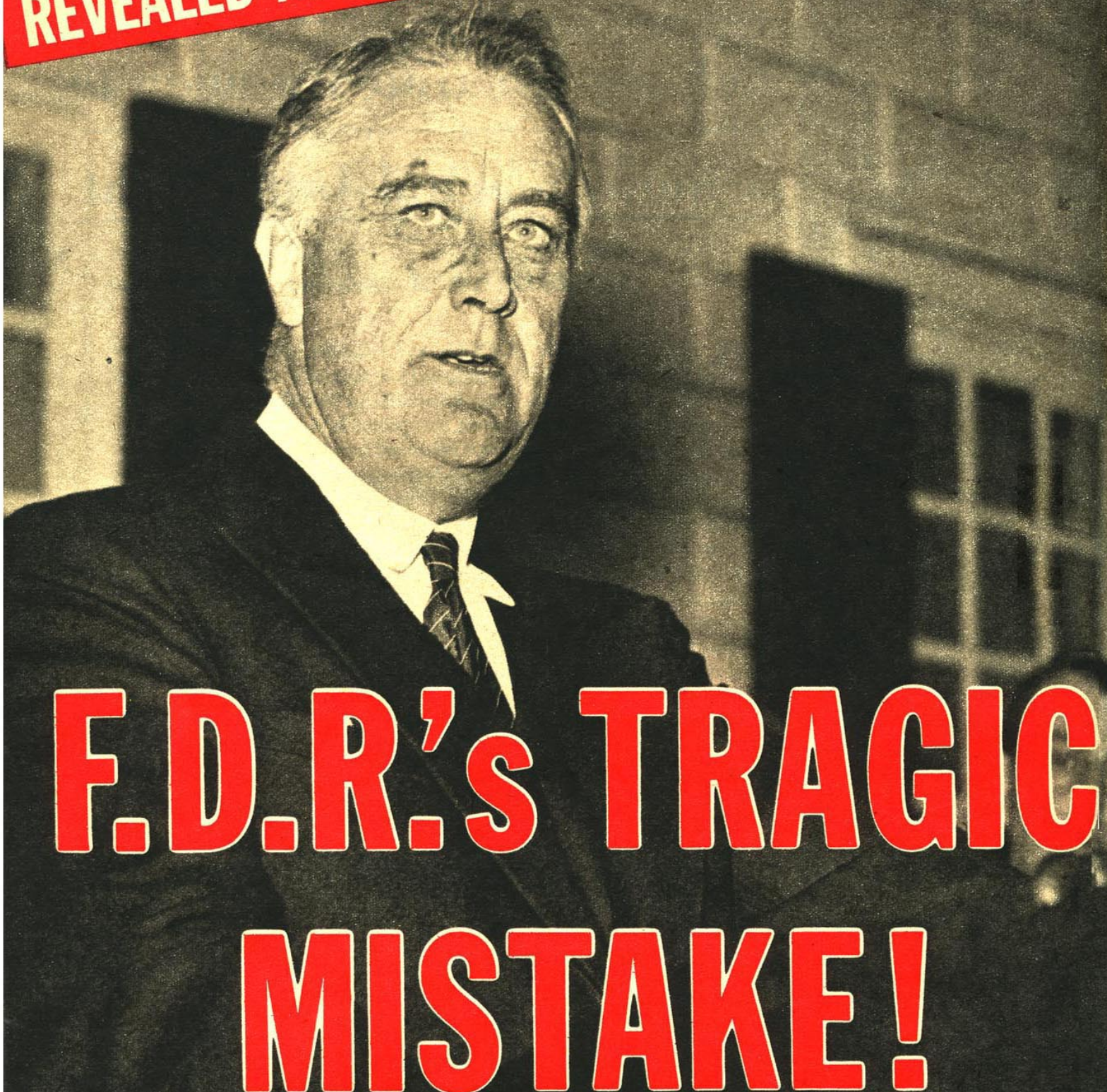


**REVEALED AFTER 15 YEARS**



# **F.D.R.'s TRAGIC MISTAKE!**

**By George H. Earle  
FORMER GOVERNOR OF PENNSYLVANIA**

**"One man had a chance to end the war in 1943 — and brushed it off. His name? President Franklin Delano Roosevelt."**

**M**ILLIONS OF AMERICAN men and women would gladly have given their lives if it meant ending World War II a day sooner than it did. I believe one man had a chance to shorten the conflict by more than 18 months—and brushed it off. His name? President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1943, while I was serving as U.S. Naval attaché at Istanbul, two high-placed Germans risked their lives to approach me with peace feelers. One was Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, chief of Hitler's Secret Service. The other was an agent of Franz von Papen, the Nazi ambassador to Turkey. This agent laid before me a fantastic proposition.

### **Asked One Thing in Return**

Papen and other high-ranking German Army officers, some of them members of the Prussian aristocracy, were prepared to revolt against the Nazi regime, kidnap Hitler, seize control of the Nazi war machine and surrender to the Allies.

They asked one thing in return: the containment of Russia. The still formidable German Army would line up with American and British troops at the Russian border and say to the Reds: "*Stop. Stay back—where you belong.*"

The implications were stupendous. I rushed the proposal to the President. Then I waited—and hoped.

In 1933-34, I had been American minister to Austria. In 1940-42, I had been American minister to Bulgaria. I had talked with fear-crazed refugees from Russia—Jews, Mohammedans, Christians. Their stories were shocking testaments to inhuman Bolshevik brutality. All of Russia was a monstrous concentration camp.

The President and Ed Stettinius and Harry Hopkins knew the suave, smiling Russian exterior. I knew the truth. Russian leaders were creatures of lies and treachery. They commanded tremendous resources, vast manpower. Once they got loose, they'd overrun the world. But here was a chance to stop them in their tracks.

