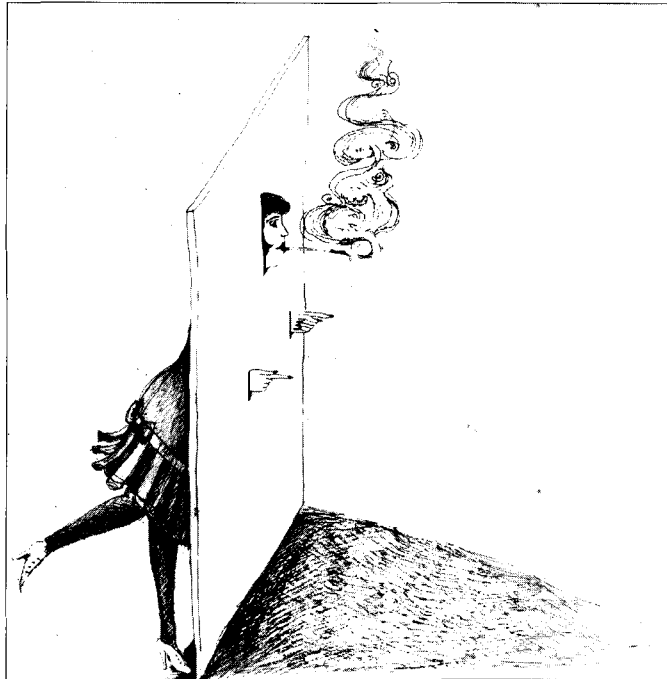


Alice of Malice

The Other Side of Rooseveltism

by Bill Kauffman



Anna Mirek-Wodnicki

The true nature of the New Deal was revealed in one of those brilliant ironies that flash lightning-like in a midnight storm. It happened September 13, 1933, the Nativity of a new secular holiday: NRA Day. An interminable parade up New York's Fifth Avenue celebrated the National Recovery Administration, which was to set prices, fix wages, control production, and otherwise cartelize the economy. More than 250,000 cheerful serfs marched; many carried the Blue Eagle, emblem of the NRA. Wolves whistled at the comely duo of Miss NRA and Miss Liberty, whose bathing suits encouraged monopolistic fantasies.

Yes, there was no doubt about it, the People were in charge now! The plutocrats were on the run; the common man, led by his paladin Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose publicists merrily admitted him to be a "traitor to his class," was ascendant. The canaille cortege filed past the reviewing stand. And looking down on the happy masses from high atop the platform of dignitaries stood the New York coordinator of the NRA, that notorious scourge of the money-changers, W. Averell Harriman.

The revolution was on.

No family did more to facilitate our passage from republic to empire than the Roosevelts, both the Hyde Park and Sagamore Hill branches. Our pious canting imperialism, the favoring of big over small business, the bloating of the executive,

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the centralization of power in Washington, permanent involvement in the affairs of Europe, conscription, confiscatory taxation: the kissing cousins Roosevelt hammered gilt nails in our coffin.

Yet the Roosevelt coin has a reverse side, which we would do well to consider: it is patrician dissent, the self-assured radical criticism begat of proprietary patriotism, and it has no more vivid incarnation than the Roosevelt stray who terrorized her kinfolk with frivolity and witty malice: Alice Roosevelt Longworth.

Alice, daughter of Theodore, is today remembered, if at all, as a tart-tongued termagant tossing off *bons mots* boiled in acid. Her remark to an unattached woman at a dinner party—"If you haven't got anything good to say about anyone, come and sit by me"—was a nugget mined from the Philip Barry/Noel Coward quarry, and indeed, a thinly disguised Alice was the heroine of a crackling George S. Kaufman-Katharine Dayton play, *First Lady* (1935).

But there was much more to her than martini wit. Like all the best dissidents, she believed that this country belonged to her. As an old woman, she said that she could still "hear my father and Cabot Lodge talking about Jefferson as if he were an obnoxious neighbor of theirs." She was unimpressed by power, impervious to the discreet charms of the Potomacists. Alice had a Hamiltonian bloodline, and she lacked, to put it kindly, the demotic touch, but her horror of internationalism drove her into the arms—literally, gossip had it in a couple of cases—of an Old Republic remnant that included such buckskin populists and reactionaries as Senators James Reed of Missouri, William E. Borah of Idaho, and Thomas P. Gore of

Oklahoma.

