

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano (30 Jan. 1882-12 Apr. 1945), thirty-second president of the United States, was born on his family's estate in Dutchess County, New York, the son of James Roosevelt, a wealthy, landed gentleman who dabbled in but usually devoted no great effort to business, and Sara Delano. The couple lived their lives and raised their child in a manner reminiscent of the English aristocracy, and Franklin grew up, therefore, in a remarkably cosseted environment, insulated from the normal experiences of most American boys both by his family's wealth and by their all-encompassing love. Until he was fourteen years old, he lived in a world almost entirely dominated by adults: his Swiss tutors, who supervised his lessons at home or during the family's annual travels through Europe; his father, who sought to train his son in the life of a landowner and gentleman; and above all his mother, who devoted virtually all her energies to raising her only child.

It was a world of extraordinary comfort, security, and serenity but also one of reticence and reserve, particularly after 1891, when James Roosevelt suffered the first of a series of heart attacks that left him a semi-invalid. Franklin responded to his father's condition protectively. He tried to spare his father any anxiety by masking his own emotions and projecting a calm, cheerful demeanor. He would continue hiding his feelings behind a bright, charming surface for the rest of his life.

In the fall of 1896 Franklin left his parents to attend Groton, a rigorous boarding school in Massachusetts that was something of a shock to a boy who had never before attended school with other children. He had never had any close friends of his own age and had difficulty making them now. Physically slight, he attained little distinction in athletics, which dominated the life of the school, and went through his four years at Groton a lonely outsider.

Upon entering Harvard College in 1900, Roosevelt set out to make up for what he considered his social failures at Groton. He worked hard at making friends, ran for class office, and became president of the student newspaper, the *Crimson*. He also became conspicuous in his enthusiasm for his distant cousin [Theodore Roosevelt](#), even affecting some of the president's famous mannerisms, such as wearing a pince-nez and frequent, hearty use of the well-known Roosevelt exclamations "Delighted" and "Bully." But he failed to achieve what he craved above all: election to the most exclusive of the Harvard "final clubs," the Porcellian. It was, he later said, "the greatest disappointment of my life."

During Roosevelt's first year at Harvard, his ailing father died, and Sara Roosevelt took a house in Boston to be near her son. Devoted to his mother, Franklin Roosevelt was always attentive and loving toward her. Yet he was determined by now to create a life of his own, and Sara's intrusive presence made him intensely secretive. Indeed, he obscured from her the most important experience of his Harvard years, his courtship of his distant cousin, [Eleanor Roosevelt](#), Theodore Roosevelt's niece, whom he had known slightly as a child. The couple began to spend time together during the 1902 social season, when Eleanor made her debut. Even though the handsome, charming, and somewhat glib Franklin seemed to have little in common with the quiet, reserved, and intensely serious Eleanor, the mutual attraction grew. By the time Franklin graduated from Harvard in 1904, they were secretly engaged. Despite the initial resistance of Franklin's mother, they married in March 1905. They had a daughter and five sons, one of whom died in infancy.

Early Political Career

By the time of his marriage, Roosevelt was a student at Columbia Law School. He never completed the requirements for his degree, but he passed his bar exams and spent several years desultorily practicing law in New York City. Already he was principally interested in politics, and in 1910 he accepted the invitation from Democratic party leaders in Dutchess County to run for the state senate. The race seemed hopeless, but profiting from a split in the Republican party and from his own energetic denunciation of party bosses, Roosevelt won. He made few friends at first among his fellow legislators, most of whom considered him naive and arrogant. But he compiled a creditable if modest record protecting the interests of Upstate farmers, his own constituents among them, and opposing the New York City Democratic machine, Tammany Hall.

In 1912 Roosevelt won reelection easily, in part because he had by then enlisted the aid of a politically knowledgeable journalist, [Louis M. Howe](#), who managed his campaign, taught him to drop many of his aristocratic mannerisms, and helped him make alliances with politicians of backgrounds very different from his own. Howe would be indispensable to Roosevelt's career for the next twenty years.

Roosevelt did not serve out his second term in the legislature. Early in 1913 [Woodrow Wilson](#), the new Democratic president whom Roosevelt had energetically supported, offered him an appointment as assistant secretary of the navy. Roosevelt eagerly accepted, not least because it was from that same position that Theodore Roosevelt had launched his national political career fifteen years earlier. Franklin enjoyed the new job and the Washington social life that came with it, and he plunged into both with a sometimes reckless enthusiasm. In the Navy Department, he was brashly assertive and often almost openly insubordinate to his remarkably tolerant superior, Secretary of the Navy [Josephus Daniels](#); but with the help of Howe, Roosevelt ran the day-to-day affairs of the fast-growing department with reasonable efficiency. He also kept his hand in New York politics and tried unsuccessfully in 1914 to seize the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate away from the Tammany candidate. From that experience he concluded that, while hostility to Tammany was good politics in Dutchess County, it was a serious, perhaps insurmountable, obstacle to statewide and national success. From 1914 on he worked to develop cordial relations with Tammany leaders.

Service as Assistant Secretary of the Navy

Roosevelt lobbied strenuously for preparedness during the years preceding World War I and for American entry into the war in 1917. Later he successfully promoted the laying of a large barrage of antisubmarine mines in the North Sea, supervised the production of small vessels to defend the American coasts, and intruded himself into deliberations of naval strategy and tactics that were not normally the province of the assistant secretary. He also became involved, perhaps inadvertently, in a controversy that would haunt him for years. In 1918 the navy began an attempt to "clean up" the area around the large naval base at Newport, Rhode Island, after receiving complaints about prostitution and homosexuality. Enlisted men were dispatched to entrap sailors and others, including a prominent Protestant clergyman, in homosexual acts. The

scandal that resulted when the operation became public simmered for years, and in 1921 a Senate investigation, dominated by Republicans, openly chastised Roosevelt for his part in the operation.

