



THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT



AN AMERICAN COLOSSUS

**Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President
1933-1945**

By Dan Sanders

IN BRIEF

Franklin D. Roosevelt's seemingly indestructible optimism in the face of personal and political hardship made him indispensable to Americans. Considered finished in public life after being disabled with polio as a young man, he led the United States through two of its greatest crises -- the Great Depression and the Second World War -- with great virtuosity. Over time, "FDR" became, for all intents and purposes, President For Life, the only man elected to four terms. To Americans of draft age during the war, he was the only president they had ever known. By war's end, his nation had secured dominance in global affairs. Roosevelt, however, did not live to see it: just weeks before Hitler's suicide, wasted by the demands of the Depression at home and wartime abroad, he was felled by a stroke. Born in Hyde Park, New York in 1882, FDR died in Warm Springs, Georgia in 1945.

LIFE BEFORE THE PRESIDENCY

Franklin D. Roosevelt's lineage was as close as one can come to royal

blood in America. By birth or marriage, he was related to no less than *eleven* presidents. His mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, could claim kinship to thirteen different passengers on the *Mayflower*. Wealthy, regal, and deeply aristocratic, she barely belonged in the late nineteenth century, let alone the one soon to come. She had married James Roosevelt, a widower twice her age of Dutch ancestry, in 1880. Two years later she gave birth to her only child, named Franklin. Her son spent his youth near Hyde Park, about fifty miles north of New York City, on a large estate and farm tended by hundreds of workers. Highly insulated from the outside world, schooled at home by tutors until a teenager, all of Franklin's social contacts were carefully screened. Despite his mother's smothering nature, the family atmosphere was one of support and affection for the only child. A staunch Democrat -- unusual for a man of his social standing at the time -- James Roosevelt invested in transportation and coal interests, with spotty success. He also took an active part in local philanthropic endeavors, a trait that made a lasting impression on his son. Franklin met his first president at the age of five, when a harried [Grover Cleveland](#) told him, inside the White House: "My little man, I am making a strange wish for you. It is that you will never be President of the United States."



Young Franklin with his mother.

A parade of European vacations, genteel country parties with other elite families, sailing, and horses comprised Franklin's childhood. His first school outside the home was Groton, a highly exclusive private school, and equally elite academies in Germany. The latter taught German master-race theories — an experience that left the young man with a lasting contempt for that European nation. Back at Groton, he began to see more of his adult cousin, New York governor Theodore Roosevelt, who took a strong liking to the gangly, introspective boy.

Another relative who had made an impression by this time was Eleanor

Roosevelt, a fifth cousin and the niece of now-Vice President [Theodore Roosevelt](#). Franklin saw Eleanor socially from time to time and confessed to admiring her in letters home. But he planned to finish Harvard in three years and romantic entanglements would have to wait. Just weeks after entering the school in 1900, his father died. Roosevelt flung himself into a wide variety of extracurricular activities at the university, helping his social standing but hurting his grades. After receiving his undergraduate degree in 1903 he returned for a year of graduate work and to edit Harvard's student newspaper. The next year, he cast his first vote — for his cousin, who had gained the presidency after the assassination of [William McKinley](#).

Franklin Roosevelt reached adulthood, it could be said, just as his country did. In 1905, cousin Theodore Roosevelt personally mediated a treaty between warring Russia and Japan. The Japanese navy had destroyed a large Russian fleet in a surprise attack that would later inspire Pearl Harbor; victory and treaty made Japan and America new leading players in the global scheme. Two years later, the president commissioned a squadron of warships on a tour of the world, in part to give Japan second thoughts about further international adventurism. Franklin Roosevelt, an avid aficionado of ships and the sea, heartily supported his president's "Great White Fleet."

1904 saw Roosevelt attending law school at Columbia University in New York City. His heart, however, was far from it; even after three years of study, he never completed his degree. Deeply in love with Eleanor, he married his fifth cousin in early 1905 despite his autocratic mother's objections. The bride was given away by her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt. In the following eleven years Franklin and Eleanor would have six children, although one died in infancy. After leaving law school he served indifferently as a law clerk for three years. In 1910, however, fellow Democrats asked Roosevelt to run for political office. That *did* interest him.

