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NEW TRUTHS ABOUT OLD ELECTIONS

Political pundits have speculated for years about why the United States has such a low percentage of voter turnout in national elections. I think one of the major reasons is that the voters intuitively recognize that, somehow, the November election usually does not offer them either a choice or a voice on the vital issues of the times.

Thirty-seven-year-old documents recently declassified and turned over to the National Archives provide new documentary proof that this was exactly what happened in the presidential election of 1944. Candidates Thomas E. Dewey and Franklin D. Roosevelt went through the motions, but the biggest election issue was never exposed to public scrutiny.

The monumental issue of the 1944 election was that President Roosevelt had failed to act after he received advance warning of the December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor attack which plunged our nation into a two-front, three-and-a-half-year war and cost a million U.S. casualties. Could the Pearl Harbor attack have been avoided? Who was responsible for that disaster?

Dewey knew that Roosevelt had refused to negotiate with the pro-American government of Prince Konoye of Japan, and had given its successor an ultimatum which meant war. Dewey knew that, before Pearl Harbor, the United States had broken the top Japanese codes.

Dewey knew that President Roosevelt, his Secretaries of War and Navy, and his Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, had advance warnings of Pearl Harbor, including the "East Wind Rain" war-with-U.S. message sent to the Japanese Embassy in Washington on the morning of December 4, 1941 (three days before the surprise attack). Dewey knew that President Roosevelt, as Commander-in-Chief, should be held responsible for the Pearl Harbor disaster. Yet Dewey failed to make this a campaign issue.

It is difficult to say whose reputation was damaged the most by the historic documents just released for public inspection. They show how Marshall connived to conceal the skeleton in Roosevelt's closet, and they show how Dewey deliberately pulled his punches.

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The documents quote Dewey as saying about Roosevelt, "He knew what was happening before Pearl Harbor. Instead of being re-elected, he ought to be impeached."

Marshall sent an Army intelligence officer in civilian clothes to meet secretly three times with Dewey in order to sell him on the idea of not talking about the fact that American code-breakers had deciphered the Japanese code-secrets before Pearl Harbor. Dewey was given quite a sales talk.

Marshall's messenger said that our victories in the battles of Midway and the Coral Sea were due primarily to the fact that we were able to decipher the Japanese codes. He said that we were able to sink so many Japanese ships in the Pacific because we learned their sailing dates and convoy routes from the broken codes. All that was true.

Dewey argued with Marshall's emissary. Dewey complained that it was widely known and talked about in Washington that the Japanese codes were broken, so why should he keep silent? The recently declassified documents prove that Dewey knew that the purpose of Marshall's mission to him was to cover up the fact that Roosevelt knew about the Pearl Harbor attack before it happened, and that he did nothing to prevent it or to warn its victims (the thousands killed at Pearl Harbor).

The declassified documents don't reveal how Dewey's thought processes made the leap from his belief that Marshall's mission was just a Roosevelt campaign ruse, to acquiescing in the deal. The documents reveal only that Dewey's final reply to Marshall was "no message." Dewey said nothing publicly -- and the voters failed to learn the truth.

Roosevelt should not have been permitted to win a fourth term by deceiving the voters about his responsibility for Pearl Harbor (and by pinning the blame on General Short and Admiral Kimmel). Election of a healthy American President in 1944 would have prevented the surrender of Eastern Europe which the fatally-ill Roosevelt agreed to at Yalta.

The survival of self-government through the democratic election process depends on the candidates confronting each other on the major issues of the day so that the voters can make an informed choice. Fortunately, in the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan fulfilled this responsibility to offer the people a choice, not an echo of the policies of the White House incumbent.

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