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**Influence of the Third-Term Issue:
The Roosevelt and Willkie Presidential Campaigns of 1940**

Rob Sobelman '08

“Third Reich. Third International. Third Term.”¹
-1940 Republican Campaign Button

Every four years for the past 218 years, the United States of America has elected a president. In the history of the United States, only the thirty-second president was elected for more than two terms. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran a unique reelection campaign against Wendell Willkie in 1940 to win an unprecedented third term. The campaign was waged in the midst of spreading war across Europe and growing fear of American entrance into international hostilities. Due to the intensity of the political issues that were debated, the campaign season was particularly compelling. However, the campaign was not unique because it was run during a time of uncertainty; it was unique because it was posing a question to the American people that had never been posed before: is the two-term tradition bigger than the presidential candidates? Despite facing an opponent who attempted to liken a third term for Roosevelt to an American adoption of dictatorship, as referenced in the campaign collateral above, Roosevelt was able to overcome the third-term issue and win reelection.

The longstanding tradition that no president would be elected for more than two terms was shattered by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in November of 1940. Most historians attribute the ability of Roosevelt to win an unprecedented third term to the success of the New Deal and the fear of changing leadership in the context of prospective imminent war. The debate over foreign and domestic policy in the 1940 presidential campaign season most likely decided the election for voters. However, the campaigns themselves were not guided by these policy positions.

This paper will argue that the third-term issue pervaded all political debate and was the single biggest factor shaping the strategy and rhetoric of both the Roosevelt and Willkie campaigns. A misunderstanding of the importance of the third-term issue in the Roosevelt and Willkie campaigns of 1940 has led to an analytical gap between Roosevelt's reelection to a third term and the ratification of the Twenty-Second Amendment just 11 years later.

¹ Private political button collection of Stephen H. Amos of St. Johnsbury, Vt. as cited in Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14.

Historiography

Historians have pursued three questions regarding the third-term issue. The first is whether the two-term tradition was real or coincidental. The second question that has been pursued is whether the dialogue about the third-term issue in 1940 was substantive or simply politically driven. The final question pursued is whether the third-term issue was a deciding factor for voters in the 1940 presidential election.

Historians Herbert Parmet and Marie Hecht concluded that the founders were wary of no term limits, but decided to leave the decision to the people and Electoral College to sort out on a case-by-case basis with no two-term limit in mind. Parmet and Hecht found that the tradition, which began with President George Washington, had no ideological grounding. Rather, they concluded that “Washington did not reject a third term for ideological considerations.”¹ Parmet and Hecht also found no evidence that President Thomas Jefferson or the other early presidents had any ideological reasoning for leaving office after two terms. However, Parmet and Hecht found that the two-term tradition did “achieve a place in the folklore of American democracy” that was a powerful example of a safeguard against tyranny.² Due to its place in American culture and society, it was compelling regardless of its factual basis and became real in the sense that it was an expectation that was highly valued.

Regardless of the ad hoc nature of the tradition, Bernard Donahoe

established that it was a large enough part of American political culture to give Roosevelt significant hesitation. Donahoe found that “the intraparty struggle between 1937 and 1940 left President Roosevelt with little or no choice but to surrender party and national leadership to men he regarded as too conservative” if he should not stand for renomination himself.³ If there had been a clear successor within the Democratic Party with an ideology closer to Roosevelt’s who was a viable presidential candidate, it is likely that Roosevelt would have abided by the tradition. However, Donahoe found that while the consideration of the third-term issue was as big a factor in Roosevelt’s decision as the impending war, Roosevelt felt the need to keep the New Deal coalition together by standing for reelection a third time. Donahoe concluded that there was no evidence that Roosevelt found the two-term tradition to be a particularly interesting challenge but served as a reason for hesitation instead.⁴

The second area of analysis that has been pursued by historians is whether the dialogue leading up to the 1940 presidential election regarding the third-term issue was genuinely principled or simply politically motivated. Eugene Roseboom found there were some who stood on principle against a third term for Roosevelt, but generally that the vocal opponents of the third term on “principle” were political enemies of Roosevelt in the two previous presidential elections.

¹ Herbert S. Parmet and Marie B. Hecht, *Never Again: A President Runs for a Third Term*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bernard F. Donahoe, *Private Plans and Public Dangers*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), viii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

Eugene Roseboom concluded that there were two groups of voters who vocally opposed Roosevelt on the stated ground that they supported the two-term tradition. The first group, conservative Democrats, would have likely rejected Roosevelt for a third term because of their opposition to the New Deal. However, they may not have felt comfortable publicly opposing Roosevelt due to his popularity within the party and nation. Roseboom found that “the no-third-term tradition [provided] a convenient bridge” and that “a long procession [of conservative Democrats] was soon crossing over to the Willkie camp.”⁵ While the number of conservative Democrats who publicly defected to Willkie was relatively small, public opposition within one’s own party gathered press coverage and raised questions of party solidarity on a national scale.

Republicans were the second group of voters and would have opposed Roosevelt regardless of the term for which he was running. However, the Republicans used the third-term issue in a sensationalist fashion when the “Republican newspapers and orators proclaimed that dictatorship was imminent and democracy itself [was] in dire peril.”⁶ Willkie and his followers regularly claimed that reelecting Roosevelt was voting for dictatorship and against democracy. Roseboom found that there were some who genuinely opposed a third term on principle, but that the majority of them would have

opposed Roosevelt regardless of the third-term issue.