Politics

Democrats did not want Roosevelt to run for the state senate in New York because of his leadership or charisma. Bluntly put, they knew a man from such a family would need little financing. Roosevelt ran in a solidly Republican area, and surprised everyone by winning on a clean-up-government platform. New Yorkers who thought the rich young state senator would opt for political business as usual were surprised: he firmly opposed the entrenched, corrupt [Tammany Hall](#) machine running New York at the time. After helping block Tammany's candidate from winning a seat in the U.S. Senate, Roosevelt gained a reputation as a reformer, and he was reelected in 1912. His name, money, energy, and political skill enabled a quick climb. That year, he went against the Tammany grain again, supporting [Woodrow Wilson](#) for president. When Wilson won, Roosevelt claimed a share of the spoils as the new president named him Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Just as he would twenty years later, Roosevelt saw world war approaching before most, and he did a superlative job of helping to get the navy on a war footing. He also made a name for himself with organized labor by mediating disputes between the military and civilian shipyard workers. Roosevelt became a valued component of the Wilson administration. Although he wanted to serve in the war as a naval officer, the president considered Roosevelt too valuable as assistant secretary, and he remained in the position until Wilson left office in 1920.

Not even forty, the Democrats turned to Roosevelt in 1920 and nominated him for vice president on the James Cox ticket. The party believed that the charismatic former Wilson operative with the famous name would shore up support in New York, but their hopes were dashed. America, tired of foreign war and the Democratic Party they widely blamed for it, turned to Republicans

Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge by a margin of nearly two to one. Roosevelt took a job with a financial firm that became a crash course in American economics. Epic hardship, however, awaited him.

Years of Pain and Comeback

During the summer of 1921, Roosevelt vacationed at Campobello Island, his treasured second home off the Maine coast. After a swim in the cold waters and a two-mile hike home, he went to bed, very tired. The next morning he was feverish and his left leg felt numb. By the following day he was partly paralyzed from the abdomen down. Several doctors misdiagnosed the symptoms, but one finally recognized as poliomyelitis — a viral inflammation of the spinal column. “Polio” was a terrifying and rampant disease in the 1920s, a mysteriouscrippler with no cure in sight. Franklin Roosevelt would never recover the full use of his legs, and would rely on canes, leg braces, wheelchairs and helpers for the rest of his life. In the early twentieth century, Americans with such afflictions were typically considered “invalids” and encouraged to be reclusive. Roosevelt,



A rare photo of FDR in his wheelchair. Most Americans knew nothing about the severity of their president's disability.

however, would bravely break this unfortunate mold, remaining socially active and undertaking rigorous therapy in an attempt to regain use of his muscles. His attitude — upbeat, positive and energetic — and the steadfast assistance of Eleanor Roosevelt would keep him in public life, all but unheard of for a “crippled” individual in that day and age. In addition, polio gave Roosevelt a dimension of courage health never had; his wife would later claim, “I know that he had real fear when he was first taken ill, but he learned to surmount it. After that I never heard him say he was afraid of anything.”

Roosevelt busied himself with helping a political friend, Alfred Smith, regain the governorship of New York. Two years later he made a strong push to get Smith the Democratic presidential nomination, but the effort came up short. Roosevelt returned to law and financial work, but again aided Smith in securing the Democratic nomination in 1928, and this time Smith won. Knowing Roosevelt was still popular in New York, Smith asked him to run for governor there, to prop up Democratic support in the state. In a widely Republican election year, Herbert Hoover crushed Smith. Roosevelt, however, eked out a victory by one half of a percentage point and gained New York's governorship, a traditional springboard to the White House.

Governor Roosevelt and the Great Depression

The tough times for Governor Roosevelt began almost immediately. The American economy of the 1920s, while wildly prosperous, was fundamentally unsound. Excessive consumer credit meant countless citizens were financially overextended. Industrial mechanization had improved dramatically since the turn of the century, but wages had not. Many farmers were feeling the pinch of new foreign competition that, along with overproduction enabled by new technologies, had sent their prices plummeting. A severe maldistribution of American wealth had created a tiny minority with staggering riches: five percent of the populace held nearly a third of the money and property, leaving a vast underclass. This left too few consumers able to purchase from an excessive pool of goods. Half the population was at or below the poverty line, unable to buy enough to keep American businesses profitable. In truth, the economic problems were commonplace in the Western world. Enemies from the First World War had been forced to pay reparations, or financial payments, to compensate the Allies for war expenses. These reparations burdened the economies of the nations forced to pay them and, in turn, hurt trade with nations such as the United States.

America resorted to high tariffs to protect domestic producers, and other countries retaliated by refusing to buy from them, further hampering trade.