There was little in her girlhood to indicate that Alice would be anything other than a luminous party flirt. "I can be President of the United States," her exasperated father told Owen Wister, "or I can attend to Alice. I can't do both." She was a pretty gamine of irrepressibly high spirits; she smoked and drank and danced and played the ponies and went to boxing matches and honed her wit on the whetstone of mordancy. Popular songs celebrated her; fashion designers mass-marketed the Alice style.

As a teenager in the White House she was a legendary brat, an admitted "selfish and defiant" child, and something of a witch: on the last evening of her father's presidency, she buried "a bad little idol" in the White House lawn to hex the stolid Ohio Tafts. (She later became young Robert's vociferous champion.)

She was funny, in the way that ostentatiously frank people are. Asked how she felt when she learned that Leon Czolgosz and an incompetent Buffalo physician had killed William McKinley, admitting Theodore Roosevelt to the White House, Alice confessed to "utter rapture" and said she had danced "a little jig." She gaily admitted that if not for Czolgosz "we would probably all have been back in our brownstone-front houses and I would have doubtless married for money and been divorced for good cause."

As it happened, she married the bald boozing Congressman (later Speaker of the House) Nicholas Longworth of the dreaded city of "Cincin-nasty." Borah had once said, "I'd rather be right than President." Alice, adapting the remark to her husband, noted, "He'd rather be tight than President."

Filial loyalties led her into her first and most successful political fight: defeat of United States entry into the League of Nations. Part of the fight was personal: she despised Woodrow Wilson for his refusal to allow her recently deceased father to raise a division of reconstituted Rough Riders at war's outset. "I never forgive the persons who injure those I love," she snarled.

But Alice was no longer the naughty hoyden boasting, "I care for nothing except to amuse myself in a charmingly expensive way." She was a budding nationalist, fearful, she said, that Woodrow Wilson wanted to submerge her father's country in a global Federation of the World of which the dour Princeton moralist would be headmaster. The league, she argued, "would pledge us to active participation in the affairs of Europe—indeed, of the whole world—[and] would pledge us in advance regardless of our interests, to use our armed and economic forces when questions arose which were of no possible concern to us."

"Alice in the anti-Wilson fight was a feline figure and one often ready with talons," recalled Jonathan Daniels, son of Wilson's Secretary of the Navy. Her salon on M Street became headquarters of the "Irreconcilables": those senators unalterably opposed to joining the league, which Senator Borah called a "conspiracy to barter the independence of the American Republic." This hardy band was tagged the Battalion of Death; Alice was dubbed "Colonel of Death." She and Ruth (Mrs. Medill) McCormick monitored the debate from the Senate gallery. (Ruth's father, Mark Hanna, might have saved us this trouble had he more forcefully pressed his doubts about empire on his Ohio client William McKinley in 1898.) Day in and day out Alice prowled the Senate, often conferring with Medill Mc-

Cormick and her closest ally, Connecticut's rascally gentleman Frank Brandegee.

Closer, in a different way, was Borah, who is widely believed to have fathered Alice's only child. (Wags called her "Aurora Borah Alice.") The Lion of Idaho, the spearless leader, roared anathemas on the league and its internationalist sponsors. "Run up the American flag and let the traitors pull it down if they dare," he boomed, and Alice loved it. She even reached into her bag of witchery, standing outside the White House on the night of President Wilson's return from Paris and chanting the curse, "A murrain on him, a murrain on him." This, truly, was American paganism's finest hour.

Alice's incessant gossiping provided valuable intelligence. She learned who was leaning which way, and when suasion was necessary she stuck the needle as only caustic-spitting ladies can. "Hello, Mr. Wobbly," Alice took to greeting Cabot Lodge, who she suspected—rightly—was not averse to compromise. ("You can't amend treason," said Borah of the proposed GOP treaty reservations.)