The days slipped by. No word from Washington. That's the way the President was. When he approved of what I wrote, glowing acknowledgement arrived by return courier. When a dispatch jarred or displeased him, I never got an answer.

Sometimes it didn't matter. This time it did. Today, 15 years later, I believe more firmly than ever that the failure to accept Papen's offer was a mistake that stands a 50-50 chance of destroying America.

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

### "The Battle of the Bottles"

My four grandparents were Quakers. I was brought up to hate terror. During World War II, I hated terror of any kind, whether it bore the Bolshevik brand or the Nazi brand. This got around in Germany after the fracas in the Cafe Maxim in Sofia, early in 1941. The President had a good sense of humor. He called it, "The Battle of the Bottles in the Balkans."

The February night Hitler's troops crossed the Danube into Bulgaria, I knew my days there as American minister were numbered. I picked up two foreign correspondents, Hugo Speck of United Press and Robert St. John of Associated Press, and the three of us went to the Maxim for a drink to King Boris before his country fell under the shadow of the swastika.

The orchestra was playing German songs. I said, "Let's have an Allied song. Play 'Tipperary.'" I'd sung it while we were fighting the Germans in the first World War and it was still the best war song ever written. So the orchestra played it. Speck, St. John and I sang our hearts out.

A fat, pink-cheeked Nazi Army officer sat at one of the tables with a beautiful Bulgarian girl. An empty champagne bottle stood between them. "Hey, you!" he said in German. "That tune is an insult to Nazi Germany."

I speak German. I went over to him and said, "This is still a neutral country. My friends and I will sing what we please. How do you like that, little tin soldier?"