Parment and Hecht also conclude that the dialogue about the third-term issue in 1940 by the opponents of Roosevelt was disingenuous. Parment and Hecht found that the third-term issue was used “as a weapon” by “those who...would have denied Mr. Roosevelt a first [term].”⁷ As with Roseboom’s conclusion, Parment and Hecht found that there was likely some legitimate concern about breaking the two-term tradition but the political discourse surrounding the issue was pervaded by purely political motivations among those who would have opposed Roosevelt regardless of the number of terms he had served or any tradition.

The most visible figure that criticized Roosevelt for attempting to break the two-term tradition was predictably Willkie. Charles Stein found that the third-term issue made the 1940 presidential campaign season a particularly “bitter one” that included a significant amount of “mud-slinging.” For example, Willkie constantly referred to Roosevelt as “the third-term candidate.”⁸ This was a not-so-subtle way for Willkie to remind voters of Roosevelt’s purported selfishness and arrogance while also showing disrespect for the sitting president. It is important to note that Stein identified this clear example of Willkie’s reliance on anti-third-term rhetoric in an attempt to convert Roosevelt supporters to his cause.

⁵ Eugene H. Roseboom, *A History of Presidential Elections: From George Washington to Richard M. Nixon*, 3rd ed., (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 471.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁷ Herbert S. Parment and Marie B. Hecht, *Never Again: A President Runs for a Third Term*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), x.

⁸ Charles W. Stein, *The Third-Term Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 336.

Another historian, Warren Moscow, found that Willkie's rhetoric often became hyperbolic when predicting a future America with Roosevelt as president for a third term. Moscow found that Willkie often predicted that "totalitarianism would come within the four years of that term" and that the 1940 election could be "the last free election the nation would ever see."⁹ Moscow concluded that the American people as a whole did not buy into Willkie's predictions and was an example of how the third-term issue played a role in his rhetoric as a candidate for president.

Some recent historians were quick to dismiss the third-term issue's role in the 1940 presidential election in favor of the argument that the entire campaign season revolved around American foreign policy and the growing fear of American involvement in a foreign war. While there are no historians who have claimed that the third-term issue did or should have taken precedence over foreign policy, the historians who wrote closer to the election itself found that the third-term issue played a significant role and would potentially have been dominant if not for fear of a looming war.

In 1943, Charles Stein wrote a book entitled *The Third-Term Tradition* that concluded that the fear of war was the dominant issue that did indeed settle the election.¹⁰ However, he argued that the 1940 election was a unique situation and that in any other set of circumstances

the third-term issue would have easily defeated a president even as popular as Roosevelt. Stein's book was the first written on the third-term issue after the 1940 election and was written in the midst of World War II. In it, Stein predicted that breaking the tradition would affect the country significantly. Of course, he was correct and the Twenty-Second Amendment, preventing a third term from ever occurring again, passed Congress just four years after his book was published. Stein argued that while the third-term issue was not the deciding factor in 1940, it was certainly a contributing factor.¹¹

In 1947, Edgar Robinson wrote a book entitled *They Voted for Roosevelt* that concluded the war most likely decided the election in favor of Roosevelt. However, Robinson argued that Roosevelt's "candidacy violated the 'no-third-term' tradition" and therefore became one of the three issues of "transcendent importance" in the campaign season.¹² Having been published just as a movement in Congress emerged to constitutionally limit presidential terms of office, the use of the word "violated" is an indication of the emerging national consensus in favor of what became the Twenty-Second Amendment. Additionally, Robinson found the third-term issue debate gave way to devolution of political discourse ending in "the bitterest national election in half a century."¹³ Similarly to Stein, Robinson argued that while the third-

⁹ Warren Moscow, *Roosevelt and Willkie*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 145.

¹⁰ Charles W. Stein, *The Third-Term Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 328.

¹¹ Charles W. Stein, *The Third-Term Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 339.

¹² Edgar Eugene Robinson, *They Voted for Roosevelt: The Presidential Vote 1932-1944*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1947), 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*

term issue was not the deciding factor in 1940, it had enormous effects on the political discourse of the time.

In 1965, Donahoe found that even though the impending war allowed Roosevelt to overcome the third-term issue in the general election, it was not the war that led to the Democratic nomination. Rather, the third-term issue was so important that there was concern it would “spell political suicide” for the Democratic Party and would require a new candidate for president.¹⁴ Donahoe found that the third-term issue was so significant that it caused the Democratic Party to look beyond the war and grapple with issues such as the economy in order to settle the intraparty fight over whether to renominate Roosevelt. Stein and Robinson found that the third-term issue had widespread effects within the larger political discourse. Donahoe looks at the discourse within the Democratic Party and finds similar, if not greater, effects of the third-term issue on the renomination debate.¹⁵

Roosevelt's Campaign Strategy and Rhetoric

President Roosevelt and his political advisors were very sensitive to the fact that the third-term issue could potentially keep him from being reelected despite his high approval ratings. To minimize the negative effect of this potentially devastating issue, Roosevelt decided not to run publicly for the nomination. Additionally, once he was nominated he decided that his most effective campaign strategy would be to

¹⁴ Bernard F. Donahoe, *Private Plans and Public Dangers*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), viii.

