The Geographic President: Franklin D. Roosevelt as a Geographic Thinker and Communicator

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14. ABSTRACT

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's geographic presidency offers important lessons for how leaders can be effective thinkers, bureaucratic organizers, and public communicators. FDR employed geography as a tool in three ways: to support his own critical thinking, to help coordinate strategy and policy among his advisors and allies, and to build public support. In an era where military service is increasingly rare among presidential candidates, FDR's use of geography is instructive for how lifelong civilians participate in the formulation of strategy.

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Geographic literacy is not among the few constitutional requirements for holding the office of President. American Presidents have varied widely in their cognitive and communication skills, including their ability to use geographic information in support of critical thinking and to employ maps as a medium for communication. Many presidents have understood the relationship between national power and physical space, and several might stake claims to being among our most "geographic" presidents. George Washington was a surveyor and general, Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase and sponsored the Lewis and Clark expedition, James Monroe declared a hemispheric doctrine, Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower commanded armies on a continental scale, Theodore Roosevelt was an explorer, and many post-World War II presidents had practical navigation experience as soldiers, sailors, and pilots. But the president who demonstrated the most compelling use of geographic thinking and communication, despite his physical disability and a lack of military training, was the one who orchestrated American victory on a global scale: Franklin D. Roosevelt.

FDR's use of maps is evident in several key aspects of leadership identified by the presidential scholar Fred Greenstein, including effectiveness as a public communicator, organizational capacity, vision, and cognitive style.[1] FDR brought substantial political and government experience to the presidency and had developed expertise in naval issues as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I, but FDR was largely self-taught when it came to geography, international relations, and military strategy. Nevertheless, his use of geography shows that his passionate curiosity, critical thinking skills, and effective communication were more important than technical skills or military experience. In an era where

[1] Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 225-299.

military service is increasingly rare among presidential candidates, FDR's use of geography is instructive for how lifelong civilians participate in the formulation of strategy. FDR's geographic presidency offers important lessons for how leaders can be effective thinkers, bureaucratic organizers, and public communicators. FDR employed geography as a tool in three key ways: to support his own critical thinking, to help coordinate strategy and policy among his advisors and allies, and to build public support.

Geography and Individual Decision Making

At the individual level, FDR had an innate tendency to think about problems in a geographic context, and he made deliberate efforts to align resources and geographic tools in support of his decisions. Richard Edes Harrison, the great strategic cartographer of World War II, discussed this kind of thinking in a 1944 essay that accompanied his 1944 *Look at the World: The Fortune Atlas for World Strategy.* [2] *Look at the World* included dozens of original maps of war zones from multiple perspectives and advanced several arguments about how different nations' unique spatial perceptions influenced the making of good or bad strategy. Harrison made an impassioned plea for the importance of "geographical sense" for Americans forced by the war from "a period of cartographic lethargy." Harrison was ambivalent on whether leaders possess this sense innately or develop it over time, but he singled out FDR's strong "geographical sense" as enabling vital moves that averted disasters and created America's path to victory.[3]

[2] Richard Edes Harrison, ed., *Look at the World: The Fortune Atlas of World Strategy*, New York: Fortune, 1944.
[3] Harrison, "The Geographical Sense," in *Look at the World*, 12.

FDR was known for his intelligence and use of historical references: as Arthur Schlesinger noted, "detail stuck in his mind like sand in honey."[4] But FDR demonstrated a particular affinity for spatial thinking and geographic detail, as seen in his passion for sailing, his support of professional geographers, and even with his lifelong hobby of collecting foreign stamps.[5] One of FDR's naval aides, who thought that FDR's geographic mastery was "amazing," once heard him respond to praise of his map knowledge that "if a stamp collector really studies his stamps he can pick up a great deal of information."[6] Robert Cross, who chronicled FDR's nautical life in *Sailor in the White House*, argues that FDR's thought patterns were shaped by strong navigational instincts he developed on his yachting and fishing trips and though world travels on ocean liners.[7] Cross constructs an unusual biography of FDR by cataloging every ship FDR was ever aboard, including at least 110 named vessels and unknown numbers of smaller craft.[8] Cross' innate nautical sense and Harrison's geographic sense are not the same thing, but both suggest the key cognitive filters FDR applied were fundamentally spatial. FDR was also a great collector of maps and a supporter of professional geographers. FDR was elected Councilor of the American Geographic Society (AGS) in 1921 and kept up a multi-decade correspondence with AGS President Isaiah Bowman. Bowman was a key figure in the establishment of academic geography in America and FDR sought his geographic advice on various policy issues.[9]

