



# FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

ROY JENKINS

Bestselling author of *Churchill*

Foreword by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr

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ROOSEVELT**

FOREWORD BY  
ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR

Completed with the Assistance of Richard E. Neustadt



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# FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

ROY JENKINS was the author of twenty-one books, including the bestselling *Churchill*, which was the British Book Awards Biography of the Year 2003, and *Gladstone*, which won the Whitbread Prize for Biography. Active in British politics for over half a century, he entered the House the Commons as a Labour member in 1948 and subsequently served as Minister for Aviation, Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. From 1977 to 1981 he was President of the European Commission. In 1987 he became Chancellor of Oxford University and took his seat in the House of Lords as Lord Jenkins of Hillhead. He also served as President of the Royal Society of Literature. He died in January 2003.

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR is the pre-eminent historian of American politics. He is the author of sixteen books and has twice won the Pulitzer Prize. He is also the winner of the National Book Award. In 1998 he was awarded the prestigious National Humanities Medal. He lives in New York City.

ALSO BY ROY JENKINS

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*Mr. Balfour's Poodle*

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*The Chancellors*

*Twelve Cities*

*Churchill*

## F o r e w o r d

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The president is the central player in the American political order. That would seem to contradict the intentions of the Founding Fathers. Remembering the horrid example of the British monarchy, they invented a separation of powers in order, as Justice Brandeis later put it, “to preclude the exercise of arbitrary power.” Accordingly, they divided the government into three allegedly equal and coordinate branches—the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary.

But a system based on the tripartite separation of powers has an inherent tendency toward inertia and stalemate. One of the three branches must take the initiative if the system is to move. The executive branch alone is structurally capable of taking that initiative. The Founders must have sensed this when they accepted Alexander Hamilton’s proposition in the Seventieth Federalist that “energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government.” They thus envisaged a strong president—but within an equally strong system of constitutional accountability. (The term *imperial presidency* arose in the 1970s to describe the situation when

the balance between power and accountability is upset in favor of the executive.)

The American system of self-government thus comes to focus in the presidency—"the vital place of action in the system," as Woodrow Wilson put it. Henry Adams, himself the great-grandson and grandson of presidents as well as the most brilliant of American historians, said that the American president "resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek." The men in the White House (thus far only men, alas) in steering their chosen courses have shaped our destiny as a nation.

Biography offers an easy education in American history, rendering the past more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves. Biography reminds us that presidents are not supermen. They are human beings too, worrying about decisions, attending to wives and children, juggling balls in the air, and putting on their pants one leg at a time. Indeed, as Emerson contended, "There is properly no history; only biography."

Presidents serve us as inspirations, and they also serve us as warnings. They provide bad examples as well as good. The nation, the Supreme Court has said, has "no right to expect that it will always have wise and humane rulers, sincerely attached to the principles of the Constitution. Wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law, may fill the place once occupied by Washington and Lincoln."

The men in the White House express the ideals and the values, the frailties and the flaws of the voters who send them there. It is altogether natural that we should want to know more about the virtues and the vices of the fellows we have elected to govern us. As we know more about them, we will

know more about ourselves. The French political philosopher Joseph de Maistre said, "Every nation has the government it deserves."

At the start of the twenty-first century, forty-two men have made it to the oval office. (George W. Bush is counted our forty-third president because Grover Cleveland, who served nonconsecutive terms, is counted twice.) Of the parade of presidents, a dozen or so lead the polls periodically conducted by historians and political scientists. What makes a great president?

Great presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America. Their passion, as they grasp the helm, is to set the ship of state on the right course toward the port they seek. Great presidents also have a deep psychic connection with the needs, anxieties, dreams of people. "I do not believe," said Wilson, "that any man can lead who does not act . . . under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads—a sympathy which is insight—an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect."

"All of our great presidents," said Franklin D. Roosevelt, "were leaders of thought at a time when certain ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified." So Washington incarnated the idea of federal union, Jefferson and Jackson the idea of democracy, Lincoln union and freedom, Cleveland rugged honesty. Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, said FDR, were both "moral leaders, each in his own way and his own time, who used the presidency as a pulpit."

To succeed, presidents must not only have a port to seek but they must convince Congress and the electorate that it is a port worth seeking. Politics in a democracy is ultimately an educational process, an adventure in persuasion and consent. Every president stands in Theodore Roosevelt's bully pulpit.



