

Man of Destiny: FDR and the Making of the American Century

By Alonzo Hamby

(New York: Basic Books, 2015. Pp. 500. Notes, index. \$35.00.)

With this portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alonzo Hamby adds to his large body of distinguished work on the Roosevelt and Truman presidencies. The book covers familiar ground in Roosevelt biographies, but adds interesting and sometimes challenging interpretations of Roosevelt's performance. There is much to be admired here; there are also some puzzles and disappointments.

Hamby delivers an excellent account of FDR's early life as a pampered child and a privileged socialite who struck many as a superficial personality lacking substance. But the author insists that those years saw growth in political and social sensibilities important in shaping his thought and career. Hamby offers interesting details about Roosevelt's work as assistant secretary of the navy, often missed or glossed over quickly in other biographies, which describe a skillful and important administrator. He adds ample evidence to counter the image of a dilettante; Roosevelt from early on displayed organizational skills, political acumen, and hard-fisted competitive will against political rivals. Hamby repeatedly insists that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were important models who continually inspired FDR. He also makes passing reference to the importance of religion in shaping Roosevelt's politics, quoting

him saying, "I am a Christian and a Democrat, that's all" (p.71). But as is true of most Roosevelt biographies, there could be more and clearer reference to readily available testimony of the importance of religion in shaping Roosevelt's political thinking.

While Hamby offers fulsome praise for Roosevelt's accomplishments, the applause is accompanied by what can be read as a neoconservative interpretation of Roosevelt's performance, especially in the New Deal years. Assessing the president's work, Hamby repeatedly frames the achievements with images of failure. A few examples will serve. Following the statement that the First New Deal failed to meet its promise, Hamby writes that within months of its founding, New Deal programs funded four million jobs; improved roads, parks, sewer systems, and much other infrastructure; employed teachers and commissioned public art; and "carried millions of people through a time of extreme desperation" (p.196). Would that all federal efforts should "fail" so well. After describing the New Deal as more slogan than coherent plan and "floundering" by 1935, Hamby notes that the "steel and auto industries were running at near capacity, port facilities were at their busiest in years. Industrial and manufacturing cities were enjoying an economic boom. Agricultural prices

were strong" (p. 254). Floundering? Most startling, and not worthy of a historian of Hamby's talent, he compares Roosevelt's 1938 election campaigning against uncooperative congressmen to Joseph Stalin's bloody purges in Russia.

Hamby is more consistently positive on FDR's handling of war strategy and diplomacy, though he tends to overemphasize the idea that Roosevelt believed he could charm Stalin into cooperation. He also tends to portray the president with diminished capacity, hovering at death's door for most of the war years, in spite of FDR's grueling schedule and clear-headed handling of military and diplomatic challenges.

In the end, Hamby concludes with a generous tribute to FDR, whom he portrays as a leader who inspired millions at home and abroad; who

left the United States as the "greatest power on the planet," committed to liberal democratic principles; and who, despite imperfections (on which the author has dwelt repeatedly), left a "most generous and appealing legacy" (p. 436). This book will not stand as a major revisionist work on Roosevelt, but it will perhaps serve as an example of a neoconservative reading of the past, not an untypical phenomenon of the early decades of the twenty-first century.

MARIO R. DiNUNZIO is Emeritus Professor of History at Providence College. His recent books include *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Third American Revolution* (2011) and *Who Stole Conservatism?: Capitalism and the Disappearance of Traditional Conservatism* (2016).



The Music of the Stanley Brothers

By Gary B. Reid

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Pp. vii, 286. Illustrations, discography, notes, bibliography, general index, song index. Paperbound, \$30.00.)

In the historiography of American music, bluegrass has grown in stature as a distinct and significant art form, reflected in the increasing amount of scholarship on its history and development. Most early literature focused on Bill Monroe, the music's proclaimed creator, but now studies of other pioneering bluegrass performers are gaining ground. In

recent years, multiple books have appeared on the Stanley Brothers, one of the most influential first-generation bluegrass groups. These include Ralph Stanley's autobiography *Man of Constant Sorrow* (2009) as well as David W. Johnson's biography *Lonesome Melodies* (2013). The newest addition is Gary B. Reid's *The Music of the Stanley Brothers*, a comprehensive