In the meantime, Roosevelt was experiencing a personal crisis that was even more threatening to his future. As a fixture in Washington's active social life, he often found himself at odds with his wife, to whom social events were seldom less than an ordeal. Perhaps as a result, he found himself drawn to the poised, attractive, gregarious young woman whom Eleanor hired as her social secretary, Lucy Mercer. Franklin and Lucy formed a romantic relationship, which continued until Eleanor discovered it late in 1918. Franklin refused Eleanor's offer of a divorce and promised to end all relations with Lucy Mercer, a promise he broke many years later when, during World War II, he began to see her occasionally again. Eleanor was deeply wounded and withdrew from any real intimacy with her husband. Their marriage survived on the basis of shared public commitments and residual respect and affection, but from 1918 on they lived increasingly separate lives.

Despite the occasional travails of his Washington experience, Roosevelt emerged from his eight years in the Navy Department with a significantly enhanced reputation, which, combined with his famous name, made him immediately attractive to national Democratic leaders. In 1920 he secured the party's nomination for vice president on the ill-fated ticket headed by Ohio governor [James M. Cox](#). Roosevelt campaigned energetically and at times rashly, such as when, in defending the League of Nations, he falsely claimed that he had written the constitution of Haiti and thus had that nation's vote "in his pocket." Despite the Democrats' crushing defeat, he emerged with little of the blame for it and with many new friends among party leaders.

The Effects of Polio and Permanent Paralysis on Roosevelt's Life

In 1921 Roosevelt returned to private life. He became a vice president of a bonding company and formed a legal partnership in New York, intending all the while to focus primarily on politics. In August 1921, however, a personal disaster seemed to shatter all his hopes. He developed polio while at Campobello Island, his family's summer home, and within days he had lost the use of both of his legs and was in excruciating pain. Months later his doctors told him that he would never walk again. But Roosevelt refused to believe them, and he spent most of the next seven years in a futile search for a cure, trying innumerable forms of therapy and becoming particularly attached to the spa-like baths he discovered in Warm Springs, Georgia. There he spent much of his personal fortune buying an old resort hotel and converting it into a center for polio patients. Eventually he became at least partially reconciled to his continuing paralysis and learned to disguise it for public purposes by wearing heavy leg braces, supporting himself with a cane and the arm of a companion, and using his hips to swing his inert legs forward. So effective was this deception (and so cooperative was the press in preserving it) that few Americans knew during his lifetime that he was largely confined to a wheelchair.

Roosevelt almost never talked about his own feelings, least of all about the impact of paralysis on him; but contracting polio was clearly one of the most important events of his life. His determination to hide his condition from those around him probably strengthened what was already his natural inclination to dissemble, to hide behind an aggressive public geniality, and to reveal as little about himself as possible. Eleanor Roosevelt later claimed that polio also gave him patience and increased his understanding of "what suffering meant." The ordeal certainly made him more serious and determined, and gradually he transferred his steely new resolve away from his efforts to walk and toward an attempt to resume a public career.

After the polio attack, Sara Roosevelt believed that her son should retire from politics and return to the family estate at Hyde Park to live as a gentleman invalid. Both Eleanor and Howe supported Franklin's own desire to resume a public life, and together they worked to keep his name alive in New York politics. During much of the 1920s Roosevelt maintained his ties to politics largely through correspondence, much of it orchestrated by Howe, and through the increasing public activities of his wife. He developed a close political although never personal relationship with [Al Smith](#), the Tammany-supported governor of New York. He also forged ties to other groups in the Democratic party and presented himself as a bridge between its two bitterly divided wings: one, represented by Smith, largely eastern, urban, Catholic, and ethnic; the other, represented by [William Jennings Bryan](#) and [William McAdoo](#), largely southern, western, rural, and Protestant.

Governor of New York

At the 1924 Democratic National Convention, a grim-faced Roosevelt dragged himself laboriously to the podium on crutches and placed Smith's name in nomination. In 1928, when he again nominated Smith for president, he "walked" to the podium without crutches, one hand holding a cane and the other clutching his son's arm. It was an important personal triumph, signaling his readiness to resume an active political career, which he did more quickly than even he had expected. After months of resisting pressure from Smith and other party leaders to run for governor of New York, he finally agreed in 1928. He campaigned energetically and buoyantly, partly to dispel the persistent rumors of weakness and poor health. Although Smith lost his home state to [Herbert Hoover](#) in the presidential contest by 100,000 votes, Roosevelt won his own race by a narrow margin.

Roosevelt's four years as governor coincided with the first three and a half years of the Great Depression. More quickly than most other political leaders, he concluded that the economy would not recover on its own and "that there is a duty on the part of government to do something about this." Roosevelt pushed for a series of modest reforms that included measures to develop public electric power, lower utilities rates, and reduce the tax burden on New York farmers. Later he also created a state agency to provide relief to the unemployed and began calling for national unemployment insurance and other government programs to assist the jobless. He was careful not to seem reckless or radical. He criticized President Hoover for failing to balance the budget and denounced excessive government intervention in the economy.