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[4] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957, 408.
[5] Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum, "Collection Overview: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President: Map Room Papers, 1941-1945," http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/?p=collections/findingaid&id=511
[6] John McCrea, "Setting up Map Room in White House and Other Incidents in Connection with Service There," edited copy of interview (oral history) by W.W. Moss for FDR Library and Museum, 19 March 1973, https://fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/mccrea+maproom.pdf.
[7] Robert F. Cross, *Sailor in the White House: the Seafaring Life of FDR,* Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 2003.
[8] Cross, "Appendix," 203-206.
[9] Archives of the American Geographical Society Library, "Roosevelt, Franklin D., 1921-1942," Library of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agsny/id/19914.

However, it was the wartime establishment of the White House Map Room that most concretely demonstrates Roosevelt's commitment to aligning geographic resources and cartographic context in support of his decision making. Roosevelt regularly referred to a map cabinet, donated by the National Geographic Society, in his private study adjacent to the Oval Office, but in late 1941, as the entry of the United States into World War II grew closer, FDR ordered the conversion of a room in the White House basement into a Map Room. Initially consisting of large-scale charts on an old table from the Cabinet Room, the Map Room grew into an information center staffed by the Navy and Army, with detailed maps and nautical charts lining the walls. The maps depicted battle lines and ship positions with push pins, continuously updated by the Map Room staff from official dispatches, while special pins also indicated the current location of particular individuals, including Churchill, Stalin, and the ship in which Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. was serving.[10]

White House Map Room circa 1943, Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum

[10] William Rigdon, *White House Sailor*, New York: Doubleday, 1962, 7.

FDR would visit the Map Room, located adjacent to the office where he received daily medical treatment, to read the latest dispatches and visualize them in a geographic context on the wall maps. The room impressed senior commanders such as Admiral Ernest King, General George Marshall, and Admiral William Leahy, who commented there was "more information about the war concentrated in your Map Room than there is in any other place in Washington."[11] The room eclipsed another comprehensive information center established by William Donovan's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Maryland. One of the lead developers of the OSS facility visited the Map Room and borrowed some ideas, but the inconvenience of its location provides a cautionary tale.[12] Information must be readily accessible to be useful to a decision maker and a trip to Bethesda, with all the arrangements required, could not compete with a trip to the basement in a White House elevator.

Creating Common Perspectives among Allies and Advisors

The White House Map Room was more than just an example of FDR's desire to immerse himself in geographic context as the leader of a nation at war. FDR was either inspired by, or envious of, the way Winston Churchill used maps in his Cabinet War Rooms and a "mobile map room" constructed in a cabin aboard *HMS Prince of Wales* for the August 1941 conference in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. FDR visited Churchill's map cabin right after a painful effort to walk aboard *Prince of Wales* with braced legs and an emotional church service on the fantail where the two "former naval persons" took a break from negotiating the Atlantic Charter to sing battle hymns together. A few months later, right after the Pearl Harbor attack, Churchill rushed to Washington to coordinate in person with FDR. Eleanor Roosevelt recalled finding the two

[11] Admiral Leahy quoted in McCrea, 6.
[12] McCrea, 24-25.

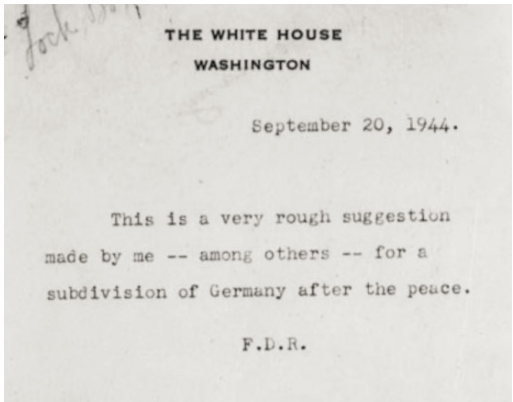
world leaders in the White House Map Room studying the charts together so enthusiastically that they showed something like a childish enjoyment of a war game.[13]