¹⁵ Bernard F. Donahoe, *Private Plans and Public Dangers*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), viii-ix.

limit the amount of time he spent campaigning and instead focus on his job as president, or at least appear to do so. Through a close analysis of Roosevelt's campaign statements, announcements, and acceptance speech this section of the paper will address the key role that the third-term issue played in guiding his campaign strategy. Additionally, the diary of one of Roosevelt's most trusted advisors, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, provides insight into the motivations and behind-the-scenes strategy discussions of the Roosevelt campaign.

Roosevelt and his advisors knew that if he was to appear ambitious and eager for a third term, he would receive significant and legitimate criticism that he was becoming too powerful and staying in office too long. While Roosevelt seemed to understand the importance of two-term tradition to the American people, he did not display much personal dismay at attempting to break it. However, he knew that the only way he could return to the White House for a third term was to let the nomination come to him.

As early as February of 1940, Ickes recorded conversations he had with Roosevelt about campaign strategy and managing the nomination process. In one entry, he wrote that Roosevelt was discussing whether his name would be on the ballot in various states and said, “...nor have I been asked to have my name put on the ballot in Ohio. I have seen to it that I wasn't asked. I have arranged it differently.”¹⁶ Roosevelt managed the nomination process from

¹⁶ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 122.

behind the scenes in order for him to avoid even discussing publicly whether he would run for a third term.

In addition to managing the nomination process in the states, Roosevelt unsuccessfully pushed for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to hold the nominating convention after Labor Day rather than in July when DNC Chairman Jim Farley wanted it to be. Part of the motivation may have been that Roosevelt wanted more time to make up his mind about running, but Ickes wrote that “the later the convention, the longer he will have to announce whether he would be a candidate or not, and this would distinctly be to the disadvantage of those who are now striving for Democratic delegates.”¹⁷ Ickes’ interpretation in his diary is that the chief result of Roosevelt’s convention plan was that there would be little chance for a Democratic candidate to challenge Roosevelt for the nomination.

Roosevelt issued a statement two days before the nomination was to take place to the Democratic National Convention on July 16, 1940, stating that he “has never had, and has not today, any desire or purpose to continue in the office of President.”¹⁸ He claimed he was too busy being president to travel to Chicago and make the speech himself. He added that the delegates should feel free to vote for any candidate and that he had exerted no influence in selecting the nominee.¹⁹ However, it was clear to all that he was to become the candidate just two days later and that his statement did

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The President States He Does Not Seek to Be a Candidate for a Third Term,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 69, 292.

¹⁹ Ibid.

not mean he would not accept the nomination. It was a brilliant political move and it was widely written that Roosevelt was “drafted” by the Democratic Party.

For example, in *The New Republic* there was a two-part series by R.G. Tugwell and John T. Flynn in which they answered the question: “Must We Draft Roosevelt?”^{20,21} In the first part of the series, Tugwell argued that was imperative for Roosevelt’s supporters to publicly advocate for the Democratic Party to nominate Roosevelt regardless of any statement that might say “I do not choose to run.” Instead, he dismisses the third-term issue and concludes that “a third term for Mr. Roosevelt is, in Mr. Laski’s words, ‘an essential condition of a decent peace.’”²²

In response to Tugwell’s article, Flynn wrote that the third-term issue was not “a bogey invented by sinister men who want to keep the government weak,” by keeping “an amateur President in the White House.”²³ Flynn argued against Tugwell’s characterization of the third-term issue as a farce and creation of those who were simply anti-Roosevelt. Rather, Flynn argued that it is best to have “professional Presidents” that retire after two terms “after which we will have to fall back on some rank amateur.”²⁴ This two-part series was a typical dialogue over the “drafting” of Roosevelt and the

²⁰ R.G. Tugwell, “Must We Draft Roosevelt?” *The New Republic*, May 13, 1940, 630-633.

²¹ John T. Flynn, “Other People’s Money,” *The New Republic*, May 20, 1940, 671-672.

²² R.G. Tugwell, “Must We Draft Roosevelt?” *The New Republic*, May 13, 1940, 633.

²³ John T. Flynn, “Other People’s Money,” *The New Republic*, May 20, 1940, 672.

²⁴ John T. Flynn, “Other People’s Money,” *The New Republic*, May 20, 1940, 672.

implications of the third-term issue that appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout 1940.

Three days after his statement, Roosevelt accepted the nomination for a third term from the Democratic National Convention at 12:25am on July 19, 1940 via radio address from the White House. He began by stating that he had “mixed feelings” and that he would like to retire but his “conscience” told him to accept the nomination.²⁵ Roosevelt was brilliant in conveying reluctance in this speech and playing down his personal ambition. Additionally, he went one step further to frame the discussion in such a way that resulted in his acceptance of the nomination being perceived as him doing the American people a favor. He stated that when he was reelected in 1936, “it was my firm intention to turn over the responsibilities of Government to other hands at the end of my term,” and that two terms as president “would normally entitle any man to the relaxation that comes from honorable retirement.”²⁶ By framing the discussion in this way, most listeners would not have been able to avoid feeling a sense of gratitude for Roosevelt’s acceptance of the nomination. This is the way in which he engaged the American public throughout the following five-month campaign season, by reminding them that he would like to retire and offering to continue only by the goodness of his own sense of duty.