From the moment of his landslide reelection as governor of New York in 1930, Roosevelt was the obvious front-runner for the 1932 Democratic presidential nomination. With the help of Howe and [James A. Farley](#), a talented New York political organizer who had helped orchestrate Roosevelt's two gubernatorial campaigns, he accumulated pledges from delegates throughout the country, particularly in the South and the West, where antipathy to Smith, Roosevelt's chief rival for the nomination, was strong. Even so, he approached the Democratic National Convention far from certain of nomination. Smith had defeated him in the Massachusetts primary, and House Speaker [John Nance Garner](#) of Texas had won the California primary. Their delegate strength, when combined with that of other candidates and favorite sons, denied Roosevelt through three ballots the two-thirds vote the Democratic party then required for nomination. On the fourth ballot Garner, after being promised the vice presidential nomination, released his delegates, and those additional votes gave Roosevelt the margin he needed. The following day he broke with tradition and flew to Chicago to become the first Democratic candidate ever to appear personally before a convention to accept its nomination. In his speech to the delegates, he pledged "a new deal for the American people," and within weeks the phrase became a widely accepted label for his program.

A New Deal

Roosevelt's task in the fall campaign was a relatively simple one: avoid doing anything to alarm the electorate while allowing Hoover's enormous unpopularity to drive voters to the Democrats. He traveled extensively giving speeches filled with sunny generalities; he was perpetually genial; and he continued to criticize Hoover for failing to balance the budget and for expanding the bureaucracy. But he only occasionally gave indications of his own increasingly progressive agenda. On one such occasion, at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, he outlined in general terms a new set of government responsibilities: for an "enlightened administration" to help the economy revive, to distribute "wealth and products more equitably," and to provide "everyone an avenue to possess himself of a portion of that plenty sufficient for his needs, through his own work."

The presidential campaign brought together people who had guided Roosevelt's career in the past and people who would shape his presidency thereafter. Howe and Farley remained his principal political strategists, Eleanor Roosevelt continued to serve as a surrogate for her husband, and Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, Roosevelt's personal secretary since 1920, remained the one constant, daily presence in his life. The 1932 campaign also brought him into contact with new aides and advisers, perhaps most notably a group of academic advisers dubbed the "brain trust" by reporters. Chief among them were three Columbia University professors, [Raymond Moley](#), [Adolf A. Berle, Jr.](#), and [Rexford G. Tugwell](#), who helped write his campaign speeches, including the Commonwealth Club address, and, more important, began developing ideas for his presidency.

Roosevelt won handily with 57 percent of the popular vote to Hoover's 40 and with 472 electoral votes to Hoover's 59. Democrats also won solid control of both houses of Congress. Most observers interpreted the results less as a mandate for Roosevelt, whose plans remained largely unknown to the public, than as a repudiation of Hoover. Many skeptics still shared [Walter Lippmann](#)'s famously dismissive view of Roosevelt as "a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president."

In the four months between his victory and his inauguration, Roosevelt did little to dispel those doubts. The depression worsened considerably, with more than 25 percent of the workforce unemployed, and early in 1933 a series of bank failures deepened the crisis. President Hoover, conservative Democrats, and leading business figures all urged the president-elect to restore confidence by pledging himself to fiscal and monetary conservatism. Roosevelt refused while offering few clues to his own plans. The most dramatic event of his "interregnum" was an attempted assassination in Miami in February, in which Roosevelt was not injured but the mayor of Chicago was killed. The president-elect responded to the incident with the same unruffled, genial calm he had displayed since the election.

Assuming the Presidency (1933) a

Roosevelt assumed the presidency at a moment of great crisis for the nation. Millions were unemployed or underemployed, the agricultural economy was nearly in chaos, industrial production had fallen dramatically, new capital investment had almost ceased, and the banking system had become paralyzed as a widening panic drained banks of their deposits. The governor of Michigan had ordered all the banks in his state closed in mid-February, and by the beginning of March almost every state in the nation had placed some restrictions on banking activity.

The banking crisis provided the ominous backdrop both for Roosevelt's inauguration and for his first days in office. His inaugural address offered words of assurance, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and stern warnings: "Rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence. . . . The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization." It was less a diagnosis of the national condition than a direct response to the banking crisis itself, and his first days in office were devoted largely to solving that crisis. On 6 March 1933 he ordered every bank in the nation closed--a "bank holiday," as he euphemistically described it. Three days later Congress met in special session to consider an emergency banking bill, drafted so hastily by holdovers from the Hoover administration that members did not even receive printed copies of it. Both Houses passed it, and the president signed it the same day. Stronger banks could now reopen with promises of government assistance; weaker ones remained closed until Treasury Department examiners could assure their viability. This was a modest and essentially conservative action, but it was enough to stop the panic. Nearly three-quarters of the nation's banks reopened within three days of the measure's passage. Roosevelt also contributed to the restoration of calm on 12 March with the first of his avuncular "fireside chats" over national radio, during which he explained the provisions of the banking bill in simple terms and offered comforting assurances that it was "safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than under your mattress." The president continued to use radio throughout his administration and thus became the first national leader whose voice was a part of the country's everyday life.

Roosevelt promised in his 1932 campaign that he would end the deficits that had plagued the Hoover administration and restore a balanced budget. This he never did, and eventually he would come to consider deficit spending a useful and necessary response to recession. In 1933, however, he remained committed to fiscal orthodoxy, and on 10 March he asked Congress to pass legislation cutting government salaries and veterans' benefits. Both Houses passed the Economy Act within days, despite protests from some progressives who argued correctly that the measure would add to the deflationary pressures on the economy.