The greatest presidents in the scholars' rankings, Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, were leaders who confronted and overcame the republic's greatest crises. Crisis widens presidential opportunities for bold and imaginative action. But it does not guarantee presidential greatness. The crisis of secession did not spur Buchanan or the crisis of depression spur Hoover to creative leadership. Their inadequacies in the face of crisis allowed Lincoln and the second Roosevelt to show the difference individuals make to history. Still, even in the absence of first-order crisis, forceful and persuasive presidents—Jefferson, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan—are able to impose their own priorities on the country.

The diverse drama of the presidency offers a fascinating set of tales. Biographies of American presidents constitute a chronicle of wisdom and folly, nobility and pettiness, courage and cunning, forthrightness and deceit, quarrel and consensus. The turmoil perennially swirling around the White House illuminates the heart of the American democracy. But Truman's famous sign – "The buck stops here" – tells only half the story. Citizens cannot escape the ultimate responsibility. It is in the voting booth, not on the presidential desk, that the buck stops.

—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

## A N O T E o n t h e T e x t

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Shortly before completing the final text of this book, Roy Jenkins suffered a sudden, unexpected fatal heart attack. The space break on page 155 indicates the last words he wrote. At the request of his widow, Dame Jennifer Jenkins, this chapter has been completed by their friend Richard E. Neustadt of Harvard University, with whom Lord Jenkins had intended to discuss it.

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## Roosevelt Cousins

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the thirty-second president of the United States, and the only one to be elected more than twice. In any rating of presidents there can be no more than three of his predecessors who could be placed in contention with him, and of his successors there are so far none. Although of a provenance grander in the social scale than any of the others except perhaps for George Washington and his own kinsman Theodore Roosevelt, he did not coast to the White House, and soon after he got there aroused unprecedented upper-class hostility. Known as Feather Duster by some of his early contemporaries, he was originally regarded as a lightweight, and his life contained several setbacks and one apparent catastrophe.

He was more tested in peace and war than any president other than Lincoln. Although often seen as a patrician among professional politicians, he was perhaps the most skilled politician of the lot. He was even more than that: he was a blazer of trails. He aroused great loyalty and he dazzled those around him with inspiring personal charm. Yet by the end of his not very long life several of those who had most helped his rise

had moved not only to detachment but to full opposition. He was therefore a man as full of ambiguity as he was of power and interest

He was procean, and hence very difficult to get hold of. He was a hero who had many unheroic characteristics. He was almost the opposite of the tribute that his companion in arms Winston Churchill paid to his own great friend Lord Birkenhead. "In any affair, public or personal," Churchill wrote, "if he was with you on the Monday, you would find him the same on the Wednesday; and on the Friday, when things looked blue, he would still be marching forwards with strong reinforcements." If Roosevelt was pressing an associate to undertake some controversial assignment on a Monday, it was only too likely that by the Wednesday he would have decided to split the job, or to give it to somebody else instead, and that by the Friday, if things looked blue, he would have moved toward abandoning the project altogether, or at any rate for the time being. Yet he was a man of massive achievement, whom, on balance, it is difficult not greatly to admire.

Equally paradoxically, while he was thought of as a leader with a program—the New Deal has remained resonant in history for over seventy years—he was much more of an improviser than an ideologue. He nudged his way forward. If something did not work, he was always willing to try something else. After three election victories and nearly nine highly controversial years in the White House, he became engaged in the winning of the biggest war in American history, although it is arguable that Lincoln's experience was still more testing because it came nearer to defeat. But what is indisputable is that 1941–45 saw an incomparable mobilization of American

effort, industrial and military. In Europe by 1945, the U.S. Army dwarfed the British by three to one, and in the Pacific the preponderance was many times greater. But, above all, it was the massive outpouring of American industrial strength, converted to guns and tanks, aircraft and ships, which became the eighth wonder of the world, and after the relatively short period of three and a half years made victory inevitable over the formidable military machines of Germany and Japan. Roosevelt, who had been so excoriated by business leaders for much of his first and second terms, was able in his third term to preside over this spectacular achievement, even if under a good deal of government direction, of the capitalist-controlled American industrial machine.

Another of Roosevelt's paradoxes was that, although a New Yorker of Dutch family origin and a Hudson Valley squire—in other words, a product not of the heartland but of the extreme eastern edge and most Europe-oriented part of America—he was peculiarly successful at transcending geography and uniting the continent. His strongest support was never on the eastern seaboard. In his landslide victory of 1936, for instance, the only two states that stood against the Republican debacle were Vermont and Maine. And in 1944, which was the last contest and the hardest fought, it was the late-declaring western states that contradicted the equivocation of the early eastern results.