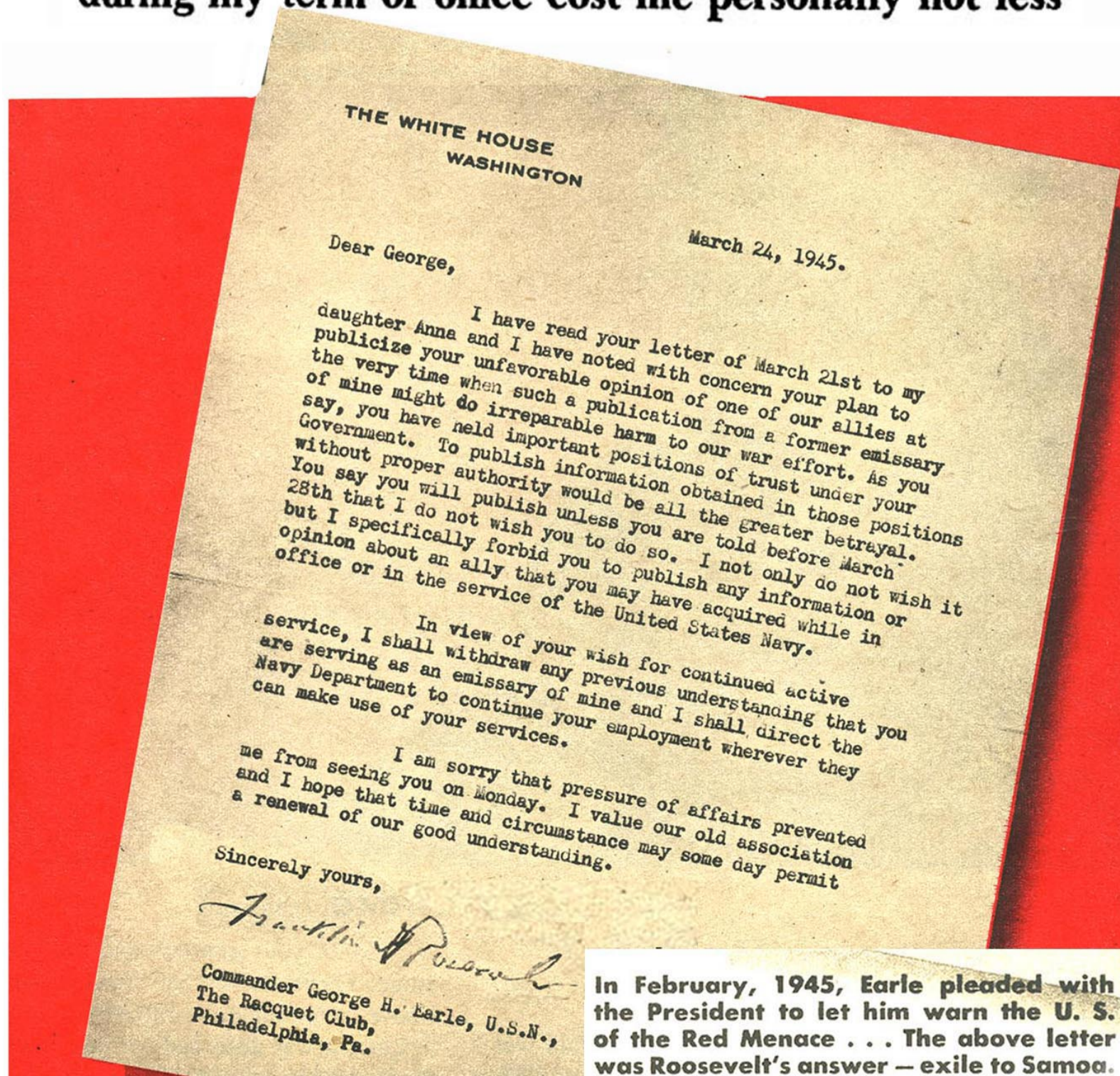
He grabbed the champagne bottle and swung it at my head. I threw up my left arm and the bottle cracked my wrist and broke it. Luckily, I'm right-handed. I picked up a light wine bottle from the next table and snapped it into his face. If it had been a massive bottle like his, it would have killed him. He went down like an ox.

### Canaris and Von Papen Remembered

A dozen friends of his jumped the three of us. We started to break up the cafe. Chairs and glassware crashed against the walls. Girls screamed. A burly Bulgarian shoemaker whose brother was in America and loved it, joined our side. He was so strong he picked up Nazis by their lapels and heaved them across the dance floor and bowled the other Nazis over like ten-pins. Finally the fight moved into the street. The police put a stop to it and escorted us back to the American Legation.

A few days later the biggest Nazi newspaper in Berlin published four charges against me: 1) I was a Jew; 2) During my term as governor of Pennsylvania, from 1935-39, I robbed the people of Pennsylvania; 3) I was drunk at all times; 4) I changed mistresses every week.

