



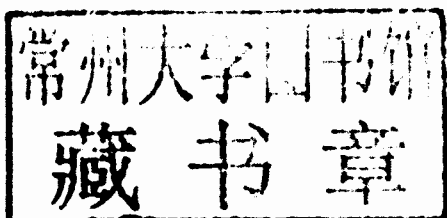
ROOSEVELT'S  
NAVY

THE EDUCATION OF A WARRIOR PRESIDENT, 1882-1920

James Tertius de Kay

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THE EDUCATION OF A WARRIOR PRESIDENT,  
1882-1920



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ROOSEVELT'S NAVY

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# ROOSEVELT'S NAVY

*For*  
*Al Zuckerman*  
*who makes things happen*

## PROLOGUE

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**T**he call came in from Paris shortly before three in the morning on September 1, 1939. Despite the early hour, the White House duty officer, following instructions, routed it directly through to the president's bedroom. Franklin Roosevelt, awakened from a fitful sleep, reached for the bedside phone with a sense of foreboding.

The caller was William Bullitt, his ambassador in France, relaying a grim but long-expected message from the American embassy in Warsaw: Hitler had invaded Poland. If Britain and France fulfilled their pledges to Poland—and Roosevelt was sure they would—World War II had just begun.

Roosevelt knew it was likely to be a long and particularly brutal war. In the coming years millions of innocent people would die before their time, killed in ugly, sickening ways. Millions more would be maimed and crippled and otherwise have their lives destroyed.

"It's come at last," he said resignedly. "God help us all."

Ever since taking office in 1933, Roosevelt had watched with increasing frustration and despair as the leaders of the European democracies, anxious to avert another war so soon after their countries had been devastated by the horrors of 1914–1918, humiliated themselves in their efforts to accommodate Hitler, caving in to his every threat, emboldening him to constantly raise his demands.

Year after year, as another war grew increasingly likely, isolationists in Congress and elsewhere did everything in their power to keep America out of it. Their arguments were cogent, and to many Americans, persuasive. The United States had sacrificed its blood and treasure to save Europe in 1917, they argued, and had received nothing in return. Now the Europeans were up to their old tricks again. Why should America help prop up countries that couldn't manage their own survival?

But Roosevelt was convinced the isolationists were shortsighted. All his life, he had been able to see the future more clearly than most, and what he saw convinced him that World War II posed a far greater threat to the United States than World War I had. If Hitler managed to subdue the European powers, his Japanese allies on the other side of the globe would gobble up Europe's undefended colonial empires and incorporate them into their "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." America would be left to stand alone, surrounded by a very powerful and hostile world.

One way or another, Americans would be drawn into the coming war. Roosevelt was sure of that. And it was up to him to lead them in that war. He was sure of that, too. He was the right man for the job. He had the training. He had the experience. Circumstances had made the President of the United States the most powerful man on the planet and because Roosevelt had that streak of arrogance that every competent leader must have, he was convinced that he knew best how to wield that power. He knew how to mobilize the nation, and he knew how to fight wars.

For months now, he had wondered if he should break with tradition and run for an unprecedented third term. Now the late-night telephone call gave him the answer. He would run. And he would win. And then he would win the war. It seemed he had been preparing his whole life for this challenge.

After a few last words with William Bullitt in Paris, the president hung up and put in calls to his secretary of state, then his secretary of war and a few other subordinates, to tell them the news. Then he replaced the phone in its cradle and picked up a pencil and wrote on a pad that he kept at bedside:

*The President received  
word at 2:50 A.M. by telephone from  
Ambas. Biddle through  
Ambas. Bullitt that  
Germany has invaded  
Poland and that their  
cities are being bombed.  
The Pres. directed that  
all Navy ships and army  
commands be notified by radio at  
once.*

*In bed  
3:05 A.M.  
Sept. 1 39*

He initialed the note, then turned out the light and went back to sleep.

The hastily scribbled note has been carefully preserved, and today it holds a place of honor in the collection of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. It is an interesting note, simultaneously self-revealing and detached. He refers to himself—twice—as “The President,” as if he were making reference to some



distant historical figure. It is a curious use of the third person for a master politician whose famous Fireside Chats relied so heavily on his skillful use of the first person singular.

Just as interestingly, he capitalizes the word “Navy,” but not “army.”

## CHAPTER ONE

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A boy sits alone, quietly reading a book. Elsewhere in the house, the familiar sounds of servants going about their daily chores are punctuated now and then by the calm, authoritative voice of his mother or father supervising their activities. But the boy is oblivious to everything except the book in his hands.

