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Waiting for Franklin D.

I

There is an Illinois legend that for an entire year after Lincoln died, in April 1865, no brown thrush sang. FDR's death on an April day eighty years later reminded many people of that earlier event and brought a comparable sense of deprivation. Each president had been taken in the final days of a great war, his work not quite completed. Each had achieved so much that the ensuing generation was left with a sharp awareness of living in a "post-heroic age," in George Forgie's phrase, an era "shaped by the memory of the revolutionary age that preceded it." In the Illinois capital of Springfield legislators have sensed Lincoln's brooding spirit, and for the past generation Americans, looking back toward the age of Roosevelt, have felt "nostalgia for a lost presence." More than a quarter of a century after that April day in 1945, Rexford Tugwell said of FDR, "'What would he have done?' is still a relevant question."[1]

Writing in 1971, nearly four decades after he had first become a member of the Brain Trust, Tugwell declared that the history of the postwar world "was drastically different than it would have been if [FDR] had lived." Roosevelt had died at sixty-four, much too young. If he had been granted twelve more years, "he would have finished out his fourth term and had a fifth and a sixth." Even if he had enjoyed only eight more years, the world would have been spared the disaster of Truman and perhaps Eisenhower, Tugwell said. To be sure, "he survived in people's memory, a standard for his successors; but, much as they might be granted for effort, they failed." Ever since his death the world had gone "off course," Tugwell concluded. "For him, death may have had no sting; for those who were left it did."[2]

Even when commentators were less fanciful and more fair-minded than Tugwell, FDR's successors have never been able to escape unflattering comparisons, though there was no way that they could reasonably have been expected to match Roosevelt's record. No president could ever again introduce the welfare state. None, after the Constitution was amended, could ever again serve as long as FDR. None, in an atomic age, could anticipate fighting a world war through to the kind of victory achieved in 1945. None could be the first to lead the country out of isolation into a United Nations and a dominant role in world affairs. In short, each of the chief executives since Roosevelt's death has been, in Sainte-Beuve's phrase, a "late-comer" who bore the special disadvantage of coming directly after an eminent figure. As Pliny observed, "The burthen of government is increased upon princes by the virtues of their immediate predecessors."[3]

II

Men of letters have been especially attuned to the kinds of disadvantages that successors face, for they have concentrated much of their attention on a single question: How can one find scope for one's talents when so much has already been achieved? Though their focus is on "the burden of the past" for the poet, their comments are no less pertinent in the political sphere.

"When a great poet has lived," T. S. Eliot has said, "certain things have been done once for all, and cannot be achieved again." That lament has been a persistent one among writers and artists. Robert Burton complained that "we can say nothing but what has been said," and Thomas Carew lamented that there were naught but "rifled fields" from which all the "buds of invention" had been taken. The situation, La Bruyère grumbled, left a writer with two choices: resort to "forced conceits" to make one's mark or slavish imitation of predecessors. The latter was the more likely course. Robert Louis Stevenson could speak for many others when he confessed, "I have . . . played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann."[4]

The realm of music holds many similar examples of composers in awe of a mighty forerunner. Handel all but exhausted the possibilities of the oratorio, and the "passion" form did not long survive Johann Sebastian Bach. In the nineteenth century, composers viewed Beethoven as "a dread idol, a jealous god whose Ninth Symphony stood as the pinnacle of human artistic creation." So dark a shadow was cast by Beethoven's achievement that Brahms could bring himself to write only four symphonies. Even more telling is the behavior of Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner, each of whom wrote more than nine symphonies but would not acknowledge what he had done. Mahler left his Tenth Symphony unfinished, while Bruckner would not number two of his early works; his D-minor symphony is called *Die Nullte* (Number Zero). Yet Beethoven himself spent his final days rereading Handel's scores.[5]

Though the sensibility of the statesman is not that of the artist, political leaders, too, have had to live with the "anxiety of influence," and they have often attempted to deal with it by associating themselves with some past figure of enormous potency. Alexander drew strength from his conviction that he descended from Heracles and Achilles, while Ptolemy I moved Alexander's body to Egypt and created a cult of Alexander throughout his kingdom. To identify herself with Peter the Great, who had come to be thought of as possessing godlike qualities, the empress Catherine commissioned a statue of him so mammoth that "a miniature cliff of 1,600 tons of granite was dragged to the bank of the Neva to form a pedestal." In France, Napoleon III calculatedly fostered the legend of the first Napoleon in order to exploit the obsession with the emperor typified by Julien's fixation in Stendhal's *Rouge et le noir.* (It did little good; Victor Hugo continued to refer to him as *Napoléon le petit.*)[6]