The "Hundred Days"

The New Deal soon departed from these conservative beginnings. Over the next three months, known then and later as the "Hundred Days," Roosevelt won passage of a series of bills that began to transform the role of the federal government in the workings of the nation's economy. The result was not a "revolution" as some liked to claim, but it was a significant turning point in the evolution of the American state. Roosevelt drew heavily from the progressive traditions with which he had grown up and in which his principal advisers had been schooled, and he also responded to genuinely new ideas born of the unprecedented problems of the Great Depression. In the end, the New Deal was an amalgam of many different ideologies with no single, consistent rationale. Roosevelt's only solid commitments were to what he called "bold, practical experimentation" and, of course, to his own political survival.

The crisis of the farm economy spurred the first of the innovative New Deal reforms, a comprehensive farm bill, the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Signed in May 1933, the new law reflected the longstanding demands of many of the leading farm organizations for government support for farm prices. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), which the legislation created, helped farmers limit production of basic commodities; over production, farm experts agreed, was one of the principal reasons for tumbling agricultural prices. The AAA also created subsidies for farmers who left land idle. Much of the administration of the program fell into the hands of the American Farm Bureau Federation, which represented mostly commercial farmers. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the AAA tended to favor larger producers and weaken smaller ones. While farm income rose by almost 50 percent in the next three years, the dispossession of small farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers continued and even accelerated. Subsequently the New Deal experimented with a series of programs designed to help these marginal farmers, including the Resettlement Administration, established in 1935, and the Farm Security Administration, created in 1937, but the movement of the agricultural economy toward large-scale commercial farming continued inexorably. In 1936 the Supreme Court invalidated the original Agricultural Adjustment Act, declaring that Congress had no authority to compel individual farmers to reduce their acreage. The administration preserved the bill's major provisions in slightly altered form through the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, and federal support for farmers continued, in much the same form the New Deal created, through the rest of the century.

Another major concern during the Hundred Days was the health of the industrial economy. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, [Gerard Swope](#) of General Electric, and other leading businessmen and industrialists urged the government to suspend the antitrust laws and allow corporations to work together to stabilize prices and production, forming a cooperative "associationalism" policed in some modest way by the government. In June 1933 the New Deal responded to these appeals and the demands of other constituencies with the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), one of the largest and most complicated pieces of legislation in American history to that point. Roosevelt called it "the most important and far-reaching legislation ever enacted by the American Congress."

The National Recovery Act

The NIRA established a National Recovery Administration (NRA), headed by the flamboyant [Hugh Johnson](#), a retired general who had directed the selective service system during World War I. Its most important task was persuading the industrialists in major industries to join together under "code authorities" roughly analogous to the trade associations many of them had created in the 1920s and earlier. Through the code authorities, industries established price floors, production restrictions, and employment standards to check deflation and restore prosperity. The codes thus produced, when approved by the NRA, were to have the force of law and were to be enforced through governmental sanctions. In addition, Johnson created a public relations campaign behind a set of largely voluntary "blanket codes" for all the employers not covered by specific code authorities. The blanket code established a minimum wage of 30 to 40 cents an hour and a maximum work week of 35 to 40 hours.

Initially the NRA was successful in creating public enthusiasm for the new program. The agency's symbol, the Blue Eagle, soon appeared in shop windows, on banners, and in public parades and demonstrations around the country. But the NRA was less successful in solving the problems of industrial production. Administratively unprepared for the enormity of its task, the agency floundered as it tried to enforce the codes. Once it became clear that large producers would dominate the code-making process, smaller businesses--many of which relied on lower prices to be able to compete with larger firms--complained loudly about their deteriorating positions. Critics also objected to artificially raised prices, which in a depressed economy tended to dampen demand and reduce production. Organized labor protested the limited implementation of NIRA's Section 7a, which guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. This stimulated an upsurge in trade union membership, but the lack of enforcement provisions and the administrators' disagreements about the section's requirements ensured that few employers were willing to recognize and bargain with the unions.

By the end of 1933 the failure of the NRA was already becoming clear. In 1934, after an external review board chaired by [Clarence Darrow](#) charged that the agency was dominated by big business and was encouraging monopoly, Roosevelt pressured Johnson to resign. Johnson's successors, however, made little progress in solving the NRA's problems, and in May 1935 the Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional. The president charged that in doing so the Court had adopted a "horse-and-buggy" interpretation of the Constitution. He was rightly concerned, for the Court's narrow construction of the Interstate Commerce Clause and its strict view of the limits on executive power called many other New Deal measures into question. Even so, the nullification of the NRA itself rescued the president from a failed experiment.

Roosevelt's first year in office produced other significant initiatives. The Tennessee Valley Authority, the culmination of years of progressive efforts to promote the development of public power, combined an ambitious program of flood control and regional development with the creation of large, government-owned hydroelectric power plants. The Civilian Conservation Corps created camps in national parks and forests and other nonurban settings where young, unemployed men from the cities found employment and training. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Civil Works Administration provided funds to relief agencies and jobs for the unemployed. The Securities and Exchange Commission began regulating the stock market. A second banking reform bill established federal insurance of bank deposits.

By the end of 1933 economic conditions were showing signs of modest improvement, but Roosevelt was reaping political rewards far out of proportion to the actual results of his programs. His carefully cultivated relations with the Washington press corps, including weekly informal news conferences in the Oval Office, ensured that he received largely favorable news coverage despite the animus he attracted from most newspaper publishers. Above all, he conveyed an image of energy and compassion--a sharp contrast to the cautious, dour image Hoover had conveyed in his last years in office.

