

ROOSEVELT AND THE SUDETEN QUESTION, A STUDY
IN AMERICAN DIPLOMACY

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Meeting off the coast of Newfoundland in August, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill agreed to a joint statement of foreign policy goals. Principal among these was a commitment to guarantee the right of national self-determination to all peoples as a basis for peace in the postwar world. Woodrow Wilson, too, in the tenth of his Fourteen Points, pledged his government to the ideal that every national group should determine its political allegiance. When confronted with the need to continue a wartime coalition as the foundation of a world organization, Wilson and Roosevelt succumbed to the Weberian ethic of ultimate

ends and sacrificed the principle of national self-determination in an effort to achieve global understanding among the Great Powers. The record of Rooseveltian diplomacy on the Sudeten German question reveals the tragedy of bowing to expediency in statecraft and is a case study of United States policy in Europe during World War II.

Decision theory through its emphasis on role, information, and motivation of the decision-maker offers the most suitable means of interpreting Roosevelt's attitude toward the Sudeten Germans. As Commander-in-Chief in a world-wide conflict Roosevelt was cast in his most formidable role, that of a Cincinnatus whose leadership could be challenged only in muted tones. The President's Sources of information on European affairs were uniform in that they excluded any input suggesting an amelioration of what Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson called a „crime against civilization“ — a Carthaginian peace for Germany. The motivation for this policy sprang from Roosevelt's fixation with the belief that German participation in world politics could only be a force for evil. Unlike that of the Soviet Union, American policy was limited to the prescription of the final destruction of a German actor in the international system. Accordingly, the Munich Agreement, which Roosevelt had once hailed as a victory for peace, was to be invalidated through the reconstitution of the pre-1938 Czecho-Slovak state. The leader of the Provisional Czechoslovak Government in London, Eduard Beneš, gained the confidence of American policy makers, as he had done a generation earlier at the Paris Peace Conference, and guided their thinking on the political reorganization of East Central Europe. Beneš strove to overcome American reluctance to approve the projected expulsion of the German population from its Bohemian and Moravian homeland. His opportunity came at the Anglo-American TRIDENT Conference (1943) when, by suggesting that he enjoyed Marshal Stalin's support, Beneš persuaded Roosevelt to sacrifice his promise of national self-determination and to acquiesce in the transfer of the Sudeten Germans rather than risk the cooperation of the Soviet Union in building a new world order.