In my report to the President, I wrote: "If Charge No. 1 were true, I'd be a lot smarter than I am. As for No. 2, the Democratic campaigns in Pennsylvania during my term of office cost me personally not less



## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

than \$160,000. Regarding No. 3, I drink no more or no less than the average member of the diplomatic corps. No. 4, I let stand. At my age, 51, it's too great a compliment to deny."

The President got a chuckle out of it, and that was the end of "The Battle of the Bottles." But Admiral Canaris and Papen must have remembered it when I got to Istanbul. They knew I hated the Nazis and the Nazis hated me. I was their man, when the right time came.

It came fast, without warning.

I had arrived in Istanbul in January, 1943, a few days before Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca and announced their "unconditional surrender" formula for the Nazi Army. I was to try, from Turkey, to maneuver King Boris and Bulgaria out of the war. I was responsible to the President, and reported to him alone. In those days, they called me a "fair-haired boy of the White House."

F.D.R. had insisted on giving me diplomatic status as assistant naval attaché; *(Continued on next page)* otherwise, he said, I might disappear. Istanbul was a hotbed of international, night-and-fog intrigue. Undercover men of both sides frequently vanished. Their slugged or bullet-riddled bodies were weighted and sunk in the Bosphorus.

One morning, a week after I had checked into the luxurious Park Hotel, there was a soft knock on the door of my suite. I answered it. Into the room stepped a short, white-haired man in his fifties. He had bright, inquisitive eyes and wore a heavy overcoat over his civilian clothes.

He closed the door behind him and turned the key. He went to all the windows and saw that they were shut and locked. Then he returned quickly to me, clicked his heels and bowed. "Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, chief of the *Abwehr*."

I had heard of Admiral Canaris. He was a career officer in the German Navy whom Hitler had drafted in 1934 as head of the Nazi Secret Service. They said he was a strange little man who played a flute and loved dogs. He traveled with several dachshunds and reserved hotel rooms with twin beds, one for them and one for him.

"My agents," he said in German, "ascertained the location of your quarters and the fact that you were alone. They assume I am checking on you. However, I have something quite different in mind."

Canaris was disturbed by the Allied doctrine of unconditional surrender. "This means war to the end, the destruction of Germany as a military power, and the emergence of Russia as the dominating force in Europe."

I agreed. The policy was a disaster. But what was the alternative?

### Reported It to the President

His eyes searched mine. "Do you think President Roosevelt really means 'unconditional surrender?'"

I turned away. I went to the window and looked out over the minarets of Istanbul. The question staggered me. Canaris, a trusted member of Hitler's closest inner circle, was hinting at a negotiated peace—if the price was right!

"Our generals," he continued, "will never swallow that policy."

"What terms would they consider?" I asked.

The little man smiled gently. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you will take the matter up with your President." He held out his hand. "I am leaving Istanbul this afternoon. I shall return in 60 days. I hope you will have something to tell me."

He bowed again, and was gone.

Canaris' words were vague. But they brimmed with portent. I wrote the President, reporting the incident faithfully. It looked like a rift in the war clouds—the end of fighting. My dispatch went off by plane, in the

## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

next diplomatic pouch. It must have been on the President's desk in two days, three at the most.

I waited impatiently for his reply. *It never came.*

One morning in March my private phone rang. I recognized the voice. Canaris. "I'm the gentleman who called on you unannounced two months ago. Has there been any progress in the matter we discussed?"

"No," I said, "no progress."

"I am very sorry," he said. The connection clicked off. I never heard from him again.

But I couldn't stop hoping. There was something in the wind. First this amazing overture from Canaris, and now I began to hear things about Baroness von Papen, wife of the jaunty and urbane German ambassador. She was slashing out at the Nazi war leaders. "Besotted men, ridden by savage inferiority complexes," she called them. She and her husband were very close. He, furthermore, was a devout Catholic. You can't make a Nazi out of a good Catholic. It won't work. Questions formed in my mind. How strong was Papen's loyalty to Hitler? How much weight would it bear?

One spring morning the telephone jangled in my hotel suite. I reached out. I didn't know it then, but I'd soon have the answers.