She told one and all that she was sure that Fa-tha would have opposed American membership in the league as a "complete surrender of our independence as a nation." (Or as Borah put it, "the League of Nations makes it necessary for America to give back to George V what it took away from George III.") Alice probably misunderstood her father, thank God. "Megaphone of Mars," as novelist Henry B. Fuller mocked him, had been bully for war, as this son of a substitute-buying Civil War draft-dodger always was; TR had called Senator La Follette an "unhung traitor" for his isolationism. In 1914, impatient for President Wilson to renounce neutrality, Roosevelt envisioned "a great world agreement among all the civilized military powers to back righteousness by force." This "World League for the Peace of Righteousness" was to adjudicate international disputes and, when necessary, bring "the collective armed power of civilization" to bear against recalcitrants. This global police force is the logical consequence of the collective security provision of Alice's hated Article X of the Covenant of the League of Nations, and Alice's vehemence on the matter, while partially traceable to the enmity she bore against Wilson, also shows the increasingly independent cast of her mind. The deb who had gone gleefully "panting after my parent, longing to go into the First World War," was becoming a sharp critic of foreign entanglements. She would never become what her father most detested—a pacifist—but she did grow up to be one of those "little old ladies in tennis shoes" whose American soles ushered in the peace and comity that marked the 1920's and 30's.

In the league fight we sight the contours of realignment, the scrapping of meaningless party distinctions and their replacement with . . . what? The provincial-cosmopolitan bipolarity is out, scuttled by the coupling of Idaho's Borah and soigné Alice. Centralist-decentralist is better, as are Little American-globalist and imperialist-republican. Whatever the taxonomy, and whether the treaty marked a sellout of our independence, as Alice asserted, or whether, as La Follette charged, it was "a treaty of financial imperialists, of exploiters, of bankers, of all monopolists, who sought through mandates to sanctify and make permanent a redistribution of the spoils of the world and to cement forever the stranglehold of the power of gold on the defenseless peoples of the earth," natural allies did battle under the Americanist banner.

The victorious patriots gathered at the Longworth residence

on November 19, 1919, to celebrate the Senate defeat of the Versailles Treaty over a midnight dinner of scrambled eggs. The whole gang was there: atrabilious Missouri Senator Reed, the brilliant Jeffersonian toper; Oklahoma populist Senator Gore and his wife; the McCormicks; the Hardings; the Frelinghysens; Borah (without the missus); and aristocratic senators Lodge, Brandegee, and Wadsworth, among others. "Mrs. Harding cooked the eggs," Alice archly recalled in her 1933 autobiography *Crowded Hours*, a listless effort which Maxwell Perkins cajoled her to write.

The Lion lay down with the Longworth; the sons of the wild jackass drank cocktails with the daughters of Pilgrims. The league issue was of such magnitude that the detritus of past quarrels over domestic issues was swept aside. Next year, Alice supported the dim-bulb family friend General Leonard Wood for the Republican presidential nomination, though she was also fond of her father's Bull Moose running mate, California Senator Hiram Johnson, whose campaign theme was his "100 percent Americanism." He did not mean by this a petty xenophobia or insistence upon loyalty oaths that no real patriot would ever dream of signing; rather, Johnson upheld fidelity to one's little corner of the world.

Johnson's platform was normalcy itself. "It is time for an American policy," he declared in 1919. "Bring home American soldiers. Rescue our own democracy. Restore its free expression. Get American business into its normal channels. Let American life, social and economic, be American again." The tragedy of 20th-century American politics is that the faithless took over, and men like Hiram Johnson were cast out into a wilderness, where they died, graves unmarked, and from which their heirs have yet to return.

Though he polled the most primary votes, Johnson's bid fell short, as did the foolish Wood's. Alice withheld the endorsement of the Sagamore Hill Roosevelts until eventual Republican nominee Warren G. Harding, whom she liked as a poker pal but disrespected as a lightweight, promised a hard-line antileague stance.

Alice roared through the 20's carrying a flask of bootleg Bourbon and a copy of the Constitution in her capacious purse. Borah sounded, at times, like Alice's father, as he denounced "this weakening, simpering, sentimental internationalism which would destroy national character and undermine nationalism" and insisted upon the cultivation of "an American mind, an American purpose and American ideals." This was Rooseveltian phraseology in service of an anti-Rooseveltian program.