In America as well, leaders have profitably identified themselves with past heroes or have had their fortunes advanced by a powerful sponsor. "I do believe," said one observer of Jefferson at his successor's inauguration, "father never loved son more than he loves Mr. Madison." In the age of Andrew Jackson party rivals spent an inordinate amount of time debating whether Jefferson, who had opposed Jackson's nomination in 1824, had changed his mind before his death in 1826. During these years, Merrill Peterson has noted, politicians showed "acute sensibility . . . to the value of Jefferson's benediction"; Thomas Hart Benton, in particular, "sprinkled Jefferson's holy water on every issue from slavery to salt." A generation later the martyred Lincoln was regarded as so essential to the plans of both Andrew Johnson and his Radical opponents that the struggle between them degenerated, as David Donald has written, into "a ghoulish tugging at Lincoln's shroud."[7]

Frequently, though, presidents have shared the sentiment of the Irishman who cried, "Get history off our backs!" The weight of having to live up to the reputation of a former resident of the White House has been too heavy to endure. More than once they have seemed much like

Holgrove in *The House of the Seven Gables,* who says: "Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant. . . . A dead man sits on all our judgment-seats."[8]

In one respect a long line of earlier presidents had a tougher time than FDR's successors, for they were subject to being outclassed by a predecessor who was still around to hog the spotlight. At John Adams's inauguration, George Washington was the center of attention, and in James Madison's presidency, critics often charged that "the long arm of Monticello" still managed the government. They found proof in the revelation that in a brief period Madison had written Jefferson twelve times. (In fact, all of the communications were about the disposition of a lamb.) Martin Van Buren fared no better. When he was inaugurated in 1837, the crowd reserved its greatest cheers for Andrew Jackson. "The rising sun," remarked Thomas Hart Benton, "was eclipsed by the setting sun."[9]

Understandably, these experiences sometimes aroused resentment. In later years Adams claimed that his role of minister plenipotentiary to negotiate peace in 1779 far outranked in significance that of Washington as commander in chief, and he even asked, "Would Washington have ever been commander of the revolutionary army or president of the United States if he had not married the rich widow of Mr. Custis?" He also thought it a bit much to say that God had denied Washington children so that he could be father of the whole country. In like fashion Jefferson was to write, in an introduction for the *Anas,* that in his second term George Washington had approached senility and had permitted himself to be exploited by politicians.[10]

III

No man who becomes president can evade a confrontation with his forerunners, since they have the most palpable effect on the way he will ultimately be regarded. Toward the end of FDR's first term, Anne O'Hare McCormick, a correspondent for the *New York Times,* observed:

> As soon as a man moves into the White House, even though up to that moment he has been only an ambitious politician, he becomes conscious of himself as a historic figure. The White House is a gallery of dead Presi-

> dents, among whom the living occupant lives as a man among his ancestors. . . . Increasingly he is aware of those who stand out from the crowd, still alive in the memory of the nation.[11]

All of FDR's successors, like those who had gone before them, faced a set of dilemmas. Their greatest problem was how to solve the question that troubles the artist—"What is there left to do?"[12] Roosevelt had bequeathed a rich legacy of ideas and institutions that were of immense value to his successors. But by that very token he had also made it much less likely that their achievements would equal or surpass his. They had to cope, too, with a further demand—to remain loyal to FDR, as the Roosevelt idolators expected them to be, and yet to establish their own identity in order to create a record comparable to his. Ironically, the more faithful they were to FDR, the more unlike him they would be, for Roosevelt had made his place in history by breaking with the pattern of his predecessors. They could succeed by greatly enlarging what he had accomplished or by finding new fields of endeavor, neither of which was an easy task, or by departing from his legacy, an action fraught with difficulty, for it seemed a kind of filial disobedience.

