

Introduction

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In August of 1941, less than four months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sumner Welles stood at the pinnacle of a remarkable diplomatic career. He had just helped draft the Atlantic Charter, which he believed would define America's impending entry into the war as a crusade for a new world order to replace the militarism, colonialism, spheres of influence, and power politics he believed had characterized the past. He had recently delivered a stirring address before hundreds of Washington dignitaries at the site of the future Norwegian Legation, offering a thorough exposition of America's war aims, and pledging United States support for the restoration of liberty to those nations subjugated in the war. A feature profile in the *New York Times* predicted that his views would dominate America's efforts to win the peace, while a *Time* cover story on Welles's address called him the "chief administrative officer of U.S. foreign policy," hinting that his elevation to secretary of state was a mere formality. [1](#)

Welles was a formidable force in wartime Washington, due to his intimate ties to President Roosevelt and the First Lady, his alliances with some of the most powerful members of Congress, his support in the press corps and the public at large, and his role as the administration's chief spokesman on foreign affairs. His views carried great weight, both abroad and at home with Congress, the press, and the White House. In short, he was one of the most important officials in the wartime administration, a man whose vision of the role the U.S. would play on the global stage made him a central figure in America's wartime transformation from a major power to a superpower, an architect of the coming "American Century." But, as events would reveal, he was also a figure of immense contradictions, a deeply troubled man who wore different faces for different occasions and different people. His career, as well as his relationships with others, would suffer for it.

"Your name will be written large in the record of these times when history is able to assess the great constructive work you have performed," predicted former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew in a wartime letter to Welles. When he died in 1961, his eulogists indeed praised his long career, but one would hardly have surmised from such accounts that he had once influenced the course of his nation like few public officials before or since. President Kennedy wrote upon Welles's death that "his career will have an enduring place in the history of American diplomacy and public life" and an editorial in the *New York Times* added that, "few Americans were better known or more highly regarded in the chanceries of the world than he. There is no fear that he will be forgotten, for he made his mark on the history of the twentieth century." [2](#) Yet, all things considered, rarely have such prophecies been proven so false so soon, as this once dynamic public figure faded from public memory within only a few years.

In the years since Welles's death, assessments of his role in wartime diplomacy have become more muted, in large part due to the lurid nature of the real reasons behind his abrupt resignation in August 1943. At the time, many assumed he had resigned due to long-standing enmities with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. The Welles-Hull feud was indeed one of the most bitter in wartime Washington. Yet the real causes of his departure were much more complex and involved more than Welles's antagonism with Hull, or, as some charged, a conservative conspiracy to purge progressives and New Dealers.

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During the early years of the war, numerous stories circulated about Welles's conduct on a train returning from the Alabama funeral of Speaker of the House William Bankhead in September 1940. According to most accounts, an intoxicated Welles propositioned several black male porters whom he had summoned to his private compartment. On a second train trip later that month he allegedly solicited porters on a train bound for Cleveland. ³



Homosexual behavior constituted grounds for criminal prosecution in the 1940s, and many assumed it would make an official of Welles's standing susceptible to blackmail, especially in wartime. The Secret Service subsequently warned President Roosevelt that the railroad company was considering legal action. Shortly after the first incident, one porter filed a formal complaint about Welles's conduct; the porter's employer was the Southern Railway Company, which had its headquarters in Philadelphia, home of William C. Bullitt, Roosevelt's Ambassador to the Soviet Union and later France, and a resentful rival for the president's favor. Once Bullitt learned of the indiscretion, he realized he possessed a weapon of sufficient strength to destroy Welles. ⁴

President Roosevelt, with the aid of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, undertook a clandestine three-year effort to protect his trusted friend. But Bullitt and Hull pushed to bring the allegations to the attention of the press and Congress, and in the summer of 1943 they succeeded, when revelations about Welles's conduct became known to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Welles abruptly resigned, declining Roosevelt's offer that he become his special envoy to Moscow. Although only fifty years old, it was clear to almost everyone that his career was over.