"This," said a cultured German voice at the other end, "is Baron Kurt von Lersner."

His handsome figure and the face of his lovely wife came instantly to mind. I had seen them both at receptions and diplomatic parties. He had been head of the German delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference after World War I and now, because of a fraction of Jewish blood, was in comparative exile in Turkey, as head of the Orient Society, a German cultural organization.

### An Intimate Friend of Von Papen

"We have met, of course, Mr. Earle. But more to the point, I have read about you in our Nazi press. Also, I am acquainted with some of your views on Russia. We have many things in common."

As he talked on, something else registered: I remembered that he was an intimate friend of Baron and Baroness von Papen.

He stressed my direct connection with the White House and the President. I listened. I tried to detect the overtones, the innuendoes, the things he couldn't say over a telephone. I decided we had to talk, man to man, alone.

At a little after nine that (Continued on page 56)



BARON KURT VON LERSNER

ADMIRAL CANARIS

night—it was a balmy April evening with no moon—I drove north from Istanbul along a dark, deserted country road. When I came to a certain bend about five miles from the city, I pulled my little Navy Plymouth sedan to the side of the road and cut the motor and the lights. A few moments later a car came toward me around the curve and stopped. Its motor went dead. Its lights blinked twice, then out. Lersner was right on time. I got out. He was alone. We shook hands and with a pocket light

## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

made our way across an open field to a small grove of cypress trees.

There, beneath the trees, we walked back and forth, talking and listening. We kept our voices low. We discussed many things. It was after midnight when we said good-bye and drove away.

The next day I wrote another dispatch to President Roosevelt. I marked it "*Urgent.*" I told him of the rendezvous with Lersner. I outlined the substance of Lersner's fears and hopes. They represented an exciting advance from Canaris' position.

According to Lersner—and I could not doubt him; he had placed his life in my hands—some of the highest officials in Germany, Papen included, loved their country but hated Hitler. They wanted to end the war before he bled Germany of all her youth, all her strength and resources. At the same time they were deeply concerned by Russia's growing might and power. What Lersner wanted to know was this: If they delivered the German Army to



The German Army brass assured Governor Earle they would deliver Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler to the allies for trial as war criminals.

the Allies, could they then count on Allied cooperation in keeping Russian troops out of Germany and her buffer states to the east? Without this assurance they could not throw their hearts and lives into a rebellion that would split Germany in two. They would have to fight at Hitler's side to the bloody, bitter end.

Weeks passed. The war went on. Russian forces mauled their way west with the help of American guns, American tanks, American oil. No word from the President.

I pressed the matter with every ounce of my persuasion and judgment. But I sensed the old trouble. Lersner's proposition, calling for an overt stand against Communist expansion, distressed Roosevelt. He still believed that Stalin was a friend, a man of integrity. He'd never answer Lersner's question.

All that summer Lersner asked and pleaded for encouragement. Hitler was not the German people. Ninety-five percent of the German people knew nothing of the atrocities of Dachau. But Hitler and his fanatics were destroying Germany. And now Russia was bearing down across the scorched earth from the east.

I had nothing for him from the White House. There was nothing to say.

One day Lersner called with a new note in his voice. A note of elation.

## **F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake**

He could hardly hold back his excitement. "Now," he said, "you'll see. We have something definite to offer." We agreed to rendezvous at ten-thirty that evening.

In the warm Istanbul night at the cypress grove, news of the incredible plot burst from Lersner. Papen had brought the details from Berlin.

Meeting in darkest secrecy, a small group of the most influential men in Germany had sworn to strike at the heart of the Nazi reign of insanity and terror. They included Field Marshal Ludwig Beck, former Chief of Staff of the German Army; Count Wolf Heinrich von Helldorf, chief of police of Berlin; Prince Gottfried Bismarck, administrative head of the Potsdam city government and grandson of the Iron Chancellor; and a well known officer of the German cavalry, Freiherr von Boeselager.