It was all a house of cards, and Franklin Roosevelt knew it, writing a friend of the coming crash: “When that time comes, I want to see the Democratic party sanely radical enough to . . . put us in power again.” The first card to fall was the American stock market. In the widely unregulated financial landscape of the 1920s, many citizens sank their savings and wages into stocks bought “on margin.” Typically, investors bought stocks with a small down payment, borrowing the rest from their broker. Even private banks were allowed to sell stock this way, loaning to their depositors. As long as the stock increased in value, all was well; the investor would later sell the stock, repay the broker or the bank, and pocket the profit. Many Americans borrowed money against their homes, farms and businesses to get in on the soaring stock market. In the fall of 1929, stock prices peaked, then slipped, and brokers began to demand payment from investors in the dreaded “margin call.” The selling quickly became a stampede, and prices went down and down. In October came the first great symptom of trouble, a massive crash in stock prices that proved Roosevelt’s words prophetic and underscored deep faults in the American economic structure. Public confidence in the economy wavered, then all but evaporated. Over the next four years, five thousand American banks collapsed, one in four farms went into foreclosure, and an average of one hundred thousand jobs vanished each week. It would be known to history as the Great Depression, but for millions it became a time of panic and poverty, hunger and hopelessness.

In the Depression’s early stages, the American government took measures that were either insufficient or incompetent. The Federal Reserve *increased* interest rates, which dried up capital and added to the strain. President Hoover was reluctant to adopt activist strategies to deal with the crisis, and at first did little but plead for calm. The public rightly saw this as either naive or insensitive

to their plight. Democrats used the Depression as a campaign issue in the 1930 Congressional elections, gained a small minority in the house, and bottled up much of Hoover's economic legislation. Not until 1932, with the election looming, would he set up a federal program to aid the shaky insurance and banking industries. Today, many economists claim his Federal policies did more harm than good.

Roosevelt, too, was slow to see the need for financial regulation. A former financial officer, his first impulse was to let the banks continue to simply regulate themselves. In late 1930, however, the nation's worst bank collapse yet occurred -- in his home state. New York's heavily Republican legislature followed the line of their national leader, President Hoover, by squashing attempts at active financial intervention. Roosevelt championed insurance for the hordes of unemployed, as well as a pioneering state relief organization. He also pushed pensions for elderly New Yorkers, limits on work hours to prevent exploitation by employers, and public-works projects to foster jobs. Roosevelt won reelection in 1930, no mean feat for a Depression-era governor. One of his favorite campaign weapons was a new medium called radio. With it, the candidate could reach into the homes of citizens ravaged by the Depression and offer his remedies. A marvelous public speaker, Roosevelt is now considered one of the first politicians to realize the potential of electronic media. Using his famous radio addresses called "Fireside Chats," Roosevelt urged Americans to apply their total efforts to ending the Depression.

By 1931, the public perceived Herbert Hoover as inept and uncaring, and were deeply disillusioned with their president. The Depression seemed to know no bounds, and Americans grew tired of what they considered Hoover's passive, "ride it out" strategy. Roosevelt knew a strong, activist Democrat could return the party to the White House for the first time since 1920.

THE CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION OF 1932



An expert operative in party politics, Roosevelt campaigned with skill and zeal. He secured the support of the national chairman for the Democratic party, who traveled across the country securing delegates. Leading professors and other experts were rounded up to help him form cogent policies. As governor of the nation's most populous state, he took advantage of its high profile and political clout, and enjoyed front-runner status from the outset. Other Democrats, rightly sensing that their party's nominee would be virtually assured of the presidency, hungrily entered the fray. Among them were the Speaker of the House, Texas' John Nance Garner, and Roosevelt's old ally Alfred Smith. Under the rules of the time, Roosevelt needed two-thirds of the delegates at his party's convention in Chicago; his rivals narrowly managed to block the nomination on the first three ballots. Before the fourth, Roosevelt dangled the vice-presidency before Garner in return for his delegates. Garner took the deal and Roosevelt took the nomination, promising delegates: "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a New Deal for the American people." Beyond securing the nomination, the deal with Garner was an astute one: the strategy of mixing a Northerner and a Southerner did much to unify the highly diverse party, and would be copied by others, including John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Roosevelt campaigned aggressively and early. Hoover, meanwhile, limited his own appearances, and when he made them he was haunted by muttering, hostile crowds bristling

with picket signs. The outcome was never greatly in doubt. Dispirited

ELECTION RESULTS, 1932

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, DEMOCRAT: 22,809,638 POPULAR, 472 ELECTORAL
HERBERT HOOVER, REPUBLICAN: 15,758,901 POPULAR, 59 ELECTORAL

Americans swept the 50-year-old Roosevelt into office in a landslide, and the Democrats into substantial congressional majorities as well. One sentence of his

inaugural summarized his attitude: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

THE ROOSEVELT PRESIDENCY: DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

While the new president was by nature positive and upbeat, he observed soon after taking office: “Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.” Inherently activist, Roosevelt took charge, quickly and completely, with a set of programs he called the New Deal. Political and ideological foes

challenged the constitutionality of these programs, and some of them were later disallowed by the Supreme Court. The first hundred days of his presidency saw more legislation than the sum total of many entire administrations that had preceded him.

