

From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan

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FROM HARRY TRUMAN TO RONALD REAGAN

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Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON

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In the summer of 1939 I was sixteen, just graduated from a mammoth high school in the borough of Queens in New York City, and, though I had my heart set on going to Cornell University, resigned to spending the next four years riding a subway to a municipal college while living at home in a claustrophobic apartment. Tuition at Cornell was \$400 a year, a sum far beyond anything that my family, with all the goodwill in the world, could hope to provide. But early in August I returned from a brief vacation on my grandparents' farm in the Delaware Valley to find the mailbox bulging with congratulatory letters from my high school teachers. Out of one envelope fell a newspaper clipping announcing that I had won a Regents scholarship of \$100 a year for four years. Out of another tumbled a clipping saying that I was also one of six students in Queens to win a Cornell scholarship of \$200 a year for four years. Overnight I had \$300 of the money I needed. But if I did not come up with the remaining \$100, still a formidable amount, I would never get to see the campus above Cayuga's waters. So, though it was already late summer and work was hard to get, I found a job wheeling a Good Humor ice cream cart through the streets of Sunnyside.

Unhappily, a Good Humor cost a dime, twice as much as any other ice cream bar, and in this tenth year of the Great Depression, most people felt they could not afford one. Day after day I pedaled my cart from early morning until after dark, but came little nearer my goal. Often I returned with my ice cream compartment almost as full as when I had started out, and registration in Ithaca was only a few weeks away.

Then one stifling day a middle-aged man who drove a Good Humor truck went out of his way to let me know that on the farthest reach of town there was a huge and hungry crowd—because Franklin D. Roosevelt was expected to dedicate an extension of Queens Boulevard. I pedaled my bike many, many blocks, and when I got to the site I was

able to sell every ice cream bar in my cart. That day's sales gave me just enough money to pay the Cornell tuition, and on a memorable September morning I set off for Ithaca.

Even with this problem solved, and with help from my generous and overextended family, I still needed to work my way through college and I had no idea how I was going to do it. But when I arrived on campus, I was told of the opportunities offered by one of the Roosevelt agencies, the National Youth Administration, and on that first day at Cornell I was assigned to cleaning test tubes at thirty cents an hour. From that day on, the NYA sustained me throughout my years at Cornell.

I never did get to see President Roosevelt, either on that summer day at Queens Boulevard, when I was on the outer edge of a milling throng, or on any other day. But, in September 1939, like millions of other Americans who never saw him, I was powerfully aware of his influence on us; in the very month that World War II began, the New Deal and his conduct of foreign affairs were transforming our lives.

In the spring of 1980 I returned to Cornell to examine the shadow cast by FDR not on the nation but on the Democrats who followed him in the White House. I was honored to be invited to give the Becker Lectures, named after the distinguished historian Carl Becker, who could still be seen about the Cornell campus in 1939. On successive days I spoke on the meaning of Franklin D. Roosevelt for Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Over the next two years I amplified these accounts by drawing on a wealth of manuscript sources, especially those at the presidential libraries in Hyde Park, Independence, Boston, and Austin. In addition, after research trips to such archives as the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, I wrote chapters on FDR's influence on the presidents I had not discussed at Cornell, not least Ronald Reagan, who was still months away from the Oval Office when I delivered the Becker Lectures.

For most of his successors Franklin Roosevelt was a formidable presence. Like the Pelew Island god described by Sir James George Frazer, FDR became a kind of deity only a short time after his death. Though he was not the victim of an assassin, Roosevelt was often perceived as Lincoln had been—as a deity who gave his life for his people. During the post-1945 era he was even regarded, in some respects, as still the president, much as French medieval kings were thought to continue to reign, however briefly, after death. At a ceremony of homage to FDR at Itamaraty, Brazil, in May, 1945, Ambassador Adolf Berle declared:

Great men have two lives: one which occurs while they work on this earth; a second which begins at the day of their death and continues as long as

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their ideas and conceptions remain powerful. In this second life, the conceptions earlier developed exert influence on men and events for an indefinite period of time. Now, only a month after his death, we are seeing the beginning of his second, and perhaps greater, life. None of us can prophesy what its results will be; but few will deny that there is a continuing and beneficent spirit which will not cease to speak to a world in pain.¹

More than two decades later the *Time-Life* correspondent Hugh Sidey wrote of a White House gathering that drew a number of Washington dignitaries to honor FDR: "You could stand on this Tuesday afternoon in February of 1967 and look out over the faces in the East Room of the White House and suddenly understand that Franklin Roosevelt still owned Washington. His ideas prevailed. His men endured. The government that functioned now was his creation perhaps more than that of any other single man." From the White House, Sidey recorded, "you looked out down the Mall and saw the gray Federal buildings that stood there and they were monuments to that amazing man. . . . So much had happened and yet so much was the same."²