Creating a common perspective among allied leaders is a challenge in any coalition, and the tight Anglo-American alliance was no exception. Churchill and Roosevelt went to great lengths to coordinate directly through several wartime conferences, but they also were able to share a worldview in between meetings with their map rooms, and by taking an identical look at the world with matching 50-inch globes. Roosevelt in mid-1942 commissioned the OSS with creating what become known as "The President's Globe," which weighed 750 pounds and was among the largest globes ever built.[14] Once complete, a special plane flew one of the globes to London by way of South America, Africa, and Gibraltar (allegedly dodging German fighters on the final leg) in time for presentation to Churchill on Christmas Day 1942.[15]

FDR Studies the OSS-Produced Globe, Courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency

[13] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time—Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, 319.
[14] Arthur Robinson, "The President's Globe," *Imago Mundi* 49 (1997), 143.
[15] Robinson, 144.

The way FDR built a common geographic perspective with Churchill was also evident in his relationships with his chief lieutenants. With the outbreak of war in Europe, FDR and his advisors struggled between 1939 and 1941 with how to define the eastern limits of the Western Hemisphere and American neutrality in supporting Britain and Russia. FDR asked Bowman to research the issue, and Bowman authored a study arguing that Greenland and the Azores were inherent parts of the Western Hemisphere.[16] To make his determination clear to his advisors and allies, FDR drew a line on a National Geographic map—even farther to the east to include Iceland—and handed it to Harry Hopkins to carry to London for consultations with Churchill.[17] FDR continued the practice of penciling lines on maps to communicate his ideas until the end of the war. In September 1944 he outlined a notional plan for postwar subdivision of Germany by marking up a blank map of Germany from *Goode's Series of Blank Maps*.[18]



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 20, 1944.

This is a very rough suggestion made by me -- among others -- for a subdivision of Germany after the peace.

F.D.R.

Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum

[16] Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 324.
[17] David Roll, *The Hopkins Touch: Harry Hopkins and the Forging of the Alliance to Defeat Hitler*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 114
[18] FDR Library, "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President: The President's Secretary's File (PSF), 1933-1945," PSF Safe File, Box 3, http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/psf/psfa0024.pdf

FDR made the Map Room available only to an exclusive group of his closest advisors, like Hopkins and Marshall, but he also expected that his principal officers would be conversant in the geography of the war. McCrea recounts that Hopkins visited the Map Room every day and that FDR came to use it more and more as the war progressed. At one point, probably late in 1942, FDR ordered Secretary of War Henry Stimson to come to the Map Room on a Sunday afternoon for what FDR called a "geography lesson." McCrea recalled that FDR asked him to move his wheelchair to the map of the Pacific where he criticized a recent memorandum from Stimson that failed to consider the tyranny of distance in the Pacific.[19] In many other administrations, one might expect the geography lessons to flow in the other direction.

In addition to the globes for the Oval Office and Churchill, FDR also ordered the OSS to provide copies to the War Department and Congress. Although FDR might have thought the globe helpful for Stimson's geography lessons, its key War Department user was Marshall. Marshall played a role in the production and delivery of the globes and discussed their value as both decision aids and symbolic gifts in correspondence with FDR and Dwight Eisenhower, who was meeting regularly with Churchill in London at the time.[20]

The Map Room was a key predecessor of the White House Situation Room, which continues to serve as a communications center but no longer emphasizes putting issues into a geographic context. The Map Room's more durable legacy is the role of the Situation Room and its staff in facilitating and hosting interagency policy discussions and meetings of the National

[19] McCrea, 6-8.
[20] Robinson, 147.

