

# Franklin he relied too heavily on his charm

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Franklin Delano Roosevelt, (1882-1945), 32nd of the United States.

Roosevelt became president in March 1933 at the depth of the Great Depression, was reelected for an unprecedented three more terms, and died in office in April 1945, less than a month before the surrender of Germany in World War II. Despite an attack of poliomyelitis, which paralyzed his legs in 1921, he was a charismatic optimist whose confidence helped sustain the American people during the strains of economic crisis and world war.

He was one of America's most controversial leaders. Conservatives claimed that he undermined states' rights and individual liberty. Though Roosevelt labored hard to end the Depression, he had limited success. It was not until 1939 and 1940, with the onset of heavy defense spending before World War II, that prosperity returned. Roosevelt also displayed limitations in his handling of foreign policy. In the 1930's he was slow to warn against the menace of fascism, and during the war he relied too heavily on his charm and personality in the conduct of diplomacy.

Still, Roosevelt's historical reputation is deservedly high. In attacking the Great Depression he did much to develop a partial welfare state in the United States and to make the federal government an agent of social and economic reform. His administration indirectly encouraged the rise of organized labor and greatly invigorated the . His foreign policies, while occasionally devious, were shrewd enough to sustain domestic unity and the allied coalition in World War II. Roosevelt was a president of stature.

The future president was born on Jan. 30, 1882, at the family estate in Hyde Park, N. Y. His father, James (1828-1900), was descended from Nicholas

Roosevelt, whose father had emigrated from Holland to New Amsterdam in the 1640's. One of Nicholas' two sons, Johannes, fathered the line that ultimately produced President Theodore Roosevelt. The other son, Jacobus, was James' great-great-grandfather.

James graduated from Union College (1847) and Harvard Law School, married, had a son, and took over his family's extensive holdings in coal and transportation. Despite substantial losses in speculative ventures, he remained wealthy enough to journey by private railroad car, to live graciously on his Hudson River estate at Hyde Park, and to travel extensively.

Four years after his first wife died in 1876, James met and married Sara Delano, a sixth cousin. She, too, was a member of the Hudson River aristocracy. Her father, one of James' business associates, had made and lost fortunes in the China trade before settling with his wife and 11 children on the west bank of the Hudson. Sara had sailed to China as a girl, attended school abroad, and moved in high social circles in London and Paris. Though only half her husband's age of 52 at the time of her marriage in 1880, she settled in happily at Hyde Park. Their marriage was serene until broken by James' death in 1900.

His record at Harvard, which he attended between 1900 and 1904, was only slightly more impressive. Thanks to his excellent preparation at Groton, he was able to complete his course of study for his B. A. in 1903, in only three years. During his fourth year he served as editor of the *Crimson*, the college newspaper. However, he was not accepted for Porcellian, Harvard's most

prestigious social club, and he did not receive much stimulation in the classroom. As at Groton, his grades were mediocre, and he showed no excitement about his studies.

At this point politics gave him a sense of purpose. The Democratic organization in Dutchess county, the area around Hyde Park, needed a candidate for the New York state Senate in 1910. Party leaders recognized that although Roosevelt had no political experience he had assets as a candidate: the wealth to finance a campaign, and the best-known political name in the United States. Roosevelt worked as never before during the campaign. Acquiring a car, he crisscrossed the county in his quest for support. He showed skill at making himself agreeable to voters and a willingness to listen to the advice of political veterans. As at Groton and Harvard, during his political career he proved open and adaptable. For all these reasons Roosevelt won impressively in the usually Republican district.

Roosevelt made an immediate impact in the legislative session of 1911. At that time U. S. senators from New York were elected by the legislature, not by popular vote. The Democrats, with majorities in both houses, prepared to select William F. Sheehan, a transportation and utilities magnate who was the choice of Tammany Hall, New York City's powerful political machine. A few Democrats balked at the choice. Roosevelt joined them and became their leader. But Roosevelt and his allies took some consolation in having forced the withdrawal of Sheehan and in attracting nationwide attention. It was an auspicious start to a career in politics.

As assistant secretary (1913-1920), Franklin Roosevelt reminded many people of TR. He advocated a big Navy, preparedness, a strong presidency, and an active foreign policy. In 1917 he enthusiastically supported war against Germany, and in 1918 he took pleasure in visiting the front in Europe. Sometimes he clashed with Daniels, a progressive with pacifist leanings. But Daniels was tolerant of his subordinate. The secretary appreciated Roosevelt's dexterous handling of admirals, departmental employees, and labor unions, which were active in naval yards, and his opposition to the collusive bidding and price-fixing practiced by defense contractors. FDR's years of service as assistant secretary gave him administrative experience and a host of contacts in Washington and the Democratic party.