Within the White House itself, Roosevelt created an atmosphere of jovial camaraderie among the small circle of aides and advisers on whom he relied, while his relationship with his wife remained distant. Even when they were together in the White House, they lived largely separate lives, and the first lady communicated with her husband on public issues largely through memos. The president's most intimate companion was LeHand, who served as his secretary and as a surrogate wife and household manager when Eleanor Roosevelt was away. Roosevelt relied heavily on LeHand for companionship and support but probably not for romance. Several of the president's children came to live at the White House at various times, and some of them worked for him while they were there. Yet he remained, in the end, the same reserved, self-contained, and somewhat mysterious figure he had always been--to no one more than to those who knew him best.

The president's disability meant that he left the White House relatively seldom and traveled less than other presidents normally did. He continued to vacation occasionally in Warm Springs, to take cruises on the Potomac and the Chesapeake, and to make regular visits to his home in Hyde Park, where his mother still lived. Periodically he embarked on elaborately orchestrated "fact-finding" missions around the country, traveling on specially fitted trains and in specially designed automobiles with aides, who created elaborate subterfuges to hide his disability. The press was willingly complicit. Never during Roosevelt's public life did any newspaper or magazine publish a photograph of him in a wheelchair or being lifted in or out of a car.

The Second New Deal

By the middle of 1934 the New Deal, for which many had had great hopes in 1933, was experiencing serious difficulties. The economy was not improving fast enough to meet public expectations, resulting in the growth of popular and radical protest movements accompanied by one of the largest waves of strikes in the nation's history. These developments were jeopardizing the president's political future, and beginning in the spring of 1935 Roosevelt responded with a series of new proposals that historians have sometimes called the "Second New Deal." Dominating it were two landmark pieces of legislation that remain among the New Deal's principal legacies.

The Social Security Act of 1935 created the framework for the nation's first national system of social insurance and public assistance. More specifically, it created an old-age pension system funded by contributions from workers and employers, a system of unemployment insurance funded by employers alone, and several programs of social welfare supported by ordinary public funds for such particularly needy groups as single mothers with children in the home, the elderly poor, and the disabled. In operation it provided the framework for America's version of the modern welfare state.

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, better known as the Wagner Act because Senator [Robert Wagner](#) of New York was the bill's principal sponsor, reaffirmed the guarantee of workers' right to bargain collectively as first stated in the now defunct NIRA. It also provided for enforcement of that right by creating the National Labor Relations Board, empowered to compel employers to recognize and bargain with unions that had won legitimate elections among a firm's workers.

Also in 1935 the New Deal launched the most extensive and innovative program of work relief in American history to that date, the Works Progress Administration. Directed by [Harry Hopkins](#), this agency kept an average of 2.1 million workers employed between 1935 and 1941 and was responsible for constructing a remarkable number of public buildings and facilities. Tax reform, utilities regulation, and other measures, some of them largely symbolic, were also part of this new wave of legislative action.

Second Term as President

The Second New Deal did not end the depression, but it did provide crucial short-term and long-term protections to large groups of Americans. In addition, it revived Roosevelt's political fortunes. In the 1936 presidential election, he faced the Republican governor of Kansas, [Alf Landon](#), a moderate conservative with a dull public presence, and a third-party challenge from Congressman [William Lemke](#) of North Dakota, the hapless candidate of the short-lived Union party. Roosevelt campaigned energetically and effectively, and he won by an unprecedented landslide: 61 percent of the popular vote, the electoral votes of every state except Maine and Vermont, and increased Democratic majorities in both Houses of Congress. The election displayed clearly the fundamental political realignment the New Deal had created. The Democratic party now had the support of a broad coalition of southern and western farmers, the urban working class, the poor and unemployed, the black communities of northern cities, traditional progressives, and committed new liberals. This "New Deal coalition" would dominate American politics for a generation.

Few could have imagined in the glow of the November election how quickly the Roosevelt administration would move from its triumph into a quagmire of frustration and defeat. In February 1937, emboldened by his apparent mandate, Roosevelt introduced a Court "reform" plan designed to give him the authority to appoint additional, sympathetic justices to the Supreme Court, which he feared would otherwise invalidate virtually all of the legislative achievements of his first term. The "Court-packing" bill, as it quickly became known, was intensely controversial and energized the president's conservative opposition. Congress defeated it, humiliating the president in the process. But the Court itself, in the face of this assault, prudently moved toward the center and became more amenable to New Deal programs. At about the same time, Roosevelt also supported an ambitious proposal to reorganize the executive branch of the federal government, which his opponents charged was an attempt to consolidate still more power in the hands of the president. They defeated the original proposal in Congress and forced him to settle for a much more modest bill in 1939.

The Recession (1937)

Most damaging of all to the administration was a serious recession that began suddenly in August 1937 and quickly wiped out most of the painfully won economic gains of the previous four years. The collapse was especially traumatic to New Dealers because it came at a point when they had begun to believe that the depression was over. Now, confronted with the hollowness of those claims, the president joined in an agonizing reappraisal of his policies and eventually launched two important new initiatives.

One was a newly energetic effort to combat "monopoly power." Opposition to monopoly had been a staple of New Deal rhetoric, although seldom of action, in 1935 and 1936, and now some of the most committed New Dealers convinced the president that the recession was a result of a deliberate effort by "economic royalists" to sabotage the economy--a "capital strike," as some called it. Roosevelt responded by calling for the creation of a new commission to investigate economic conditions. The Temporary National Economic Committee spent over three years studying the effects of monopoly power, but its final report, released after World War II had begun, had no effect on public policy. In addition, Roosevelt's new director of the antitrust division of the Justice Department, [Thurman Arnold](#), began making more energetic use of the antitrust laws than had any of his predecessors. But Arnold's experiment, too, came to an end during the war.

