

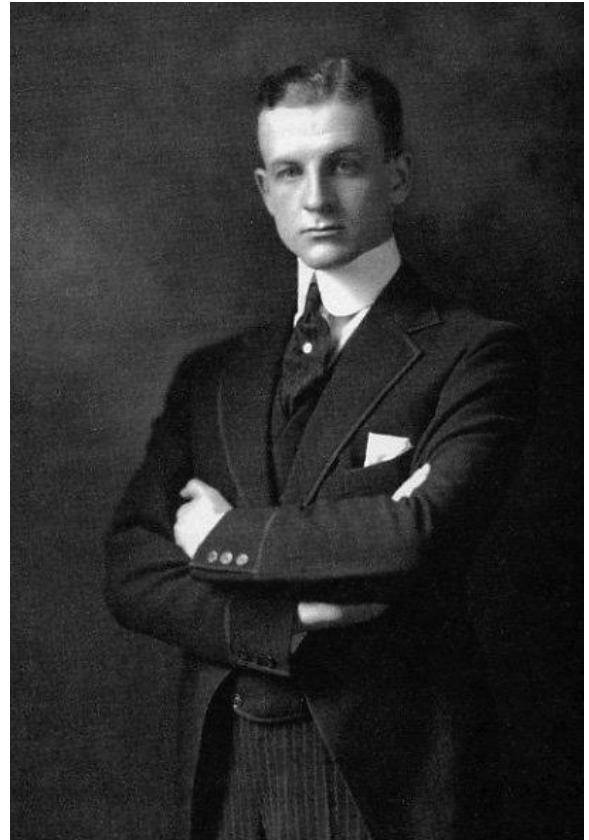
Sumner Welles: Brilliance and Tragedy

by Raymond E. Spinzia

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Welles' rise within the State Department was meteoric, portending a brilliant government career. In 1915 he was assigned to his first post as the third secretary at the United States Embassy in Japan. By 1922 he was serving in the State Department as Chief of the Latin American division. In 1933 the forty-year-old Sumner Welles was appointed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the position of Assistant Secretary of State and, then, just three weeks later United States Ambassador to Cuba. In 1937 Welles became Under Secretary of State, second in the department's chain of command to Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

During his tenure as Under Secretary, Welles was the driving force within the department; the person to whom FDR turned when he needed advice and/or action.¹ He is credited with conceiving and implementing the Good Neighbor Policy, which became the cornerstone of the Roosevelt administration's Latin American policy; drafting the original charter for the United Nations; playing a major support role within the Roosevelt administration for the establishment of the state of Israel; and authoring, with FDR, Churchill, and British Under Secretary of State Alexander Cadogan, the Atlantic Charter, a statement of broad aims to be accomplished once peace had been achieved. Why had FDR's most trusted member of the State Department, the man whom United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes had referred to as "presidential



Sumner Welles

timber,” inexplicably resigned in 1943 on the eve the Tehran Conference when his leadership and advice were so sorely needed?

Who was Sumner Welles?

Benjamin Sumner Welles III (1892-1961) [*aka* Sumner Welles] was the descendent of wealthy Boston merchants. His grandfather, Benjamin Sumner Welles, Sr., who was a member of the Patriarchs, an organization of twenty-five men which had been created in 1872 by Ward McAllister to “establish and lead” New York society, married Katherine Schermerhorn, the daughter of Abraham Schermerhorn of Manhattan. The Welleses summered at *Welles House*, their estate on St. Mark’s Lane in Islip. Katherine’s sister Caroline Webster Schermerhorn, Sumner’s great aunt, married William Backhouse Astor, Jr. and was the undisputed arbiter of society’s elite *Four Hundred*. Katherine and Caroline’s sister Ann married Charles Suydam and resided in Bayport. Sumner’s mother Frances Wyeth Swan was the daughter of Frederick G. and Emily Wyeth Swan, who resided in the Oyster Bay area as did Sumner’s great uncle Edward H. Swan, whose estate *The Evergreens* was in Cove Neck.²

As a youth of twelve, Sumner had been a page at Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt’s wedding. He grew to adulthood at *Welles House*; was schooled at Groton and Harvard; and was married three times to prominent socialites.³