Yet Welles was a more interesting figure—in part because of his many complexities and contradictions—than the selfless public servant or hapless victim who has so often been portrayed in the drama of World War II accounts. To many, he seemed a model statesman: intelligent, articulate and knowledgeable about his department and the world. Tall, at six feet three inches, erect in bearing, and attired in London-made bespoke suits which he often changed several times a day, with his neatly clipped mustache and

ivory-handled walking stick, he seemed the epitome of the "striped pants" stereotype of the diplomatic corps. James Reston, the chief Washington correspondent of the *New York Times*, thought Welles possessed "enough dignity to be Viceroy of India, and, what is more important, enough influence in this critical era to make his ideas, principles and dreams count." Yet, Reston added, "No man in public life in this century has been judged so often or so inaccurately ... by external appearances." [5](#)

To others, Welles could be aloof, snobbish, uncompromising, and elitist. Fluent in several languages, it was joked that he could hold his tongue in Spanish, French, German, or Italian. "Someone has said he is the nearest thing to a ruling-class Englishman the United States produces," a British magazine claimed in 1940, adding, "he has more than his share of that uncompromising reticence so popular in official circles here." Harold Ickes characterized Welles as "a man of almost preternatural solemnity and great dignity. If he ever smiles, it has not been in my presence. He conducts himself with portentous gravity as if he were charged with all the responsibilities of Atlas. Just to look at him one can tell that the world would dissolve into its component parts if only a portion of the weighty state secrets that he carries about were divulged." [6](#)

Welles certainly had more than his share of human frailties, which, coupled with his certitude, elitism, and arrogance, aided in his downfall. Shrouded in a self-protective armor of privilege and rigid manners, little of his human side was ever revealed. Dean Acheson, who had known Welles since their boyhood days at Groton, recalled that his "manner was formal to the point of stiffness. His voice, pitched much lower than would seem natural, though it had been so since he was a boy, lent a suggestion of pomposity." He often concealed himself behind an exaggerated fastidiousness and propriety. Once, when a remark of Alice Acheson made Welles laugh, he abruptly caught himself short: "Pardon me," Welles said, embarrassed, "You amused me." Washington newspapermen never quite knew what to make of Welles, and referred to him as "Mr. Icicle." [7](#)

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Welles began his diplomatic career during the First World War and had been inspired by President Wilson's pronouncements about reordering world politics. Early in his career he became a proponent of the view that the United States should use its vast power to achieve a sense of order on a global scale to pursue outcomes consistent with U.S. interests. But only through his long-standing association with Franklin D. Roosevelt would Welles's ideas actually come to carry any weight. He had known Roosevelt since childhood, and served as a friend and counselor to the future president throughout the 1920s.

Welles had long understood the importance of trade to what had become the world's most powerful economy, and he foresaw America's growing power and influence in world affairs. He assumed that the removal of restraints on international trade would increase prosperity and make future wars less likely. Welles faced his earliest foreign relations challenges in Latin America, where the Monroe Doctrine served as his lodestar. He became an early proponent of securing better relations with the other American republics as a way of promoting greater regional economic integration. In the 1920s he began to articulate a vision of this concept, which he called the "American system," thereby creating the basic outlines of what would later become the Good Neighbor Policy. He also began to foresee that, before the United States could become the foremost power in the world, it would first have to extend and strengthen its presence in the Western Hemisphere. He strove to clarify and realize these vague aims after Roosevelt named him assistant secretary of state for Latin America in 1933. After several false starts, he took the lead in promoting economic integration and political unity in the hemisphere. His appointment as under secretary in 1937 placed him in a position to push for U.S. leadership in the world beyond the Americas, as he spearheaded the administration's efforts to play a more active role in global affairs.

More important than his diplomatic efforts prior to U.S. entry into the war was his work toward shaping a vision of the postwar order. Welles feared that the other world powers might achieve a settlement that would be contrary to U.S. interests. Thus, even before the United States entered the war, he emerged as the administration's strongest voice advocating a U.S.-led international order founded upon a new world organization. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, he publicly called for the United States to lead the way toward an internationalist future where the world's markets would be free, trade barriers nonexistent, and colonialism and economic nationalism unnecessary.

Welles wished to bring about a new world order based upon free markets and republican institutions, buttressed by American military power. While heading the state department's committees for postwar planning, which were entrusted with the task of designing the foundations of the postwar order, he transmuted these vague goals and aims into a plan of action. He envisioned how trade and the distribution of aid would be essential to American prosperity in the postwar era. He became sharply attuned to the needs of the national economy, which he believed was destined to dominate the global marketplace, and he assumed that American prosperity in the postwar era would depend upon foreign markets and a world made safe for democracy and capitalism. He oversaw plans to design the United Nations and advocated a "soft peace" toward the defeated Axis powers, in the hope that they would reemerge as part of his desired new order. He desired the withering away of the colonial empires, and wished to put U.S. relations with Moscow on a more permanent footing that might endure after the war. He aimed to avoid simply reviving the old League of Nations by instead building the new world organization upon a series of smaller regional leagues and by providing it

with a strong military capability and an extensive system of trusteeships for colonial areas which would differ from the old scheme of mandates. [9](#)