The time is somewhere in the early 1890s, and the boy is Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

He is about ten or eleven years old, and the book he is reading represents something of a challenge. It is filled with unfamiliar technical terms, complicated charts, and curious diagrams; but because it is also filled with the clash of combat and the smell of gunpowder, and is crowded with thrilling accounts of derring-do in the age of fighting sail, the boy is enraptured and reads with the focused intensity of youth, totally lost in its pages.

He is sitting in the library of Springwood, his family's country home in the village of Hyde Park, overlooking the Hudson River about seventy miles north of New York City. We cannot be precisely sure

when he first read the book he is holding, but we know he read it at an early age—certainly before his teens—and we know that it was to have a powerful influence upon him throughout his life. It is almost certainly the single most important book he will ever read.

The book that has so captured his attention is *The Naval War of 1812*. From early childhood, Franklin has been fascinated with the sea and things maritime. He is an avid sailor, and under his father's watchful tutelage he has learned his seamanship in knockabouts and ice boats and other small craft, and has served as crew on his father's 51-foot sailing yacht *Half Moon*, during summers on Campobello Island in the Bay of Fundy, where the family keeps a cottage.

But it is not the subject matter that has drawn him to *The Naval War of 1812* so much as it is the fact that the book is written by his distant cousin Theodore Roosevelt, of the Oyster Bay branch of the family. Young Franklin knows and greatly admires his ebullient, fun-loving 35-year-old Cousin Ted, who enjoys inventing strenuous games for children, and who, after a day of running and shouting, likes nothing better than to gather everyone around the fire and tell them ripping tales of his adventures as a cowboy in the Dakota Territory. At this point in his life, Theodore has already made a considerable name for himself as a writer but has not yet progressed as far as he would like in his other chosen interest, politics. At the moment, he is still a relatively obscure Washington functionary in the Civil Service Commission. World fame still lies in the future. But to those who already know him, his dynamism and boisterous energy already define his character. Throughout his life, Franklin will habitually refer to his fifth cousin Theodore with genuine awe as “the most wonderful man I ever knew.”

*The Naval War of 1812* is filled with Theodore's infectious patriotism and his delight in the exploits of the gallant and glamorous commodores who led America's early Navy—Stephen Decatur, Oliver Hazard Perry, David Porter and the rest. But Theodore Roosevelt has not limited his narrative to heroes alone. Woven into

his celebration of their adventures are broader points on the strategic value of navies in general, and of the unique role they play in shaping and carrying out national policy. He explains how warships can reach across the globe to enforce the national resolve thousands of miles from home, as even the tiny American Navy managed to do in the War of 1812, when Yankee frigates engaged the enemy off the coast of Africa and as far away as the waters of Brazil and the Marquesas.

Cousin Ted points out that when navies are large enough to be organized into fleets, they can wield devastating power in combat, much as Nelson did at Trafalgar, or, in equally effective manner, choke off an enemy's supply lines by blockading his coast. And he makes it clear that navies are just as important in peacetime as they are in war. Unlike armies, which are apt to become expensive nuisances in times of peace, navies continue to serve the nation long after the battles are over. Properly deployed, they can foster and protect a country's foreign trade, and their very existence will tend to discourage an attack by any potential enemy.

Again and again, Cousin Ted hammers home his basic message, that navies are vital to a maritime nation's welfare, and young Franklin hungrily and uncritically absorbs it all. Cousin Ted's enthusiasm and his tightly organized arguments will form the foundation for his personal philosophy and provide the boy with a matrix with which to define the world around him.

Over the years to come, Franklin D. Roosevelt will read voraciously; but that one book, *The Naval War of 1812*, will always remain of singular importance to him. Fifty years onward, when fate and circumstances put him in command of the most powerful military force in history, it will be to his distant relative Theodore that he turns for inspiration and guidance. And Cousin Ted's book will never be far away, its lessons never ignored. Throughout his presidential years, FDR kept two copies in his personal library—one for the White House, the other for his boyhood home in Hyde Park.



## CHAPTER TWO

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**T**he Roosevelts were old money. By American standards, very old money. Like the Schuylers and Schermerhorns and Van Rensselears and other early Dutch settlers who arrived in New Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, Claes Martenzen van Rosenvelt and his descendants put down deep roots and quietly prospered.

At the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's birth in 1882, his family maintained a lifestyle somewhere between well-to-do and rich. He was born into the post-Civil War era known as the Gilded Age, a time when immense new fortunes were being created, and while his family could not boast the prodigious wealth of such neighbors as the Vanderbilts, they could take for granted the security and comfort of the moneyed classes. But it was not so much money as it was social prominence that contributed to the Roosevelts' sense of entitlement. The family held a position as close to that of nobility as it is possible to get in a democratic republic, replete with all the trappings of landed estates, carefully researched genealogies, and a family coat of arms centered around a decorous display of roses topped by three feathers, just like the Prince of Wales.