Roosevelt left his mark on his successors in a great many ways. Three of the first four presidents who came after him-Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson—were men whose careers he had advanced, and the other, Kennedy, had first gained familiarity with Washington when Roosevelt named his father to high office. No one before Roosevelt had so dominated the political culture of his day, if for no better reason than that no one before him had been in the White House for so long, and in the process he created the expectation that the chief executive would be a primary shaper of his times—an expectation with which each of his successors has had to deal. He bequeathed them not only the legacy of the New Deal but that of a global foreign policy, as well as all those instrumentalities that emerged during the years when he was Dr. Win the War. The age of Roosevelt set the agenda for much of the postwar era, whose debates centered on such questions as whether price controls should be maintained, how far social security was to be extended, to what level the minimum wage ought to be raised, and how large the domain of public power should be. Long after FDR was gone, New Deal agencies such as the TVA and the SEC continued to administer statutes drafted in his first term, and the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society all drew heavily on the Roosevelt experiments.

"All contemporary national politics descend from Franklin Roosevelt," Theodore White has observed. The first Democrat in eighty years to enter the White House with a popular majority, Roosevelt helped bring about a fundamental realignment of American politics. He created an "FDR coalition" that combined traditional Democratic sources

of strength in the Solid South with lower-income ethnic groups in the great cities and appealed, as one survey found, to those "cosmopolitans and statists" who approved of the twentieth-century trend toward modernization. In no election after FDR's final victory in 1944 did the South remain solid, and the alliance became frayed in several other ways, too. Nonetheless, as late as 1980 an observer noted that two shrewd election experts had "likened the demise of the FDR coalition to the death of theater in New York City. There have been decades of rhetoric about its death, but if you venture into Manhattan's theater district the lights are bright. So it is with the FDR coalition. For 47 months we hear about how it is breaking up, yet, on Election Day, presto, there it is again."

Roosevelt's success as the architect of a new political era encouraged subsequent Democratic presidents, and even some Republicans, to identify with FDR. They fought off usurpers who claimed that they were the true heirs to the Roosevelt legacy, campaigned in the image of FDR, and year in, year out recited Roosevelt's sayings. They appointed to posts in their administrations men and women who had served under FDR, and made use of Roosevelt's approaches in coping with the problems of their own day.

They did all of these things not only out of conviction but also out of necessity, for they had a vivid sensation of being watched. They knew that their performances were monitored for any sign of deviation from the true faith by a corps of inspectors—by Mrs. Roosevelt, who sometimes behaved like a Chinese empress dowager; by the late president's sons, who had their own notions of how far the FDR legacy might take them; by all those bright young men of the 1930s who still had advice to give in the 1980s; and by the large body of liberal activists for whom FDR was an idol.

These critics asked not whether Roosevelt's successors dealt adequately with contemporary problems but whether they equaled FDR. They were required not merely to quote Roosevelt and replicate his policies but to do so with conspicuous ardor, not only to put through a program of similar magnitude but to carry it off with the same flair. Each was expected to have a rubric—to be known by three initials like FDR, to be the progenitor of a catch phrase like New Deal. When they ran for office, it was asked why they fell so far short of the Great Campaigner, and at the end of each successor's first hundred days, observers compared the score with FDR's. Even their wives had to bear the onus of contrast to Eleanor Roosevelt.

To be sure, much that American presidents did in the ensuing decades owed little or nothing to FDR. A Kennedy or a Johnson often

responded to a pressing problem with no thought of Roosevelt. Each relied upon his own instincts or was driven by forces that emerged well after Roosevelt's death. Nor was FDR the only predecessor who was recalled. We need not take literally Lyndon Johnson's claim that he "walked with Lincoln every night" to recognize that there were other chief executives whose influence was pertinent. Not even direct citations of Roosevelt offer incontrovertible proof of his influence, for his successors sometimes cited him only ritualistically and used him selectively for their own purposes.