In 1928, Roosevelt vaulted suddenly to national prominence. After helping Smith get the presidential nomination, he set off for Warm Springs, where he looked forward to weeks of therapy. But Smith urgently needed a strong gubernatorial candidate on the Democratic ticket in New York, and he pressured Roosevelt into running. Smith lost the election to Herbert , the Republican presidential candidate, who carried New York by 100, 000 votes. Roosevelt, more popular upstate than Smith, successfully bridged the urban-rural gap in the Democratic party and beat his opponent, state Attorney General Albert Ottinger, by 25, 000 votes. It was a striking triumph in an otherwise Republican year.

During his two terms, Governor Roosevelt battled a Republican legislature for many progressive measures. These included reforestation, state-

supported old-age pensions and unemployment insurance, legislation regulating working hours for women and children, and public development of electric power. He named skilled people to important positions, including James Farley, a New York City contractor, as chairman of the state Democratic Committee; Frances Perkins, a social worker, as state industrial commissioner; and Samuel Rosenman, an able young lawyer, as his speech writer and counsel. All became important aides during Roosevelt's presidency.

In 1931, when the Depression was serious, Roosevelt became the first governor to set up an effective state relief administration. Harry Hopkins, a social worker who later served as his closest adviser in Washington, directed it. In a series of "fireside chats" Governor Roosevelt also proved a persuasive speaker over the new medium of radio. He was reelected in 1930 by 750,000 votes, the largest margin in state history.

By March 4, 1933, when Roosevelt was inaugurated at the age of 51, the economic situation was desperate. Between 13 and 15 million Americans were unemployed. Of these, between 1 and 2 million persons were wandering about the country looking for jobs. Hundreds of thousands squatted in tents or ramshackle dwellings in "Hoovervilles," makeshift villages on the outskirts of cities. Panic-stricken people hoping to rescue their deposits had forced 38 states to close their banks.

From the beginning, Roosevelt tried to restore popular confidence. "The only thing we have to fear," he said in his inaugural address, "is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror." He added that he would not stand

by and watch the Depression deepen. If necessary, he would "ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis--broad executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe." He then closed the rest of the banks--declaring a "bank holiday"--and called Congress into special session.

His first legislative requests were conservative. He began by securing passage of an emergency banking bill. Instead of nationalizing the banks--as a few reformers wished--it offered aid to private bankers. A few days later the president forced through an Economy Act that cut \$400 million from government payments to veterans and \$100 million from the salaries of federal employees. This deflationary measure hurt purchasing power. FDR concluded his early program by securing legalization of beer of 3.2% alcoholic content by weight. By the end of 1933, ratification of the 21st Amendment to the U. S. had ended prohibition altogether.

His relief program was more far-reaching. A series of measures took the nation off the gold standard, thereby offering some assistance to debtors and exporters. He also got Congress to appropriate \$500 million in federal relief grants to states and local agencies. Harry Hopkins, who headed the newly created Federal Emergency Relief Administration, quickly spent the money. By early 1935 he had supervised the outlay of \$1.5 billion more in direct grants, and in work relief under the Civil Works Administration (CWA) of 1933-1934.

In 1933, Congress also approved funding for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), and the Public Works Administration (PWA). The CCC eventually employed more than 2.5 million young men on valuable conservation work. The HOLC offered desperately needed assistance to mortgagors and homeowners. The PWA, while slow to act, ultimately pumped billions into construction of large-scale projects. Though left-wing critics demanded higher appropriations, most Americans were grateful for these measures. The relief programs of them gave hope to the have-nots--blacks and the unemployed--and did much to restore confidence in the government.

FDR placed his hopes for economic recovery in two agencies created in the productive "100 Days" of the 1933 special session of Congress. These were the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). The NRA encouraged management and labor to establish codes of fair competition within each industry. These codes outlined acceptable pricing and production policies and guaranteed labor the rights of collective bargaining, minimum wages, and maximum hours. The AAA focused on raising farm prices, a goal to be achieved through the setting of production quotas approved by farmers in referenda. Once the quotas limiting production were established, farmers who cooperated would receive subsidies.

After a promising start the NRA lost its effectiveness. Union spokesmen grumbled that the courts undercut the labor guarantees. Progressives complained that the NRA exempted monopolies from antitrust prosecution.



Small businessmen protested that the codes favored large corporations. Some employers were slow to sign the codes, and others evaded them. If the PWA and other spending agencies had moved more quickly to promote purchasing power, these liabilities might not have been serious. As it was, the PWA was slow to spend its funds, hard times persisted, and evasion spread. Well before the Supreme Court declared the agency unconstitutional in May 1935, the NRA had failed in its aims of sponsoring government-business cooperation and promoting recovery.