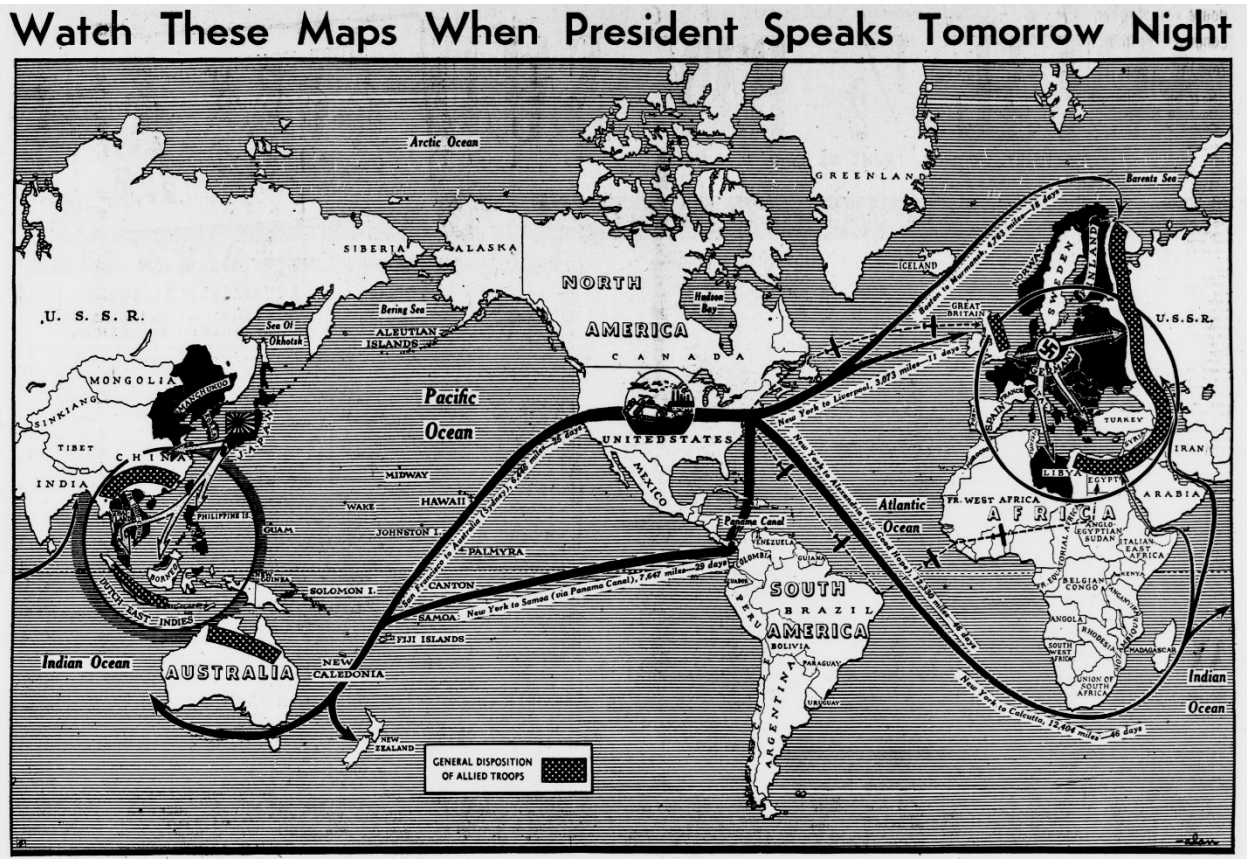
Security Council. Policy debates, strategic discussions, and occasional geography lessons still take place in the White House basement even if the walls are not (alas) lined with maps.

Maps as a Tool for Communicating with the Public

FDR loved engaging the public both directly and indirectly. FDR was known for his free-flowing press conferences, but he was even more famous for reaching out to the American people through the new medium of radio. For his first fireside chat after Pearl Harbor, FDR made it known that he wanted Americans to be ready to study a world map while they listened. Newspaper nationwide responded to White House by printing reference maps on the day of the address, 23 February 1942. The quality of these newspaper maps varied widely according to the editorial preferences and cartographic resources of different publishers. The *New York Times* ran a detailed map on a Mercator projection with key shipping distances that filled the top third of page 12. The *Washington Evening Star*, on the day prior to the Monday address, dedicated a full page of its Sunday edition to three maps: a general world map with strategic air and sea routes, along with detailed maps of Southeast Asia and the North Atlantic. On Monday evening, some 61 million adults, with their newspaper maps or family atlases, tuned in to the broadcast.[21] After invoking the spirit of George Washington and Valley Forge, FDR told his listeners to "take out and spread before you a map of the whole earth, and to follow with me in the references which I shall make to the world-encircling battle lines of this war." FDR told his audience to "look" at something seven times and made six references to the "map" as he used simple, spatial terms to explain the strategic imperatives of "vast distances," "vast areas," and "vital lines."[22]

[21] Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time,* 319.

[22] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "February 23, 1942: Fireside Chat 20: On the Progress of the War," full text and audio available through the University of Virginia Miller Center at https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-23-1942-fireside-chat-20-progress-war.