Moreover, the postwar presidents had to bear in mind that the public was deeply divided about Franklin Roosevelt. If there was a large cult of FDR-worshipers, millions of other Americans loathed him—for upsetting class relations, for showing disrespect toward venerated institutions such as the Supreme Court, for creating the leviathan state, and for leading the nation into a war that cost the lives of thousands of young men. Many others were not quite sure what they thought about him—he seemed to have brought both good and ill—and hence he was an uncertain model for his successors to emulate. A commission set up in 1946 to approve a memorial to Roosevelt encountered so many difficulties that by the summer of 1981 it had become the longest-running single-purpose commission in U.S. history.⁵

Still, no one doubted that FDR was a protean figure. From 1945 to the present, historians have unfailingly ranked him with Washington and Lincoln, and the men who succeeded him found one question inescapable: How did they measure up to FDR? They were expected to tread in the rows that he had furrowed, even, like those who sought a sign of grace from a Chinese emperor, to exhibit the quality of *Isiao*, of filial piety. Little wonder that they sometimes felt much like the Athenian who voted to exile Aristides because he had wearied of hearing him called "the Just."

I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge the help I have received in writing this book. David Burner and Thomas West, who devoted an extraordinary amount of energy to reading the manuscript, made many trenchant suggestions. Richard Polenberg, a most congenial host on my visit to Ithaca, submitted astute reports on each chapter to Cornell University Press. I have benefited from the counsel of scholars who read the entire manuscript—Otis L. Graham, Jr., Dewey W. Grantham, Thomas Guinsburg, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.—as well as from that of Michael Beschloss, William H. Chafe, Robert Dallek, Robert Divine, and Richard Kirkendall, who read selected chapters.

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Lawrence Malley and the staff of Cornell University Press have shown an inspiriting faith in this book, and the staffs of a great many manuscript archives, notably those at the presidential libraries, have been most resourceful in responding to my inquiries.

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Harry Truman

On the afternoon of April 12, 1945, Vice-President Harry Truman was presiding in the Senate over a long, dull debate on a water treaty. When the session ended, about five o'clock, he made his way over to the office of Speaker Sam Rayburn to join his friends for their afternoon round of bourbon and tap water. No sooner had his drink been poured than the vice-president was told to call the White House. The president's press secretary, Stephen Early, wanted him to come down right away, quickly and quietly. Truman raced through an underground tunnel to the Capitol, ordered a car, and, unescorted, rode down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. By the time he got there, it was nearly twilight. Upon entering the executive mansion, he took an elevator to the second floor, walked down a corridor, and entered a study. There Mrs. Roosevelt came up to him, put her arm on his shoulder, and said softly, "Harry, the President is dead." Franklin D. Roosevelt had died that afternoon in Warm Springs, Georgia. After a moment of shock, Truman recovered himself to ask Mrs. Roosevelt: "Is there anything I can do for you?" She replied: "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."1

That was an odd remark to make to someone who had just ascended to the highest office in the land, but Truman grasped immediately that he was indeed "in trouble," for Roosevelt had so embodied everyone's notion of who "the president" was that it seemed incomprehensible that anyone else could be president of the United States. A member of the White House staff later said of April 12: "It was all so sudden, I had completely forgotten about Mr. Truman. Stunned, I realized that I simply couldn't comprehend the Presidency as something separate from

Roosevelt. The Presidency, the White House, the war, our lives—they were all Roosevelt." One journalist wrote of Truman, "For a time he walked, as completely as did the smallest laborer who had been a 'Roosevelt man,' in the long shadow of the dead President."²

Many Americans could not remember when there had been anyone in the White House but Roosevelt, and they had assumed without thinking about it that he would be there forever. During the 1944 campaign, the *Chicago Daily News* wrote of Roosevelt, "If he was good enough for my pappy and my grandpappy, he is good enough for me." According to one story that year, a man said to a loyal Democrat who had just become father of a baby boy, "Maybe he'll grow up to be president." "Why?" the man snarled. "What's the matter with Roosevelt?"³

So hard was it to visualize Truman in Roosevelt's chair that some could not even say his title when speaking to him. One Washington correspondent has recalled that "it was difficult, unnatural to address this man as 'Mr. President,' so we skirted around the edges by prefacing our questions with the word 'Sir' or by not using any form of address at all." On the night of April 12 Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard wrote in his diary: "I have resolved that I would be very careful when I addressed the new President to call him 'Mr. President' . . . but much to my surprise and somewhat to my disgust I shook hands with him and said, 'Harry, we want to help you all we can.'"

The secretaries who had served under FDR found it especially hard to accept the transition. Lela Stiles was shocked at what seemed indecent haste in swearing in the new president, and Grace Tully could not understand what Harry Truman was doing walking into the Pullman car that had been built for Roosevelt. Lela Stiles has written: "Roosevelt had been regarded by millions as indispensable to winning the war. Now he was gone, and you could hear people on the street murmuring to themselves, 'President Truman, President Truman.' They were trying to get used to the name." When at noon on the first morning of Truman's tenure a messenger cried, "The President is coming out," one secretary was stunned for a moment, then burst into tears and ran into her office. Sobbing, she said, "I thought he meant the President—I mean President Roosevelt."

