A lesion over Franklin Roosevelt's left eye, which resembled a sunspot in the 1920s, spread from the lower part of his forehead to the base of his eyebrow until 1940, when it lightened considerably. By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it was no more than a faint shadow.

According to Steven Lomazow, a neurologist at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, and Eric Fettman, associate editorial page editor at the New York Post, the lesion was a malignant melanoma, which had metastasized to his abdomen and his brain. Although Roosevelt had severe cardiovascular problems as well, Lomazow and Fettman claim that cancer killed the president in 1945.

Lomazow and Fettman acknowledge that without a biopsy, an autopsy, or confirmation from Roosevelt's medical records (kept under lock and key in a safe in Bethesda, Md., they disappeared, mysteriously, after his death), their diagnosis must remain speculative. Nonetheless, they argue, strenuously, that even before he ran for a third term the president and his physicians knew he was terminally ill with cancer.

The authors speculate that Roosevelt rejected the only available treatments, removal in one surgical procedure (known as a wide excision) and concentrated doses of radiation, because both would be "immediately and unavoidably visible," impairing Roosevelt's capacity to lead the nation through World War II. Hoping against hope that he'd live for three to five years, the president opted for a "gradual, purely cosmetic" cauterization.

The case the authors make is 4 feet shy of a slam-dunk. Nonetheless, even if they're wrong, "FDR's Deadly Secret" documents a pattern of deceit about the president's health. Roosevelt, they demonstrate, "rolled the dice with history." He won, but just barely.

Roosevelt's lies began after he contracted polio. When he ran for governor, he assured the public that because he had had the best possible care, "today I am on my feet." When he was president, his physician, Dr. Ross McIntire, became the liar-in-chief. In 1944, in an "unprecedented report to the press," issued just weeks after Roosevelt had been found to have severe, life-threatening congestive heart failure, McIntire declared his health "excellent in all respects" and better than average for a 62-year-old man. And when rumors that the president was gravely ill continued to surface, the FBI was recruited to stamp them out.

In private, Roosevelt's doctors, including McIntire, expressed doubts about whether he could survive a fourth term. If he decided to run again in 1944, Dr. Frank Lahey observed, the president "had a very serious responsibility concerning who is the Vice President." Nonetheless, Lomazow and Fettman write, the president did not choose Harry Truman as his running mate because "he was best-suited to take over from him at a moment's notice." Nor did Roosevelt involve Truman in decision-making following their election in 1944.

These days, most Americans believe that it would be impossible for a president to keep a deadly secret from the public. And they may be right. But, as Lomazow and Fettman remind us, presidential candidates are not now required to undergo a medical screening by an independent board (as opposed to their own physicians). Wouldn't we rather be safe than sorry?

FDR's deadly secret
Steven Lomazow
and Eric Fettman
PublicAffairs, $25.95

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An undated photo of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Associated Press file

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Return to Story