Boeselager and his cavalry brigade were ready to surround the remote and heavily guarded *Wolfschanze*—Wolf's Lair — Hitler's headquarters deep in an East Prussian pine forest near Rastenburg. They would swoop down and capture Hitler, Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler and Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary. They would throw these three into prison and later turn them over to the Allies for trial as war criminals. Beck and the others would take command of all German troops in the field.

"We would then offer you," Lersner said, "—how shall I put it?—unconditional surrender, with one condition. The Russians are not to be allowed in central Europe, either into Germany or territory now controlled by Germany."

"What about Goering and Goebbels and the rest of the crew?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Hang them, if you like. We do not care. Here is the final point. We will place the entire German war machine at your disposal to keep the Russians out."

Their lives and the future of Germany—perhaps of all Europe—were at stake. They still had to have this guarantee from the Allies, from President Roosevelt.

### **Russians Would Be Stopped**

Ever since the morning Admiral Canaris had knocked on my door, I had believed this was the way out. The Nazis would be crushed. The Russians, who at heart were no better, would be checked. There would be an end to suffering and bloodshed. All the struggle and sacrifice would have been worthwhile.

I told Lersner this. I promised to do my best. We parted solemnly.

Within 12 hours my dispatches were on their way to the President, not only by the State Department's diplomatic pouch, but by Army and Navy channels. I took no chances. They had to get through.

I sent them off with high hopes. By this time I should have known better.

It was all planned. Papen had a

## 7 F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake



**Commander Earle not only got the brush-off on his plan to end the war, he got shipped to Samoa and couldn't warn of the Red menace.**

plane standing by. When the President's word came through, I would drive to a small private airfield outside Istanbul. Lersner had suggested that I wear civilian clothes or a Nazi officer's uniform. But I insisted on my own uniform, that of lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy. I would wear a Navy raincoat over it. A rubber rain protector would conceal the officer's patch on the cap. I felt this way: I might not come back. If I didn't I wanted to go out in an American uniform.

The flight to Berlin would take six hours. The plane would fly at ground level to avoid anti-aircraft fire. Hell-dorf and Bismarck would meet me at a secret landing strip north of Berlin. I would hand them a written guarantee of the terms, signed by the President. It was all they asked. Within hours Boeselager's brigade would close in on *Wolfschanze*. The anti-Hitler powder keg would blow sky-high.

I wrote farewell letters to my family back in the States. I told them if something went wrong and the Nazis got us, it would be a good way to go out. Only one thing scared me. Gestapo executioners usually hanged their victims. I didn't want to hang.

The days dragged past. Lersner kept checking in. The plane was waiting. Everything was poised. We had to act.

### **F.D.R. Killed the Plan**

I sat there at my desk, and got

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

sicker every day. My appeals to Washington went unacknowledged. Finally the President's answer came through: "All such applications for a negotiated peace should be referred to the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower."

In diplomatic language, this was the final runaround. Even if we did get to Eisenhower, the matter would be referred back to Roosevelt for a final decision. The President's answer was therefore a clear indication of his complete disinterest in this plan to end the war. I couldn't explain to Lersner. I didn't even try.

The rest of the story seems like a nightmare. In May, 1944, I flew to Washington. In the White House ante-room, waiting to see the President, I talked with Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. It was five years before his tragic suicide would shock the world. I told him my fears of Russia.

"My God, George," he said, "you and I and Bill Bullitt are the only ones around the President who know the Russian leaders for what they really are."

But the President was relaxed and full of confidence. "Stop worrying, George. We are getting ready for this Normandy landing. It cannot fail. Germany will surrender in a few months."

"Mr. President," I said, "the real menace is not Germany. It is Russia."

"F.D.R. smiled. "George, Russia is a nation of 180 million people speaking 120 different dialects. When the war is over, she will fly to pieces like a cracked centrifugal machine at high speed."

Back in Germany, the conspirators were desperate. Many of their leaders, cut off from Allied support, lost their nerve. But a daring few decided to risk all in one hopeless, last-ditch plot — Operation Valkyrie — foredoomed to failure. The third week of that July they struck. It was a hot day. Hitler and his staff met, not in *Wolfschanze's* concrete citadel, as usual, but in a flimsy wooden building, with the windows open. The plastic bomb blew the hut apart, killing four and wounding several others. Hitler staggered out, uniform burned, injured, but not fatally.

