



In the depths of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt restored faith in a political system that Americans had few reasons to respect. Following Pearl Harbor, he rallied the nation and its allies in an epic conflict in which victory was by no means assured. Both as an inspirational leader and as a master politician, FDR provides a benchmark for later presidents.

*(Corbis/Bettmann-UPI)*

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## CHAPTER 2

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### The Virtuoso Leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt

This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that we have nothing to fear but fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give support to leadership in these critical days.

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT,  
FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS,  
MARCH 4, 1933

Very often when some matter was being fought out with his advisers, he would bring up the question at dinner and bait me into giving an opinion by stating as his own a point of view with which he knew I would disagree. He would give me all the arguments which had been advanced to him, and I would try vociferously and with heat to refute them. I remember one occasion . . . when I became extremely vehement and irritated. My husband smiled indulgently and repeated all the

things that everyone else had said to him. The next day he asked Miss Thompson if she could have tea in the West Hall in the White House for him and Robert Bingham, who was then our Ambassador to London and about to return to his post.

I dutifully served them with tea, fully expecting to sit and listen in silence to a discussion of questions with which I probably would not be in agreement. Instead, to my complete surprise, I heard Franklin telling Ambassador Bingham to act, not according to the arguments that he had given me, but according to the arguments that I had given him! Without giving me the satisfaction of batting an eyelash in my direction, he calmly stated as his own the policies and beliefs he had argued against the night before! To this day I have no idea whether he had simply used me as a sounding board, as he so often did, with the idea of getting the reaction of the person on the outside, or whether my arguments had been needed to fortify his decision and to clarify his own mind.

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT,  
*This I Remember*, 1949

The force of nature known as Franklin Delano Roosevelt swept into the presidency on March 4, 1933, and remained there until his death on April 12, 1945, three months into his fourth term. By then the United States had become a world power and a nascent welfare state, and the presidency itself had undergone a fundamental transformation, replacing Congress as the principal energy source of the political system. Roosevelt was not solely responsible for these changes, but without him American history would have been different, not just in its details but in its larger contours.

## A RARIFIED UPBRINGING

It is difficult to imagine a more unlikely candidate for the leader of a powerful coalition of blue-collar workers, labor unions, and ethnic minorities than Franklin Roosevelt. He was born on January 30, 1882, and raised on the Hudson River Valley estate of his family in Hyde Park, New York. He was the only child of James Roosevelt, a wealthy landowner who traced his ancestry to seventeenth-century New Amsterdam, and Sara Delano Roosevelt, who came from a moneyed family that went back to the founding of Plymouth Colony in 1621.

Franklin was the center of attention of his adoring parents and their many retainers. He was educated by governesses and tutors and accompanied his parents on their annual stays at leading European watering spots. When the family traveled within the United States, it was in James's private railway car. In some men this would have been a prescription for snobbery and indolence, but that was inconsistent with the Roosevelt family ethos. James Roosevelt was a vestryman of the local Episcopal church, a guiding spirit in the village of Hyde Park, and a benign force in the lives of those in his employ. Franklin's mother reinforced his father's example, holding him to high standards of gentlemanly conduct and civic responsibility.

To this there was added the teachings of Endicott Peabody, the headmaster of Groton preparatory school where Franklin was sent at age fourteen. Peabody considered his calling to be the molding of "manly Christian character," stressing the importance of service to mankind. From Groton, Roosevelt went to Harvard, where he was an indifferent student but exhibited his interest in leadership by staying on an extra year to serve as editor in chief of the student newspaper.