At the same time, Roosevelt responded to pleas from liberal economists and others who argued that the recession was a result of the significant reductions in government spending he had approved early in 1937. In the spring of 1938, to the chagrin of Secretary of the Treasury [Henry Morgenthau](#), Roosevelt abandoned further efforts to balance the budget and secured emergency appropriations of \$5 billion in spending and loans for relief and public works. It was the first time a president had explicitly endorsed the idea that stimulating mass consumption through deficit spending could promote economic growth. Ultimately the idea that federal fiscal policy was an effective tool by which government could regulate the economy, an idea associated with the British economist John Maynard Keynes, became one of the New Deal's most important policy innovations and one of its most significant legacies. Also in 1938 Roosevelt won passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a minimum wage, created a maximum forty-hour work week, and abolished child labor. It, too, was in part an effort to stimulate economic growth by increasing mass purchasing power.

The Failures and Achievements of the New Deal

By the end of 1938 Roosevelt was only about halfway through his presidency, but the New Deal he had created was close to completion. In retrospect, it has often seemed as significant for the things it did not do as for the things it achieved. It did not end the Great Depression and the massive unemployment that accompanied it; only the enormous public and private spending for World War II finally did that. The complaints of conservative critics notwithstanding, it did not transform American capitalism in any fundamental way. Except in the fields of labor relations and banking and finance, corporate power remained nearly as free from government regulation or control in 1945 as it had been in 1933. The New Deal did not end poverty or significantly redistribute wealth, nor did it do very much, except symbolically, to address the principal domestic challenges of the postwar era, among them the problems of racial and gender inequality. Despite the commitment to civil rights of Eleanor Roosevelt and other New Deal officials such as Secretary of the Interior [Harold Ickes](#), the president shied away from issues that he feared would divide his party and damage his ability to work with Congress.

Even so, the achievements of the Roosevelt administration rank among the most important of any presidency in American history. First, the New Deal created new state institutions that significantly and permanently expanded the role of the federal government in American life. The government was committed to providing at least minimal assistance to the elderly, the poor, and the unemployed; to protecting the rights of labor unions; to stabilizing the banking system; to building low-income housing; to regulating financial markets; to subsidizing agricultural production; and to doing many other things that had not previously been federal responsibilities. As a result, American political and economic life became much more competitive, with workers, farmers, consumers, and others now able to press their demands upon the government in ways that in the past had usually been available only to the corporate world. Hence the frequent description of the government the New Deal created as a "broker state," a state brokering the competing claims of numerous groups. Second, the New Deal produced a political coalition that sustained the Democrats as the majority party in national politics for more than a generation after its own end. Finally, the Roosevelt administration generated a set of political ideas, known to later generations as New Deal liberalism, that remained a source of inspiration and controversy for decades and that helped shape the next major experiment in liberal reform, the Great Society of the 1960s.

That the New Deal sputtered to something like a close in Roosevelt's second term was in part because the political tides were turning against him. In 1938 and again in 1942 the Democrats suffered considerable losses in congressional elections, and the emerging conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats was capable of blocking almost anything liberals proposed. The New Deal faded as well, however, because of the president's growing preoccupation with the worst catastrophe of the twentieth century, the spiraling global crisis that led Europe, Asia, and ultimately the United States into World War II.

Roosevelt's Foreign Policy

For the first five years of his presidency, foreign policy had been a distinctly secondary concern to Roosevelt. Shortly after taking office, he withdrew his support from the London Economic Conference, which was seeking a global solution to depression-induced problems of currency and trade. He was implicitly saying that the United States would go it alone, and he then devalued American currency by weakening its link to the gold standard. Subsequently he promoted American foreign trade and, not unrelated, improved U.S. relations with Latin America through a wide-ranging cluster of initiatives known together as the "Good Neighbor Policy."

Still, as a Wilsonian, Roosevelt was an internationalist at heart, as was his secretary of state, [Cordell Hull](#), and from time to time they tried to nudge the United States into a more active global role. In 1935 Roosevelt asked the Senate to approve a treaty that would allow the United States to join the World Court. Spirited opposition from isolationists both in and out of Congress prevented ratification. In 1937, in response to Japanese attacks on China, he made a vague proposal to "quarantine the aggressors," only to be greeted with such savage denunciations from much of the press and the public that he drew back again. Although disturbed by the growing militarism in Europe and Asia, he was as yet uncertain about what role the United States could play in stopping it. In 1938, when British prime minister Neville Chamberlain met with Adolf Hitler at Munich and ceded Czechoslovakia to the Nazis in exchange for what turned out to be a hollow promise of peace, Roosevelt cabled Chamberlain congratulations.

When war finally broke out in Europe in September 1939, Roosevelt insisted that the conflict would not involve the United States, but he took pains to differentiate his policies from those of Wilson in 1914. Whereas Wilson had insisted that the United States would be neutral in "word and deed," Roosevelt declared, "This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well." His support for Britain and its allies was clear and unequivocal from the start.

In the spring of 1940, as the war spread throughout western Europe, driving the British and French armies from the Continent, public opinion began to move slowly toward support for a more active American role in the conflict. Roosevelt moved with it and at times somewhat ahead of it. Despite organized opposition from powerful isolationist groups, he managed to persuade Congress to repeal the Neutrality Acts it had passed in the 1930s, thus making it possible for the United States to begin selling weapons and other supplies to Britain. He formed an extraordinarily intimate relationship with Britain's prime minister Winston Churchill that facilitated increasing aid to Britain. In September 1940 Roosevelt traded fifty American destroyers to the British in exchange for several British bases in the Caribbean. In December, shortly after winning an unprecedented third term in the White House by handily defeating [Wendell Willkie](#), a prominent industrialist who had secured the Republican nomination, Roosevelt proposed what he called "lend-lease," a system designed to permit the nearly bankrupt British to continue receiving armaments from the United States without paying cash for them. Congress obliged him by passing the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941.

