters that politics made strange bedfellows.

The press knew all about Willkie's love life, but said nothing. When asked about it, Willkie defiantly asserted that his personal life was no one else's business. The Democrats knew all about this, but chose to keep their powder dry, holding this information in reserve in case the Republicans tried to make an issue out of Henry Wallace or Sumner Welles. In the end, mutual assured destruction was enough to prevent either political party from making use of this information.

Roosevelt, who had not campaigned for the nomination, asserted he would not campaign in the general election either, though he made frequent trips to inspect defense plants and facilities, giving him the opportunity to present himself as the busy Commander-in-Chief.

But after a month of heavy campaigning, after he made over 500 speeches in 31 of the 48 states, Willkie went from ten points down in the polls to twelve points down. The candidates' positions were so similar, there seemed to be no compelling reason to change. As the Republican mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia, put it when he endorsed Roosevelt, "I would rather have FDR with all his known faults than Willkie with his unknown qualities." When Willkie tried to make an issue out of Roosevelt running for a third term, that didn't get him anywhere either.

In early October, with the election just weeks away, Willkie shifted positions and started talking like an isolationist. It worked. His poll numbers began to climb. There were substantial constituencies in the US that responded to his pledge to keep Americans out of the war, especially in the German-, Italian- and Irish-American communities. Heartened by these results, Willkie began to go further, accusing Roosevelt of having made a secret pledge to Churchill to enter the war as soon as the election was over. He warned that if Roosevelt were re-elected, America would be in the war by spring.

These attacks infuriated Roosevelt and sent him onto the campaign trail beginning October 23, to correct Republican falsifications, as he explained it. Roosevelt strenuously denied having entered into any secret agreement and promised never to send Americans into a foreign war.

And just like that, Willkie's numbers began to slip again. When the votes were counted, Roosevelt won 55% of the popular vote, down from his historic numbers of four years ago, but still a solid win. In electoral college terms, Willkie carried ten states amounting to 82 electoral votes, versus Roosevelt's 449.

Willkie was gracious in his concession speech, calling for unity during a time of national emergency. Roosevelt invited him to the White House, and the two met alone in the Oval Office.

On December 3, 1940, a group of top Administration officials, including the Secretaries of State, War, the Treasury, Commerce, and the Navy gathered in the Treasury Department building to discuss an urgent matter. The Treasury Department's best estimates suggested that the British government was going to exhaust its reserves of gold and of US dollars by the end of the year.

To turn the British away was unthinkable, but the Neutrality Act's cash-and-carry provision demanded it.

They brought the matter to the President, who was preparing to leave for the Caribbean aboard the heavy cruiser USS *Tuscaloosa*. Officially, the purpose of this trip was to allow the President to inspect some of the new naval bases America had just acquired, but it was also a chance for the President to get away from Washington for a spell.

But Presidents work, even at sea. Roosevelt received regular cables and bags of mail delivered by airplane. On December 9, the mail bag contained a 4000-word cable from Winston Churchill. Churchill summarized Britain's military position in the North Sea, in the Mediterranean, and in Africa. Churchill told Roosevelt that the danger of Britain falling to a swift and overwhelming strike was no longer acute, but now Britain faced a second danger. German factories were out-producing those in the UK, and British imports were being picked off by U-boats. Britain needed arms, but, Churchill admitted, soon it would no longer be able to pay for them. He told Roosevelt "I believe you will agree that it would be wrong in principle and mutually disadvantageous in effect if at the height of this struggle Great Britain were to be divested of all saleable assets, so that after the victory was won with our blood, civilization saved, and the time gained for the United States to be fully armed against all eventualities, we should stand stripped to the bone."

Harry Hopkins was also aboard *Tuscaloosa*, and he reported that Roosevelt read Churchill's cable several times, then spent two days brooding, during which he hardly spoke to anyone. Then he hit upon the answer. A week later, back in Washington, the President held a press conference to announce it. He began with an everyday analogy. If your neighbor's house is on fire, and your neighbor comes to you to ask for your garden hose to use to put the fire out, you wouldn't tell your neighbor first you wanted \$15 up front for the hose. You'd tell your neighbor he was welcome to use it, so long as he returned it after the fire was out.

America's stockpiles of armaments would do more to protect the United States if they were placed in British hands, rather than collecting dust in armories across the nation. The British could pay America back after the war, by returning the arms, or their equivalent, or by paying cash.

This was the beginning of the program known as Lend-Lease. Winston Churchill, who had not been informed of the proposal before Roosevelt made it public, was gobsmacked. He told Parliament it was "the most unsordid act in the history of any nation."

