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Richard Norton Smith

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Roosevelt and Reagan

Eternal Optimists

By Richard Norton Smith

Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, the modern White House became a temple in the cult of presidential personality. Today it stands ringed with satellite dishes, ready to beam every presidential utterance to a public for whom 24 hour news cycles and saturation coverage poses a threat to any leader who presumes to dominate his age and set the national agenda. After all, how many television characters last more than a single season, let alone, four or eight years? Yet that is exactly what presidents have become -- guests in our electronic home, and just as likely to wear out their welcome as most company.

History, like lightning, is not supposed to repeat itself. A dozen years after the old Rough Rider went to his grave, his distant cousin would replace another president, Herbert Hoover, whose short-comings were publicly and poignantly summarized in his own lament that, "you can't make a Teddy Roosevelt out of me." Franklin Roosevelt entertained no such doubts: "I want to be a Preacher President," he said in conscious emulation of his swashbuckling cousin.

By the 1930s, the Bully Pulpit first put to such affective use by the first Theodore Roosevelt was electronically wired. Thanks to radios, millions of Americans could listen to a president in their own homes. Aiding FDR's honey on toast baritone was a keen sense of timing and an instinctive grasp of the dangers of over-exposure. A depression-weary public responded overwhelmingly to the new messenger and his message of hope. The actress Lillian Gish said of FDR, "he seemed to have been dipped in phosphorus." Herbert Hoover's mail had been taken care of by a single clerk; Franklin Roosevelt had to hire 50 clerks to take care of his mail. As the presidency reached new heights of prestige and visibility, the rest of the federal government grew in direct proportion to the economic and foreign crises of the period.

Contrary to popular belief, in twelve years Roosevelt conducted just 30 of his celebrated fireside chats. Shying away from overtly partisan appeals, he used homely metaphors to ingratiate himself with listeners around America's kitchen tables. So he spoke of "priming the pump" to justify deficit spending, and of loaning an embattled Britain a "garden hose" in the form of lend-lease with which to douse the flames started by Hitler and Nazi arsonists. Among the listeners who drew hope from the buoyant new occupant of the White House was a shoe salesman's son in Dixon, Illinois. Ronald Reagan was a child of the Great Depression, which crippled America's economy in the 1930s, casting doubt on the future of the Country's Democratic institutions. In the Reagan household Franklin D. Roosevelt was an icon of hope, as were his New Deal programs -- not least of all for Ron's alcoholic father Jack, who landed a job with the WPA. Young Reagan cast his first presidential ballot for FDR. In fact he would vote four times for Franklin Roosevelt and at the time he could scarcely imagine that one day he would lead his own political counter-revolution -- a conservative crusade to reverse the flow of power to Washington first implemented by his boyhood hero.

Now on the surface, there seems little to bond the aristocratic Roosevelts of Hyde Park with the itinerant Reagans of Dixon, Illinois. There are, however, many kinds of roots. The Reagan family may have been poor enough that oatmeal meat was considered a delicacy, but Nellie Reagan, the Bible-quoting mother who assured Ron that everything in life was part of God's plan, gave her son as firm a grounding in his own place in the moral universe. As did Sarah Delano to her beloved only child on their Hudson Valley Estate. Growing up in a household dominated by adults, young Franklin Roosevelt learned early to hide his true feelings behind a dutiful façade of smiling aloofness. As president he would have countless acquaintances and almost no true friends. Much the same could be said of Ronald Reagan, the bookish boy who lived through his dreams, and through his mother's fundamentalist faith.

From his first day in office, Franklin Roosevelt experimented with new ideas. Consistency would never be his hobgoblin. At the same time he wasn't afraid to make mistakes. "I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat," he explained to one aide. "What I seek is the highest possible batting average." In 1934, FDR dismayed reformers by naming the financier Joseph P. Kennedy to be chairman of the new Securities and Exchange Commission. Even Jim Farley, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, protested the appointment reminding Roosevelt of the unscrupulous methods that he had employed in building his fortunes. FDR was unfazed and un-persuaded. He had his own rationale for putting Kennedy in charge of Wall Street. In his words, "Set a thief, to catch a thief." A man of instincts rather than fixed ideology, Roosevelt seemed surprised when someone asked him to outline his personal philosophy. "Why," he said, "I am a Christian and a Democrat." He was similarly unreflective when his own wife raised the issue of religious training for their children. "I never really thought about it," he told her. "I think it is just as well not to think about things like that too much." Ronald Reagan was scarcely more introspective. And yet, for someone who was so wedded to basic truths, Reagan's mid-life decision to jettison his life-long commitment to the priorities of Roosevelt represented a spiritual and intellectual crisis that was hardly less wrenching than FDR's bout with Polio.

