



Franklin D. Roosevelt

U.S. President (1882–1945)

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the only U.S. president to be elected four times. He led the United States through the Great Depression and World War II.

Synopsis

Born on January 30, 1882, in Hyde Park, New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt was stricken with polio in 1921. He became the 32nd U.S. president in 1933, and was the only president to be elected four times. Roosevelt led the United States through the Great Depression and World War II, and greatly expanded the powers of the federal government through a series of programs and reforms known as the New Deal. Roosevelt died in Georgia in 1945.

Early Life

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born on January 30, 1882, into a wealthy family. The Roosevelts had been prominent for several generations, having made their fortune in real estate and trade. Franklin was the only child of James Roosevelt and Sara Ann Delano Roosevelt. The family lived at Springwood, their estate in the Hudson River Valley in New York State. While growing up, Franklin Roosevelt was surrounded by privilege and a sense of self-importance. He was educated by tutors and governesses until age 14, and the entire household revolved around him, with his mother being the dominant figure in his life, even into adulthood. His upbringing was so unlike the common people who he would later champion.

In 1896, Franklin Roosevelt attended Groton School for boys, a prestigious Episcopal preparatory school in Massachusetts. The experience was a difficult one for him, as he did not fit in with the other students. Groton men excelled in athletics and Roosevelt did not. He strived to please the adults and took to heart the teachings of Groton's headmaster, Endicott Peabody, who urged students to help the less fortunate through public service.

After graduating from Groton in 1900, Franklin Roosevelt entered Harvard University, determined to make something of himself. Though only a C student, he was a member of the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity, editor of the Harvard Crimson newspaper and received his degree in only three years. However, the general consensus was that he was underwhelming and average. During his last year at Harvard, he became engaged to Eleanor Roosevelt, his fifth cousin. She was the niece of Franklin's idol, Theodore Roosevelt. They married on March 17, 1905.

Franklin studied law at Columbia University Law School and passed the bar exam in 1907, though he didn't receive a degree. For the next three years, he practiced corporate law in New York, living the typical upper-class life. But he found law practice boring and restrictive. He set his sights on greater accomplishments.

Political Beginnings

In 1910, at age 28, Roosevelt was invited to run for the New York state senate. Breaking from family tradition, he ran as a Democrat in a district that had voted Republican for the past 32 years. He campaigned hard and won the election with the help of his name and a Democratic landslide. As a state senator, Roosevelt opposed elements of the Democratic political machine in New York. This won him the ire of party leaders, but gained him national notoriety and valuable experience in political tactics and intrigue. During this time, he formed an alliance with Louis Howe, who would shape his political career for the next 25 years. Roosevelt was reelected in 1912 and served as chair of the agricultural committee, passing farm and labor bills and social welfare programs.

During the 1912 National Democratic Convention, Roosevelt supported presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson and was rewarded with an appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, the same job his idol, Theodore Roosevelt, had used to catapult himself to the presidency. Franklin Roosevelt was energetic and an efficient administrator. He specialized in business operations, working with Congress to get budgets approved and systems modernized, and he founded the U.S. Naval Reserve. But he was restless in the position as "second chair" to his boss, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, who was less enthusiastic about supporting a large and efficient naval force.

In 1914, Franklin Roosevelt, decided to run for the U.S. Senate seat for New York. The proposition was doomed from the start, as he lacked White House support. President Wilson needed the Democratic political machine to get his social reforms passed and ensure his reelection. He could not support Franklin Roosevelt, who had made too many political enemies among New York Democrats. Roosevelt was soundly defeated in the primary election and learned a valuable lesson that national stature could not defeat a well-organized local political organization.

In politics, Franklin Roosevelt was finding personal as well as professional success. He took to Washington politics and thrived on personal relationships. He was often seen at the most prominent parties and was considered by women to be a very attractive man. In 1914, he developed a relationship with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor Roosevelt's social secretary, which evolved into a love affair. In 1918, Eleanor discovered the affair and gave Franklin an ultimatum to stop seeing Lucy or she would file for divorce. He agreed, but continued to secretly see Mercer over the years.

With his political career thriving, Franklin D. Roosevelt accepted the nomination for vice president—as James M. Cox's running mate—at the 1920 Democratic Convention. The pair was soundly defeated by Republican Warren G. Harding in the general election, but the experience gave Roosevelt national exposure.

Polio Diagnosis

While vacationing at Campobello Island, New Brunswick, Canada, he was diagnosed as having contracted polio. At first, he refused to accept that he was permanently paralyzed. He tried numerous therapies and even bought the Warm Springs resort in Georgia seeking a cure.

Despite his efforts, he never regained the use of his legs. He later established a foundation at Warm Springs to help others, and instituted the March of Dimes program that eventually funded an effective polio vaccine.

