

retrenchment and declining international trade, and the Japanese invasion of the Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931 had strained foreign relations across the Pacific. Abroad as well as at home, the depression seemed to be growing worse by the day, bringing about significant political changes. The Dow Jones reached its all-time low of 41.22 in July 1932. The Ford Motor Company had just experienced its worst year ever, with its output down from its 1929 high of 1.5 million to just 232,000 cars. Economic conflicts grew increasingly tense. When some of Ford's remaining employees demonstrated at the company's Dearborn plant, police fired into the crowd, killing four. A week later, six thousand dissidents marched in Detroit streets singing the Communist hymn "The Internationale." **John Reed Clubs**, which disseminated Communist propaganda in music, film, and literature, made their first appearance in Chicago. Under these circumstances, a Republican incumbent had at best a minimal chance of winning the presidential election.

Republican Defeat: The End of an Era

For three successive Republican administrations, Americans had generally appeared to agree with former President Calvin Coolidge's famous dictum that "the business of government is business." By 1932, however, both business and the government seemed to have reached their wit's end. To be sure, President Hoover had launched bold economic recovery initiatives, such as the \$150 million for the prevention of foreclosures through the Federal Home Loan Bank Act, the \$2 billion for public works through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and the \$750 million in gold reserves for business recovery through the Glass-Steagall Act. But all this government-stimulated demand was cancelled out by Hoover's unprecedented tax hike and his insistence on a balanced federal budget. In June 1932, Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak had actually told a House committee that the president had the choice between sending relief, and sending troops. As Hoover's disastrous response to the Bonus Army protest showed, the president had chosen the latter. When Republicans met in Cermak's hometown that same month to nominate Hoover for the second time, they did so with little enthusiasm or hope for victory.

The Democratic Contender: Hope as a Program

Hoover lost the 1932 election in the greatest landslide since the re-election of Abraham Lincoln in 1864, an election that had been held without the seceding southern states. Hoover's rival, Franklin D. Roosevelt, won 472 of the 531 electoral votes, and 57 percent of the popular vote. The deciding issue was not that the former New York governor had an answer to the economic troubles of the time. Like Hoover, Roosevelt attacked extravagant government spending and actually promised a 25 percent cut in the federal budget. He described the gold standard as a sacred covenant

and mocked suggestions by the Farm Board that the answer to agricultural overproduction was plowing under crops in return for government payments. But even when Roosevelt tried to reassure a middle-class frightened of revolution, he demonstrated the political will for experimentation. In a nationwide radio address he called for government programs to help "the forgotten man" and advocated for "persistent experimentation" in the fight against the depression and for a "wiser, more equitable distribution of the national income." This stirred fear and anger among many in the upper class and some in the middle class, but it gave hope to a large number of Americans who felt that any effort at relief was better than Hoover's ideological commitment to voluntarism and self-reliance.

By March 1933, the economy and the state of the nation had reached such a poor state that Americans had little left but hope for change. An event just two weeks before Roosevelt's inauguration suggested that this change would have to depend on luck as well. Roosevelt had arrived in Florida for a fishing trip and spoke to a group of American legionnaires at Miami Airport when an Italian construction worker, Guiseppe Zangara, fired five shots at the president from just ten yards away. Zangara, a staunch anti-capitalist who feared that FDR's administration would bury the chances for a revolution, missed his target, but hit and killed Chicago's Mayor Cermak instead. Roosevelt refused to be evacuated and instead held the bleeding mayor in his arms on the way to the hospital, not leaving his bedside for hours. The future of the New Deal had survived by a thread.⁶⁶

THE GIFT OF EMPATHY: FDR AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

The New Deal shaped the American state and American life not only during Roosevelt's thirteen years in office, but for decades after. While much of this has to do with the policies of the New Deal, the personality of the president himself may have played an equally important role. Not only did Roosevelt's reform efforts set a new historical standard for political vision and acumen, but his personal style, too, has become the benchmark by which politicians have measured their own success with the people and the press. Consider the fact that Ronald Reagan, a Republican president strongly committed to dismantling elements of the New Deal, deliberately modeled his personal style after that of FDR.

More than any other president before him, Franklin D. Roosevelt knew how to relate to the American people and convince them that he was in fact "their president." Thousands and thousands of letters to the White House collected in the National Archives provide overwhelming historical evidence of the fact that regular people from the most diverse social and economic backgrounds never doubted for a second that the president himself would read their note and act on it as

if he had received a message from a dear friend. How could a wealthy patrician from an old aristocratic New York family ever gain such mass appeal? The answer to that question lies as much in the man's individual character and biography, as in the timing of his political career, the foresight of his wife and other advisers, and the American people's desperate need for an advocate in their worst economic, social, and political crisis since the Civil War.