Map from the Washington Evening Star of 23 February 1942, Courtesy of the Library of Congress "Chronicling America" project

This address was not the first time FDR had invoked a map in a speech broadcast on the radio to warn the public of strategic peril. In October 1941—after the Newfoundland conference with Churchill—FDR made a remarkable public claim about a "secret map" indicating Nazi designs on Latin America:

> I have in my possession a secret map made in Germany by Hitler's government-by the planners of the new world order. It is a map of South America and a part of Central America, as Hitler proposes to reorganize it. Today in this area there are fourteen separate countries. The geographical experts of Berlin, however, have ruthlessly obliterated all existing boundary lines; and have divided South America into five vassal states, bringing the whole continent under their domination.[23]

[23] "President Roosevelt's Navy Day Address on World Affairs," The New York Times, 28 October 1941, p. 4.

British intelligence had acquired the map and passed it via liaison channels to Donovan, who discussed it with FDR several days before the speech.[24] FDR believed by late 1941 that war in Europe was inevitable and sought to build domestic support for the coming conflict. The "secret map" gave him a compelling visual image for arguing to the public that the Nazi threat was not an abstract issue that only applied to Europe. Historians have since debated the authenticity of this map, which some suspect could have been a British fabrication to heighten US fears of German aggression, but there is no evidence that Donovan or FDR questioned the map's veracity at the time.[25] However, regardless of whether the "secret map" was persuasive evidence or a useful fabrication, the geographically-minded FDR found great value in making his case with a map.

[24] John T. Bratzel and Leslie B. Rout, "FDR and the 'Secret Map'," *The Wilson Quarterly* 9:1 (1985).
[25] Bratzel and Rout, 172. Original map is in the FDR Library, President's Safe File (Box 3), Safe: Germany, Map "Luftverkehrsnetz der Vereinigten Staaten Sud-Americkas Hauptlinien."

Conclusion

One could argue that FDR employed geography more superficially than substantively, that he used maps as politically expedient props and not because of deep and geographic intelligence. Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously called FDR a "second-class intellect. But a first-class temperament."[26] Perhaps FDR's worldview, whether as a sailor, strategist or stamp collector, was abstract and not based on profound insight into geopolitics,

[26] Geoffrey Ward, *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989, xv.

foreign cultures, and military operations. One might also argue that fixating on FDR's geographic traits has more to do with mythologizing a wartime leader than systematically explaining his decision making and the effectiveness of his presidency. Praising FDR's mastery of geography could be seen as embracing the "Great Man" theory of leadership that many scholars have criticized for over-simplifying the true complexity of world events for the convenience of crediting an individual with an outsize role.[27] Some critics have argued that mythologizing FDR obscures his tendency to tightly restrict the flow of information, confuse everyone as it his try intent, and play subordinates against each other. In the summer of 1941, FDR approved Donovan's proposal to name him "Coordinator of Information" as the head of a new intelligence service. But when FDR created the Map Room to fuse information soon thereafter, Donovan was not on the list of officials approved for access was not included in policy debates and geography lessons within FDR's inner circle.

Despite these criticisms, FDR's presidency was a high point in the history of effective use of geography at senior levels of American policy, whether the President himself drove this effectiveness or not. The strengths and weaknesses of American presidents in using geography is not solely a matter of historical interest. FDR's presidency is instructive for strategic decision makers and those who support them. Effective use of geography in developing strategy and policy sharpens individual critical thinking and elevates the debate among policymakers. This kind of support to the policymaking process is an explicit function of the intelligence community (IC), which owns the bulk of the US government's geographic and cartographic capability. The wartime OSS marked the birth of the modern American IC and the creation of compelling visual

[27] Bert Alan Spector, "Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered," *Leadership* 12, no. 2, 250–260.

aids like the "President's Globe" continues today. But the OSS experience also highlights the tradeoffs between quality and availability of information: while the OSS Research and Analysis Department excelled at compiling different sources of information and the OSS established a sophisticated center of what we would now call geospatial intelligence, it could not compete with the White House Map Room. The OSS made many globes and maps but did not develop nor operate the Map Room.