Unlike many of the president's other foreign affairs advisors, Welles considered himself more than a mere executor of Roosevelt's will and aims. He even expanded and went beyond the traditional role of a secretary of state. He not only maintained an iron grip on the State Department bureaucracy and advised the president, but he also played a defining role in the genesis of policy and in its presentation to Congress and the public, and he led the State Department's efforts to expand its policymaking role and protect its turf. Welles's pivotal role in postwar planning, and his public efforts on behalf of the administration's foreign policy aims, made him something more than a traditional advisor. Furthermore, as he clearly demonstrated in his newspaper columns and published works, Welles also had a world-view, or *weltanschauung*, that went well beyond day-to-day policy concerns and bureaucratic infighting. And, perhaps most importantly, a closer look at Welles's world-view allows us a better understanding of Roosevelt's foreign policy, for he understood and anticipated Roosevelt's true aims just about as well as any one could have.

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It is certainly noteworthy that so many of his ideas paralleled those of the chief executive. But which way did the influence flow, from Welles to Roosevelt or vice-versa? On numerous controversial issues—such as American relations with the Free French, efforts to ally U.S. war aims with the aspirations of colonial peoples, the design of an international organization, and the postwar future of Palestine—Welles seems to have had a notable and significant influence on Roosevelt's views. Yet on other questions, such as the reconstruction of postwar Germany, their views were not immediately sympathetic. On yet other matters, such as regionalism and the creation of regional federations, or the question of trusteeships for post-colonial areas, Welles's resignation in September 1943 marks a significant alteration in the trend of Roosevelt's thinking.

While Welles often sought to anticipate Roosevelt's needs, aims, and desires, the under secretary was also clearly his own man with his own views. In this, he certainly benefited from Roosevelt's loose management style. In fact, it could be said that Roosevelt had little regard for formal structure of any kind. This, coupled with the marginalization of Cordell Hull within the administration, enabled Welles to have greater access and influence than he might otherwise have enjoyed. The difficulty in tracing the seams or connections in the Welles-Roosevelt partnership stems in part from the almost willful chaos which often characterized the administration, as well as from the fact that Welles remained loyal throughout his life to the confidential and personal nature of the relationship. Aside from the fact that he was in contact with Roosevelt on a daily basis and provided the president with crucial briefing materials prior to important decisions or meetings with

foreign officials, it must also be emphasized that Welles had a relationship with Franklin and Eleanor that predated the New Deal by three decades. He felt a deep sense of loyalty to Roosevelt the man, as well as to Roosevelt the president, a loyalty and depth of commitment that were not necessarily shared by other presidential advisors. Roosevelt trusted Welles, and that trust was reciprocated by Welles's devotion and loyalty, and (at least officially) discretion.

Of all those whom Roosevelt consulted on international matters, only Welles consistently sought to provide a broader justification for America's war effort. He often introduced themes and ideas that the president and Hull were not yet prepared to advance publicly themselves. He championed the most advanced universal and liberal goals of the administration, thus making him a favorite of many progressives and New Deal intellectuals. Yet should we accept his utterances at face value? Or did he merely seek to camouflage his real aims behind an idealistic smokescreen? Welles was a self-professed internationalist, and his vision of a postwar world aimed to promote largely national objectives of security through international means. His promotion of idealistic principles such as liberal democracy and self-determination perhaps owed more to calculations of America's national interests than to high ideals or selfless altruism. While an idealist in his public pronouncements, he endeavored to promote the more specific needs of America's expanding economy and strategic interests. Welles would perhaps have felt quite at home with a definition of internationalism that placed it in the service of the pursuit of national interests. He believed the two concepts were perfectly compatible.

He had calculated that the war effort would be better sustained by moral arguments than by appeals to self-interest. While he understood that his vision of the postwar order would allow American commerce to flourish alongside universal ideals and values, he used idealistic rhetoric because he assumed the American people would more willingly sacrifice for ideals that they believed were consistent with their deepest moral, religious, and political convictions. ¹⁰ He thus offered broader idealistic justifications than free trade or a mere resurrection of the balance of power, and foresaw the United States taking the lead in building a new global order that was based on universal principles but also compatible with its national interests. The quasi-religious overtones of Welles's wartime utterances made many of his public addresses sound like sermons, casting an aura of spiritual and moral zeal around what otherwise might have sounded like nothing more than a call to American nationalism. Such pronouncements sought to provide the pursuit of America's interests with a broader moral justification and underpinning. Thus to many it seemed that Roosevelt had given Welles the tasks of defining why Americans fought and of preparing the country for its preeminent role in the peace. ¹¹

His world-view did not look backward to an era of time-honored neutrality, but forward to a world "reformed" through American guidance. He saw the Second World War as a revolutionary event that would transform the United States into a superpower, while U.S. participation in the war would begin the gradual process of remaking the world in America's image. Welles assumed that the promotion of American values and free enterprise would best ensure the national security of the United States, while a stable and market-oriented world order would ultimately best promote American interests abroad. He assumed that a world made safe for democracy and free trade would simultaneously advance the material interests and security needs of the United States.