In time, both men would be shot at by would-be assassins, their graceful responses exposing the steel behind their smiling exteriors. In the wake of his shooting in 1981, Reagan became more fatalistic than ever. He told New York's Terrence Cardinal Cook and Mother Theresa that, "whatever time I have left, belongs to God." More important he believed it. No doubt FDR would have agreed.

Their similarities do not end there. Each man had served as governor of the nation's largest state. Each entered the White House in a period of great economic crisis. Each brilliantly used the media to enlist public support for his agenda. Successful managers, I would suggest, are stage managers and screenwriters. They are narrators of their own drama, heroes of their own morality play. As a great communicator, President Reagan used television to go over the heads of Congress and special interests seeking to frustrate his efforts to reduce the size and cost of the federal establishment. Like Roosevelt, he raised the mood of the nation through the force of his personality and unquenchable optimism.

But it could also be said that he had a great deal more help than FDR could call upon. By the 1980s, the Bully Pulpit had been institutionalized -- some would say trivialized -- to include three people in the White House Office of Communications, ten in the Office of Speech Writing and Research, two in the Office of Media Relations and Planning, fourteen in the Office of Public Liaison, Three in the Office of Public Affairs, two in the Office of Communication Planning, fourteen in the Office of the Press Secretary, five in the Office of News Summary and Audio Service. Under the circumstances, spontaneity went the way of Rose Garden Ceremonies and focus groups.

In his first run for the White House, FDR declared, "I ask you to judge me by the enemies I have made." This was more than shrewd. In truth both Roosevelt and Reagan had a genius for exploiting their opponents, whether the European dictators against whom FDR maneuvered in the 1930s, or the evil empire that haunted Reagan's vision of a world precariously balanced on the narrow window-ledge of nuclear destruction. On the home-front Reagan ran against big business, Roosevelt railed at the excesses of big government. Each man defeated a predecessor who knew considerably more than he did about the minutia of government, and who understood far less about the American People. What Justice Holmes said of Herbert Hoover's successor in March 1933 seemed equally applicable to Jimmy Carter's half a century later: "Roosevelt," equated the old Brahman, "possessed a second rate intellect but a first class temperament."

Now, not even their greatest admirers would call Roosevelt or Reagan slaves to consistency. FDR entered office guaranteeing a twenty-five percent cut in Federal Expenditures, only to weigh the foundation for the bottom Welfare State. There is in fact a wonderful story which has the added advantage of being true. In 1932, Roosevelt ran against Herbert Hoover from the left and the right, which was not difficult to do since Hoover wasn't very mobile. In Pittsburgh Roosevelt gave a very famous speech demanding a twenty-five percent cut in all Federal Expenditures, denouncing Hoover as a spendthrift and a wastrel, and promising to do away with all sorts of unnecessary government boards and regulations. He wins the election, he governs successfully, he runs for reelection in 1936. Guess what? He's going back to Pittsburgh. His speech writer Sam Rosamond comes up to him and says, "Mr. President, we have a problem."

FDR says, "What?"

And he says, "Remember that speech you gave in Pittsburgh in 1932? You promised a twenty-five percent cut in government spending."



This week marks the anniversary of Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential nomination, as well as Franklin Roosevelt's unprecedented and since unmatched 3rd and 4th-term nominations.

Needless to say it was a promise that had not been kept.

"What should we do?" FDR thought for a moment and said, "I Know. Deny we were ever in Pittsburgh."

With much of the same cavalier attitude, Ronald Reagan believed he could cut taxes and grow his way out of the resulting deficit without sacrificing either his cherished military build-up or the social programs that even conservative voters wished to conserve for their children.