At Roosevelt's funeral, the old New Dealers regarded Truman as a sorry substitute. Rexford Tugwell, a charter member of the 1932 Brain Trust, had some sympathy for the new president, but he noted that when Truman affirmed that he would be wholly devoted to carrying out FDR's policies, "the dry Missouri voice, it was sad to say, was a disastrous declination from the Roosevelt oratory which had familiarized Americans with a richness they had come to take for granted and

now realized had been a golden gift they had not sufficiently valued." Years later Truman recalled that on the funeral train to Hyde Park, "every place we stopped there'd be a crowd just as if . . . well, you'd think the world had come to an end, and I thought so, too." He added, "On the way back I heard old Harold Ickes carrying on about how the country would go to hell now that Roosevelt was gone. He said there wasn't any leadership anymore, something like that. He went on and on. He was a man who carried on a good deal." "Did he know that you could hear him?" Truman was asked. "I think yes, I think that is what he had in mind, that I'd hear him."

When Roosevelt's body arrived back in Washington on the funeral train from Warm Springs, Truman once more took second rank. As the procession moved through the crowded streets of Washington from Union Station to the White House, the eyes of the thousands of onlookers massed on the sidewalks focused not on the new president but on the caisson. Truman later wrote:

I shall never forget the sight of so many grief-stricken people. Some wept without restraint. Some shed their tears in silence. Others were grim and stoic, but all were genuine in their mourning. It was impossible now to tell who had been for him and who had not. Throughout that enormous throng all of them were expressing their sense of loss and sadness at the passing of a remarkable man. . . . When the cortege passed along Constitution Avenue, most of those who lined the streets were in tears.⁷

At the White House, two hundred FDR loyalists were there to pay Roosevelt homage, Harry Hopkins, his face a "dreadful cold white," looking as though he no longer had anything to live for. When President Truman entered the room, nobody rose.8

Often Truman did not receive even the minimal respect due a man who held the same office that Roosevelt had adorned. On his second morning in the White House, he phoned Jesse Jones, administrator of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, to report that the president had appointed a St. Louis man to be a federal loan official. "Did he make the appointment before he died?" Jones asked. "No," Truman replied. "He made it just now."

So much did Roosevelt dominate the Truman years that one of FDR's former advisors put forth the novel claim that Roosevelt continued to be president of the United States beyond the grave. On the first anniversary of FDR's death, Samuel Rosenman wrote:

One year later, it is well to recall a fact too easily overlooked. That fact is that, although Franklin D. Roosevelt died before the fighting in World War II had ended, he left a mark upon the post-war world which has not

been erased, and never will be. He was not only a pre-war President, and later a war President; he was also, in a very real and practical sense, a post-war President.

No one believed that more strongly than Harry Truman. As one commentator has noted, "He did not visualize himself in the robes of greatness and he approached power with a disbelieving look." Five months after he took office, he was still writing Mrs. Roosevelt, "I never think of anyone as the President, but Mr. Roosevelt." 10

п

From the very beginning, FDR and his circle had been a problem for Truman. He had won the Democratic nomination for U.S. senator in 1934 after a campaign in which he said he was "heart and soul for Roosevelt," and when he came to Washington he voted as the White House wished on every measure. Yet Truman rarely got to see the president. It took five months even to schedule an appointment with Roosevelt, and when he did get to talk to him, the meeting lasted only seven minutes. Many in the capital perceived Truman as merely a non-descript minion of the Kansas City boss, Tom Pendergast—in the words of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "Ambassador in Washington of the defunct principality of Pendergastia." 11

Some of the disdain for Truman derived from the fact that, in contrast to the eloquent FDR, he made so little mark as a public speaker that he was "definitely classed among the Senatorial Mutes." In the years when FDR was winning the admiration of millions, Truman rarely rose from his seat. A newsreel crew dispatched to record one of his speeches was so exasperated by the number of retakes required that the cameraman yelled at him, "Senator, speak up!" As they left, Truman heard the sound man say in disgust, "He ain't no Roosevelt." 12

Truman got so little respect from Roosevelt and the White House staff that they made him angry. When the administration prevailed upon Pendergast to bring pressure on him to switch his vote in a Senate leadership contest, Truman was irate. "I'm tired of being pushed around and having the President treat me like an office boy," he told a newspaperman on Capitol Hill. "They better learn downtown right now that no Tom Pendergast or anybody else tells Senator Truman how to vote." 13