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Welles lent intellectual firepower to America's war aims, but his idealistic rhetoric was often in conflict with his passion for order, which also found personal expression in his impeccable attire, precise manners, and cold demeanor. His rigid mien, rooted in the Victorian values of his youth, rarely wavered in public. But behind his forbidding exterior was a deeply troubled man who could drink himself into blackouts; a man with a rigid and tightly controlled personality who struggled to contain his sexual feelings toward both men and women, often hiding his true feelings behind a monumental snobbery.

Welles's complex and seemingly contradictory personality reflected his world-view. His idealistic pronouncements about freedom, self-determination, and radical change belied his fear of revolution, upheaval, and chaos. He set himself apart from more prosaic views during the war by embracing such radical concepts as a "people's war," "world revolution," and "a new world order," while opposing the "status quo" and the "old unsteady balance of power." But, in actuality, he abhorred revolution and upheaval and greatly desired order and equilibrium, as demonstrated by his dogged advocacy of large-scale global planning, worldwide institutions, and permanently fixed international laws and standards. He had a passion for structure and systematic planning, once telling an audience that stability, security, and peace could be guaranteed only if constructed upon the foundations of consensus, detailed study, scientific truth, and international law. In the midst of wartime chaos, he believed such ideals would not flourish without first restoring order and, while he attacked much of the "status quo" during the war, he never resolved the dilemma raised by the fact that placing such a heavy emphasis on maintaining stability would ultimately make it more difficult to challenge the old order.

Idealistic, almost utopian, ideals, coupled with more narrow self-interested aims, underlay Welles's world-view. In public policy, as in his stewardship of the State Department, Welles often sought to disguise a ruthless pursuit of his own ends under the cloak of idealism. Like Wilson, Welles's idealistic rhetoric often obscured a crusading internationalism that aimed to reshape the world in America's image. Wilson's self-professed universalism often

concealed a blunt unilateral pursuit of national self-interest. While Welles frequently spoke about self-determination, democracy, and independence, he placed stability and order on a higher plane. His public pronouncements about national self-determination in the colonial world, for example, stood in contrast to his desire that a U.S.-designed and guided system of international trusteeships would carefully manage incremental steps toward independence. In some areas, he conceded, his system of trusteeships might endure for a thousand years. Furthermore, despite his oratory about freedom and individual rights, he supported and worked closely with authoritarian regimes throughout his career, readily accepting them so long as they did not interfere with American interests. Additionally, he spoke passionately of reordering the politics of regions such as the Middle East and Eastern Europe, but he desired a return to the stability and unity of the Ottoman Empire in the former, and flirted with notions of bringing back the Habsburgs for the latter.

There were other paradoxes. Welles claimed he opposed spheres of influence, but his regional approach to world organization seemed to be a tacit acceptance that such spheres would inevitably develop. In fact, regionalism was essentially a spheres of influence scheme under a different name. Furthermore, he claimed a moral abhorrence of colonialism, but he endeavored to create an informal U.S. empire in the Americas, and his "enlightened paternalism" toward certain diplomatic officials could be painfully similar to the patronizing demeanor of some European imperial officials. He publicly championed a universalist vision of equal opportunity, but sought to tell the whole world how to arrange its affairs, and privately admitted that he thought "the Negroes are in the lowest rank of human beings" and that "the colored races" were generally "unfit for self-government...." ¹² An Anglophile by background, style, and temperament, Welles had a strong sense of personal, cultural, and political kinship with Great Britain. Yet he had a profound distrust of the sincerity of the Churchill government, frequently became enraged with British officials, feared Britain might prove more of a hindrance than help in the postwar era, sought ways to undermine London's political aims, and deliberately shaped and pursued policies that led to the diminishment of British power and influence throughout the world. In addition, Welles had an abiding suspicion of communism. Nevertheless, during the war he pragmatically promoted closer relations with Moscow and helped cement the Grand Alliance, which he hoped would outlast the war.