The most telling line about his campaign strategy in the entire speech

²⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The President Accepts the Nomination for a Third Term,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 70, 293.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

was when he stated that he “shall not have the time or the inclination to engage in purely political debate.”²⁷ In this speech, he stated that he would simply be too busy with being president and would have no time or interest in engaging in political debate. While many citizens might have said they didn’t want to hear purely political debate, it is what a campaign for president essentially consists of. The way in which we choose our office holders in the United States is through lively, public political debate to decide what values and policies we think are most important.

Roosevelt was able to run a minimalist campaign by making his role as president extremely public. For example, just a month after his nomination by the Democratic Party, he went on a three-day tour of New England’s governmental and private-sector defense infrastructure. Some newspapers and magazines questioned his motives for such a trip, but he received enormous amounts of positive press coverage. For example, in a *Life* article covering this tour, he was pictured inspecting troops and equipment as no one but the president can do. Some of the captions in the article read, “here the President passes the drydock, in which the big submarine *Bass* is being refitted,” and “at Naval Training Station the President reviewed new recruits on parade ground.”²⁸ The pictures and their captions sent a message stronger than any campaign could without the fear of

²⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The President Accepts the Nomination for a Third Term,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 70, 298.

²⁸ *Life*, “President Campaigns for Third Term Against Backdrop of National Defense,” August 26, 1940, 24.

exposure on the third-term issue by engaging in overt campaigning.

Roosevelt knew that if he was to run a regular campaign and put himself, the New Deal, and his foreign policy at the center of the debate he would have to spend an enormous amount of time and resources responding as any candidate for reelection might. Moreover, this would exacerbate the third-term issue. If he ran for a second term in 1940 under the same circumstances, he would most likely have not been able to get away with running a non-traditional campaign. Roosevelt was more entrenched, known, and popular than most candidates running for a second term would be. Additionally, Roosevelt knew that if he was to run a conventional campaign in unconventional circumstances with the third-term issue hanging over his head, he may have had publicly debate that issue. He knew that he was good at being president and that the only issue he could not control was the fact that he was running for an unprecedented third term.

This strategy was presented by Roosevelt to his closest advisors on July 11, 1940, one week before he received the nomination from the Democratic Party. Ickes wrote in his diary a detailed account of the meeting in which Roosevelt discussed the type of campaign he would want to run and shared his idea for the New England defense infrastructure trip. According to Ickes, Roosevelt stated that “since his justification to run again would be the international emergency, he said that he could not campaign the country but would stay in Washington or within a few

hours of it.”²⁹ Roosevelt did not state that he could not travel far from Washington for real national security reasons, but rather for political reasons that would be presented as part of his national security focus.

When sharing his idea for the New England defense infrastructure trip, Roosevelt was similarly shrewd in calculating the public image generated by his actions. Roosevelt suggested the trip because it “would make it possible for him to emphasize what was being done in the way of preparation for war,” while not overtly seeking the presidency even though Ickes “gathered nothing from the President to make me feel certain that he had not fully made up his mind to run again.”³⁰ Roosevelt would spend his time as the president focusing on issues relevant to his reelection rather than as a candidate for the presidency campaigning. This strategy conveniently avoided his coming off as overambitious or overtly political.

Staying true to his campaign strategy as publicly stated in July, Roosevelt did not campaign at all or give any public indication about his intention until October 18, 1940 when the White House put out a brief statement laying out the goal and structure of his campaign. The minimal activity on his part had become the strategy itself because of the third-term issue. A month before the statement, Ickes and Attorney General Bob Jackson were asked by Roosevelt to put together a speaking tour of his surrogates in order to keep up an

²⁹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 238.

³⁰ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 238.

active campaign without Roosevelt's public involvement. Roosevelt wanted Ickes, Jackson and White House Press Secretary Steve Early "to go on the air with a speech answering the charges of 'dictatorship' and its relationship to a third term."³¹ Ickes told Roosevelt that he had "all the material on this and it would be no trouble at all to put it in the shape of a speech."³² With this new charge, Ickes published a pamphlet entitled *The Third Term Bugaboo* later that month in addition to his various speaking engagements.

The title of Roosevelt's October 1940, statement, "White House Release on the President's Personal Entrance into the Presidential Campaign of 1940," is groundbreaking in and of itself.³³ For a president to sit out his own reelection campaign and then publicly acknowledge his lack of campaign activity in this kind of public statement is highly unusual.

The statement began by quoting his acceptance speech to remind the public that Roosevelt "shall never be loath to call the attention of the nation to deliberate or unwitting falsifications of fact."³⁴ With simple correction of fact as the stated goal of his upcoming campaign involvement, the White House indicated that Roosevelt would tell the American people what misrepresentations have been made and "make five speeches

between now and election day."³⁵ Making only five speeches was perhaps the least amount Roosevelt could possibly have done for his campaign. Most presidential candidates before 1940, even incumbents, made dozens if not hundreds of campaign speeches in the time between Labor Day and Election Day. Roosevelt knew that he had to limit his public perception of wanting the third term in order to get it. If he displayed the ambition to break the tradition and serve for another four years, many Americans would question his motives and his effect on democracy in America as was seen in commentary sections of numerous magazine and newspaper publications.