Classic administrative theory held little appeal for either leader. FDR had three vice presidents. Reagan had six national security advisors. Early in his second term, Reagan casually allowed his White House chief of staff and secretary of the treasury to swap jobs with disastrous results. At one point the president joked about the controlled chaos in his administration, claiming that his right hand didn't know what its far right hand was up to. For his part FDR similarly welcomed the clash of ideas and personalities that went with duplication and overlapping responsibilities. In an effort to bolster farm prices he cavalierly set the international price of gold while breakfasting in bed on soft-boiled eggs. One morning he set the price at twenty-one cents, telling his advisors that three times seven was a lucky number. Other decisions had more fateful consequences. Roosevelt presided over the creation of the first atomic bomb. Reagan envisioned a strategic defense initiative popularly dubbed "star wars," to end the nuclear nightmare. FDR boldly recognized the Soviet Union in 1933. Reagan shocked the Foreign Policy Establishment in 1982 by consigning the Marxist experiment to the ash heap of history. Roosevelt put the first woman in the Cabinet. Reagan named the first woman to the Supreme Court. Each man was married to a controversial wife whose emersion in admirable causes was insufficient to overcome the fear and resentment she inspired among White House staffers.

Roosevelt was the patrician with the common touch. Reagan, every man with more than a touch of Hollywood glamour. Figures of illusive temperament each man was accustomed to being underestimated by his contemporaries. Of FDR, Walter Whitman famously, if inaccurately, observed that he is, "A pleasant man who without any important qualifications for the office would very much like to be President." Even harsher things were said about Ronald Reagan, whose presumed intellectual and ideological shortcomings earned him the mockery of one Washington opinion leader as an amiable dunce. More modest than the average politician, Reagan said he didn't mind the fawning media coverage accorded Mikhail Gorbachev after the Soviet leader conceded most of Reagan's points to obtain a nuclear arms deal. "I don't resent his popularity," explained the president. "Good Lord, I co-starred with Errol Flynn once." Beyond this, both presidents used humor as a shield and a weapon. As a presidential humorist, Ronald Reagan was in a class by himself. Who will ever forget the grace and wit he displayed in the aftermath of his shooting in 1981? The next day, Lyn Dobsinger went to the president's sick-bed and announced, "You'll be happy to know that the government is running normally." "What makes you think I would be happy about that!" said Reagan.

Famously genial, Reagan could actually be quite astringent in putting down a rival. For example, during the 1980 campaign he claimed that Jimmy Carter was supposed to go on "60 Minutes" to talk about his achievements, "but that would leave 59 minutes of dead air to fill." Reagan defeated his critics in the intelligencia by describing a mythical costume ball attended by a friend who, "slapped some egg on his face and went as a liberal economist." Reagan's joy and vovite for combat echoed that of his democratic counterpart. In the 1936 election, FDR had a field day with so-called "me too" Republicans. Addressing a Democratic audience in New York that September, the president was at the top of his form. "Let me warn the nation, against the smooth evasion which says, 'of course we believe all these things, we believe in social-security, we believe in work for the unemployed, we believe in saving homes -- cross our hearts and hope to die, we believe in all these things. But we do not like the way the president's administration is doing them. Just turn them over to us. We will do all of them, we will do more of them, we will do them better, and best of all, the doing of them will not cost anybody anything.'"

For each man, each landslide reelection was followed by a political come-uppance. Roosevelt's too-clever-by-half plan to pack the Supreme Court with justices friendly to the New Deal demonstrated the limits of his normally faultless political judgment. Reagan stumbled just as badly in the Iran Contra Affair, refusing to acknowledge his error with the same stubbornness that made him go through with his controversial visit to a German military cemetery containing the graves of men who had served in Hitler's SS. In both instances, a pragmatic leader elevated in transience to level of principle. That both men emerged from these incidents largely unscathed is a tribute to their formidable gifts of persuasion, first honed through self-persuasion.

Reagan actually believed he had seen Holocaust victims in Nazi concentration camps. He had in fact glimpsed them on film only. For his part, FDR solemnly assure voters in 1936 that "I have seen war," or as he says, "I have seen *woar*. I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs. I have seen the dead in the mud." He neglected to mention that he saw most of these things from the windows of a Rolls Royce that carried him on a 1918 inspection tour of World War I battlefields, where an outbreak of influenza posed more danger from germs than from Germans. In the words of his distinguished biographer Geoffrey Ward, "Roosevelt could never leave history alone." In the White House he was forever inventing conversations with imaginary garage mechanics and Chinese laundrymen who just, in the president's words, "just dropped by," long after hours to voice agreement with his policies. None of the visitors were ever recorded by White House staff, but they showed up repeatedly at White House press conferences -- spectral evidence of Roosevelt's supposed closeness with ordinary Americans. But this was so much overkill. Few if any American leaders have ever inspired greater devotion, or it must be said, vitriolic hostility. The same could be said of Ronald Reagan.