James Roosevelt died during his son's freshman year at Harvard. Following his death, Sara Roosevelt made Franklin her central concern, going so far as to move to Boston for his remaining college years. When Franklin married his distant cousin, Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1905, Sara set the couple up in a house adjacent to hers in New York City, intervening freely in the raising of their children. She maintained control of the family fortune until her death in 1941. Her persistent effort to

control her son had the unintended effect of fostering the wiles that became an integral part of his political style, including what one FDR biographer calls his “selective candor” and “creative use of indirection.”<sup>1</sup>

#### AN ILLUSTRIOUS EXEMPLAR

A further stimulus to FDR’s political development was the example of his fifth cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, who was on the ascendant in Republican politics during Franklin’s formative years. Between 1895 and 1901, TR served as New York City police commissioner, assistant secretary of the navy, commander of a swashbuckling cavalry regiment in the Spanish-American War, governor of New York, and vice president under President William McKinley. McKinley was assassinated six months after taking office for his second term, and on September 14, 1901, the forty-two-year-old Roosevelt became president.

Theodore Roosevelt’s career demonstrated to Franklin that a member of the upper classes could thrive in the rough-and-tumble of politics and even suggested a trajectory. After Harvard, FDR dabbled in the law, but he confided to a contemporary that his real interest was in politics, adding that he hoped to replicate TR’s experience by winning office in New York and moving on to become assistant secretary of the navy, governor of New York, and president of the United States.

FDR went on to do precisely that, but as a Democrat, perhaps to avoid competition with TR’s sons, who were viewed as likely to enter Republican politics. In 1910, Roosevelt ran for the New York State Senate at the behest of the Democratic organization in his home district, which was attracted by his famous name and the hope that he would finance his own campaign. He fought a vigorous election campaign, winning 52 percent of the vote, and continued his activism in the legislature, where he led a revolt against his party’s urban bosses. Before long, FDR was the object of national attention as a promising young Democrat carrying on the progressive tradition of his Republican cousin. In 1912, FDR supported New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson in his campaign for the presidency. When Wilson was elected, he made him assistant secretary of the navy.

#### CLIMB TO THE PRESIDENCY

In 1920, the Democrats chose the thirty-nine-year-old Roosevelt as their vice-presidential candidate. Apart from being a rising political star, FDR provided regional balance for the presidential candidate, Ohio governor James M. Cox. The Democrats lost the election, but Roosevelt delivered nearly a thousand speeches in thirty-two states, emerging as one of his party’s leading figures.

Before FDR could emulate TR and go on to the New York governorship and the White House, two developments came close to ending his political career. In 1918, his wife discovered that he had been having an affair with her social secretary. She proposed a divorce, which would have been politically fatal in that era, but their marriage continued and evolved into their famous political partnership.

In 1921, the political community was shocked to learn that FDR was paralyzed by a severe attack of poliomyelitis. By the norms of the day, such an affliction would have been an insurmountable barrier to public office, but after strenuous physical therapy, Roosevelt regained the use of his upper body and learned to simulate walking with the use of a cane. At the 1924 Democratic convention, he made a dramatic comeback, winning widespread praise for his address nominating New York governor Al Smith as the party’s presidential candidate.

Smith did not secure his party’s presidential nomination in 1924, but he did in 1928. To strengthen the national ticket in New York State, Smith persuaded FDR to run for governor. Smith lost the general election to Herbert Hoover, but Roosevelt carried New York by a narrow margin. When the Great Depression set in, FDR enhanced his national stature by instituting a series of bold measures to stimulate economic recovery in his state. In 1930, he was reelected by a record 725,000-vote margin, and in 1932, he won the Democratic presidential nomination on the fourth ballot.

Roosevelt campaigned with his characteristic dynamism, calling for a “new deal” for the American people, but saying little about what its content might be. He was elected with 57 percent of the popular

vote and 89 percent of the electoral vote, bringing into office with him an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress.

### THE POLITICS OF INSPIRATION

The circumstances under which FDR assumed the presidency could scarcely have been more intimidating. The nation was in the fourth year of a disastrous economic crisis. A quarter of the labor force was out of work, the banks had been closed in thirty-eight states, and farmers had begun to resist foreclosures with violence. The very continuation of a democratic political order was in jeopardy.