It was a staple of the pop psychology of the times to refer to Roosevelt as a father figure, and though only Johnson seems in any significant way to have confused FDR with his own family, other presidents may well have viewed him as a parental preceptor. To the extent that his successors thought of FDR as a father, they became involved in all the complicated emotions that any effort to displace a father entails. "The essence of success," Freud observed, is "to have got further than one's father . . . as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden." In fact, the relationship is deeply ambiguous, for a son may love his father and seek his approval while also wanting to surpass him.[13]

Roosevelt had a much easier time than the presidents who followed him, but he, too, had to conjure with the past. Anne O'Hare McCormick wrote of him in 1936:

> More than most Presidents, he measures himself by his official ancestors. At a first meeting, before he went to Washington, this reporter was struck by his frequent allusions to the Presidents who in his mind have served as instruments of historic change. Once he enumerated the characters in history he most admires, and I was struck again by the fact that all were Americans and three were Presidents—Washington, Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt.

> The reason for his admiration is just that these men led the country from one phase of development into another. He thinks of them as translating into policy and action revolutions already far advanced in the national mind.[14]

For the most part, the memory of his predecessors served Roosevelt well. FDR, as David Donald has remarked, "seemed to rummage through the clothes closet of American history and take his pick of garments. He understood what was meant by 'the usable past.'" In one address in the 1936 campaign he mentioned no fewer than five of his predecessors—Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson. As a Democrat FDR identified most particularly with Andrew Jackson. On Election Day in 1936 he wore Jackson's hefty gold watch chain for good luck, and he stipulated that the reviewing stand for his inauguration in 1937 should be a replica of the Hermitage.[15]

Roosevelt even appropriated the totem of the Republican party. Four years before he entered the White House, he said, "I think it is time for us Democrats to claim Lincoln as one of our own," and as president he made a pilgrimage to Lincoln's birthplace, long the exclusive shrine of the GOP. He employed as his speechwriter the author of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois,* Robert Sherwood, who gave Broadway a Great Emancipator who was an early New Dealer. Frequently he likened his situation to Lincoln's. Asked by young radicals how he could justify rearmament, he replied, "Have you read Carl Sandburg's *Lincoln*?" He even compared the antiwar critic Charles Lindbergh to Clement Vallandigham, the Copperhead leader. When after meeting with Churchill at the Atlantic Conference he was asked to draft his own headline for the ensuing press interview, he answered, "I'd say, 'President Quotes Lincoln—And Draws Parallel.'"[16]

Only Woodrow Wilson caused him some anxiety. Roosevelt often referred to his experience as assistant secretary of the Navy in the Wilson administration, but he said that he had profited more from Wilson's errors than from his successes. In particular, he saw Wilson's unhappy experience in the League of Nations fight as an example of what he must avoid. (After the president viewed the movie *Wilson* in 1944, his blood pressure rose to the worrisome rate of 240 over 130.) In pacing off the path for a postwar United Nations, Roosevelt tried, as Ernest May has written, "step by step to stay out of Woodrow Wilson's footmarks." His insistence on unconditional surrender signified a deliberate departure from Wilson's action in acceding to an armistice that permitted the "stab in the back" legend to build. As Robert Sherwood said, "The ghost of Woodrow Wilson was . . . at his shoulder."[17]

IV

Just as Roosevelt had to come to terms with such men as Wilson, those who have followed after him have had to figure out how to make the best use of the FDR legacy, and that task has often been perplexing, especially in recent times. Early in 1982 a Washington commentator wrote:

> The Democrats, willy-nilly, are FDR's true political legatees. They must build a house of their own in which to hang his portrait, and we have no doubt in time they will. But for the moment they are like the listless heirs of some departed magnate, picking sadly over the threadbare furniture in a cobwebby mansion.[18]

No one doubted that Roosevelt continued to cast a shadow decades after his death. When Jimmy Carter campaigned in West Virginia in the midterm elections of 1978, pictures of FDR still adorned the walls of miners' shacks. In the 1980s millions of Americans still drew on the accomplishments of the Roosevelt years: old people counted on social security benefits; Southerners electrified their homes with TVA power; big-city residents lived in New Deal housing projects; New Yorkers crossed the Triboro Bridge and Virginians traveled the Skyline Drive. The jobs legislation enacted in 1983 owed an obvious debt to the WPA, and a bill to create a new program modeled on the CCC won wide support in Congress. Five miles from Willow, in southwestern Oklahoma, the first of the more than 200 million trees planted in FDR's pet project of a shelter belt against dust storms on the dry western plains still thrived. Some of the most prominent political figures of the 1980s looked back half a century for guideposts. Teddy Kennedy frequently alluded to FDR, while Fritz Mondale recalled having been raised in a family that regarded Franklin Roosevelt as a household god.[19]