For a time, Franklin Roosevelt was resigned to being a victim of polio, believing his political career to be over. But Eleanor Roosevelt and political confidante Louis Howe encouraged him to continue on. Over the next several years, Roosevelt worked to improve his physical and political image. He taught himself to walk short distances in his braces and was careful not to be seen in public using his wheelchair. He also began to repair his relationship with New York's Democratic political machine. Roosevelt appeared at the 1924 and 1928 Democratic National Conventions to nominate New York governor Al Smith for president, which increased his national exposure.

U.S. Presidency

Al Smith urged Franklin Roosevelt to run for governor of New York, in 1928. Roosevelt was narrowly elected, and the victory gave him confidence that his political star was rising. As governor, he believed in progressive government and instituted a number of new social programs. By 1930, Republicans were being blamed for the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt sensed opportunity. He began his run for the presidency, calling for government intervention in the economy to provide relief, recovery and reform. His upbeat, positive approach and personal charm helped him defeat Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover in November 1932. By the time Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, there were 13 million unemployed Americans, and hundreds of banks were closed. Roosevelt faced the greatest crisis in American history since the Civil War.

In his first 100 days, President Franklin Roosevelt proposed sweeping economic reform, calling it the "New Deal." He ordered the temporary closure on all banks to halt the run on deposits. He formed a "Brain Trust" of economic advisors who designed the alphabet agencies such as the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration) to support farm prices, the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) to employ young men, and the NRA (National Recovery Administration), which regulated wages and prices. Other agencies insured bank deposits, regulated the stock market, subsidized mortgages, and provided relief to the unemployed.

By 1936, the economy showed signs of improvement. Gross national product was up 34 percent, and unemployment had dropped from 25 percent to 14 percent. But Franklin Roosevelt faced criticism for increased government spending, unbalanced budgets, and what some perceived as moving the country toward socialism. Several New Deal acts were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. Roosevelt retaliated by proposing to "pack" the court with justices more favorable to his reforms. Many in Congress, including some Democrats, rejected the idea. By 1938, negative publicity, a continuing sluggish economy, and Republican victories in mid-term elections virtually ended Roosevelt's ability to pass more reform legislation.

Since the end of World War I, America had adopted an isolationist policy in foreign affairs. In the early 1930s, Congress passed the Neutrality Acts to prevent the United States from becoming entangled in foreign conflicts. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt stepped away from the unilateral principle of the Monroe Doctrine and established the Good Neighbor Policy with Latin America. However, as military conflicts emerged in Asia and Europe, Roosevelt sought ways to assist

China in its war with Japan and declared France and Great Britain were America's "first line of defense" against Nazi Germany.

Third Term and the U.N.

Early in 1940, Roosevelt had not publically announced that he would run for an unprecedented third term as president. But privately, with Germany's victories in Europe and Japan's growing dominance in Asia, he felt that only he had the experience and skills to lead America in such trying times. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Roosevelt swept aside all challengers and received the nomination. In November 1940, he won the presidential election against Republican Wendell Willkie.

During 1941, Franklin Roosevelt pushed to have the United States' factories become an "arsenal of democracy" for the Allies—France, Britain, and Russia. As Americans learned more about the war's atrocities, isolationist sentiment diminished. Roosevelt took advantage, standing firm against the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Bipartisan support in Congress expanded the Army and Navy and increased the flow of supplies to the Allies. Hopes of keeping the United States out of war ended with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt was a commander in chief who worked with and sometimes around his military advisors. He helped develop a strategy for defeating Germany in Europe through a series of invasions, first in North Africa in November 1942, then Sicily and Italy in 1943, followed by the D-Day invasion of Europe in 1944. At the same time, Allied forces rolled back Japan in Asia and the eastern Pacific. During this time, Roosevelt also promoted the formation of the United Nations.

Final Years

The stress of war, however, began to take its toll on Franklin Roosevelt. In March 1944, hospital tests indicated he had atherosclerosis, coronary artery disease and congestive heart failure. In spite of this, and because the country was deeply involved in war, there was no question that Roosevelt would run for another term as president. He selected Missouri Senator Harry S. Truman as his running mate, and together they defeated Republican candidate Thomas E. Dewey, carrying 36 of the 48 states.

In February 1945, Franklin Roosevelt attended the Yalta Conference with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin to discuss post-war reorganization. He then returned to the United States and the sanctuary of Warm Springs, Georgia. On the afternoon of April 12, 1945, Roosevelt suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died. At his side were two cousins, Laura Delano and Margaret Suckley, and his former mistress Lucy Mercer Rutherford (by then a widow), with whom he had maintained his relationship.

Franklin Roosevelt's sudden death shook the American public to its roots. Though many had noticed that he looked exhausted in photographs and newsreels, no one seemed prepared for his passing. He had led the United States through an economic depression and the greatest war

in human history. A whole generation of Americans had grown up knowing no other president. His social programs during the Great Depression redefined the role of government in Americans' lives. His role during World War II established the United States' leadership on the world stage. His 12 years in the White House set a precedent for the expansion of presidential power and redefined liberalism for generations to come.

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