

Susan Dunn. *Roosevelt's Purge: How FDR Fought to Change the Democratic Party*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. 361pp.

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In *Roosevelt's Purge*, Susan Dunn sets out to recount the story of the 1938 Democratic primaries, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to throw the weight of the White House behind liberal primary challengers to conservative Democratic incumbents hostile to the "New Deal." Dunn is clearly writing as a Roosevelt fan and as a fan of the politics of the "New Deal" in general:

Coming after decades of inert government and especially after the laissez-faire, passive presidencies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, Roosevelt's administration took the bold step of expanding and harnessing the power of government for the many, not for the few (2).

The fact that Dunn is broadly sympathetic to what Roosevelt was trying to do adds to the power of her argument that the "purge" of the Democratic Party that Roosevelt attempted was ill-judged, ill-timed, and half-heartedly executed.

Dunn argues that what Roosevelt was attempting to do was to create two ideologically distinct and coherent political parties in the US system: a conservative Republican Party, and a liberal Democratic Party, and, in particular, Dunn argues that the key to understanding Roosevelt's goals and motivation lay in a deep concern for the relative economic backwardness and political stagnation of the American South: "The South ached from low wages, inadequate purchasing power, depleted soil, unemployment, the absence of labor unions, and poor public schools" (64).

Whilst Dunn sees clearly what Roosevelt intended to do, she is scathing about the half-hearted and ill-judged way that Roosevelt went about it. First, she argues that the targets of Roosevelt's purge were determined more by the quality of the relationship they enjoyed with Roosevelt than by their politics, and, also, Dunn points

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out that the actual number of casualties from Roosevelt's purge was minimal: "four of the purge's main targets sailed to renomination and reelection, easily brushing Roosevelt's onslaught aside: Walter George of Georgia, Cotton Ed Smith of South Carolina, Millard Tydings of Maryland, and Guy Gillette of Iowa" (215).

The second part of Dunn's argument, which is less convincing than the first, is that Roosevelt's "purge" prefaced the party re-alignment that took place between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1980s: "Had geography become destiny? Had FDR's brand of realignment overreached its goal, taking his party too far to the left and making the South forevermore red? Had the GOP become the permanent majority party of the nation?" (268). The idea that the gradual re-alignment of US politics began with Roosevelt's attempt to "purge" is difficult for Dunn to sustain. First, because, as she herself acknowledges, Roosevelt's "purge" was based as much on personality as it was on politics. Second, because intervening factors such as the Vietnam War, Watergate, and a demographic shift in population towards the South and West partially explain the re-alignment in US politics and violate the dyad that Dunn has set up between the economic Populism of the Democratic Party and the economic Conservatism of the Republican Party.

In conclusion, Dunn provides a rich narrative history of the 1938 primaries and Franklin Roosevelt's attempt to "purge" the Democratic Party. However, Dunn's attempt to link this particular episode in American politics with broader trends of Party alignment, de-alignment and re-alignment over the last sixty years is less convincing than the story of the primaries.