Roosevelt was leery of using government spending on public works as a means to increase spending and consumer confidence,

and much of his early strategy lay in simple relief programs to alleviate starving and homelessness. Roosevelt’s early “New Deal”

policy created scores of government agencies aimed at putting Americans to work in return for this relief; later, more liberal measures were outright attempts to stimulate the economy. In addition, banks were closed and their books checked for improprieties. Later in his first term, a governmental insurance entity covering bank accounts was implemented, greatly increasing public confidence in the banks. Farm prices were raised by reducing production of crops and livestock. Unions were empowered to negotiate as a single, powerful block. Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration even attempted to suspend antitrust law, fixing production quotas and prices while raising low-end wages, but this was thrown



Roosevelt was a master at reaching the masses. He was the first president to fully understand and exploit electronic media.

out by the Supreme Court. Finally, an agency was formed to provide monthly payments to Americans who were disabled, widowed, orphaned or elderly -- Social Security.

Like all activist presidents, Franklin Roosevelt was controversial, and remains so to this day. Some historians even blame his policies for *prolonging* the Depression, not easing it. Many business interests considered the president's strategies as naive meddling, though others supported them because of the protectionist policies they provided as part of the deal. Roosevelt was a lightning rod for the era's culture wars. A raucous collection of radio personalities such as the acerbic Father Charles Edward Coughlin incessantly railed at a president they condemned as a socialist, power-grabbing, kingly monster with names like "Frankenstein D. Roosevelt" and "Doctor Jekyll of Hyde Park." Racists like Coughlin also accused Roosevelt of being in secret, insidious league with Jewish organizations. In a far more reasoned vein, the Supreme Court ruled that many of his policies, such as the National Recovery Administration, grossly exceeded presidential power. The majority public did not agree with these dissenters, awarding

Roosevelt a second term in 1936 over hapless Republican

ELECTION RESULTS, 1936

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, DEMOCRAT: 27,752,869 POPULAR, 523 ELECTORAL
ALF LONDON, REPUBLICAN: 16,674,665 POPULAR, 8 ELECTORAL

Alf Landon in one of

the most crushing victories in the annals of presidential politics.

Given this mandate, Roosevelt refused to lower his activist profile, telling listeners at his 1937 inaugural: "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." This and other decisions significantly undermined his popularity in his second term. For the first time, he suffered major legislative setbacks. Retaliating against Supreme Court justices who had thrown out many of his New Deal policies, Roosevelt attempted to increase the court's membership and

“pack” it with justices supportive of him. His plan was to add a new justice for every current jurist over the age of seventy and increase its membership to fifteen. Congress stood up to Roosevelt and refused to cooperate, and the attempt failed. Organized labor, emboldened by the collective-bargaining legislation, engaged in provocative, confrontational strike tactics that alienated many Americans. Most important, yet another economic downturn cast its shadow in 1937. At this point, Roosevelt’s New Deal policies took a turn leftward, comprising more economic-stimulative measures, as well as a concerted attack on large corporate trusts. Despite these changes, public confidence in Roosevelt’s economic strategies slipped badly, and the Republicans made large gains in the midterm congressional elections of 1938. Sensing a chance to regain the White House, the Republicans nominated a strong candidate for 1940, Indiana’s Wendell Wilkie. In the century and a half of American sovereignty, no one had successfully challenged the custom of the presidency limited to two terms. Roosevelt, sensing controversy, tread lightly.

A common charge by Roosevelt’s detractors is that he really did not help the country to a great extent in pulling out of the Depression, that it was American industry readying itself for World War II that was the true catalyst. Much of this criticism is justified: Roosevelt never managed to pump enough money in the economy to increase demand for goods and services, and his economic strategies largely failed to increase public confidence. However, what these critics persistently neglect to recognize is that Roosevelt had more to do with putting the United States on footing for war industrialization than anyone. As he had in



FDR (center) takes the oath of office for the third time, January 1941.

ELECTION RESULTS, 1940

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, DEMOCRAT: 27,307,819 POPULAR, 449 ELECTORAL
WENDELL WILKIE, REPUBLICAN: 22,321,018 POPULAR, 82 ELECTORAL

1912, he saw the inevitability of American involvement, and closely oversaw war-preparedness policy. In the months before the 1940 election he was conspicuous in his visits to aircraft plants and ammunition factories. Chilled by the 1939 outbreak of war in Europe, by Hitler's conquest of France and battering of Great Britain, as well as Japan's growing aggression in the Pacific, most Americans were reluctant to go with an untried leader. While Roosevelt had a slimmer margin of victory than four years before, he still achieved another landslide.

