

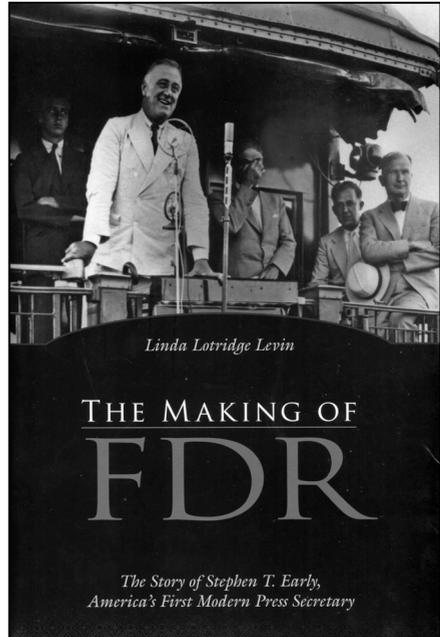
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Informative insights into the making of a president

The Making of FDR: A Story of Stephen T. Early, America's First Modern Press Secretary, by Linda Lotridge Levin. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Press, 2008, 538 pp. ISBN 978-159-1025-77-1

THE MAKING OF FDR argues that the image of US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a modern, charismatic, and politically astute leader was 'made' in a significant way by his talented but non-intellectual press secretary, Stephen Early. The author, journalist Linda Lotridge Levin, clearly makes the case that Early played a crucial role in the Roosevelt presidency that lasted from 1932 until his death in 1945.

Like President Barak Obama in 2009, Roosevelt assumed leadership during a severe economic crisis and used the media to encourage the American people to regain faith in



their ability to rebuild the economy. Roosevelt began his inaugural address with the famous words, 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself'. As the book documents, he depended heavily on Early to get his message out in an effective way.

However, a reader must be very curious about media relations and the Roosevelt era to wade through 447 pages of this biography. That is principally because Early, although an important political player under Roosevelt, is not presented as a truly compelling historical figure himself.

While Early was obviously a competent and accomplished journalist as well as a master public relations

professional, he apparently failed to maintain detailed, informative, and insightful personal journals and records. Because Early apparently wasn't a detailed chronicler of his own life, Levin must often resort to speculation on what Early was doing or thinking as he participated in important historical events.

In particular, the first five chapters about Early's life before he began fully serving Roosevelt indicate that he was a talented journalist with the advantages of being born and raised in Washington, DC, and able to meet future leaders, especially General Douglas MacArthur and FDR, before they became fully formed historical figures.

It is easy to surmise, however, that if Early had been born in a less central American town, he would more likely have had an average career. He didn't pursue an advanced education and seemed to lack the ambition to propel himself to the political and journalistic heights he attained under Roosevelt. In fact, Levin's portrait shows him to be very much a sycophant in his early service to Roosevelt.

Much is made of Early's stint as an Army officer in France during the last months of World War One and of his work for the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, but his war record

is unexceptional and his work at *Stars and Stripes* was more directed at propaganda than objective and professional journalism.

The promotional flyer for the Levin book proclaims: 'In an engrossing narrative that brings to life key people and events during a calamitous time in American history, journalist Linda Lotridge Levin documents how Early remade what had been a routine White House briefing function into the modern high-visibility role of today's breathtaking reorganisation of the way government informed the public.'

It is true that much of the book includes 'engrossing narrative' and that the Roosevelt-Early publicity team was highly effective and innovative with regard to informing the American public and engendering empathy and support for the President during a critical time in American and world history.

The book has significant historical merit and should particularly appeal to those devoted to persuasion research and professional practices. The beginning chapters, however, are unlikely to stimulate the general reader to continue on the more compelling and informative period of Early's career beginning in the 1920s.

But for readers less interested in the profession of public relations, the

book is probably too long and there is the nagging problem that Early as presented by Levin is not a particularly interesting or compelling individual. Particularly distracting are the many parts of the book where the author is forced to speculate for lack of sources on what Early did or thought during an important event.

Early had the integrity to refuse to reveal personal details and insider information about Roosevelt and his presidency, even after Roosevelt's death. But without such new material and a more intimate revelations contributed by Early, the book fails to go beyond other histories and biographies focusing on Roosevelt.

Public relations professionals are rarely revered outside of their own field. This has much to do with the nature of the work, which is to praise others and to hype policies, products, corporations, institutions, and governments. Because they must promote the bad as well as the good, their profession is often more tarnished than it is elevated. While Early was an unquestionably competent and ethical journalist, as a public relations practitioner, he reached the top of what remains an often controversial and even vilified profession.

Early's lifetime efforts to maintain professional and fraternal bonds with the political journalists he both

informed and denied information to indicates that he considered journalism a higher profession than public relations.

Early led in the adoption of innovations that included the use of new mass media technologies to humanise and gain public trust for the President, such as movie newsreels, radio programming, and Roosevelt's famously innovative and effective broadcast of his 'Fireside Chats'. All of these PR advances won the appreciation of the media and the support of the public.

The Making of FDR is a useful and informative reference for mass media academics, political journalists, public relations practitioners, and historians. It makes a convincing argument that Early was an agent of democratic government and an innovator in effective public communication through his insistence on providing information to appreciative political beat reporters that was as timely, accurate and informative as the President, the military, and security agencies would allow him to release.