Gradually American assistance to the Allies grew even more overt. As German submarines made shipping material across the Atlantic increasingly difficult, American naval vessels began patrolling the ocean and escorting convoys of merchant ships. In August 1941 Roosevelt and Churchill met aboard an American cruiser off Newfoundland and signed the Atlantic Charter, a statement of war aims that called for an end to fascism and a guarantee of national self-determination throughout the world. In November 1941, shortly after Hitler invaded Russia, Roosevelt extended lend-lease assistance to the Soviet Union, the first step toward forging what would soon be an important wartime alliance.

Attack on Pearl Harbor

In the meantime, the United States responded to continuing Japanese aggression in China by imposing a trade embargo on Japan and freezing Japanese assets in the United States. To meet this threat to their oil supplies, the Japanese laid plans to seize the oil-producing British and Dutch possessions in the Pacific. It was there, Roosevelt and most other American officials assumed, that Japan's next aggressive moves would be. The Americans had cracked the Japanese codes and knew an attack on the territory of one of the Western powers was coming. The intelligence information Washington received could have, if properly interpreted, alerted the United States to Tokyo's plans, but because no one anticipated that the Japanese would launch so bold an effort, no one predicted what they actually did. On 7 December 1941, without warning, a wave of Japanese bombers struck the American naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing more than 2,000 American servicemen and damaging or destroying dozens of ships and airplanes. The next day Roosevelt traveled to Capitol Hill to ask Congress for a declaration of war, which it passed within hours. Three days later Germany and Italy, Japan's European allies, declared war on the United States, and the American Congress quickly reciprocated. The United States was now fully engaged in the largest war in history.

Roosevelt was somewhat more detached from day-to-day decision making as a war leader than he had been as a domestic one. More than a year before Pearl Harbor, he had appointed men of great stature to supervise the military. Former secretary of state [Henry Stimson](#) was secretary of war, and [Frank Knox](#), a distinguished Chicago publisher of strong internationalist credentials, was secretary of the navy. Both men were Republicans, and indeed Roosevelt made strenuous efforts throughout the war to attract bipartisan support for his policies, even to the point of permitting and at times encouraging the departure from government of New Deal liberals. During the war Roosevelt tended to defer to the judgment of his military leaders, but he participated actively and often decisively in major strategic decisions.

Roosevelt's War Strategy

Almost immediately after Pearl Harbor Roosevelt made what was perhaps the most important of those decisions: although the United States would wage a two-front war, it would concentrate first on the conflict in Europe. Disagreement quickly emerged, however, over the best strategy for defeating Germany and Italy. The American leaders wanted to devote virtually all of their resources to preparing an invasion across the English Channel into France, the most direct route to Germany. Churchill and other British leaders, remembering the terrible carnage in France during World War I, preferred to delay the major invasion and begin with smaller incursions along the periphery of the Nazi empire. Roosevelt finally sided with Churchill and supported the British proposal to engage the Germans first in the territories they had seized in North

Africa. An Allied invasion of North Africa began in November 1942. After Anglo-American forces drove the Germans from Africa, they continued across the Mediterranean, invading Sicily and Italy in the summer of 1943.

Although American forces in the Pacific received less than a fifth of the resources the nation devoted to the war in these early years, they pursued an active strategy against the Japanese. Having been driven from virtually the entire Pacific west of Hawaii (including the Philippines) within a few months of Pearl Harbor, American forces began striking back and soon won two critical victories--first in the battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and then in the battle of Midway a month later. From there the United States launched a series of offensives against Japanese outposts in the Solomon Islands just north of Australia, the first in several prolonged and savage island campaigns that continued for the rest of the war.

Throughout 1942 and 1943 Roosevelt was preoccupied with the ongoing debate over how and when to launch an Allied invasion of France. The Soviet Union was now bearing the brunt of the German war effort. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin argued that Anglo-American forces must move quickly to open another front in Europe. At a meeting with Churchill in Casablanca, Morocco, in January 1943, Roosevelt tried to mollify Stalin by declaring his support for nothing less than "unconditional surrender" by the Axis. In other words, the United States and Britain would not agree to a separate peace and leave the Soviet Union to fight alone.

In November 1943 Roosevelt and Churchill traveled to Teheran for their first meeting with Stalin. By then the war in eastern Europe had turned decisively in favor of the Soviet Union, which meant that Roosevelt now had only limited leverage over Stalin. Even so, Stalin agreed to enter the Pacific war after the fighting in Europe came to an end, and Roosevelt and Churchill promised to launch the long-delayed invasion of France in the spring of 1944. The meeting produced less agreement on other matters, but the Western leaders seemed inclined toward arrangements that would allow the Soviet Union to keep the areas of Poland it had seized in 1939.

Shaping the Postwar World

Roosevelt turned his attention increasingly to the shape of the postwar world. He persuaded twenty-six nations to sign the United Nations Declaration, a statement of principles based on the Atlantic Charter. In July 1944 he convened an international monetary conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, that created the International Monetary Fund, charged with stabilizing global currencies, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to assist the shattered nations of Europe and Asia in rebuilding after the war.