Few knew of Welles’ drinking problem and no one knew of his bisexuality until an unfortunate incident in 1940. While aboard the presidential train carrying the President and cabinet members to the funeral of Speaker of the House William Bankhead, Welles became intoxicated and unsuccessfully attempted to solicit several of the black male porters. The incident was brought to the attention of the railroad officials, the Secret Service, and, ultimately, to the President, who believed that Welles’ political enemy Christian Bullitt, FDR’s former United States Ambassador to France, had arranged to have the porters bribed to initiate the advances.⁴ The matter was shelved and kept secret until 1942 when Bullitt, his aide Carmel Offie, and President Theodore Roosevelt’s daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth began spreading rumors about the incident to Washington’s inner circle.⁵

Republicans saw a golden opportunity to exploit a weakness in the administration in the upcoming 1944 presidential election campaign. The 1940 incident involving Welles was just the scandal which they craved. No longer able to protect Welles and sensing his vulnerability, FDR had no choice but to accept Welles’ resignation.

A consummate workaholic, Welles had suffered several minor heart attacks while in government service. As a private citizen he continued the grueling work schedule, which was his habit, but this

time as an author, syndicated columnist, radio broadcaster, and lecturer. In 1948, while taking an evening stroll, Welles experienced chest pains and decided to take a short cut back to his house. Disoriented, he took a wrong turn and eventually collapsed onto the snow-covered ground one mile from his 250-acre Maryland estate at Oxon Hill. Discovered the next morning by a neighbor, returning from church, Welles was rushed to the hospital suffering from severe exposure and frostbite which necessitated the amputation of two toes and a finger. According to Sumner's son Benjamin, the incident also left Sumner with equilibrium and circulatory problems which plagued him for the remainder of his life.

Welles' health continued to decline, exacerbated by his work load, heavy drinking, indifference and inattention to his health problems, and the household turmoil created by his bisexual valet Gustave Van Hamme.⁶ Unwilling to endure extensive medical treatments, the sixty-nine-year-old succumbed to pancreatic cancer.

Portions of the preceding were based on Benjamin Sumner Welles IV's sensitive, albeit biased, biography of his father, *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.)

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ENDNOTES

1. The elderly and chronically ill Cordell Hull, whose ponderous personal decision-making process was reflected in the State Department he headed, was incapable of galvanizing the department's personnel into action. Welles' attempt to alleviate the situation by a massive reorganization of the department and its personnel would create politically dangerous enemies.
2. Correspondence between the Swan and Welles families can be found in the Sumner Welles Papers at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
3. Welles' first marriage (1915-1923) was to Esther Slater, the daughter of Horatio Nelson and Mabel Hunt Slater, Sr., of Boston. Mabel was the daughter of artist William Morris Hunt and niece of architect Richard Morris Hunt. Esther's paternal grandfather Samuel, who made his fortune during the War of 1812, is frequently referred to as "the father of the country's cotton industry." Her nephew Horatio Nelson Slater III married Martha Byers Lyon and resided at *Ricochet* on the corner of Duck Pond and Piping Rock Roads in Matinecock.
In 1925 Welles married his only true love, Mathilde Townsend, the daughter of Philadelphia stockbroker Richard Townsend and granddaughter of Erie, Pennsylvania, coal baron William L. Scott.
Three years after Mathilde's death in 1949 Welles married Harriet Appleton Post, the granddaughter of architect George B. Post.

4. FDR, aware that Welles had been involved in a similar incident during the same month, believed that no one should be held accountable for what they did while they were drunk.

Bullitt's animosity towards Welles stems from Welles' involvement in Bullitt's dismissal from his ambassadorial post in France.

5. Cordell Hull, who came to feel that he was overshadowed by Welles and had grown to resent and hate him, issued an ultimatum to President Roosevelt that either Welles should go or he, Hull, would resign. Ironically, Hull did resign just one year after Welles.

Christian Bullitt never held another post in the Roosevelt administration.

Carmel Offie was arrested by Washington vice squad officers for soliciting.

6. Van Hamme, who looked upon Welles as a father figure, had previously been employed by New York's Governor Thomas E. Dewey and by Marjorie Merriweather Post, as a steward aboard her yacht *Sea Cloud*. He is described by Welles' son as a psychopathic alcoholic whose cleaver-wielding episodes terrorized the Welles household's staff.

photo credit: *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist*, 1

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