The War Years

Winning history's greatest war took a mammoth effort by Roosevelt and his people. The vast majority of America's industrial and human resources was brought to bear on it. Food and consumer goods were strictly rationed; new automobiles, radios, and other big-ticket items were virtually unavailable. The results of this war production were astounding. Great ships were built in weeks, then in *days*. American-made vehicles all but put the entire Russian Army on wheels. The single-mindedness of such effort had a steep price for some. The military was heavily segregated by race, and most Americans of Japanese ancestry were interned in guarded camps. On the positive side, women were welcomed on a large scale into the workplace for the first time; at the Douglas Aircraft plant in Santa Monica, maker of the Dauntless dive bombers that wrecked the Japanese fleet at Midway, women comprised a full 60% of the work force.

THE ROOSEVELT PRESIDENCY: FOREIGN AFFAIRS

America's first third-term president did not know when war was coming to his country's doorstep, only that it would. His people, only twenty years removed from "The War to End All Wars" that had killed so many Americans and all but

obliterated an entire generation of British, German and French young men, were deeply wary of foreign entanglement. The premier foreign-policy challenges at the beginning of FDR's third term were to ready America for war, aid its allies, and minimize antagonizing future enemies abroad and isolationists at home.

Many of World War II's causes lay in the first war — a shattered German economy, humiliating terms of the [Armistice](#), and a newly ambitious Japan. The German dictator, Adolf Hitler, had restored economic and political viability to his nation in a remarkably short span. He blamed old enemies and Jews for his country's woes while encouraging nationalism and a strong sense of German superiority. Determined to settle scores from the last war and expand German influence, he occupied Austria in March 1938 and Czechoslovakia six months later. When he invaded Poland in September, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Hitler had a glittering run of success in the war's early stages, seizing Denmark, Belgium, Norway and France. He then broke an alliance with the Soviet Union and invaded it in mid-1941. Roosevelt, alarmed by Hitler's rampant success, concocted "Lend-Lease," a policy that would help arm future allies while skirting neutrality acts and legislative restrictions on his presidential powers. Under Lend-Lease, countries subject to oppression by enemies could receive American-made supplies and military equipment. Roosevelt's reasoning was that if a neighbor's house is on fire, one does not haggle over the price of a hose to put it out; the hose is readily loaned and the price figured later. Britain and the Soviet Union were the leading beneficiaries of Lend-Lease aid.

By the time Roosevelt first took office, Japan, too, was boldly asserting itself on the world stage. It had invaded the Chinese region of Manchuria in 1931, ignoring Western protests. Five years later it signed a diplomatic agreement with Germany; by mid-1937 there were renewed hostilities with China that resulted in gruesome atrocities by the Japanese in cities such as Nanking. Japan attempted to subjugate the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina (later

Vietnam). Roosevelt responded by forbidding the sale of American oil and steel to the Japanese. Some think this *embargo* was a concerted attempt to provoke Japan into attacking America and thus bring it into the war. If this is true, it worked. Roosevelt's embargo forced Japan's hand, and their solution was war with the United States. A nation with few natural resources of their own, Japan's grand strategy was to gain access to the oil and other raw materials of East Asia, resources that would enable it to expand its empire.



After calling the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor "unprovoked and dastardly," FDR signs the declaration of war.

Standing in the way was the American Navy's Pacific Fleet, based in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The superb Japanese naval commander, Isoroko Yamamoto, thought the best chance for Japan was to deliver a crushing opening blow against the United States. On a Sunday morning in December 1941, Japanese carrier-based aircraft descended on Pearl Harbor in a brilliant surprise attack that sunk or badly damaged every capital ship there. In succeeding decades, many have charged that Roosevelt knew of the attack and allowed it to happen to hasten America's entry into the war.

Findings, to this day, are inconclusive and controversial, but the opinion that Roosevelt orchestrated Pearl Harbor is a decidedly minority one. In any case, Roosevelt

asked for and received a declaration of war from Congress the next day; Germany and Italy declared war on the United States in mid-December.

World War II, The Pacific Theater

The Allies' war against the Japanese was one of vast distances: a battlefield comprising a third of the earth's surface, dotted with lonely islands thick with jungle, heat and disease.