At home, massive wartime spending had ended the depression and launched a period of vigorous economic growth, while a new set of war mobilization agencies--staffed, like the comparable agencies in World War I, largely by corporate executives and attorneys borrowed from their firms--channeled manpower, materials, and capital into the production necessary for the war. Roosevelt's liberal allies complained constantly, but ineffectually, about the domination of the war effort by capitalists. Roosevelt promoted no significant domestic reform legislation during the war, and in 1943 he was unable to prevent an increasingly conservative Congress from dismantling many New Deal agencies. He did, however, support an ambitious vision of a peacetime society in which the government would ensure a minimal level of comfort and security for all Americans, and he helped craft the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the "G.I. Bill of Rights," which provided generous housing, educational, and other benefits to veterans when the war ended.

Roosevelt was less receptive to the demands of the many Americans who sought to harness the war effort to great moral causes. In 1940, largely because of heavy pressure by African-American leaders, he created the Fair Employment Practices Commission, the first federal agency since Reconstruction that was actively engaged in the effort to promote racial equality. He did not, however, respond to other black demands, and the armed forces remained segregated throughout the war. The president approved a proposal from military officials on the West Coast to "intern" the thousands of resident Japanese Americans, many of them native-born citizens, despite the absence of any evidence that they were disloyal. Most of them were not released until 1944. Even more troubling to many Americans, both at the time and since, was the administration's apparent unwillingness to take effective action to save the Jews of Europe, who were being systematically exterminated by Nazi Germany. In fairness, the United States could have done little other than win the war to save most of the Jews imperiled by the Holocaust, but the government gave minimal help even to those cases in which it might have made a difference at the margins.

Successful Campaign for a Fourth Presidential Term and Victory in Europe

Roosevelt agreed without any apparent resistance to be the Democratic party's candidate for president for the fourth time in 1944. Preoccupied with the war and in increasingly frail health, he took only slight interest in the campaign. At the convention, he acquiesced, almost passively, to the demand of party leaders that he abandon his controversial vice president, [Henry Wallace](#), and run instead with the more moderate senator [Harry S. Truman](#) of Missouri. After the convention, he did virtually no campaigning until rumors of his declining health became a factor in the election. At that point he rallied for several vigorous and effective appearances. He defeated Governor [Thomas E. Dewey](#) of New York, a man he had come to despise, with 53 percent of the vote.

One of the many reasons for Roosevelt's political resilience was that the Allied war effort was by then clearly on the road to victory. On 6 June 1944 Allied forces landed on the Normandy coast and began a successful invasion of France. By August they had liberated Paris, and by mid-September they had driven the Germans almost entirely out of France. The invasion bogged down for a time later that fall, and not until early spring 1945 did the Anglo-American advance on Germany resume. Soviet forces also swept westward into central Europe and the Balkans. In the Pacific, American forces captured almost all the strategic islands east of Japan, retook the Philippines, and were closing in on Japan itself. Unknown to all but a few, the United States was by then far along in an effort Roosevelt had authorized early in the war, the Manhattan Project, which detonated the first atomic bomb two months after Roosevelt's death. There is little evidence to suggest how he would have used the new weapon had he lived.

In January 1945, with victory in Europe apparently imminent, Roosevelt traveled to Yalta for another meeting with Churchill and Stalin. Both men were shocked at the president's wasted physical appearance, a result of advanced arteriosclerosis that had been weakening him for over a year, forcing him to live much of the time as a virtual invalid. At Yalta, however, Roosevelt participated actively and capably in the negotiations. The three leaders agreed on the postwar occupation of Germany, the Soviet Union's participation in the Pacific war, and the creation of what became the United Nations. But they could reach no accord on other issues, most notably the future of Poland. Instead, they papered over their differences with a series of weak and unenforceable compromises. Roosevelt returned home still believing that he could eventually reach some accommodation with Stalin. Even though he did not realize it then, however, the outlines of the coming Cold War were already visible at Yalta.

Both because of his failing health and because of the distortions the war had caused in his family life, Roosevelt became even more isolated during the war years than he had been before. His mother died in 1941, his sons were serving overseas, and his wife traveled almost constantly. LeHand suffered a debilitating stroke in 1941 and died in 1944. The president turned for companionship to his daughter Anna, to two adoring and unmarried cousins who came to live at the White House, and to a rotating series of charming, attractive women who deferred to him in a way Eleanor had never been willing to do. He also began seeing Mercer (now Lucy Mercer Rutherford and a widow) again, nearly thirty years after the unhappy end of their World War I romance.

Early in April Roosevelt left Washington for a vacation at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia, accompanied by his cousins and several aides. On 12 April he received a visit from Rutherford, who brought with her an artist who wished to paint a portrait of the president. As he posed for the portrait while working on papers at a small table in his cabin, he suddenly looked up and complained of a "terrific headache." Moments later he collapsed. He had suffered a massive stroke, and he died several hours later.

Roosevelt's Legacy

In the half century after his death, Roosevelt's stature as one of the major figures of the twentieth century did not diminish. Even those critical of his achievements recognize their magnitude: the reshaping of American government, the transformation of the Democratic party, the redefinition of American liberalism, the leadership of the United States through the largest war in world history, and the reconstruction of America's relationship to the international order. Such achievements were not his alone, of course. But it is only necessary to look at some of those who contended with him for leadership of the United States in the 1930s, and some of those who actually assumed leadership of other major nations, to understand Roosevelt's critical importance to the great changes that America experienced during his unprecedented--and never to be repeated--twelve years as its leader.

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Online Resources

- Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Digital Archives
<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/>

Administered by the National Archives and Records Administration. Includes many digitized documents and audio-visual materials (the latter require RealPlayer; a free version is available from <http://www.real.com/>).

- Pearl Harbor Radiogram

<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/originals/fdr.html>

From the National Archives and Records Administration's American Originals Exhibition.

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