Roosevelt was unfazed. The ringing affirmations of his inaugural address signaled many of the changes that distinguish the presidency of the final two-thirds of the twentieth century from what had gone before. His assertion that America had “nothing to fear but fear itself” focused the nation’s consciousness on its chief executive, eliciting truckloads of White House mail.\*<sup>2</sup> His demand that Congress pass “the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require” marked the emergence of the presidency as the nation’s principal agent of policy initiation. Roosevelt’s warning that if the legislature failed to act, he would seek executive power “as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe” heralded a quantum increase in autonomous presidential policymaking.

Roosevelt’s formal addresses were at the heart of his public leadership. His speeches derived much of their force from the eloquence of his speechwriters: “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” “This nation has a rendezvous with destiny.” “The American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” But Roosevelt’s oratory made poetry of even the least memorable prose.

Another facet of Roosevelt’s public leadership was his fireside chats—the low-key, almost conversational radio broadcasts through

\*The longtime White House executive clerk William Hopkins recollected that “President Roosevelt was getting as much mail in a day as President Hoover received in a week. . . . They couldn’t even get the envelopes open.”

which he explained his policies. In contrast to presidents who inundate the nation with words, Roosevelt rationed his broadcasts. After delivering four such talks in 1933, he reduced their frequency, remarking that “the public psychology” cannot be “attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, there was his hold over the mass media. When he was in Washington, Roosevelt met twice a week with the reporters assigned to the White House. His remarks were off the record, but he provided the press with invaluable background information and occasional direct quotations. The tone was set in the first of the nearly one thousand such meetings:

When the questioning began, the full virtuosity of the new Chief Executive was demonstrated. Cigarette holder in mouth at a jaunty angle, he met the reporters on their own grounds. His answers were swift, positive, and illuminating. He had exact information at his fingertips. He showed an impressive understanding of public problems and administrative methods. . . . He made no effort to conceal his pleasure in the give and take of the situation.<sup>4</sup>

Everything about FDR made for superb copy: his language, appearance, and attractive family. He also was a constant visual presence. His photograph was everywhere, not only in static portraits, but also in the newsreels that were the era’s equivalent of television.

### A MASTER OF MANEUVER

No other president has been more politically proficient than FDR. He had a sure instinct for when to proceed obliquely and when to go public, a legendary political network, and charm that could melt glaciers. The complexities of Roosevelt’s political style are well captured by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.:

He was forever weighing questions of personal force, of political timing, of congressional concern, of partisan benefit, of public inter-

est. Situations had to be permitted to develop, to crystallize, to clarify; the competing forces had to vindicate themselves in the actual pull and tug of conflict; public opinion had to face the question, consider it, pronounce upon it—only then, at the long, frazzled end, would the President's intuitions consolidate and precipitate a result.<sup>5</sup>

But the man behind the style was an enigma. Try as his aides did to understand him, the inner man was terra incognita. One adviser referred to the “secrecy of the Roosevelt inner operations chamber.” Another complained to Roosevelt that he was “one of the most difficult men to work with that I have ever known. You won't talk frankly even with people who are loyal to you and of whose loyalty you are fully convinced.”<sup>6</sup> A third concluded that Roosevelt was inscrutable out of choice:

He seemed not to want any one person to know the whole story. At times he seemed to delight in having two or more people do different but related parts of a single job that could have been done by one person. . . . It was an inefficient way of doing things and frequently led to duplication of effort, and sometimes to argument and conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Schlesinger purports to find method in Roosevelt's sphinx-like quality and the byzantine White House politics to which it contributed, arguing that FDR adhered to a “competitive theory of administration,” geared to keeping decision making in his hands and maximizing his information.<sup>8\*</sup> Whether Roosevelt consciously held such a conception is uncertain. His elusiveness and his practice of playing aides off against one another undoubtedly did enhance his influence and information, but at a cost. His practices made for need-less rivalries and poor morale. More important, they elevated divining

\*In the final two years of the war, Roosevelt's organizational idiosyncrasies were tempered by his reliance on strong subordinates, including Harry Hopkins as emissary to the Allied leaders, Admiral William Leahy as his link with the military, and James F. Byrnes as the overall director of the domestic war effort.