Of course the similarities between the two men, however striking, are outweighed by FDR's love of experimentation and his genuine disdain of the old order. His New Deal was an improvised response to the gravest economic crisis in the nation's history. The Reagan Revolution by contrast was rooted in ideological convictions developed over more than thirty years. In the end, each man pursued fundamentally different objectives. By promising economic security through government action, FDR established political norms that would last half a century -- if the life jacket of one generation can become the straight jacket of the next. By a curious twist of logic Reagan refused to concede that his election in 1980 heralded a repudiation of FDR's policies. Indeed, he did not hesitate to summon Roosevelt's ghost to justify what he called "The New Beginning." Reagan told audiences early in his first term, "With the same energy that Franklin Roosevelt sought government resolutions to public problems, we will seek private solutions." In making this claim, Reagan tipped his hat to a leader whose enduring impact placed limitations on just how transforming his own presidency could be. George Will said it best when he declared early in the 1980s that, "the American people were indeed conservative. They wished to conserve the New Deal." As a result, the man who spoke of a future without limits was forced to disguise his new term as a mere change of course.

Historians like generals are prone to re-fight past battles. Many find it difficult to categorize the Reagan presidency. To apply conventional terms to this most unconventional of leaders, just consider: a conventional leader would have hesitated to confront the basic assumption which has governed American politics since 1933 -- the belief that Washington must exert more control over personal and economic decisions. Reagan not only challenged such ideas, he left in his wake a new consensus that would both govern and limit successors of both political parties. Bill Clinton did not set out to be the most conservative Democratic president since Grover Cleveland. He was forced into that role contrary to his activist instincts because he inherited the anti-Washington consensus bequeathed him by Ronald Reagan. A conventional leader would have taken for granted the existing superpower relationship balanced on the equilibrium of Cold War hostility. Reagan insisted that the Soviet Union was a historical aberration, and that the Cold War could be won by the West in "our lifetime." A conventional leader would have been satisfied with incremental progress on arms control, slowing the rate of increase in the world's nuclear stockpiles. Reagan believed that the arms race could be ended, and the stockpiles eliminated. When it came to foreign relations and his reputation as a staunch anti-communist, Reagan managed to have his cake and eat it too. He liked to tell the mythical American and his Soviet counterpart who were comparing their respective forms of government. "In my country," said the American, "I can walk into the White House, slam my fist on the desk, and say I don't like the way Ronald Reagan is running the United States."

"Well," replied his Soviet counter-part, "I can do the same thing in the POA Bureau."

"You Can?" asked the incredulous American.

"Certainly I can! I can go into Gorbachev's office, slam my fist on his desk and say, 'I don't like the way President Reagan is running the United States.'"

I have to tell one more Reagan story because he loved to tell it. You know, he told Gorbachev stories around Gorbachev, which suggests the kind of relationship that they had developed. So one day Gorbachev decided to turn the tables. Gorbachev decided to tell a Gorbachev story to Reagan, and this concerned a long and interminable, very Soviet line outside of a store with a little bit of meat and a few other consumer goods.

The line went seemingly for miles and it barely moved. Ultimately people just got fed up and they were on the verge of rioting. Someone stepped out from the line and said, "I can't take it anymore. I'm going to go shoot Gorbachev." And he went off and everyone cheered. He went off in the direction of the Kremlin. Twenty-four hours go by, and the line has moved about half a block, and he comes back. Someone says, "Well, did you shoot Gorbachev?" He said, "No, that line was twice as long." Great leaders not only have a sense of humor, they can turn it on themselves. A sense of humor, I've always said, is a synonym for a sense of perspective. If you can laugh at yourself, then I think that's a wonderful safety valve.

The great presidents all have that capacity. Franklin Roosevelt loved to tell the story of a Wall Street executive who would buy a paper every morning, look at the front page, swear, and throw the unread paper in the trash can. One day the newspaper stand operator asked the executive what he was doing day after day. "I'm looking for an obituary," said the businessman.

"But sir, obituaries aren't on the front page, they're toward the back."

"Son," said the executive, "you damn well better believe the obituary I'm looking for will be on the front page."