For example, *The Christian Century* published an endorsement of Wendell Willkie on October 16, 1940, entitled "No Third Term!" In this four page endorsement, the majority of the commentary regarded an opposition to a third term on principle. *The Christian Century* wrote "we are opposed to a third term for any president, because the very fact that he covets it, and that he has a fighting chance to win it, implies the presence of the precise conditions which make a third term dangerous for the country."³⁶ The endorsement specifically cited the ambition for a third term as the factor that lead to their opposition. This widely read magazine came out against Roosevelt on this basis which was reflective of the opinion of many Americans at the time.

With Roosevelt's minimalist five-speech campaign set in motion, he openly engaged Republicans on foreign

³¹ Ibid., 324.

³² Ibid.

³³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "White House Release on the President's Personal Entrance into the Presidential Campaign of 1940," *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 116, 481.

³⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "White House Release on the President's Personal Entrance into the Presidential Campaign of 1940," *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 116, 481.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *The Christian Century*, "No Third Term!" October 16, 1940, 1270.

and domestic policy but avoided overtly discussing the third-term issue. I argue that a close analysis of Roosevelt's campaign speeches and his final radio address reveals the subtle, yet pervasive role that the third-term issue played in the rhetoric he chose to use throughout the campaign.

On October 23, 1940, Roosevelt gave the first of his five campaign speeches in Philadelphia. As was promised in the White House release discussing his campaign plans, Roosevelt did not lay out a platform or pontificate on one of his policy goals. In fact, Ickes noted in his diary that Roosevelt requested that his platform be kept "as short as five hundred words, if possible," which did not leave Roosevelt anything new to discuss.³⁷ Instead, he spent the time pointing out what he saw as falsifications by Willkie and other Republicans. At the beginning of his speech he stated that "truthful campaign discussion of public issues is essential to the American form of government" and reminded listeners that he would not be speaking out at all if it were not for the untruthful campaigning of his opponent.³⁸ While Roosevelt did go into great depth about American foreign and domestic policy issues in his five campaign speeches, he did not even mention the third-term issue by name or engage it directly in any sense. However, he did make many references to continuing democracy and free elections.

³⁷ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 235.

³⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Opening of the 1940 Presidential Campaign," *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 119, 486.

Some of the references to preserving democracy were reactions to charges that the New Deal was bringing about communism, socialism, or dictatorship in America. However, some of the references to protection of democracy would be out of context or misplaced within the speech if construed as being a defense of the New Deal. If these specific references to democracy and freedom were interpreted as a subtle defense of his third-term nomination, they become relevant and contextual.

For example, Roosevelt made reference to the charge by his Republican opposition that "the election of the present Government means the end of American democracy within four years."³⁹ He dismissed this charge as being untrue, melodramatic, and disingenuous political discourse. To prove that he does truly revere American democracy, he stated that he believed "the Presidency is a most sacred trust," to communicate an understanding of the meaning of the office he held and the third-term issue.⁴⁰ By using grand statements such as this, Roosevelt was able to convey his view that he did not view himself as one with the presidency itself, but rather one lucky enough to serve as a president.

Throughout this five speeches, Roosevelt often emphasized the principles of American democracy and the rights that it gave the American people. Particularly, he focused on the ability it gave them to freely and openly elect their governmental leaders. In a subtle argument, Roosevelt pitted the

³⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Opening of the 1940 Presidential Campaign," *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 119, 487.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 488.

two-term tradition against freedom of choice for the American people. In his November 2, 1940 campaign speech in Cleveland he stated that “Americans are determined to retain for themselves...the right to choose the officers of their own Government in free elections.”⁴¹ Rather than react to the third-term issue in an overt and defensive fashion, he chose to make free choice of governmental leaders one of the principles he campaigned on.

At the end of his speech in Cleveland, Roosevelt reassured the American people that they would succeed in the face of the international challenges “before the next term is over,” and that “when that term is over there will be another President, and many more Presidents in the years to come.”⁴² While most presidents running for reelection would not have wanted voters to picture others serving in their position, Roosevelt went out of his way to highlight that he would not serve forever. It is likely that he made this reference to subtly address the fears of his supposed endless ambition.

After his five official campaign speeches, Roosevelt made one final radio address on the eve of the election from his home in Hyde Park, New York. In this address, he made one of the least subtle references to the third-term issue of his entire campaign. He reminded the voters that the question they were to answer on November 5, 1940, was: “Who do I think is the best candidate best qualified to act as President?”⁴³ The

question not only simplified the thought process but also ignored issues to focus on qualifications. At that point, he had been president for nearly eight years and was almost objectively well-qualified to continue holding the office. Instead, Roosevelt’s opposition was opposed to his domestic policy, foreign policy, and his attempt to break the two-term tradition.

After he iterated the question that voters should ask themselves at the ballot box, Roosevelt argued that democracy was safeguarded by the very fact that the electorate had “the right to determine for themselves who should be their own officers of Government” and “the right to place men in office, at definite, fixed dates of election for a specific term.”⁴⁴ Roosevelt felt the need to assure the American people that his reelection did not mean the end of democracy in America but rather the election itself was the protection of democracy. He argued that the outcome was only the result of democracy, not democracy itself. Using rhetoric that addressed the institutional implications of democracy, Roosevelt was able to counter those who argued that voting for Roosevelt was voting for dictatorship.

