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## In Search Of True Believers

*The voters may have liked their president, but they didn't want him picking their senator.*

Bookshelf By JONATHAN KARL

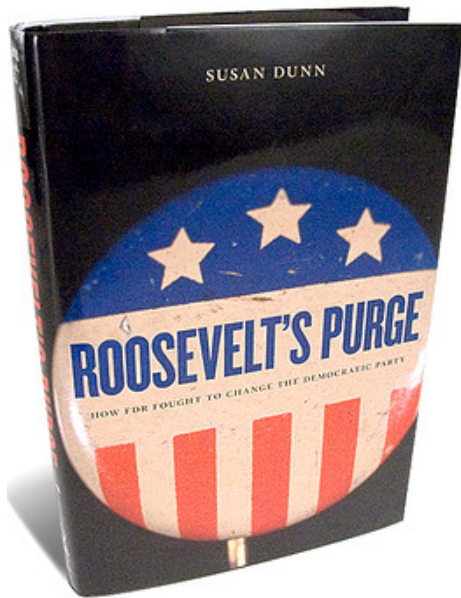
In 1936, Franklin Delano Roosevelt trounced Republican Alf Landon by 24 percentage points in the popular vote and won the biggest electoral landslide in American history. Equally impressive were the lopsided congressional victories that year: a 76-16 majority over the feeble Republicans in the Senate, a 334-88 majority in the House.

With such a mandate, Roosevelt set out to expand the New Deal and to give himself the power to make it work. He pushed bills to establish a minimum wage and streamline his control over the executive branch. To fend off a Supreme Court that had struck down key aspects of the New Deal, he tried adding another six justices to the court. Yet the popular president soon found that all his political capital wasn't worth much in Congress.

"Just nine months after Roosevelt's landslide election, opposition in his own party had grown assertive, militant, and confident—and the New Deal had come to a standstill," writes Susan Dunn in "Roosevelt's Purge." Ms. Dunn, a professor at Williams College, delves into a fascinating and overlooked aspect of the FDR presidency: Roosevelt's brazen effort to assert control over his own party in the summer of 1938.

Ms. Dunn has written an engaging story of bare-knuckled political treachery that pits a president at the peak of his popularity against entrenched congressional leaders who didn't like where he was taking the country and their party. FDR tried to use the power of the White House, and his personality, to run his opponents out of the Democratic Party. He failed miserably.

When Roosevelt's second-term agenda hit a brick wall of Democratic opposition, he first tried a charm offensive. In June 1937, he invited every Democrat in the House and Senate to be his guest for a weekend getaway at the Jefferson Islands Club on the Chesapeake Bay. (Well, not quite every Democrat—the six women in Congress were not on the list.) The president treated them to a weekend of skeet shooting, fishing, poker and skinny dipping. The New York Times reported he had done himself "a world of good," easing tension with congressional Democrats.


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### Roosevelt's Purge

By Susan Dunn  
(Belknap/Harvard, 361 pages, \$27.95)

Not really. When the skinny dipping and skeet shooting were over, his agenda was still stalled. Four weeks later, 70 senators again voted to block his court-packing bill. One of the few to support the president was Sen. Hattie Caraway of Arkansas, the only woman in the Senate and the only Democratic senator not invited to the president's weekend retreat.

It was time to play hardball. As Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau put it: "There has got to be a fight and there has got to be a purge." Roosevelt made a decision. He would drive the conservatives out of the party, beginning with those who faced competitive primaries in 1938. He had reason to believe that he could call the shots. He had won the South in 1936 by the kind of margins that would make a Soviet leader blush: 87% of the vote in Georgia, 96% in Mississippi, 98.6% in South Carolina.

One of FDR's first targets was Georgia Sen. Walter George. The senator had opposed parts of FDR's agenda but eagerly sought his support in his Democratic primary, even writing him a letter apologizing for his political transgressions. "I have never meant to be offensive to you," he wrote, adding that he had never "at any time felt anything but deep affection for you."

With much fanfare, FDR traveled to Barnesville, Ga., in August 1938 to dedicate a rural electrification project. Before a large crowd of enthusiastic FDR supporters and with George sitting a few feet behind him, Roosevelt went for the kill against "my old

friend, the senior senator from this state."

"On most public questions," Roosevelt said of George, "he and I don't speak the same language." After lambasting the senator for standing in the way of progress, he told the crowd that if he could vote in the upcoming primary, he would "most assuredly" cast his ballot for George's opponent, Lawrence Camp. To reinforce FDR's popularity in Georgia, Ms. Dunn writes, "federal money rained down on Georgia, including \$53 million in WPA funds for building projects in Georgia that promised to create thirty-five thousand jobs."

FDR did the same in state after state, endorsing liberal primary challengers against incumbent Democratic senators. The conservatives fought back hard. "Their attempt to pack the Court failed," one opponent said of Roosevelt and his team, "and their attempt to pack the Senate will fail." In Maryland, Sen. Millard Tydings turned FDR's support for his primary opponent into a central campaign issue, condemning the president's "invasion" of Maryland and declaring: "The Maryland free state shall remain free."

Tydings was perhaps the most anti-New Deal Democrat in Congress and the one Roosevelt wanted defeated above all others. He instructed Harold Ickes to "take Tydings' hide off and rub salt in it." But it was FDR who would be rubbed in salt. Tydings trounced his FDR-backed opponent in a 20-point landslide. A bitter Roosevelt refused to congratulate him.

And it wasn't just Tydings. All of the Democratic senators targeted by FDR coasted to victory in their Democratic primaries. The voters may have liked their president, but they didn't want him picking their senator. In the general election, Roosevelt didn't fare any better. Republicans picked up eight Senate seats and nearly doubled their numbers in the House.

For FDR, it may have been a blessing in disguise. As the focus of his presidency quickly changed to containing Nazi Germany, Roosevelt's closest allies would be the very conservatives he opposed in 1938. He would never

again attempt to intervene in a party primary. He had learned a lesson that needs re-learning from time to time: Political purges are more effectively done by the voters, not by the power brokers in Washington.

*Mr. Karl is senior political correspondent for ABC News.*

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