In the days following their Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese struck throughout Asia. Hong Kong fell to them, then Singapore, then Guam. Finally the American forces holding the Philippines were forced to surrender. In mid-1942 Yamamoto attempted another surprise attack on American forces at Midway Island, unaware that American intelligence personnel had deciphered Japanese military codes. Yamamoto approached Midway with a vastly superior strike force, but this time it was the Americans lying in ambush. On the morning of June 4, U.S. dive bombers caught Japanese aircraft carriers at their most vulnerable moment: just prior to launching their warplanes, with live munitions on deck and gasoline flowing. In five scant minutes the heart and soul of the Japanese Navy, three large carriers, were flaming pyres.

For Japan, the losses in prestige and ships at Midway were beyond recovery. Generaled by Roosevelt and his legions of able aides, the Americans could draw on seemingly bottomless natural resources and industrial output. The Japanese, lacking both, became increasingly outgunned. However, they were still firmly entrenched in the Pacific. To sweep the Japanese from the world's largest ocean would involve one of warfare's most difficult attack problems — seaborne assault onto land — at thousand of islands. One such attack alone, on 300-acre Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in late 1943, cost 3,000 American casualties, the bloodiest single engagement in the history of the Marine Corps. In mid-1944, a massive carrier engagement in the Marianas island chain largely destroyed Japan's naval aviation. America's bid to retake the Philippines resulted in history's largest sea battle, Leyte Gulf, and another victory. By the end of the year islands had been secured that allowed huge new American bombers based on them to reach Japan, further undermining its industrial plant.

Japan's war effort seemed doomed by early 1945, but surrender to them was unthinkable; they continued fighting and dying. There were intelligence estimates that an invasion of Japan would result in *one million* American



The “Big Three” – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin.

casualties. Such an invasion, however, proved unnecessary. With Roosevelt’s unqualified support, Allied scientists had been developing a new technology during the war years: nuclear fission. In the months after Roosevelt’s death in April, the atomic bomb was perfected. The new president, [Harry Truman](#), promptly sanctioned its use. In August, two Japanese cities were incinerated in history’s first and only nuclear attacks. Within days, the Japanese surrendered. The global battlefield was changed forever.

World War II, The European Theater

Adolf Hitler had picked a fight with the two most powerful nations on earth — the Soviet Union and the United States — and for the first full year, 1942, he more than held his own. Much of that year involved America simply mobilizing its forces on the other side of the Atlantic. By the end of the year, however, American troops led by [General Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) were fighting Germans in North Africa. 1943 saw the first large-scale air raids on Germany by Americans based in England; Italy was invaded and knocked out of the war. In late 1943 the “Big Three” met in Iran — Roosevelt, British Prime Minister [Winston Churchill](#), and Soviet leader [Joseph Stalin](#). In one day, the Soviet Union eclipsed Great Britain as a world-dominant power. Roosevelt knew it came down to either making Stalin or Churchill happy; knowing the Soviet leader held the better cards, Roosevelt sided with him on strategies, dealing Churchill out. In early June 1944, [“D-Day,”](#) history’s largest single military operation, culminated with Americans, British and Canadians landing in France under Eisenhower’s command. At summer’s end Paris was liberated and Italy neutralized.

Roosevelt’s health was now failing. White House visitors who had not seen him in a year or two were stunned at his deterioration. There was no doubt

he would seek a fourth term, but some of his advisers felt he was dying. The vice president, Henry Wallace, had publicly differed with FDR on policy matters. The president sought a more loyal, capable man to assume the vice presidency and settled on [Harry S. Truman](#), a U.S. Senator from Missouri. Truman had shown uncommon allegiance to the president, and his politics were sufficiently balanced for the diverse Democratic party. Roosevelt blunted charges about his health and dictatorial tendencies with humor. When it was wrongly charged that rescuing his beloved terrier, Fala, had once cost millions of tax dollars, the president told an audience, with timing worthy of a professional comic: “These Republican leaders

have not been
content with attacks
on me, or on my wife,
or on my sons . . .

ELECTION RESULTS, 1944

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, DEMOCRAT: 25,606,585 POPULAR, 432 ELECTORAL
THOMAS DEWEY, REPUBLICAN: 22,014,745 POPULAR, 99 ELECTORAL

they now have to include my little dog Fala.” The audience roared and the would-be president, New York’s Thomas Dewey, was on the defensive thereafter. As in 1940, Americans were still disinclined to trust new leadership, although misgivings about Roosevelt’s condition made the race closer this time.