Papen, Helldorf and Bismarck escaped the blood bath with which the Gestapo avenged the attempt to assassinate Hitler. Others were not so lucky. Field Marshal Beck tried to commit suicide. He failed and was given the *coup de grace* as he lay wounded. Another general pulled the pin from a hand grenade, held it against his neck and blew his head off. Gestapo agents arrested Canaris. Ten months later he was sentenced to death for treason. Drunken S.S. guards killed him in the execution yard at Flossenburg.

One report says he was hanged, cut down and revived, then hanged again. Another says he was hanged in an iron collar, and took 30 minutes to die. A third says that, like other conspirators, the little admiral was slowly strangled with a steel piano string.



## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake

Papen, Helldorf and Bismarck escaped the blood bath with which the Gestapo avenged the attempt to assassinate Hitler. Others were not so lucky. Field Marshal Beck tried to commit suicide. He failed and was given the *coup de grace* as he lay wounded. Another general pulled the pin from a hand grenade, held it against his neck and blew his head off. Gestapo agents arrested Canaris. Ten months later he was sentenced to death for treason. Drunken S.S. guards killed him in the execution yard at Flossenburg.

One report says he was hanged, cut down and revived, then hanged again. Another says he was hanged in an iron collar, and took 30 minutes to die. A third says that, like other conspirators, the little admiral was slowly strangled with a steel piano string.



FRANZ VON PAPAN

**Earle reported to F. D. R. that these German leaders were ready to surrender the entire German Army to the Allies – in 1943 – to stop the Russians . . .**

In February, 1945, my usefulness at Istanbul was at an end. I asked for transfer. The next month, back home in the United States, I was ready to travel from one end of the country to the other telling the American people the truth about Russia. I wanted to warn the free world against the madness of any treaty or agreement with the treacherous Russian leaders.

The President, who had less than a month to live, forbade this "betrayal" of an ally. To make sure I obeyed orders, he sent me to Samoa, in the South Pacific, as assistant governor to 16,000 island natives. I remained there in exile until recalled by President Truman, four months later.