FDR's “operations chamber” over reasoned policy deliberation and complicated the jobs of his aides, leaving them uncertain about how he would come down on issues, how vigorously he would advance them, and whether he would suddenly change direction.

#### A CASCADE OF ENACTMENTS

Of the many instances of Roosevelt's political artistry that would reward the attention of his successors, two of the most impressive were his leadership of Congress during the cascade of lawmaking known as the Hundred Days and his invention of the policy departure to which he gave the name lend-lease.

Between March 9 and June 6, 1933, FDR proposed and Congress disposed of an unprecedented volume of new legislation: banking reform, a government economy act, unemployment relief, agricultural relief, relief of small home owners, railroad reorganization, public construction and taxation legislation, and the acts that created the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the National Recovery Administration (NRA).<sup>9</sup>

The Hundred Days was an unpremeditated triumph. There had been no plan for it on Roosevelt's part. He had convened Congress to act on a few emergency measures, but on the opening day, the legislature showed a dramatic readiness to act on Roosevelt's bidding. Before the day was over, it had passed the banking bill even though its text was not yet available. Attempts to debate the measure were greeted with cries of “Vote! Vote!” Seizing the occasion, Roosevelt arranged for Congress to remain in session until it enacted the rest of his program.

Roosevelt's hand was evident throughout the Hundred Days. He approved policies, set strategies, met with legislators, explained his purposes, and courted the press. His timing was superb. When the pension cuts provided for in the economy bill met the opposition of veterans' groups, Roosevelt deflected criticism by proposing the legalization of beer. He was buoyantly improvisatory, comparing himself to a quarterback who knows “what the next play is going to be,” but cannot say what the play after that will be “until the next play is run

off." He even recovered his own fumbles. He initially opposed a proposal for bank deposit insurance, considering it unsound, but when it became evident that it would pass, he took credit for it.<sup>10</sup>

#### INVENTING LEND-LEASE

More advance planning went into lend-lease than the Hundred Days. Roosevelt had viewed Hitler with abhorrence from the time that they both came into power early in 1933, but until the German dictator's meeting with the leaders of Britain and France at Munich in October 1938, he was uncertain about the extent of Hitler's ambitions. The severity of Hitler's demands at Munich and his sheer unreasonableness resolved Roosevelt's doubts. He set out to align the United States with the Western democracies, embarking on a sustained effort to educate his nation to his views and build up its military capacity.

By summer 1940, Germany had overrun Europe, and Britain stood alone, dependent on arms purchases from the United States for its survival. In December, Prime Minister Winston Churchill informed FDR that his nation could no longer pay for American arms. As the balance of forces stood on Capitol Hill, Congress was unlikely to approve a loan to the United Kingdom.

Roosevelt himself devised the solution in what his labor secretary and long-time political ally Frances Perkins called a "flash of almost clairvoyant knowledge and understanding."<sup>11</sup> The United States would send armaments to Britain without charge, asking only that they be returned after the war. He floated the proposal in an off-the-record meeting with reporters in December 1940, employing a homely analogy:

Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help to put out his fire. Now what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, "Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15; you have to pay me \$15 for it." What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want \$15—I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.