The Allies Close the Jaws; Roosevelt’s Last Days

The “Big Three” met again at Yalta just after FDR’s fourth inauguration. Yet again, it was Roosevelt and Stalin making policy while turning aside Churchill’s. Tension was considerable, because much of the summit focused on the powers that would be maintained by each Allied nation after the war. Stalin was angry that the Americans and British had not crossed the English Channel earlier; the Soviet Union was bearing fearsome losses (some eight million human beings, exceeding even the [Holocaust](#)) against the Germans. Roosevelt appreciated this, and pragmatically recognized the Soviet’s need for influence

outside its borders in the postwar world. Some historians feel that Roosevelt “sold out” the West in doing this. Other modern analysis assigns Roosevelt considerable blame for the [Cold War](#) that began shortly after his death. Regardless, the Second World War comprised a complete shuffling of the world deck, due in large part to Roosevelt’s leadership. Germany and Japan were left in ruins, Britain’s power was marginalized, and the United States and Soviet Union were the planet’s undisputed masters. A month after Yalta, Allied troops were crossing the Rhine into Germany. In a hint of things to come, the Germans introduced two weapons to the human arsenal – the jet aircraft and the guided missile -- in the last stages of the war. The technology was too little and too late. Nazi troops were now surrendering by the tens of thousands, and Allied troops were uncovering concentration camps with names like Dachau and Auschwitz where mechanized slaughter almost beyond comprehension had occurred. Hitler stood raving in an underground bunker with a small flock of delusional diehards. It was over, almost.

Roosevelt, however, would not live to see the war’s end. In April 1945 he traveled to Warm Springs, Georgia. A rustic resort he owned there had been a frequent retreat over the years. On April 12, while sitting for a portrait, he collapsed and died of a cerebral hemorrhage. The death stunned everyone — Roosevelt had been president for a dozen years. The preminent American of the twentieth century was buried at his childhood home in Hyde Park, scant weeks before the German surrender.



FDR and his thirteen grandchildren on the day of his fourth inaugural in 1945.

FAMILY LIFE

The Roosevelts had five sons and a daughter, although one son died in infancy. Perhaps being the child of such a larger-than-life individual took its toll: the five surviving children would marry a total of nineteen times. It has been suggested that, after FDR's affair with Lucy Mercer, the Roosevelts were uncomfortable being alone with each other for any duration, and this was why the White House was constantly stuffed with long-term visitors. Whatever the truth behind these speculations, the family was superb at putting up appearances. They entertained often and capably; the president was a master at making anyone and everyone feel welcome. In rare off-hours, Roosevelt would relax with his stamp collection, or with martinis and cards with a few friends, or by swimming to exercise his ravaged muscles.

THE FIRST LADY: ANNA ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Despite her family's wealth and prestige, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt had a difficult upbringing. Her mother died when she was eight; her father, Theodore Roosevelt's brother, was a severe alcoholic and died two years later. The girl was shipped to a strict grandmother and expensive boarding schools. Shy and awkward, she lacked confidence. Her distant cousin Franklin liked her intellect and kind nature, however, and they were married in 1905.



During the years of the First World War, Eleanor faced a deeply trying time. Her haughty, regal mother-in-law treated her like a hired nurse, and she faced long stretches of what amounted to single parenthood as her husband worked at his duties in the Wilson administration. Then came a crushing revelation: her husband was involved with Lucy Mercer, her secretary. Never confident about her looks or social graces, the affair hurt Eleanor Roosevelt badly.

When polio overtook her husband in the early 1920s, Eleanor Roosevelt found herself. She oversaw her husband's rehabilitative therapies, urged him to return to politics, and became a vital emissary for her husband, traveling where he could not. Unlike many men of the time, Franklin valued Eleanor's opinions on America and the world. She was decidedly more liberal than the president and urged him to do more in social justice concerns such as civil rights. In a sense, the two utilized one another: Eleanor Roosevelt was FDR's liaison to left-of-center entities such as labor unions, civil rights organizations, and others on the liberal side of the president's coalition. She constantly pushed her husband to adopt a more liberal stance in his policies. Eleanor Roosevelt was the first president's wife to engage in overt political campaigning, and voice her own opinions in the media. With her speeches and newspaper columns and radio shows, Mrs. Roosevelt was everywhere, a powerful political force in her own right. Like outspoken First Ladies before and since, she generated deep controversy. After the war she was the very conscience of the Democratic Party, the grand spokeswoman of the liberal agenda. She championed countless human-rights causes; Presidents Truman and Kennedy would appoint her to important United Nations positions after the war. She died in 1962.

THE AMERICAN FRANCHISE

Franklin Roosevelt supported women's suffrage as early as 1912. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins became first female [Cabinet](#) member in his administration. The war's use of minorities in the military and women in the workplace were major forces behind the Women's and Civil Rights movements a generation later.