FDR was a conservative radical who forged a new consensus in place of the prevailing orthodoxy of the 1920s -- one that accepted the growth of the state and the overriding importance of the presidency. Moreover, Roosevelt insisted on an Economic Bill of Rights to compliment the political rights enshrined in the original amendments to the Constitution. He sought not freedom from government, but freedom through government. Ronald Reagan by contrast was a radical conservative who exalted the sovereignty of market forces, going so far as to compare government to a baby: "an elementary canal with a big appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other." Ironically his victory in the Cold War and the return of power to grass roots Americans, would produce a post-Reagan presidency that was more visible and less powerful than at any time in sixty years, until 9-11. "It's a terrible thing," said President Reagan, "to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead and find no one there."

In the economically desperate 1930s, it was said that it took a man on crutches to show a crippled nation how to walk. But it was one thing for the president who proclaimed himself "Dr. New Deal" to raise a nation's spirits, not to mention billions of dollars of government spending, and quite another to convince a people who harbored bleak memories of the First World War that they should again enter the lists against European Dictators. For most of the 1930s, Roosevelt waged a war of words because public opinion could stomach nothing stronger. For himself, the president never doubted the threat posed by fascist dictators in Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo. With mounting frustration he watched as Japan occupied Manchuria, Mussolini took Ethiopia, and Hitler annexed Austria before the spineless democracies handed him Czechoslovakia on a platter. Roosevelt didn't have to take a poll to know that most Americans were isolationist and anti-war -- the bi-product of an earlier war, Woodrow Wilson's war.

These views found vehement expression in the halls of Congress. In 1935 lawmakers enacted the Neutrality Act prohibiting the exportation of weapons, ammunition, or instruments of war to any belligerent nation. In 1937 they amended the act to forbid American ships from entering war zones or traveling on belligerent vessels. It didn't end there. In 1938 there was something called the Peace Amendment. The Peace Amendment, according to every political opinion poll, enjoyed the support of seventy-five percent of the American people. It was introduced in the House of Representatives. It got 188 votes in the House of Representatives. It would have passed had FDR not applied what pressure he could to his fellow Democrats. The Peace Amendment was very simple: it was not enough to allow Congress constitutionally to declare war, any declaration of war then had to be validated in a popular referendum.

When FDR asked congress to repeal the Neutrality Act in 1939, he was met with blank refusal. Not until Germany invaded Poland later that year did the people's representatives grudgingly permit the United States to sell arms, and only then to nations able to pay for them in cash. Publicly Roosevelt continued to proclaim his allegiance to non-intervention. Behind the scenes, however, he began to prepare the nation and it woefully inadequate military for the coming battle. The United States Army in 1940 was smaller than that of Portugal's. The defense budget was dramatically increased, the economy converted to a war-time footing. To broaden his political base in 1940, Roosevelt shrewdly picked two leading Republicans, Henry Stimpson and Frank Knox, to take over the War and Navy Departments. Soon after, he agreed to swap fifty aging U.S. destroyers for British bases in the Caribbean and New Finland.

At the end of December 1940 the president went on the radio. "This is not a fireside chat on war," he told listeners. "It is a talk on national security." Then he recalled the dark days of March 1933, enlisting history on his side to both frighten and inspire his countrymen. At no time since Jamestown or Plymouth Rock had American Civilization faced such danger. No longer could Americans expect to hide behind the Atlantic and Pacific as if they were moats around a medieval castle. The difference between Nazi positions in North Africa and Brazil was less than that from Washington to Colorado -- five hours for the latest type of bomber. As the world shrank, the threat posed by Hitler grew daily. "The experience of the past two years has proven beyond doubt that no nation can appease the Nazis. No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it. There can be no appeasement with ruthlessness. There can be no reasoning with an incendiary bomb. We now know that a nation can have peace with Nazis only at the price of total surrender."

The following month, the president set forth in his State of the Union Address, a set of war aims for a nation technically at peace. They were called The Four Freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Straining the very limits of his presidential powers, Roosevelt authorized the Navy to attack German submarines west of twenty-five degrees longitude. In August 1941, by a single vote, he convinced Congress to permit a peacetime draft. That same day Roosevelt and Winston Churchill published the Atlantic Charter, another lofty declaration that stopped just short of declaring war. The result of a secret five day conference at sea, it left little doubt in Berlin or Boston about the approaching conflict. By now, "Dr. New Deal" was retired in favor of "Dr. Win the War."