The White House paid no attention. The very next year, when Truman's vote was needed to break a tie, a state highway trooper overtook

his car while he was driving to Missouri and fetched him back to Washington. Hopping mad, Truman told FDR's press secretary, "This is the third time I've come back here to bail you guys out on a vote. You tell that to the President!" No matter. The administration continued to ignore Truman on federal patronage and funneled it instead through the senior senator from Missouri, even though Bennett Champ Clark was hostile to Roosevelt's aims. Exasperated, Truman announced that he opposed a third term for the president. 14

In 1940 the relationship between Truman and Roosevelt sank still further. As Truman's term was expiring, the governor of Missouri, Lloyd Stark, came to the senator to assure him that he had no political aspirations. The moment Stark walked out of his office, Truman said to an aide, "That son of a bitch is gonna run against me." Stark had made himself welcome in Roosevelt circles by being a vocal advocate of a third term for FDR, and the president, to pave the way for Stark's senatorial ambitions, tried to get Truman to step aside by offering him an appointment to the Interstate Commerce Commission. "Tell them to go to hell," Truman instructed an aide. Undeterred by FDR's coolness, Truman announced his candidacy with the comment "Just the other day I spent a very pleasant hour with the President at the White House, discussing various bills pending in Congress, and he expressed the hope that I would come back to the Senate next year." Despite the handicap of Roosevelt's hands-off posture, Truman survived the primary contest and went on to gain reelection in November to another six-vear term. 15

During World War II Truman and Roosevelt continued to have difficulties. No longer an obscure backbencher, Truman did not hesitate to scold the chief executive: "Mr. President, the White House and Capitol are not connected by a one-way street." Roosevelt, for his part, was infuriated by Truman's blunder in carelessly approving the draft of a ghostwritten article excoriating the administration for inefficiency. Months went by after "We Can Lose the War in Washington" appeared before the president would agree to a reconciliation. ¹⁶

On balance, however, World War II proved to be the making of Truman as a public figure and did much to bring him closer to Roosevelt. As chairman of the Senate Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, Truman took pains to avoid interfering with the president's conduct of the war as the Joint Committee of Fifteen had intruded on Lincoln during the Civil War. Afterward, he reflected, "I am happy to say that so far as I know our committee did not make any of those mistakes. We were never an embarrassment to Roosevelt, not at any time." 17

Truman's constructive role in World War II led to his choice as FDR's running mate in 1944, though that decision could hardly have been made more grudgingly or inconsiderately. Roosevelt said that if he were a delegate, he would vote not for Truman but for Vice-President Henry Wallace (though he did nothing further to promote Wallace's chances), and even when he agreed that Truman would be acceptable, he indicated that he preferred Justice William O. Douglas. The president never extended Truman the courtesy of a personal invitation to join the ticket. Informed that Truman was balking at running for vice-president, he replied, in a telephone conversation designed for Truman to overhear, "Well, you tell him if he wants to break up the Democratic party in the middle of a war, that's his responsibility," then slammed down the phone. Shaken by this unceremonious invitation, Truman, though recognizing that he had no option save to say yes, asked, "Why the hell didn't he tell me in the first place?" 18

In the eighty-two days he was vice-president, Truman had so little contact with Roosevelt that he cannot be said to have received any tutelage at all. "I don't think I saw him but twice as Vice President except at Cabinet meetings," Truman subsequently acknowledged. Not once did he see the inside of the map room at the White House, where battle strategy was reviewed, and Roosevelt failed to keep him abreast of diplomatic developments for he was viewed as altogether too insignificant a subaltern to be trusted with secrets of state. (Roosevelt appears never to have entertained seriously the possibility that he would die.) When Roosevelt went to Yalta, he informed the vice-president that he could send dispatches via the map room only if they were "absolutely urgent"; and if Truman's messages ran too long, the map room officer would have the discretion to refuse to radio them. A week before FDR's death, the vice-president was reduced to writing, "Hate to bother you but I have a suggestion to make." As Truman later told his daughter, "He never did talk to me confidentially about the war, or about foreign affairs or what he had in mind for the peace after the war." Incredibly, Truman never even met the secretary of state, Edward R. Stettinius, Ir. 19

Truman sometimes denied that Roosevelt had not taken him into his fold (though he admitted as much to his daughter), either because it was too humiliating or because he wanted so desperately to be thought of as FDR's heir. After a talk with Truman in August 1945, Rex Tugwell recorded:

He embarrassed me a little by suggesting that perhaps he felt less at home in the White House than I. My familiarity with the White House, I told