It would still require Congressional approval though, and Congress was in recess for the holidays. So on December 29, 1940, Roosevelt gave his most famous fireside chat. It was also his most widely heard. An estimated 75% of the US population either listened to the speech on the radio or read it in the newspapers the next day. Roosevelt told Americans there could be no negotiated peace with Adolf Hitler. As he put it, you can't tame a tiger by petting it. If Britain fell, the Axis would control Europe, Africa, Asia, and the high seas. The Western Hemisphere



would no longer be safe. It would do no good to crawl into bed and pull the covers over our heads, he said; America had to confront the threat. And how would it do that?

[sound clip: FDR speech.] *The people of Europe who are defending themselves do not ask us to do their fighting. They ask us for the implements of war, the planes, the tanks, the guns which will enable them to fight for their liberty and for our security. Emphatically we must get those weapons to them in sufficient volume and quickly enough, so that we and our children will be saved the agony and suffering of war.*

*We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us, this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would so were we at war.* [End sound clip.]

Franklin Roosevelt was in charge. It was like the Hundred Days all over again. Letters to the White House ran 100 to 1 in favor of the speech. Polls showed a upwards of 70% of the public favored increased aid to the British. But there was still Congress to deal with.

In January, Congress returned to session, and Roosevelt appeared before them to deliver his State of the Union message. He spent most of his speech advocating for his Lend-Lease proposal and for American military preparedness. But this speech is most remembered for this passage:

[sound clip: FDR speech.] *In future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is the freedom of speech and expression...The second is the freedom of every person to worship God in his own way...The third is freedom from want...The fourth is freedom from fear...* [end clip.]

Roosevelt met with the chief of British intelligence in the United States, who suggested some prominent American go on a goodwill tour of the United Kingdom. Roosevelt asked which American's visit would do the most to raise British morale. The answer he got: Wendell Willkie.

Through intermediaries, Willkie was sounded out about the idea and he agreed to it. Before leaving, Willkie met with Roosevelt a second time. Their meeting lasted over an hour, and witnesses in the next room reported hearing frequent bursts of laughter.

The Lend-Lease bill was introduced in January. By now, isolationists in Congress were clearly swimming against the tide of public opinion, but they spoke out against the bill all the same. Thomas Dewey called it "an end to free government in the United States." Arthur Vandenberg said the bill would give the President authority to make war on any country at any time. Not sure how either of them reached those conclusions. Robert Taft delivered the best zinger. He said, "Lending armaments is a good deal like lending chewing gum. You don't want it back."

In February, following his return from the UK, Wendell Willkie appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to testify in favor of the bill. He was asked about some of the criticisms he'd leveled against Roosevelt during the Presidential campaign. Willkie told the

committee that he'd tried his best to defeat Roosevelt, but Roosevelt had won the election, and he was the President. Republican Senator Nye of North Dakota pressed him further, citing Willkie's claim that Roosevelt would have the nation at war by April, now just two months away. Did Willkie still believe that? Willkie said he might, then expressed his gratitude that someone had paid attention to his campaign speeches because "the President said he did not." The room erupted with laughter.

The Democrats still held lopsided majorities in both houses of Congress, so the bill passed easily, mostly along party lines. The following day, Congress appropriated \$7 billion—the largest appropriation in American history—to purchase weapons for Britain.

Lend-Lease erased the "cash" part of "cash and carry," but the British were still responsible for shipping American arms, and that was still a concern for Roosevelt and his administration. What good would \$7 billion worth of new weapons be if German U-boats sent them to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean? But that is a story for a future episode.

When April came, Mr. Gallup's polls showed overwhelming public support for aid to Britain, and Roosevelt's approval rating came in at 73%.

The United States was still neutral in theory, but in practice it was involved in the war, and becoming more involved all the time. Roosevelt told his Cabinet that he would follow the precedents of Abraham Lincoln, who did not go to war until Fort Sumter was attacked, or Woodrow Wilson, who did not lead the US into war until the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare. The United States would not fire the first shot, but certainly would go to war if attacked.

But that is also a story for a future episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Stephen for his kind donations, and thank you to Raven for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Stephen and Raven help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I'm pleased to be able to tell that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It's a collection of stories about magical artifacts. The ebook is

available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo, and I understand there will be a paperback edition as well.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the war in Europe. By autumn, it was becoming clear that Britain could not defeat Germany alone, but neither could Germany defeat Britain alone. What next? Stalemate, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. You might have thought that Wendell Willkie would be the likely frontrunner for the 1944 Republican Presidential nomination. Willkie thought so too, and began campaigning in 1943. But in his first primary, in April 1944 in Wisconsin, he ran behind all the other major candidates and failed to elect a single delegate, prompting him to withdraw from the race.

That was just as well, for as fate would have it, Willkie would not live to see the 1944 Presidential election. A heavy drinker and smoker, Willkie passed away on October 8, 1944, at the age of 53.

Willkie's 1940 Vice-Presidential running mate, Oregon Republican Senator Charles McNary had died eight months earlier, in February 1944, at the age of 69. This was the first and only time in US history that both nominees on the national ticket of a major party died before the end of the term of office for which they had campaigned.

[music: Closing War Theme]