In September 1941, a U.S. ship exchanged fire with a German submarine in the North Atlantic. The following month German subs attacked another U.S. vessel escorting a British convoy; several crewmen were injured. At the end of October, Nazi subs sank an American ship and killed more than 100 crew members. Under the circumstances the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was almost anti-climatic. As a wartime leader, FDR entrusted battlefield strategies to his generals while reserving geopolitics for himself. He displayed a keen eye for talent, for example, jumping at junior officer named Dwight Eisenhower -- a few short months before a fifty year-old lieutenant colonel -- over more than 300 superior officers before entrusting him with the greatest invasions in history.

Roosevelt planned for peace, even as he prosecuted the war. More importantly, he realized that the two were inseparable. In 1944, international conferences held under American auspices, established such post-war bulwarks as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the same year FDR ran for a fourth term, his chief campaign plank calling for an Economic Bill of Rights guaranteeing sixty million jobs after the war. Picking up where Wilson left off, but displaying a far surer grasp of domestic politics, Roosevelt convinced Churchill, Stalin, and others to join him in establishing an international organization that would make permanent the wartime alliance, known as the United Nations. Was Roosevelt capable of Duplicity? You bet. Did he sometimes bend the rule, exceed his Constitutional authority, flirt with falsehood? Absolutely. And history has endorsed his actions emphatically. Little wonder, then, that along with Lincoln, FDR is held up as the quintessential war leader.

Whatever else may have divided them, Roosevelt and Reagan alike embodied national optimism and the rejection of limits, much as Winston Churchill became the British lion at a critical juncture in the history of his Island race, and Charles de Gaulle personified his certain vision of France in repudiating the dishonor of May 1940. In the end, great figures are essentially mysterious figures, even to their followers. Said National Security Advisor Robert MacFarlane, one of many Reagan White House staffers whose condescension was matched by their bewilderment over the president's achievements, "he knows so little and accomplishes so much." The leaders who remain lodged in our collective memory march to the beat of their own drummer, and label and logic be damned. Consider the following. In the summer of 1985 the president of the United States entered Bethesda Naval Hospital where surgeons successfully operated on him after discovering a malignancy. In releasing this news to the public the doctors made only one mistake. They didn't bother to confer with their patient. As Ronald Reagan saw things, he didn't have cancer. "Something inside of me had cancer and they removed it," said President Reagan with the same willful disregard for the obvious that sustained his presidency and drove his adversaries to distraction.

So put aside the conventional academic morals. The real question that should be asked of any president is, did he make a significant difference, not only in his time but for a long time to come? Did the force of his personality and the power of his ideas affect the way Americans live, how

they see themselves, and how they relate to the rest of the world? Did he spend himself in causes larger than himself, for purposes nobler than re-election?

Leaders that espouse timeless principles will generally find that time is on their side. I will never forget hearing President Reagan in one of his last public appearances relate this story to an audience assembled at the Reagan Library, of which I was then director. It seems there was a much married woman who walked into a bridal shop one day and told the sales clerk that she was looking for a wedding gown for her fourth wedding. "Well," replied the sales clerk, "what type of wedding dress are you looking for?"

"A long frilly white dress with a veil," she replied. The sales clerk didn't quite know what to say.

"Frankly Madame, dresses of that nature are considered more appropriate for brides who are being married for the first time. For those who are a bit more *innocent* if you know what I mean."

"Well," replied the customer, more than a little put out, "I can assure you that I am as innocent as the rest of them. Believe it or not, despite all of my marriages, I remain as innocent as any first-time bride. You see," she went on, "my first husband was a dear sweet man. Unfortunately the excitement of the wedding was too much for him and he died as we checked into the hotel on our wedding night."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," said the sales clerk. "What about the others?"

"Well, my second husband and I got into a terrible fight in the limousine on the way to our wedding reception. We haven't spoken since and got the marriage annulled quickly."

"Well, what about your third husband?" asked the sales clerk.

"Well," said the woman, "he was a Democrat and every night for four years, he just sat on the edge of the bed and told me how good it was going to be."

Every politician makes a career out of telling voters how good it is going to be. The greatest make us believe it. As poignant as Reagan's handwritten letter to the American People revealing his Alzheimer's disease are the final scrolled lines set by FDR for delivery on April 13, 1945. "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow," wrote Franklin Roosevelt in the twilight of his life, "will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith."

While other presidential reputations bounce around like corn in a popper, Reagan and Roosevelt seem assured of history's notice and posterity's gratitude. If you doubt my word just pay a visit to the nation's capital, where not far from Ronald Reagan National Airport and Ronald Reagan International Trade Center you can experience Washington's newest and most popular monument, a moving tribute in granite and bronze to the president who redefined the presidency: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.