Roosevelt’s campaign strategy minimized the amount of time he spent campaigning or engaging his opponent, but it necessitated active and aggressive campaigning on behalf of several surrogates including Ickes, Jackson, Senator Joseph Guffey, and then-Secretary of Agriculture and Vice-

⁴¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Campaign Address at Cleveland, Ohio,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 128, 547.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 552.

⁴³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Final Radio Speech of the 1940 Presidential Campaign,” *The Public*

Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Vol. 1940, no. 129, 555.

⁴⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Final Radio Speech of the 1940 Presidential Campaign,” *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1940, no. 129, 555.

Presidential Nominee Henry Wallace. In addition to speaking tours where they addressed the third-term issue, Ickes authored a pamphlet and Guffey authored a book entitled *Roosevelt Again!* Ickes and Guffey were the two public figures that openly and overtly addressed the third-term issue on Roosevelt's behalf. Ickes' pamphlet and Guffey's book made similar arguments but differed in detail and length.

Ickes was likely the most active campaigner in Roosevelt's cabinet. Roosevelt asked Ickes very shortly after being nominated "to be the spearhead in the campaign."⁴⁵ In this role, he traveled extensively and met with many of Roosevelt's political allies across the country. Ickes wrote *The Third Term Bugaboo* shortly after his conversation with Roosevelt about the third-term issue in September of 1940. Roosevelt and Ickes were particularly worried because the opposition was being extremely aggressive against their minimalist campaign. In his diary, Ickes wrote that "in Chicago on Friday, Willkie made some seven speeches. He got right down into the sawdust ring to prove that he was one of the people."⁴⁶ With the growing popularity of Willkie's energetic campaign, Ickes organized a new speaking tour and published the pamphlet to overtly engage the third-term issue rather than continue to address it subtly.

The Third Term Bugaboo began by explaining that "everyone knows that the Third Term is not the real issue in this campaign. The real issue is whether a

democratic people should have the right to choose an experience and trusted leader."⁴⁷ Ickes carefully established this premise so that he was not perceived to engage the issue on a political level, but rather as an institutional question. Ickes then explained that he wrote the pamphlet because "the opponents of President Roosevelt are using the Third Term bogey against him" and are "trying to create the impression that the Third Term is unconstitutional, unpatriotic, and a violation of the express will of the Founding Fathers."⁴⁸ The pamphlet contained quotes from the Founding Fathers, explanations of practical reasons why various two-term presidents did not seek a third term, and a final chapter about Roosevelt.

Ickes argued that the American people should not "let the third-term bugaboo interfere with your preference for a Presidential candidate."⁴⁹ Rather, he argued that the two-term tradition grew out of a series of coincidental retirements and happenstance. In the chapter on Roosevelt, Ickes quoted several supportive members of Congress including Representative Hamilton Fish, Jr., who stated that he "would like to see this third time issue decided by the people," rather than by Roosevelt or politicians.⁵⁰ Ickes was not the only surrogate of Roosevelt that made these set of arguments on his behalf.

According to Ickes' diary, Guffey was an associate and ally of Ickes within

⁴⁵ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 268.

⁴⁶ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 325.

⁴⁷ Harold L. Ickes, *The Third Term Bugaboo*, 1940, i.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Third Term Bugaboo*, 1940, 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

Roosevelt's campaign.⁵¹ Guffey's 120-page book did not focus entirely on the third-term issue as Ickes' pamphlet did, but it was one of the main subjects addressed. Guffey opened his book by referring to the third-term issue as a "so-called 'tradition'" and asking, "Is it a fundamental principle of American democracy?"⁵² He answered his question by stating that it was not a fundamental principle but was instead "a political hobgoblin, used by scheming politicians to scare the people away from candidates the people want."⁵³ This argument was similar to Ickes' argument because it argued that the third-term issue was only a creation of Roosevelt's opponents and not something to be taken seriously by voters.

However, it is important to note that both of these books were written on the topic on behalf of Roosevelt and dozens of speeches were made around the country on the same topic. This was a serious campaign issue regardless of how it came to exist in the political discourse of the campaign season. Guffey goes on to argue that as Americans we must be "unhampered by the dead weight of age-old traditions," and echoed Roosevelt's argument that "the people can have what they want under a democracy."⁵⁴ This argument provides a way to identify Roosevelt's subtle arguments addressing the third-term issue in the campaign speeches he made.

⁵¹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 321.

⁵² Joseph F. Guffey, *Roosevelt Again!* (Philadelphia: Frankling Publishing Company, 1940), 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Joseph F. Guffey, *Roosevelt Again!* (Philadelphia: Frankling Publishing Company, 1940), 9, 12.

The most useful argument found in Guffey's book discussed the relationship between the third-term issue and the New Deal in Willkie's campaign. Guffey wrote that the American people "are witnessing today a repetition of an old custom in political life - that of frightening the people with the shadow in order to deny them the substance. The shadow is the third term 'tradition.' The substance is the Roosevelt New Deal."⁵⁵ He went on to claim that the opponents of Roosevelt are falsely claiming to support principles of democracy for their own political gain. This passage is extremely useful in deciphering whether Willkie's campaign language was directly or indirectly addressing the third-term issue or the New Deal.

