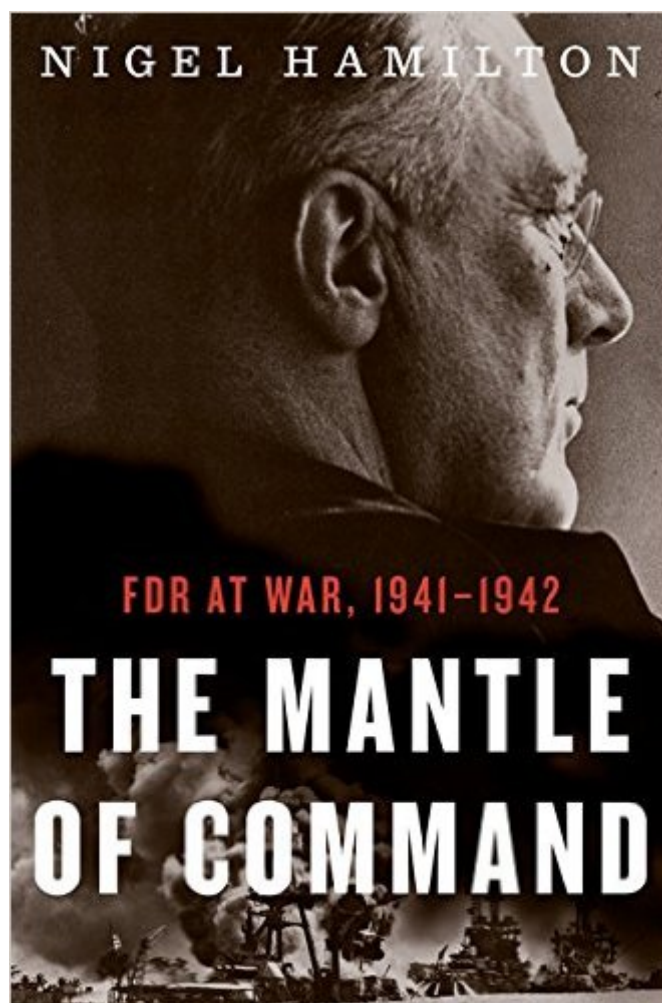


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The Mantle Of Command: FDR At War, 1941-1942



Synopsis

Based on years of archival research and interviews with the last surviving aides and Roosevelt family members, Nigel Hamilton offers a definitive account of FDR's masterful and underappreciated command of the Allied war effort. Hamilton takes readers inside FDR's White House Oval Study his personal command center and into the meetings where he battled with Churchill about strategy and tactics and overrode the near mutinies of his own generals and secretary of war. Time and again, FDR was proven right and his allies and generals were wrong. When the generals wanted to attack the Nazi-fortified coast of France, FDR knew the Allied forces weren't ready. When Churchill insisted his Far East colonies were loyal and would resist the Japanese, Roosevelt knew it was a fantasy. As Hamilton's account reaches its climax with the Torch landings in North Africa in late 1942, the tide of war turns in the Allies' favor and FDR's genius for psychology and military affairs is clear. This intimate, sweeping look at a great president in history's greatest conflict is must reading.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First, the good points: 1. Breezy and readable. 2. Useful and unusual perspective on FDR's conflicts with the War Dept and Chiefs of Staff, and on how poorly the war was going for the UK, especially in light of Churchill's consistently poor choices for commanding generals. 3. Use of some unusual sources, notably Daisy Suckley's diary, Ian Jacob's diary, and so on. Now for the bad points: 1.

Sometimes, it's TOO breezy, given the serious issues the author wants to deal with. 2. When it comes to Marshall and others who opposed Torch, Hamilton is certainly correct that FDR had a better sense of what the 1942 US military was capable of than the on-to-Berlin-immediately crowd, but he does not seem to understand that rather than them having been motivated by mere stubborn-ness or petulance, the military men were (I think) simply following the best military theory -- don't divert resources to the periphery, concentrate your forces on the enemy's main force (Clausewitz, Jomini). 3. Some of the unusual sources are a bit off-point and perhaps unreliable. Large swaths of Goebbels' diary are quoted. Daisy Suckley is interesting on FDR's personality, but not on grand strategy. In sum, this is an interesting read. Especially for those who can take it with a grain of salt. The author can't seem to decide how to integrate his two themes -- what a great man FDR was personally in terms of moral vision and ability to motivate -- with the grand strategy theme (how to go about winning the war). A final point: While reading the book, I was struck by how Hamilton, a Brit, was remorseless brutal in condemning British military performance (and Churchill's leadership) in the 1939 to 1942 period (and there is much to condemn); most writers tend to cut the UK some slack for their failures.

Winston Churchill survived World War II to write a six-volume memoir in which he -- naturally -- portrayed his leadership, including his military leadership, in a very favorable light. Most of the Allied senior commanders also wrote memoirs in which -- naturally, once again -- they burnished their images and highlighted the important roles they played in the conflict. Franklin Roosevelt died before the war's end, and although he left some notes for a future memoir, he was accordingly unable to provide an account of his wartime leadership as commander-in-chief. Nigel Hamilton argues strongly that because FDR did not live to write a memoir, both other leading figures on the Allied side and, more tellingly, most historians have downplayed or overlooked how well FDR discharged his duties as commander-in-chief. Hamilton makes a compelling case that FDR was truly the indispensable man, realizing just what was required to rally the American public for a struggle that many had opposed right up to December 7, 1941, and dealing adroitly with Churchill at a time when the British army was encountering one setback after another. Hamilton argues that Roosevelt's time as assistant secretary of the navy during World War I was crucial in providing him with the perspective necessary to evaluate the strategic position of the United States and the advice pushed on him by George Marshall and the other senior U.S. commanders. In fact, Hamilton shows convincingly that Roosevelt's strategic judgement was generally superior to that of his military advisers, particularly in overruling their push for an immediate cross-channel invasion of Europe in

favor of an invasion of North Africa.

The book is very good and well worth buying and reading, but I had problems with it starting on the first page. In order to elevate FDR, the author states "...the military challenges facing Roosevelt as commander in chief were greater than any that had confronted his predecessors..." Well, we could argue all day about that. George Washington had a rabble of an army prone to desertion and defeat, a lack of funding from a weak government, and spent many hours pleading for supplies and food. Lincoln had the problem of a nation at war with itself. He had few troops at the beginning and had a hostile enemy force just a march from the nation's capital. Another problem here is that the author is very critical of the military chiefs under FDR, especially Marshall. Early in the book, he blasts their miscalls on military matters since May 1941, but on the next page, he states that that the President was certain, that with Hitler having his hands full in Russia, he would dare not declare war on America as long as he perceived the U.S. to be strong. Well, he was monumentally wrong, just as Stalin was just as wrong in believing Hitler would not turn on Russia. The point is, when you have so many things to contend with, somebody is going to call it wrong, and FDR, while a brilliant man, was not perfect. And he goes on about Pearl Harbor as "a veritable catastrophe". Certainly, the commanders at Pearl were caught with their guard down and paid a heavy price, but Hamilton uses this episode to further pile on the military leaders at the time in order to make FDR appear the better man.

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