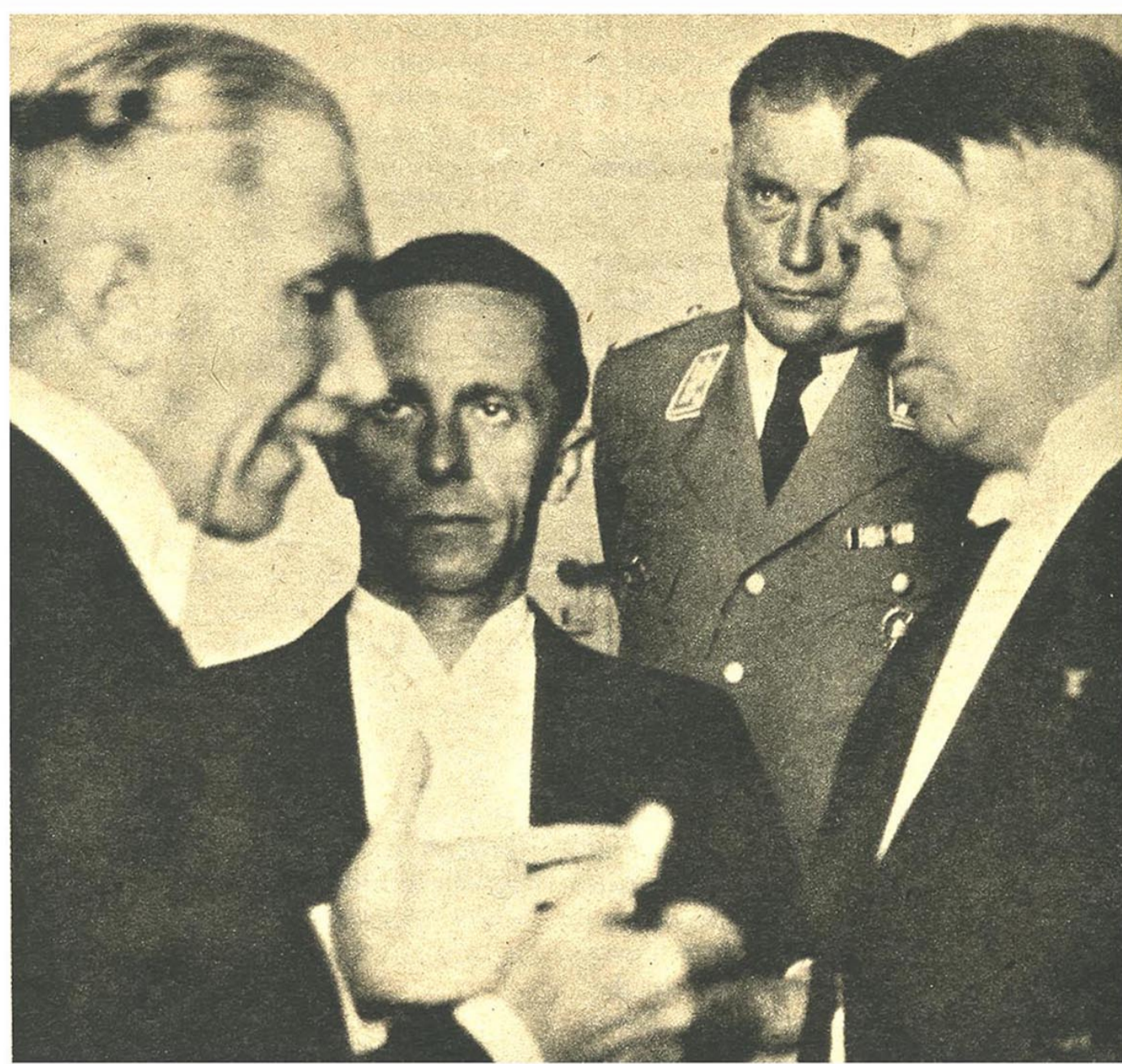
"If" is the biggest two-letter word in the English language. If President Roosevelt had accepted Papen's peace offer and agreed to its one condition, it is my firm conviction that *the war would have ended by January, 1944, at the latest!*

Without Germany, Japan would have collapsed. Thousands of lives and billions of dollars would have been saved. Entire cities, later bombed to ruins, would have escaped destruction. The red threat of Communism would have been beheaded in its infancy, long before it engulfed Europe and Asia, long before its rule-by-terror imperiled every freedom-loving nation on earth.

Finally, and most important of all, without the help of the German scientists they ultimately captured, the Russians would never have been able to develop long-range missiles or nuclear weapons. The military supremacy of the United States would be clear and unchallenged.

I stopped saying my prayers when I went to bed long ago, in childhood. Now, since none of these things came to pass, I say them again, every night. I never know. Maybe I'll die, before I wake. ▲▲▲

## F.D.R.'s Tragic Mistake



Franz von Papen had Hitler's ear. Being high in Nazi councils, he was the perfect one to head the betrayal coup that FDR turned down.

# Confidential

TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

august, 1958 \* p. 14



**Ex-Gov. George H. Earle**

GEORGE H. EARLE is one of the most colorful, outspoken and independent figures of the contemporary American political scene. He entered politics in 1932, abandoning his family's traditional Republicanism to support FDR for President. Roosevelt appointed him minister to Austria in 1933. Earle resigned a year later to run for governor of Pennsylvania and became that state's first Democratic governor in 44 years. His "Little New Deal" administration resulted in the passage of two volumes of laws effecting social and humanitarian reforms in the Keystone State.

In 1938, President Roosevelt appointed Earle minister to Bulgaria, a post he held through 1940-41. During World War I, he had commanded a submarine chaser and was awarded the Navy Cross for valor. In 1942, he served a hitch back in the Navy as lieutenant commander and chief gunnery officer on the transport *Hermitage*, which carried Patton's troops to North Africa. Here, in his own words, Earle tells the cloak-and-dagger narrative covering the events which led to his fall from grace as a "fair-haired boy" of the New Deal.

—THE EDITORS