Even young Democrats with no memory of Roosevelt expressed a yearning for those special qualities that distinguished his stewardship. The governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, told the Democratic convention in 1980:

> It seems that everyone in this convention and half the people at the Republican convention quoted Franklin Roosevelt. Everyone can quote him, but his words out of context mean little. And they do very little to illuminate what was really significant about his leadership. When Franklin Roosevelt ran for reelection in 1936, . . . he was returned to office, but not because the depression was over. . . . Far from it. We were still in the teeth of the depression. Why was he returned to office? Because people knew what sort of vision he had for America. They knew what action he was taking to transform the country. And they were willing, most important, to accept hardship for the present, because they believed they were part of a process that would lead them to a better tomorrow.[20]

Yet if FDR still casts a shadow, that shadow appears to be waning. Though Nixon, Carter, and Reagan have all affirmed the influence of Roosevelt, that acknowledgment has been largely ritualistic. It is not a little like the play-acting at Versailles, where Louis XV maintained the tradition of the *coucher* that had come down from his great-grandfather; when the courtiers had left his bedroom, the king would flee by a back door and spend the night elsewhere.[21]

Memories of the Roosevelt era have receded further with each passing year. A historian wrote in 1979 that "what exists now in literature of a revised Roosevelt is little more than a shadowy figure lurking in the gazebo of Clio's estate," and the following year the chief of *Newsweek*'s Washington bureau remarked that "the days of F.D.R. [seem] for so many of us now . . . pre-history." Mondale, his biographer notes, remembered the "clear, patrician voice" he had heard over the radio as "distant and somewhat disembodied." Even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the admiring chronicler of *The Age of Roosevelt,* wrote, "The New Deal is of course over." Each season brought news of the death of another of the Young Turks of the New Deal—Tommy Corcoran, David Lilienthal—and on the prairie bulldozers were leveling trees that had been planted in FDR's shelter belt. In 1981 the organizer of the FDR centennial celebration observed, "While most people over age 45 feel passionately about FDR one way or another, those younger than 30 often cannot distinguish Franklin Roosevelt from Theodore Roosevelt. Young people today see his name on a school and often cannot tell you who he was."[22]

Political analysts have been performing last rites on the FDR coalition for a long while. Gerald Pomper has noted that from 1944 to 1964 there was "an indication of the decreasing salience of the New Deal ideological division between the two parties," and after the 1966 elections Walter Dean Burnham announced that "the liquidation of the older New Deal alignment and political styles associated with it is becoming an associated fact." The president of Common Cause, David Cohen, recalled that when he was a boy every store in the neighborhood carried a picture of FDR; but in 1980 he reflected on "the fracturing of the Roosevelt coalition—its last hurrah was the 1968 Hubert Humphrey campaign." By the 1980s voters who cast their first ballot for FDR in 1932 were in their seventies.[23]

A generational fault line bifurcates the Democratic delegation on Capitol Hill. The Great Depression shaped the ideas of the congressional leadership, which remained faithful to the ideology of the age of Roosevelt. "I did not become Speaker of the House to dismantle the programs that I've worked all my life for," said Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Tip O'Neill had learned in his youth that government was a benefactor while a younger group of House Democrats had been taught in the era of Vietnam and Watergate to distrust government. "Clearly we don't think of ourselves as New Dealers—at all," stated a Michigan representative with no recollection of FDR. "We don't assume that what was enacted in 1939 should set the priorities for 1979."[24]

Legacies have a way of coming undone, and each generation must redefine for itself the significance of the heritage handed down to it. Not even Alexander, in giving his signet ring to Perdiccas, could determine the course of events after his death, and Charlemagne's empire did not long survive him. The test of each president in this regard is how successful he is in maintaining continuity with what is worthwhile in the past and adapting old ideas to new ends. Alfred North Whitehead has observed:

> The art of free society consists in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.[25]

V

The shadow cast by FDR has created an imposing set of challenges with far-reaching consequences. Each of his successors has known that if he did not walk in FDR's footsteps, he ran the risk of having it said that he was not a Roosevelt but a Hoover. Yet to the extent that he did copy FDR, he lost any chance of marking out his own claim to recognition. The efforts of Roosevelt's successors to deal with this dilemma—to prove their fidelity to FDR while distancing themselves from him—has done much to shape the course of events from the spring of 1945 to the present.