In addition, Roosevelt's legislation benefitting organized labor had a vast effect for generations to come. Workers were finally allowed to organize and bargain collectively, including the Sleeping Car Porters Union, a group of railroad-

passenger attendants that was almost completely comprised of African Americans. Led by the tireless, charismatic [A. Philip Randolph](#) (1889-1979), the union languished for years until Roosevelt's legislation made it legally viable. They were the first African American union to be allowed into the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1935 the Porters Union forced a virulently anti-union company, the makers and operators of Pullman passenger cars, to sit at the bargaining table with the union's members. After two long years of struggle, Pullman agreed to terms, a milestone event in American civil rights history. After this victory the union leader, Randolph, later convinced Roosevelt to issue an executive order requiring fair hiring practices in war industries. Measures like this were instrumental in the large-scale migration of African Americans to the Northern and Western factories. Randolph later became a major organizer of pro-civil rights activity, including the decisive March on Washington in 1963.

ROOSEVELT'S IMPACT AND LEGACY

There is something preposterous about an attempt to compress the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt into a few pages. Most of his biographies are multiple-volume affairs. Like no one else, his administration could be called an Epic Presidency. Not only its length, but its sheer scope, is unparalleled. The changes he wrought on the political, economic, and social makeup of America were immense. Roosevelt was faced with America's greatest foreign crisis — and, excepting the Civil War, its greatest domestic crisis.

It is interesting to note that the two men widely considered our greatest presidents, Lincoln and Roosevelt, were also the most dictatorial. Both, in the modern vernacular, "played to win," refusing to compromise the grand issues while making firm, astute decisions to influence them. Both dangerously skirted the highest laws to get things done in a time of peril, and the end of both their tenures saw a much stronger nation than when they had taken office. What they

had in common, of course, were their century's prime threats to their nation — for Lincoln, the Civil War; for Roosevelt, the Depression and the Second World War. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and a disciplined use of emergency powers is a legitimate sign of greatness. It is a rare trait, and one that places Roosevelt, in the estimation of most historians, in rarefied company with Washington and Lincoln.

Roosevelt was able to weld together an unlikely collective of labor, minorities, Southerners, and the working class into a powerful coalition; not until the failures of Vietnam and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society did it begin to fray. The 32nd president made the office a focal point for domestic and foreign policy to a degree all successors have tried and failed to match. Besides his adept, breakthrough use of electronic media, Roosevelt also pioneered the use of experts in forming campaign strategy.

Beneath the jaunty veneer of FDR was a steely, crafty leader. No less an authority on human nature than [Carl Jung](#) marveled at his “perfectly ruthless, highly visible, superior but impenetrable mind.” Franklin Roosevelt did not hesitate to use anyone, *anything* to get his way. In a lesser man this might have proved dangerous. The ace in Roosevelt's deck, however, was his deep, genuine concern for the common citizen. This trait is far from common in one born to the upper class, and it goes a long way to explaining his massive appeal and success as chief executive. It completed his greatness and made him, perhaps more than anything else, the dominant human being of the Twentieth Century.



ISSUES TO PONDER

- 1.) During Roosevelt's presidency, many Americans were completely unaware that he was paralyzed from polio. Contrasted with the amount of information we have on our political leaders today, what are advantages and disadvantages of the type of "censorship" from which Roosevelt benefitted?
- 2.) What were some of Roosevelt's qualities that enabled him to be "president for life"? What contemporary events made people want him to remain president regardless of the past two-term-only custom?
- 3.) How did Eleanor Roosevelt redefine the role of the First Lady in American life?
- 4.) What were some actions by Roosevelt that, to many, overreached his rightful power as president? How might supporters have argued that these were justified?
- 5.) Why was the Great Depression so devastating to the American spirit? What caused it, and why did it last so long?

READING MORE

FDR, by Robert D. Graff, Robert Emmett Ginna, and Roger Butterfield, Harper & Row Publishers, 1963. Photographic essay of Roosevelt's life.

FDR, A Biography, by Ted Morgan, Simon and Schuster, 1985. Single-volume biography, highly readable and engaging.

FDR, His Personal Letters, by Franklin Roosevelt, Duell, Sloane and Pierce, 1947. Correspondence before and after he became president.

No Ordinary Time, by Doris Kearns Goodwin Simon and Schuster, 1994. A highly regarded historian's account of the Roosevelts during World War II.

The Roosevelts: An American Saga, by Peter Collier with David Horowitz, Simon and Schuster, 1994. Strong account of the two branches of the Roosevelt family that produced two presidents.