The AAA was a little more successful. Agricultural income increased by 50% in Roosevelt's first term. Some of this increase, however, was attributable to terrible droughts. These, ruining thousands of farmers in the Great Plains, caused cuts in supply and contributed to higher prices for crops produced elsewhere. AAA acreage quotas also led some landlords to evict tenants from their lands. Moreover, as the AAA improved farm prices, it forced consumers, millions of whom lacked adequate food and decent clothing, to pay more for the necessities of life. Roosevelt, it seemed, was fighting scarcity with more scarcity.

These early measures displayed Roosevelt's strengths and weaknesses as an economic thinker. On the one hand, he showed that he was flexible, that he would act, and that he would use all his executive powers to secure congressional cooperation. Frequent press conferences, speeches, and fireside chats--and the extraordinary charisma that he displayed on all occasions--instilled a measure of confidence in the people and halted the

terrifying slide of 1932 and 1933. These were important achievements that brought him and his party the gratitude of millions of Americans.

FDR also refrained from large-scale deficit spending or from tax policies that would have redistributed income. Purchasing power, essential to rapid recovery, therefore failed to increase substantially. Roosevelt, a practical political leader and a moderate in economics, helped preserve capitalism without significantly correcting its abuses or ending the Depression.

In 1935, Roosevelt turned slightly to the left. He sponsored bills aimed at abolishing public-utility holding companies, at raising taxes on the wealthy, and at shifting control of monetary policy from Wall Street bankers to Washington. When Congress balked, Roosevelt compromised. The bills revealed Roosevelt's loss of faith in government-business cooperation. They helped undercut demagogues like Sen. Huey Long (D-La.), who was agitating for tougher laws against the rich. But they did not signify a commitment to radical, antibusiness policies.

While these struggles were taking place, Roosevelt worked successfully for three significant acts passed in 1935. One, a relief appropriation, led to creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA disbursed some \$11 billion in work relief to as many as 3.2 million Americans a month between 1935 and 1942.

The second measure, the Wagner Act, set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which effectively guaranteed labor the right to bargain collectively on equal terms with management. In part because of the Wagner

Act, in part because of overdue militance by spokesmen for industrial unionism, the labor movement swelled in the 1930's and 1940's.

The third reform was social security. The law provided for federal payment of old-age pensions and for federal-state cooperation in support of unemployment compensation and relief of the needy blind, of the disabled, and of dependent children. The act, though faulty in many ways, became the foundation of a partial welfare state with which later administrations dared not tamper.

Controversy disrupted the president's second term. His troubles began in February 1937, when he called for a "court reform" plan that would have permitted him to add up to six judges to the probusiness U. S. Supreme Court. The court's conservative majority had angered FDR by declaring some New Deal legislation, including the NRA and AAA, unconstitutional. Congress, reflecting widespread reverence for the court, refused to do his bidding.

At the time, militant workers staged "sit-down" strikes in factories. Though Roosevelt opposed the sit-downs, conservatives were quick to blame him for the growing activism of organized labor. In the fall of 1937 a sharp recession, caused in large part by cuts in federal spending earlier in the year, staggered the country. Taken aback, Roosevelt waited until the spring of 1938 before calling for increased federal spending to recharge purchasing power. His procrastination revealed again his reluctance to resort to deficit spending.

These developments in 1937 and 1938 severely damaged his standing in Congress, which had grown restive under his strong leadership as early as

1935. In FDR's second term, therefore, the lawmakers proved cooperative only long enough to approve measures calling for public housing, fair labor standards, and aid to tenant farmers. None of these acts, however, was generously funded or far-reaching. Meanwhile, Congress cut back presidential requests for relief spending and public works. After Republican gains in the 1938 elections, a predominantly rural conservative coalition in Congress proved still more hostile. Henceforth it rejected most of the urban and welfare measures of Roosevelt's administrations.

Cordell Hull of Tennessee served as secretary of state from 1933 to 1944, but Roosevelt's desire to engage in personal diplomacy left Hull in a reduced role. In 1933 the president's "bombshell message" to the London Economic Conference, saying that the United States would not participate in international currency stabilization, ended any immediate hope of achieving that objective. In the same year he extended diplomatic recognition to the USSR, still a relative outcast in world diplomacy. Roosevelt and Hull worked smoothly in behalf of reciprocal trade agreements and in making the United States the "good neighbor" of the Latin American.