The context in which Ickes' pamphlet and Guffey's book was published was important in the understanding of their impact on the political discourse regarding the third-term issue. There were two books published in 1939 and 1940 that were completely dedicated to addressing the third-term issue. The first was entitled *The Third Term Issue* by Willis Thornton, a historian and journalist. Thornton addressed the third-term issue's constitutional implications as well as the historical precedents set by former presidents as far back as Washington. Thornton concluded that "the appeal to sheer tradition as such is untrue to the best American spirit. Better is the appeal to reason...not, 'Has this been done before?', but simply, 'Is this wise?'"⁵⁶ His argument is consistent with Ickes and

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁶ Joseph F. Guffey, *Roosevelt Again!* (Philadelphia: Frankling Publishing Company, 1940), 119.

Guffey that there is not much historical weight to the two-term tradition but argued that it could have merit but needs to be consciously accepted rather than grandfathered into American politics.

The second book published on the third-term issue was entitled *Democracy and the Third Term* by Fred Rodell, a professor at Yale Law School. Rodell attempted to address the third-term issue from an objective standpoint and subtitled his book “A handbook for both sides.” Rodell found that the political discourse regarding the third-term issue was generally insincere and unprincipled. He wrote that “views on the third term issue, though expressed in impersonal and abstract terms, have a way of shifting from one extreme to the other,” depending on what candidate is being discussed.⁵⁷ Rodell authored the book in the hope of providing some principled argumentation to guide the discussion of the third-term issue regarding Roosevelt. Rodell concluded that the two-term tradition’s history was “largely accidental” and that the Republican Party should have addressed issues of domestic and foreign policy rather than the third-term issue if the Party wanted to win the presidency.⁵⁸

In addition to these books and *The Christian Century* endorsement of Willkie, the *The New Republic*’s defense of Roosevelt’s campaign for a third-term was significant in the public discussion of the third-term issue. In “Who Willed the Third Term,” *The New Republic* argued that “Roosevelt himself desired not to run again, and so told many of his

confidants.”⁵⁹ The article concluded that Roosevelt was truly drafted into the campaign and he was not overly ambitious because he did not seek a third term.

The books and articles that were written by journalists, historians, and Roosevelt’s surrogates are testament to the weight of the third-term issue. Roosevelt overcame the two-term tradition not by a strong, forceful campaign that had him at its center but instead he stayed behind the scenes and ran a campaign that was perceived as minimalist and almost reluctant. Roosevelt’s surrogates were able to address the issue directly and provide enough argumentation to counter the attacks from Willkie’s campaign. This type of campaign allowed Roosevelt to avoid confronting charges of becoming too powerful or dangerously ambitious.

Willkie’s Campaign Strategy and Rhetoric

Wendell Willkie’s only run for office was for president in 1940. He was a very complex individual who had never served in public office and had supported Roosevelt in his elections for a first and second term. However, Willkie took issue with many of Roosevelt’s policies and used the third-term issue as a way to transition to the opposition. To understand the role of the third-term issue in Willkie’s campaign, this section will provide close analysis of Willkie’s nomination pledge and acceptance speech. They are predictive of Willkie’s campaign strategy and rhetoric used throughout the 1940 campaign season.

On June 28, 1940, Willkie made a speech to the Republican National

⁵⁷ Fred Rodell, *Democracy and the Third Term*, (New York: Howell, Soskin & Company, 1940), 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 114, 129.

⁵⁹ *The New Republic*, “Who Willed the Third Term?” July 29, 1940, 134.

Convention acknowledging that he had been selected as the presidential nominee of the Republican Party that he called “A Pledge to the Delegates of the Republican Convention.”⁶⁰ In the body of this speech, Willkie mentioned general foreign policy and domestic policy goals that he intended to fight for as the presidential nominee. However, he opened by stating that he pledged to work for the “preservation of American democracy.”⁶¹ While Willkie and Roosevelt both discussed the protection of the American homeland in the potential instance of an attack or invasion, Willkie did not refer to such attempts when he discussed preserving American democracy rather than America itself. Instead, Willkie made the argument that a vote for him was a vote for democracy rather than dictatorship. He stated that in this election American democracy “is facing the most crucial test it has ever faced in all its long history.”⁶² He made the argument subtly in this pledge but it sets the stage for more overt arguments to be made later in the campaign.

On August 17, 1940, Willkie delivered his official speech accepting the Republican Party nomination in Elwood, Indiana. In this speech, Willkie elaborated and extended the subtle argument he had made pitting himself and democracy against Roosevelt and dictatorship. He stated that the purpose of the speech was to “give you an outline of the political philosophy that is in my heart,” which was essentially “the

⁶⁰ Wendell Willkie, “A Pledge to the Delegates of the Republican Convention,” *This is Wendell Willkie*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 253.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 254.

preservation of American democracy.”⁶³ As in the pledge given at the Republican National Convention, Willkie aligned himself with American democracy and implied that Roosevelt threatened American democracy.