FDR was not the first nor last president to use geography in the three ways outlined above, but he may have been the most effective at employing a combination of all three. Other sailor-presidents, explorer-presidents, general-presidents, or pilot-presidents have brought a certain "geographical sense" to their analysis of national security problems. Lincoln was another wartime president with an affinity for maps who directly invoked geography in debates on strategy and emancipation with his "team of rivals."[28] However, no President has been as effective as FDR in employing geography to communicate directly with an American public, who responded with a new demand for cartography that led bookstores nationwide to sell out of atlases. Multiple presidents during the Vietnam War attempted to argue for the strategic importance of Southeast Asia by pointing to maps in televised press conferences, but to mixed effect. As much as President Obama excelled at the "teaching and preaching" aspect of the presidency, he relied on rhetoric and not visual or geographic communication. President Trump embraces elements of FDR's direct public outreach through new media, but, among their many other differences in character and message, President Trump shows none of FDR's affinity for

[28] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.

geography nor has he ever tweeted a map.[29] The dearth of cartography in the American public discourse on international affairs parallels a lack of clarity in the fundamental basis of American grand strategy. As Eliot Cohen puts it, "foreign policy elites have forgotten how to make the argument for a global order that has existed for longer than most of them have been alive; many have forgotten that they needed to argue for it at all."[30] FDR not only had a vision for that world order, but he understood the importance of communicating that vision to the American public and employed geography to do so.

Geography is an important element of individual decision making at the highest levels, facilitates communication and strategic thinking among allies and advisors, and can help construct a compelling public narrative in support of national policy. Mastering geography and the communicative power of cartography can provide leaders with a broader set of tools for analyzing complex problems, developing options within a team, and presenting a public vision for a decision. FDR's presidency offers useful lessons in all three of these areas and demonstrates the power of a leader with "the geographical sense."

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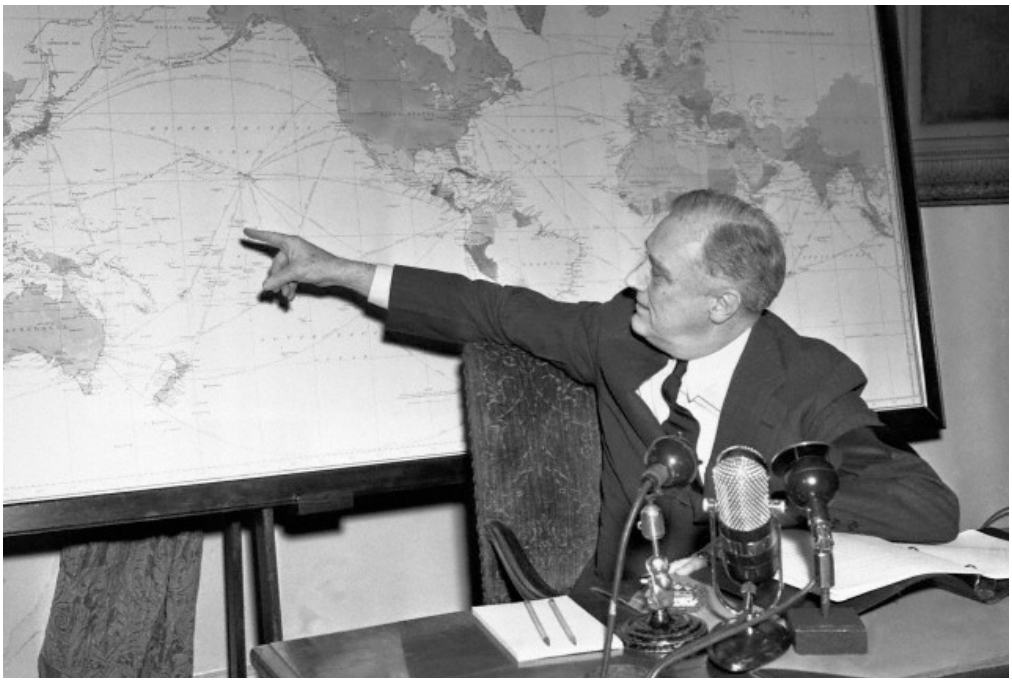
[29] A review of President Trump's tweets does show that he once retweeted a red-blue choropleth map of 2016 election results, commenting in a 27 February 2018 tweet, "Such a beautiful map, thank you!" The original tweet and Twitter account (@steffan_nancy) have been deleted. Archive available at http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/, accessed 4 February 2018.

[30] Eliot Cohen, "America's Long Goodbye: The Real Crisis of the Trump Era," *Foreign Affairs* 98:1 (January/February 2019), 145.



FDR refers to a world map during his 23 February 1942 radio address, Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division