Roosevelt was also an outstanding example of a leader who, although not in any full sense an intellectual (he was a book collector rather than a book reader, and his Harvard grades were of a mediocrity that suggest that today he might have had difficulty in gaining entry to that august institution), had an unusual capacity to inspire the intellectual classes. So did

John F. Kennedy, and so, too, did FDR's family predecessor in the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt. But TR, bizarre mixture of frenetic cowboy and New York grandee though he was, had much greater historical knowledge and a higher capacity for literary composition than anything Franklin Roosevelt ever exhibited. Yet any serious assessment would put the President Roosevelt of 1933–45 substantially higher than the President Roosevelt of 1901–1909. They both had long enough presidencies (FDR's of unprecedented length) to qualify for a gold medal. Franklin Roosevelt effortlessly achieves it, but Theodore Roosevelt has to remain content with a silver or perhaps even a bronze.

It is impossible to understand Franklin Roosevelt (difficult enough in any case) without appreciating the influence that his remote cousin had upon the first thirty-eight years of his life. Although their degree of consanguinity (they were fifth cousins) was far less than that of the two Adamsses, the two Harrisons, or the two Bushes, the resonance of the Roosevelt name in American history is not only greater than that of the other pairs but is also a joint legacy of both its presidential bearers. Both Theodore and Franklin were eighth-generation Americans, being equally descended from Claes Martenszen van Rosenvelt, who had arrived in New Amsterdam from Haarlem in Holland about twenty years before the change of name to New York in 1664. The two presidents were equally descended from his son Nicholas, American born in 1658. Thereafter the two families split, the elder of Nicholas's two sons founding what became known as the Oyster Bay (Long Island) branch of the family, into which, almost two hundred years later, Theodore was to be born, and the younger producing the Hyde Park (Hudson Valley) branch, which added Franklin twenty-

three years after that. The position was complicated by Franklin marrying in 1905 a daughter of the (dead) younger brother of Theodore, who was then in the White House but who nonetheless came to New York and gave a presidential blessing to the wedding. What is indisputable is that both Roosevelt presidents came of impeccable New York stock, with many generations of prosperity behind them. Insofar as there is an American aristocracy (and a very powerful case can be made for its existence) both Roosevelts clearly belonged to it. Indeed the middle stretch of the Hudson Valley, particularly the eastern bank, from just south of Albany through Tivoli, Hyde Park, Poughkeepsie, and Garrison to Peekskill, was laid out in a series of grand squirearchical estates unmatched by any concentration in England or France. They followed one another along the river like fine pearls in a necklace. They made the properties in the so-called dukeries of northwest Nottinghamshire look sporadic. And there the riparian squires lived a pattern of life that was not ostentatious but determinedly gentlemanly.

James Roosevelt (FDR's father) was well described as

a tall man with mutton chops whiskers who was rarely without a riding crop. He bred trotters and built a famous herd of Alderneys that he crossed with Jerseys and Guernseys. He took the cure annually at a German spa, hunted in Pau, shot grouse in Scotland, and as a patriarch was amongst those who decided who belonged to New York society. While declining to take part in politics as not quite gentlemanly, he fulfilled a squire's obligation to the Volunteer Fire Company, was warden and vestryman of the church, and served as town supervisor.



And as president of a small railroad company he was entitled to take his private railroad car . . . to any part of the country.

He and those like him were in New York City for the relatively short late fall season, but in general they preferred to spend most of the year in their river residences, perhaps going to the city a day or so a week in order to look after their substantial inherited portfolios, but not to strive too officiously to add to them.

The Oyster Bay Roosevelts were Long Island Sound rather than Hudson River grandees, but they added to the vast cousinage, which was a very self-conscious link not only between the two Roosevelt branches, but also with many of the other old New York families. They used the terms "Cousin X" and "Cousin Y" in a way that similar English families, Cavendishes and Spencers, Cecils and Stanleys, would not have thought of doing. When the very unpretentious Eleanor Roosevelt became engaged to FDR in 1903 and had to write to her formidable mother-in-law-to-be, Sara Roosevelt, she always improbably addressed her as "Cousin Sally." So rampant indeed was the practice that one is reminded of the joke about the Armenian family which claimed to be so old that they always spoke of the Virgin as "Cousin Mary."

Somewhere along the way the two branches of the family had become separated in their politics. The Oyster Bay branch had been Republicans at least since the Civil War, even though they had been true to the New York attitude of leaving perfervid involvement in that conflict to Boston and Philadelphia. The father of TR had bought himself a substitute rather than participate in the Union army—which may be thought a pro-