Welles has received due credit for his role in Latin America, his prewar diplomacy, and the part he played in numerous war-related decisions, but his chief interest remained postwar planning. More than anyone else in Washington, he seemed to be more concerned about long-term U.S. interests than in the day-to-day realities of the war. Even before U.S. entry into the war, he focused not so much on routine events as on the opportunities that a postwar peace would afford U.S. interests. He foresaw America's huge accumulation of power and anticipated that the dislocation and upheaval

created by the conflict would facilitate America's rise to global leadership, where the world would have little choice but to consent to a benevolent American hegemony. But he deluded himself that American predominance would be different from what had come before. Welles assumed that, unlike previous attempts at global preeminence, the American empire would eschew crude military intervention and instead rely on economic power such as aid and trade, as well as political and moral guidance. His vision of a new world order rested upon the belief that the very fact of U.S. primacy would almost irresistibly bring about a sort of Americanization of the world based on order, international cooperation, and free trade.

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The war was his moment. He saw it as an opportunity to achieve order abroad and embraced the illusion that the world at large would accept American ideals. Ultimately, Welles would discover that Washington's ability to transform the world in its own image would not be so easy. Like Woodrow Wilson before him, he failed to understand that American values, ideals, and institutions were not easily exportable and, throughout the war, he would repeatedly come up against the difficult truth that, despite America's vast new power, even the best laid plans would consistently go astray in the effort to create a new world order.

Notes:

Note 1: *New York Times Magazine*, August 2, 1941; *Time*, August 8, 1941. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Joseph Grew to Welles, September 21, 1943, box 94, folder 5, Welles papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library [FDRL]; John F. Kennedy to Harriette Welles, September 25, 1961, box 22, folder 5, Welles papers, FDRL; *New York Times*, September 25, 1961. [Back.](#)

Note 3: A detailed account of the scandal can be found in a recent biography of Sumner Welles written by his son. See Benjamin Welles, *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1-3, 342-346. Another valuable account is Irwin Gellman, *Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull and Sumner Welles* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 219-220, 237-238. [Back.](#)

Note 4: The origin of the animus between Welles and Bullitt is hard to pin down but seems to have intensified in the spring of 1937 when Welles obtained the post of under secretary of state over the strenuous objections of Bullitt, who favored his close friend Walton Moore. It may have worsened when Welles's mission to Europe in 1940 diminished the role Bullitt believed he played as the president's chief diplomatic representative in Europe. For more on the Welles-Bullitt antagonism see Orville Bullitt, ed., *For the President: Personal and Secret: Correspondence Between Franklin Roosevelt and William Bullitt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 511-518; Adolf Berle

Diary, September 1, 1943, box 215, Adolf Berle Papers, FDRL; Breckinridge Long Diary, August 29, 1943, box 5, Papers of Breckinridge Long, Library of Congress Manuscript Division; Athan Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex, and Crime: An Historical Antidote* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1995), 32. [Back.](#)

Note 5: *New York Times Magazine*, August 2, 1941. [Back.](#)

Note 6: *Time*, February 19, 1940; *Picture Post*, March 9, 1940; Harold Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes: The Inside Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 351. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 12. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Sumner Welles, "An Association of Nations," July 22, 1941, speech files, box 195, folder 2, Welles papers, FDRL; Sumner Welles, "Wilson and the Atlantic Charter," November 11, 1941, speech files, box 195, folder 2, Welles papers, FDRL. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Welles to Archibald MacLeish, August 13, 1942, box 81, folder 1, Welles papers, FDRL. [Back.](#)<

Note 10: Sumner Welles, "The Realization of a Great Vision," May 30, 1942, speech files, box 195, folder 5, Welles papers, FDRL; Robert Sherwood to Welles, June 25, 1942, box 83, folder 11, Welles papers, FDRL. Not everyone was so convinced of Welles's idealism. "Welles is no radical," wrote the esteemed journalist and social critic I. F. Stone, "he is only occasionally liberal. His outlook is about that of a sensible business man who prefers a shrewd adjustment of realities to butting his head against a stone wall." See *The Nation*, September 4, 1943. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Welles privately shared his generation's condescension toward "lesser races" and was unsure that all peoples were fit for self-government. For Welles's comments, see Political Subcommittee minutes 27, October 3, 1942, box 54, Harley Notter files, Record Group 59, National Archives (hereafter referred to as "P minutes"). [All planning documents and planning minutes are from the Harley Notter files, National Archives, Record Group 59, unless otherwise noted]. [Back.](#)

Note 12: See P minutes 34, November 21, 1942, as well as the minutes of Welles's subcommittee on international organization, referred to as PIO minutes 10, October 9, 1942, box 85, Notter files. [Back.](#)

[Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning, and the Quest for a New World Order, 1937-1943](#)