"I am a Republican with a Progressive tradition-inclination," Alice said in 1932. She deplored "lavish Federal spending and drastic Federal control of business and agriculture" and, most of all, any diminution of American sovereignty. Her progressivism was the forgotten kind, that of Amos R.E. Pinchot, the *Nation's* William Hard, and the New Jersey dynamo George Record. It stood for parsimonious expenditure; for "equal rights for all, special privileges for none"; for the destruction of monopoly by democratically controlled local governments; and for the coiled rattlesnake foreign policy of the Founders. That this progressive tradition was at antipodes with her father's never seemed to cross Alice's mind. (Others understood. The Republican Party of North Dakota, deep-dyed in agrarian antimonomopolist radicalism, tried and failed to start an "Alice for Veep" boomlet in 1932.)

And then along came her father's fifth cousin, "Feather Duster" Roosevelt, whom she had long ago dismissed as "the kind of boy whom you invited to the dance but not the dinner." Alice was Eleanor's maid of honor and she introduced Franklin to the elongated cigarette holder, but she could not abide their reign. She sighed, "When I think of Franklin and Eleanor in the White House, I could grind my teeth to powder and blow them out my nose."

The new President, she complained, was "ninety percent mush and ten percent Eleanor." He was hobbling our hale republic. "My poor cousin, he suffered from polio so he was put in a brace; and now he wants to put the entire U.S. into a brace, as if it were a crippled country—that is all the New Deal is about, you know," she said, typically impolitic. Her animus did not keep her from abetting Franklin's affair with Lucy Mercer Rutherford: after all, she later explained, he "deserved a good time. He was married to Eleanor."

Alice undertook a syndicated column that was every bit as insipid as Eleanor's "My Day." She meant to write corrosively funny attacks on the New Deal but, as with *Crowded Hours*, her lively wit sputtered and died somewhere in transit between mind and paper. Besides, her country had become "all body and no soul" and she despaired of the mostly fourth-rate men who stood quakingly in opposition.

Her scorn was withering for the Republican panjandrums who made the party so ineffectual during the critical middle decades of the century. Thomas E. Dewey, of course, was the "bridegroom on a wedding cake"; John Bricker was "just an honest Harding"; Wendell Willkie "sprang from the grassroots of a thousand country clubs." She approved of Calvin Coolidge, but he was dead. She also admired Senator Robert A. Taft, though she conceded that he suffered from "an abundance of lack and shortage of luster." With Taft, at least, we could "return to the ways of our old self-reliance," she told readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1940. Yes, he was phlegmatic, but "Miss Columbia has had a long and giddy spell being the girlfriend of the whirling dervish. It's time she stopped revolving, chose another partner." (Her paean to Taft is sprinkled with metaphors of physical activity, an obvious taunt of the wheelchair-bound President. Alice did have a mean streak.)

She lobbied energetically against the Supreme Court-packing scheme that backfired on FDR in 1937, and the friendships she forged in that fight with independent liberals like Senator and Mrs. Burton K. Wheeler flowered over the next quadrennium, as old republicans of left and right merged to halt the drift toward war. The friends she acquired in this phase of her life perplex those chroniclers who regard Alice as a bipartisan *bon vivant*. Borah was strange enough, but another rumored swain, United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis, boggles the mind. About the Iowa-born CIO leader she quipped, "He loved making trouble, and I loved watching him make it. It was natural that we should get together."

Lewis also loathed Franklin, but there was more to this than beefy petulance. He was anti-imperialist to the bone. Lewis understood that working men pay war's wages in blood; he was a patriot who believed FDR was a "would-be dictator" under whose misrule "the United States first becomes a militaristic nation, and second, becomes an imperialistic nation." Lewis called 'em the way he saw 'em for the rest of his tumultuous life; even in the Cold War's most frigid phase, he denounced the transfer of wealth from American taxpayers to European

governments.

Alice bolstered her men in their anti-FDR efforts; the fortifying effect of her slashing Old Right wit is impossible to calculate. She never brought Lewis over to Taft—like Hiram Johnson, he was for Wheeler in 1940—but her charm and magnetism helped cohere the farraginous antiwar movement.