It is likely that Willkie was referring both to the New Deal and the third-term issue when making the sweeping statement about American democracy. Guffey countered this charge by writing, “the fact is that those who would impose the restriction of tradition upon the will of the people do so because they do not believe in democratic government.”⁶⁴ A significant portion of the rhetoric between Roosevelt’s campaign and Willkie’s campaign was a battle over the high-ground of principled American democracy.

Rather than arguing over foreign policy and the protection of America itself, Willkie set up the debate around what is best for American democracy. The two biggest advantages of framing the political dialogue in this way were that the third-term issue had bipartisan appeal and it avoided engaging foreign or domestic policy. Willkie attempted cross-party appeal by stating that “party lines are down” and that 1940 was a time when Americans of all parties could come together to stop “all special privileges and forms of oppression.”⁶⁵ The balance of the speech was spent telling a story from his childhood that emphasizes how when he was young he always believed that “any

⁶³ Wendell Willkie, “Speech of Acceptance,” *This is Wendell Willkie*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 259.

⁶⁴ Joseph F. Guffey, *Roosevelt Again!* (Philadelphia: Frankling Publishing Company, 1940), 87.

⁶⁵ Wendell Willkie, “Speech of Acceptance,” *This is Wendell Willkie*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 259-260.

young man might become President,” and that American leaders are not necessarily “members of the ruling or wealthy classes.”⁶⁶ By painting a picture of the presidency as a humble, accessible office, Willkie attempted to create a sharp contrast between the intention of the presidency and Roosevelt’s third-term ambitions. He attempted to appeal as the candidate who was not elitist or overly ambitious in addition to establishing that those were the qualities that should be found in a president.

Toward the end of the speech, Willkie chose to address the third-term issue directly, but he did so carefully. He stated that he “should like to debate the question of the assumption by this President, in seeking a third term, of a greater public confidence than was accorded to our presidential giants.”⁶⁷ Rather than overtly stating that Roosevelt is overly ambitious or is attempting to break a sacred American tradition, he said he would like to simply discuss it and made the “proposal respectfully to a man upon whose shoulders rest the cares of the state.”⁶⁸ Willkie was not as harsh as might have been regarding the third-term issue because Roosevelt was extremely popular and Willkie did not feel personally invested in the principled third-term opposition.

While Willkie did use rhetoric referring to the third-term issue, he was more concerned with the New Deal and foreign policy than he was the two-term tradition. After he lost to Roosevelt, Willkie stayed in the public eye until he

died in October of 1944. Just prior to his death, he published a proposed Republican Party platform entitled *An American Program* in which he did not mention the third-term issue at all. The chapter on the centralization of power in the United States made no mention of Roosevelt’s breaking of the third term tradition even though it would have been quite apt in supporting his argument.⁶⁹ The lack of continued concern about the third-term issue only highlights the likelihood that Willkie engaged the issue primarily for political purposes rather than on principle.

In September of 1940, Ickes addressed Willkie’s use of the third-term issue in his diary. He wrote that Willkie “hasn’t raised a single effective issue as against the President. So barren is he of issues that he has been campaigning recently almost entirely upon the third-term issue.”⁷⁰ Willkie had been campaigning since June, several months ahead of Roosevelt, and had not yet gained traction on any political issue against Roosevelt.

In addition to winning votes from Republican and independent voters, Willkie’s advocacy for the protection of the two-term tradition was an easy excuse for some active Democrats to oppose Roosevelt. For example, Ickes wrote of the defection of Senator Hiram Johnson in October of 1940 on these very grounds. According to Ickes, four years before Johnson would have come “out for a man whom he would have despised and fought with every ounce of his

⁶⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁷ Wendell Willkie, “Speech of Acceptance,” *This is Wendell Willkie*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 278.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Wendell Willkie, *An American Program*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 3.

⁷⁰ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 331.

strength four years ago.”⁷¹ However, he was a staunch isolationist and moved to oppose Roosevelt in the 1940 campaign season. Rather than oppose Roosevelt publicly over their difference in foreign policy, Johnson joined the Willkie campaign and his “pretended reason” was the third-term issue.⁷² This was not the choice of many influential Democrats, but it did provide an easy excuse to those looking to leave Roosevelt’s campaign.

Conclusion

While Roosevelt knew he could not win if he allowed the third-term issue to be central to the political dialogue, Willkie also knew that he could not win if it were not a part of every aspect of his campaign for president. Therefore, Willkie framed his campaign around preserving American democracy with the third-term issue front and center. It was easy for him to link the New Deal and Roosevelt’s foreign policy to this theme but it would have not have had any grounding without the third-term issue at its core.

On November 5, 1940, Roosevelt shattered the two-term tradition by carrying 38 states with 449 electoral votes and 55 percent of the popular vote.⁷³ In 1947, Congress passed an amendment to the Constitution limiting the presidency to two terms which was ratified in 1951. The third-term issue was forever relegated to history, never to be factor in a presidential campaign again. However, in the 1940 presidential campaign it was the single biggest factor shaping the

strategy and rhetoric of both the Roosevelt and Willkie campaigns. Domestic and foreign policy differences may have decided the 1940 election, but without an understanding of the impact of the third-term issue, it is difficult to contextualize the amendment of the Constitution just 11 years later.

⁷¹ Ibid., 355.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ross Gregory, *Wendell Willkie*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 64.

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