Roots of Privilege:

Franklin D. Roosevelt's Upbringing

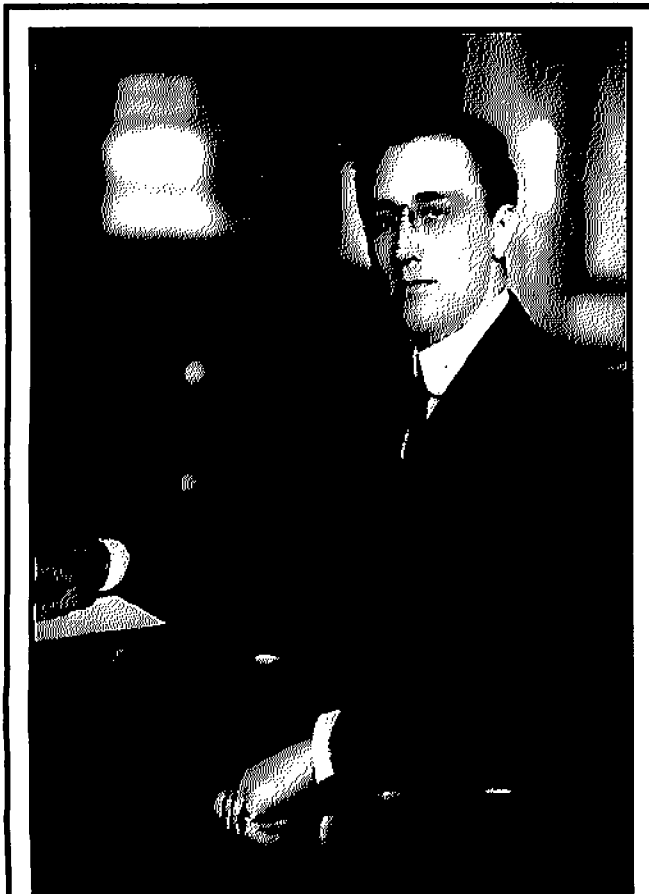
If the life of Herbert Hoover would have suggested to most a capable president in times of economic crisis, that of Franklin D. Roosevelt would have inspired little similar confidence. Born in 1882, Roosevelt grew up in abundant material comfort. His family had been part of New York's wealthy establishment for generations, and the fortunes of the family's railroad and coal mining investments paid for Franklin's idyllic childhood on the family's estate at Hyde Park, where he developed his passion for horses, sailing, and the country life of the gentry. Unlike other financial aristocrats at the

time, however, the Roosevelts were not interested in amassing further fortunes, but instead were convinced that their wealth and privilege obliged them to serve their community. Franklin's much older father—James Roosevelt was fifty-two when he married his second wife and Franklin's mother, twenty-six-year old Sara Delano in 1880—demonstrated this sense of *noblesse oblige* by example, serving as a town selectman and as a member of the local state hospital board. While young Franklin's education prepared him well for public service, he did not initially display much passion for it. A graduate of the prestigious Groton prep school, he entered Harvard University in 1899 and went to Columbia University law school in 1904, where he dropped out after one year for lack of interest in the details of legal study. For the young Roosevelt, social life in these prestigious institutions always took precedence over intellectual achievement.

Despite his limited intellectual ambitions, Roosevelt passed the bar and began work as a corporate lawyer. He enjoyed the social mingling with people of very different backgrounds in the courthouse more than his actual work, however. Despite the strongest misgivings of his regal and smothering mother, who like many in their genteel world considered politics undignified, Franklin decided to follow the path of his cousin and twenty-sixth President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, with whom he had met at the White House several times. Running as a Democrat, Franklin Roosevelt won a New York State Senate seat in 1910. Three years later, he became Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Influenza prevented him from joining the uniformed ranks in 1918. He considered a move into business after the end of World War I, but instead he was picked as a vice presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in 1920. He took the defeat of the James Cox / Franklin D. Roosevelt ticket in stride, but was soon struck by a far more serious personal challenge.⁶⁷

FDR and Polio: Reinventing a Life and Political Career

During a summer outing to the family's vacation home in 1921, Roosevelt was struck by polio. An infectious viral disease that attacks the nervous system and leads to various degrees of paralysis, poliomyelitis devastated thousands of lives of mostly young children from the beginning of major epidemics in Europe and the United States in the 1880s until Jonas Salk's development of a vaccine in 1952. Roosevelt was diagnosed two weeks after being struck by the disease. Despite his early optimism, he never again regained strength in his legs, but with fierce determination he learned to stand in steel braces that encased both his legs, despite excruciating pain. With the support of his wife and his closest staff, Roosevelt vowed not to let this disability end his political career. His confidence survived this sternest of tests unscathed.



Portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of the Navy.