All that social prominence was not due solely to the Roosevelt side of the family. Franklin's young mother Sara was a Delano heir, who could trace her New World lineage back as far as her husband's, and who liked to point out that "Franklin is as much a Delano as he is a Roosevelt." Her son learned that lesson early, and throughout his life always included his middle name, or at least its initial, when signing papers.

Both parents taught the boy to take pride in his family heritage, and the combination of wealth and social position helped breed in him a certain confidence, a fearlessness, that served him well throughout his career. He was an only child and profited from the highly focused attention of two adoring parents.

His father, James Roosevelt, was considerably older than his mother, and had been a widower when he first met the vivacious, high-spirited Sara Delano at a party at Theodore Roosevelt's home in New York City. James was something of an entrepreneur. He managed the family's investments and served on various corporate boards and enjoyed playing the role of country squire. He encouraged young Franklin's interests in natural history, and, along with sailing, taught him the gentlemanly skills of horseback riding and hunting.

His young mother Sara watched over him solicitously, and while some have accused her of being *overly* solicitous at times, she did not pamper him. He was assigned household duties—he had to take care of his pony, Debby, and his red setter puppy, Marksman—and she made sure he performed his duties responsibly and on time.

The Roosevelts moved comfortably in high circles. One time in Washington, when Franklin was just five years old, his father took him to the White House to meet his old friend President Grover Cleveland. At the end of the visit, Cleveland, a Democrat who was having difficulties with Congress at the time, put his hand on Franklin's head and said with great earnestness, "My little man, I am making a strange wish for you. It is that you may never be President of the United States." The adult Franklin loved to repeat that story, particularly

in those years after he had moved into the White House. He always followed the retelling with a loud burst of laughter.

By any measure Franklin was a well-educated boy. He had a solid grounding in English literature, was well read in history, had a good grasp of geography, knew his sums, and was conversant in both French and German, thanks to a succession of teachers and governesses imported to instruct him. And because the Roosevelts regularly toured through Europe, Franklin was well traveled, and by the age of twelve was a veteran of half a dozen Atlantic crossings.

But for all his travel and learning, there were important deficiencies in his education that would take him years to fully overcome. The most significant of these was the fact that he was taught almost exclusively at home: he did not actually go to school until he was fourteen. While academic lessons can be taught anywhere, some of the most important lessons of childhood can only be learned in the rough-and-tumble of school. Such lessons include the complex and sometimes painful ones involved with learning how to get along with one's peers—the sometimes exhilarating, sometimes humiliating competition of the classroom, with its rivalry for attention and good grades; the cut and thrust of the schoolyard, where students are sorted out in ways that are often unfair and undemocratic, but always realistic; the problem of dealing with bullies; the agonizing and delicate compromises that must be learned in order to make friends, and the further compromises needed to keep them; the bargaining and lies—black and white—required to hold your position in the crowd. These were the life lessons that Franklin Roosevelt missed as a young boy, and which would later take him decades to master. Although he was neither spoiled nor pampered, his sheltered life would leave him at a certain social disadvantage for many years.

Although home-educated, Franklin was not a recluse. There were always the children of his parents' employees to play with, augmented on occasion by other kids imported from the village for the afternoon.



There is a famous story that his mother liked to tell about her son. “Franklin had a great habit of ordering his playmates around,” she remembered in her book, *My Boy Franklin*, “and for reasons I have never been able to fathom, [he] was generally permitted to have his way. I know that I, overhearing him one day with a little boy on the place, with whom he was digging a fort, said to him:

“‘My son, don’t give the orders all the time; let the other boys give them some time.’

“‘Mummie,’ he said, without guile, ‘if I don’t give the orders, nothing would happen!’”

The story is sometimes cited as an indication of the inherent leadership skills FDR would exhibit throughout his public life, but it is just as likely that it indicates his early grasp of basic social realities. The simple fact was that he was demonstrably superior to his playmates. They were, for the most part, the children of people who worked on the estate, and they did what his mother and father wanted them to do. By extension, it was Franklin’s right to govern the activities of the servants’ children. They were never his equals in any sense. He knew it and they knew it.

Years later, Mike Reilly, who as chief of the White House Secret Service detail knew FDR from a particularly intimate perspective, put it bluntly. “He never was ‘one of the boys,’” he observed. “[He] was raised alone and he had just about everything he wanted throughout his youth, so it would be just a little too much to expect him to be ‘one of the boys.’”