The following week, Roosevelt took his creation to the public. He called on the nation to discard the mentality of "business as usual" and become an "arsenal of democracy" and proceed "with the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war." Otherwise, he declared, the "unholy alliance" of Germany, Italy, and Japan would advance toward world domination, and Americans "would be living at the point of the gun." By January, the lend-lease bill, complete with the symbolic designation HR 1776, had been submitted to Congress. In March it was signed into law.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE PERILS OF GRANDIOSITY

The boldness and aplomb that Roosevelt's aides found awesome could be a prescription for ill-conceived ventures. During FDR's first term, the Supreme Court had struck down numerous New Deal measures. In February 1937, Roosevelt suddenly announced a proposal to add as many as six justices to the Supreme Court. Roosevelt's frustration with the Court was understandable, but the proposal was drastic and it was launched out of the blue. He consulted neither members of Congress nor his closest aides. The resulting tempest consumed political energies that might have been better expended and mobilized a bipartisan conservative coalition that continued to block liberal policy departures long after Roosevelt left the political stage.

Roosevelt was equally capable of acting on untested intuitions in international affairs, as in his overly personalized wartime relations with the Soviet Union.\*<sup>13</sup> In 1942, Roosevelt apprised Churchill of his belief that he could "personally handle Stalin better than either your Foreign Office or my State Department."<sup>14</sup> When the two met with the Soviet dictator in November 1943, he acted on that belief, seeking to

\*There is unlikely ever to be a resolution to the debate over the larger question of whether FDR needlessly sacrificed the interests of the West in his agreements with Stalin late in the war or simply responded to the realities of Soviet power in Eastern Europe. Positions on that issue require unverifiable inferences about complex historical contingencies and depend as much on the values of the disputants as the appeal to evidence.

make a personal connection with Stalin by needling Churchill. The angrier Churchill became, Roosevelt later recalled, the more it amused Stalin: "Finally Stalin broke out into a deep, hearty guffaw. From that time on our relations were personal, and Stalin himself indulged in an occasional witticism. The ice was broken and we talked like men and brothers."<sup>15</sup>

So Roosevelt wanted to think. Six months later, the Yugoslavian communist Milovan Djilas had a conversation with Stalin in which the Soviet dictator commented that FDR was even less trustworthy than Churchill. The latter, Stalin observed, "is the kind who, if you don't watch him, will slip a kopeck out of your pocket," but Roosevelt "dips his hand only for bigger coins."<sup>16</sup>

#### SIGNIFICANCE

**Public Communication** In his communication practices, as in much else, FDR provides a benchmark for his successors. His soaring rhetoric roused imaginations and stirred souls. He restored faith in a political system that Americans had few reasons to respect and rallied the nation and its allies in an epic conflict in which victory was by no means assured. He dominated his times, defining the terms of politics at home and abroad. As a communicator, Roosevelt is to later presidents what Mozart and Beethoven have been to their successors—inimitable but endlessly inspiring. Future presidents are unlikely to equal FDR's eloquence, but they could scarcely do better than to immerse themselves in his record, reading his addresses, listening to recordings of them, and studying his public presentation of self.

**Organizational Capacity** Roosevelt's famously chaotic organizational methods are not a promising model for presidents to come. Despite Arthur Schlesinger's praise of his "competitive theory of administration," Roosevelt's practice of playing aides off against one another provoked needless rivalries, sapping the morale of his lieutenants. It also put a premium on wile, making the influence of his advisers a function of their bureaucratic skills rather than the merits of

their recommendations. By encouraging his aides to vie with one another, FDR generated sparks. His policies would have profited from steadier illumination.

Roosevelt did make an enduring organizational contribution by creating the cluster of presidential agencies known as the Executive Office of the President (EOP). To constitute the EOP agencies, FDR created the White House Office, an entity that for the first time provided the chief executive with a staff of high-level aides. He also moved a minor treasury department unit called the Bureau of the Budget to the new executive office, where it was to become the nerve center of the federal government. Roosevelt employed his new EOP assistants in much the same freewheeling manner as the many unofficial aides who buzzed around him. Still, he laid the groundwork for the organization-minded Harry Truman to create a cadre of dedicated civil servants who serve the presidency, as well as its incumbent, providing the chief executive with the institutional capacity to shape the nation's policy agenda.<sup>17</sup>