Later Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins believed that the disease helped transform Roosevelt from a pampered privileged playboy into a thoughtful and deeply empathetic person. Whether this is true has been a matter of historical debate. There is no doubt, however, that many Americans who felt marginalized because of physical handicaps, religious prejudice, racism, or poverty and unemployment, felt they had something in common with this man who otherwise would have seemed aristocratic and aloof. In fact, recent evidence suggests that Roosevelt never deliberately concealed his disability from the media and the public and that, on the contrary, the essential facts of his physical condition were well known and documented throughout his time in office.⁶⁸

A Political Marriage: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt

Franklin's polio condition forever changed his life, but it also profoundly altered the role of his wife, **Eleanor Roosevelt**. The two distant cousins had met each other numerous times at family events as children, but fell in love in 1903. Eleanor's upbringing had been quite different from Franklin's. The daughter of

a cheerful but alcoholic father who died early and a strict and religious mother, she was often called an ugly duckling in the family's correspondence. Despite her shyness and awkward insecurities, Eleanor had acquired a charm and elegance that swept Roosevelt off his feet. The two married in 1905 and between 1906 and 1916 had one daughter and five sons. In 1919, however, Franklin Roosevelt's secret love affair with his wife's social secretary, Lucy Mercer, nearly put an end to the family life that they both so loved. Although Eleanor and Franklin remained married, their relationship changed from a marriage into a friendship and political partnership. Eleanor began her own political education and pursued her own public mission in volunteer and charity work—most prominently in the League of Women Voters. Although FDR told his wife the relationship had ended, he secretly maintained an on-and-off again relationship with Mercer, who was with him when he died in April 1945.⁶⁹

POLITICS AS STATECRAFT: FDR AND THE MEDIA

Controlling the Image: FDR and the Press

Roosevelt's good relationship with the press during the New Deal was the product of frequent press interactions in his preceding twenty-two-year political history. Never the bookish type, Roosevelt's superior social skills aided his talent for communication, and his fondest Harvard memories were of his work on the college newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*. Early on, he understood that favorable attention from the press was the beginning of political success. As luck would have it, FDR's own political interests in social issues and economic reform prior to World War I matched the crusade of many newspapers and magazines against corruption and abysmal industrial working conditions. A talented orator, his confident and witty campaigns in his run for state Senator earned him national press attention, the nickname "Galahad of the insurgency" (for his progressive opposition to the Democratic Party machine), and the loyalty of New York journalist Louis McHenry Howe, who would serve as FDR's publicity manager and closest advisor for the remaining twenty-two years of his life. Together they perfected the skill of conveying a positive image of progress without getting bogged down in complicated details. "I cannot recall whether Franklin D. Roosevelt said anything worth saying or whether anyone listened," said journalist Henry Pringle during the 1920 presidential campaign, but "I do remember he had a pleasing personality,... and that he had a magnificently strong physique." That most Americans continued to find Roosevelt strong and vigorous despite his disability is testimony to the skillful public relations of FDR and Howe.⁷⁰

Riding the Airwaves: The Fireside Chats

Roosevelt went beyond the established press to disseminate his political messages, and in 1929 first



FDR never regained strength in his legs after being struck with polio in 1921. This picture is unusual in that FDR was rarely photographed in a wheelchair.

employed the new media of the time—the radio. He was not the first politician or president to address a radio audience directly. Woodrow Wilson had spoken on the radio when it was still in its infancy, and Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover addressed the nation regularly through the ether. No one was quite as skilled as FDR in talking to the public through a microphone, however. When Roosevelt faced a conservative Republican legislature as governor of the Empire State, he would speak to New Yorkers directly to gain their support for his agenda. The letters he received after his speeches helped build the case against his opposition. Radio, he believed, restored “direct contact between the masses and their chosen leaders.” When Americans found themselves once again gripped in a panic over the nation’s banks just days after Roosevelt’s inauguration, his informal talk on the airwaves made a difference. Roosevelt did not speak to his radio audience as if they were the masses, but instead imagined his listeners to

be no more than a few people around his fireside in Hyde Park, where political conversations with his wife and children were one of his favorite activities. These **fireside chats** gave Americans the feeling that their president was speaking to them personally and not to millions. Less than thirty minutes long, and without grand oratory or a specific agenda, FDR’s casual explanations of his policies and his account of national events in a pleasant, rich, and melodious voice made Americans intimately familiar with his personality and endeared him to them.⁷¹

A NEW KIND OF LIBERALISM? FDR’S POLITICS

Roosevelt had entered politics in 1910 at the height of the nation’s love affair with progressive reform. Even though he ran as a Democratic state senator in the rural and predominantly Republican Dutchess County in New York, his amiable style and relentless campaign-



FDR was exceptionally skilled at speaking to the American people through the microphone.