By the mid-1930's dictatorial regimes in Germany, Japan, and Italy were casting their shadows across the blank pages of the future. In 1936, in his speech accepting renomination as president, Roosevelt had said, "This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." By 1938, Roosevelt was spending increasing amounts of time on international affairs. Until then he had acquiesced in congressional "neutrality" acts designed to keep the United States out of another world war. Roosevelt did not share the isolationist sentiments that lay behind such legislation. But he hoped very

much to avoid war, and he dared not risk his domestic program by challenging Congress over foreign policy. For these reasons he was slow to warn the people about the dangers of German fascism.

Germany's aggressiveness in 1939 forced Roosevelt to take a tougher stance. Early in the year he tried unsuccessfully to secure revision of a neutrality act calling for an embargo on armaments to all belligerents, whether attacked or attacker. When Hitler overran Poland in September and triggered the formal beginning of World War II, Roosevelt tried again for repeal of the embargo, and succeeded. In 1940 he negotiated an unneutral deal with Britain whereby the British leased their bases in the Western Hemisphere to the United States in return for 50 overaged American destroyers. Roosevelt also secured vastly increased defense expenditures, which brought about domestic economic recovery at last. But he still hoped to keep out of the war and to appease the anti-interventionists in Congress. Thus he remained cautious.

To protect the supplies against German submarines, U. S. destroyers began escorting convoys of Allied ships part way across the Atlantic. In the process the destroyers helped pinpoint the location of submarines, which Allied warships duly attacked. Roosevelt did not tell the people about America's unneutral actions on the high seas. When a German submarine fired a torpedo at the American destroyer Greer in September 1941, he feigned surprise and outrage and ordered U. S. warships to shoot on sight at hostile German ships. By December the United States and Germany were engaged in an undeclared war on the Atlantic.

Most historians agree that Hitler was a menace to Western civilization, that American intervention was necessary to stop him, and that domestic isolationism hampered the president's freedom of response. But they regret that Roosevelt, in seeking his ends, chose to deceive the people and to abuse his powers.

Historians also debate Roosevelt's policies toward Japan, whose leaders were bent on expansion in the 1930's. Hoping to contain this expansion, the president gradually tightened an embargo of vital goods to Japan. He also demanded that Japan halt its aggressive activities in China and Indochina. Instead of backing down, the militarists who controlled Japan decided to fight, by attacking Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941, and by assaulting the East Indies. These moves left no doubt about Japan's aggressive intentions. In asking for a declaration of war, the president called December 7 " a date which will live in infamy." He brought a united America into World War II. By December 11, the United States was at war with Germany and Italy.

Some historians argue, however, that Roosevelt should not have been so unbudging regarding the integrity of China and Indochina, which lay outside America's national interest--or power to protect. If Roosevelt had adopted a more flexible policy toward Japan, he might have postponed a conflict in Asia at a time when war with Hitler was about to erupt.

Roosevelt's military policies also provoked controversy. In 1941 critics blamed him for leaving Pearl Harbor unprepared. Extremists even claimed that he invited the Japanese attack in order to have a pretext for war. In

1942 liberals complained when he cooperated with Jean Darlan, the Vichy French admiral who until then had been collaborating with the Axis, in planning the Allied invasion of North Africa. In 1943, FDR's opponents grumbled that his policy of unconditional surrender for the enemy discouraged the anti-Hitler resistance within Germany. Other critics complained that he relied too heavily on strategic bombing. His own generals were angry because he postponed the "second front" against Hitler until June 1944. Such delay, critics added later, infuriated the Soviet Union, which had to carry the brunt of the fighting against Hitler between 1941 and 1944, and sowed the seeds of the Cold War.

Some of these criticisms were partly justified. Poor communications between Washington and Hawaii helped the Japanese achieve surprise at Pearl Harbor. Dealing with Darlan was probably not necessary to ensure success in North Africa. Strategic bombing killed millions of civilians and was not nearly so effective as its advocates claimed. The delay in the second front greatly intensified Soviet suspicions of the West.

But it is easy to second-guess and to exaggerate Roosevelt's failings as a military leader. The president neither invited nor welcomed the Pearl Harbor attack, which was a brilliantly planned maneuver by Japan. He worked with Darlan in the hope of preventing unnecessary loss of Allied lives.

Unconditional surrender, given American anger at the enemy, was a politically logical policy. It also proved reassuring to the Soviet Union, which had feared a separate German-American peace. Establishing the second front required control of the air and large supplies of landing craft, and these

were not assured until 1944. In many of these decisions Roosevelt acted in characteristically pragmatic fashion--to win the war as effectively as possible and to keep the wartime alliance together. In these aims he was successful.

By 1945, Roosevelt was 63 years old. The events early in that year added to the strains on his heart, and on April 12, 1945, he died suddenly at Warm Springs, Ga. Three days later he was buried at Hyde Park. Despite his limitations, he had been a strong, decent, and highly popular president for more than 12 years.

Category: Biographies