At times the injunction to emulate FDR has had mischievous results. Roosevelt has loomed so large that it has too often been forgotten that he, like his trouble-plagued successors, made mistakes and ran into difficulties. Nor is it always remembered that some of the developments of the postwar era that were to be most deplored, such as the military-industrial complex, had their origins in the age of Roosevelt. Comparison of his successors to FDR, especially to a legendary FDR, has inevitably produced not just disappointment but an inordinate sense of depression at the decline in quality in the presidential office.

Yet it has also been, and continues to be, beneficial to use Roosevelt's performance as a measuring rod, for his largeness of view has been, and is, badly needed. FDR displayed a hospitality to new ideas and vivid personalities that sets a standard for all who follow him. He demonstrated, as well, a willingness to concern himself about excluded groups in America that has been too little seen in recent years. In short, he showed that government can be both imaginative and humane, a contribution that is as relevant to our own times as it was to his.

Lastly, Roosevelt bequeathed his successors a lesson on how to cope with an awesome predecessor. He proved especially nimble in adapting the legacy of Thomas Jefferson to his own purposes. When he first campaigned for the presidency in 1932, Jefferson was the Democratic party's patron saint, and it was widely understood that "Jeffersonian" implied faith in limited government. But as early as April 1932 Roosevelt chose the occasion of a Jefferson Day dinner in St. Paul to come out for national economic planning. Five months later, in his Commonwealth Club address in San Francisco, he announced the end of the "long and splendid" day of Jeffersonian individualism, while still claiming the Sage of Monticello as authority for the view that government might be "a refuge and a help."[26]

In his years in the White House Roosevelt so reversed the emphasis on states' rights that his opponents called themselves "Jeffersonian Democrats," but he did so while keeping faith with Jefferson's distrust of single-interest government and while enlarging the Jeffersonian iconography. The president frequently quoted Jefferson, put his face on a postage stamp and a nickel, and in 1939 arranged to have a grove of twenty tulip poplars planted on the White House grounds in Jefferson's honor. Four years later, a temple to Jefferson's memory was completed on the banks of the Potomac under the sponsorship of FDR, in "requital," it was said, for his destruction of his predecessor's philosophy of government.[27]

By this subtle combination of efforts Roosevelt managed to supplant Jefferson as the party's most revered figure. In 1934 he took no part in Jefferson Day festivities and even stated that it would be a "fine thing" if as many Republicans as Democrats served on the banquet committee. "Much as we love Thomas Jefferson we should not celebrate him in a partisan way," he told Colonel House. As Merrill Peterson observes, "The partisan symbol was dying in the house of democracy." Peterson adds, "After Roosevelt, there was no 'return to Jefferson,' though there might arise at some future time the wish to return to Roosevelt. The party was furnished with a new tradition." Even the tree planting was symptomatic: Jefferson was identified with the Lombardy poplar, not the tulip poplar, which was FDR's favorite. Never, though, did Roosevelt make explicit what he was doing. On the contrary, he saw to it that a wreath was laid on Jefferson's tomb on each anniversary of his birth. The final wreath was placed there on April 13, 1945, as the funeral train carrying FDR's body from Warm Springs to Washington passed through Virginia.[28]

Sources

Almost nothing has been written about the impact of Franklin Roosevelt on his successors. There is no book on the subject, not even a substantial article. As a consequence I have had to rely on archival sources and on fragmentary references in works designed for other purposes.

Nor has the subject of this book—the influence of a head of state on those who succeeded him—attracted historians of other periods or of other countries. The closest models I have been able to find are Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: Norton, 1979); and Peter Karsten, *Patriot-Heroes in England and America: Political Symbolism and Changing Values over Three Centuries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). These books have a focus different from mine, but each has proved useful. In comparing FDR's legacy with that of powerful political figures elsewhere in the world, I have profited from reading Miguel A. Bretos, "From Banishment to Sainthood: A Study of the Image of Bolivar in Colombia, 1826–1883," Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1976; Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-portrait of K'ang-hsi* (New York: Knopf, 1974); and Silas H. L. Wu, *Passage to Power: K'ang-hsi and His Heir Apparent, 1661–1772* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Some writers have shown considerable awareness of FDR's shadow. There is speculation about what would have happened if Roosevelt had lived in Rexford G. Tugwell, *Off Course: From Truman to Nixon* (New York: Praeger, 1971) and Otis L. Graham, Jr., "1945: The United States, Russia and the Cold War—What If Franklin Roosevelt Had Lived?" in *Speculations on American History,* ed. Morton Borden and Otis L.