**Political Skill** The Roosevelt presidency is laden with insights into how presidents can get results in an often intractable political system. Future presidents might well begin with the beginning, using the Hundred Days as a source of lessons on such matters as setting the agenda for congressional action, timing proposals, and even transforming a defeat into a seeming victory, as Roosevelt did when he took credit for bank deposit insurance. They would be equally advised to study FDR's international maneuvers, especially his patient, step-by-step alignment of the United States with the Western democracies in the period following Munich and his display of political imagination in inventing lend-lease. But Roosevelt's successors should take warning from his failures, many of which stemmed from his reluctance to expose his intuitions to debate within his advisory circle.

**Vision** For those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, it may border on blasphemy to suggest that a leader with Roosevelt's superlative inspirational qualities and sweeping imag-

ination was deficient in vision. Nevertheless, FDR's thinking about policy was intuitive rather than conceptual or analytic. In international affairs, his faith in democracy and instinct for power relations lent coherence to his administration's policies, especially after Munich. In domestic affairs, however, his views were vague and contradictory and his policies were a patchwork. A telling illustration is provided by a member of Roosevelt's legendary Brain Trust, the Columbia University economist Raymond Moley. On an occasion when Roosevelt's advisers were deeply divided on tariff policy, Moley presented him with alternative speech drafts announcing diametrically opposed policies. Roosevelt left Moley "speechless" by instructing him to "weave the two together."<sup>18</sup>

The enactments of the Hundred Days point to the consequences of such indifference to policy content. Some of them were unproductive, because they cancelled one another out; others were even counterproductive. The economy bill, which was deflationary, negated the effect of the relief measures, which were inflationary. The National Recovery Act triggered a boom *in advance* of going into effect, as businesses scrambled to fill orders before price and wage controls were in force. It impeded recovery once it was operational by interfering with market forces.<sup>19</sup> Small wonder that it took the war to bring about recovery.

**Cognitive Style** Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously remarked that FDR had "a second-class intellect" and "a first-class temperament."<sup>20</sup> He was on target in both respects. Roosevelt's intellectual strengths included an exceptional memory, a remarkable ability to synthesize diverse ideas and facts, and the openness to "almost clairvoyant" insights to which Frances Perkins referred. His weaknesses included his insensitivity to abstractions and his inability to identify the contradictions in his policies.

In a revealing episode, one of FDR's associates arranged for him to meet John Maynard Keynes in the hope that the great economist would help provide coherence to the New Deal, but to no avail. Roosevelt did not know what to make of Keynes. "I saw your friend Keynes," he reported to the associate who set up the meeting. "He left a whole rigma-

role of figures. He must be a mathematician rather than a political economist."<sup>21</sup> One need not be a Keynesian to recognize that an FDR who was better able to grasp economic abstractions would have been less likely to preside over policies that cancelled one another out.

**Emotional Intelligence** FDR presents a complex emotional picture. The "selective candor" and "creative use of indirection" he acquired at his mother's knee made for a leadership style that was manipulative and inscrutable, even when circumstances did not warrant it. Roosevelt also had a striking capacity for ignoring disagreeable realities. He showed no compunction about seeking a fourth term, even though he had undergone a severe physical decline, and after being reelected, he left Truman uninformed about the Manhattan Project and what had transpired at Yalta. None of this is the mark of a blemish-free personality.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Roosevelt fully deserved Holmes's encomium. His temperament could scarcely have been better suited for inspiring public confidence. There is no way of knowing whether he himself felt no fear in 1933, when he assured the nation that it need only be afraid of "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror," or whether he was as supremely confident as he appeared to be on December 8, 1941, when he declared to the nation that "the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory." Even if the sense of absolute assurance he radiated was only that of a masterful performer, it reveals his singular emotional fitness for the demands of his times.