Once more her salon, now in a four-story sandstone just off Du Pont Circle, was a hospice for Americanists who, like Alice, wanted to “keep out this time.” Alice was on the national America First Committee and a constant presence at America First rallies, sitting on stage beneath a broad-brimmed hat. She was a director of the potent D.C. chapter of America First; her manner gave the dowdy committee a welcome dash of flair.

Apologists—the kind who believe “America First” is code for Nazi, and scramble to explain away their beloved Mrs. L’s fervent isolationism—point to her retrospective crack, “Family feeling enters into it; anything to annoy Franklin.” But this was a calculated exculpation of what had come to be defined as a hate crime, for Alice, like most self-consciously outrageous persons, had a keen sense of boundaries, and she knew better, once the myths had hardened, than to advertise her objections to the Holicist Enterprise Ever Undertaken By Man.

Family feeling did enter into it, of course: she regarded herself as keeper of her father’s flame, though it is hard to imagine the sanguinary Teddy wanting to sit out the European War of 1939. The lyncean Richard Nixon noted of Alice, “As a devoted admirer of her father, she was first, last, and always a nationalist. Her father, of course, was America’s first truly internationalist President.” (From her ebullient father she did inherit a passion for learning and life. One can easily imagine Teddy spending a magnificent evening with Edwin Hubble on Mount Wilson at the eyepiece of the 100-inch reflector, as Alice did.)

War came, and America was not to come first again. “Well, Franklin asked for it. Now he’s got it,” she remarked at lunch on December 7, 1941. After the war, she dabbled in Americanist activities (helping to organize a “United States Day” in 1954 to counter United Nations Day), but mostly she reveled in her role as what she termed “a rather loathsome combination of Marie Dressler and Phyllis Diller.”

She got older and more cantankerous and, ultimately, harmless. John F. Kennedy called her “the best company in town.” She voted Democratic for the first time in 1964 because she thought Goldwater humorless. She enjoyed the student rebellion because it gave her old nemeses in the Democratic Establishment fits. According to her unsympathetic biographer Carol Felsenthal, Alice as dotard extinguished her father’s flame. When a reporter asked in 1977 about the Panama Canal Treaty, she replied, “I don’t care what they do with the canal. Who cares? It’s there and I don’t give a damn. Nothing could bore me more.”

In her senescence she recalled, “We were against the League because we hated Wilson. . . . All that nonsense about my killing the League with a bunch of diehard cronies is ridiculous.” The earlier self she reimagined belonged in the George S. Kaufman play; it was motivated by spite and jealousy and the desperate need to be an intrigant in the court. This did no justice to the hellcat princess who had thrown herself into valiant battles against “the internationalism that we felt menaced our very existence as an independent nation.”

Alice was bigger than a hostess; she was no mere Perle Mes-

ta or Pamela Harriman. Indeed, compare her with Harriman to gauge our free fall. Alice was a Mayflower descendant who guarded her republican birthright with grit and bile. Harriman, Democratic dowager and Clinton’s Ambassador to France, is an alien doxy whose reverence for American sovereignty ranks somewhere below her belief in chastity and household economy. Among the trio of husbands that Madam Ambassador has buried is W. Averell Harriman, which is where we came in. Rule by the robber baron or his whore—take your pick.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth did not lead a blameless life. She was, it seems, a horrible mother, by turns domineering and inattentive, and her shy daughter Paulina was a suicide by age 31, though not before the girl found *The Bridge* by being active in both Twenties for Taft and the anarchist Catholic Worker movement. In this sense, at least, Paulina was very much the daughter of the Republican dame who loved John L. Lewis.

However maculate, Alice had a soul. She laughed, and made others laugh. She brightened the corner where she was, and the light she generated was, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh might say, American . . . American . . . American. She concluded in *Crowded Hours*, “Anyway, the show is there for us, and we might as well get what entertainment we may out of it.” That is how one lives to be 96 years of age, sunnily dispensing wicked apothegms as the empire slides into night. c

Wryneck

by Peter Russell

Held in the hand
This speckled bird
Feigns death
Is wayward

Free in the woods
A snake, it hisses
Master of moods
Of wounds, of kisses

Torn on the wheel
It turns men’s hearts
Women conceal
Deathly arts

The Jinx is Death
The speckled bird
Flies out of hand
Is wayward