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Franklin Roosevelt as a Leader

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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What made Franklin Roosevelt such a powerful leader and one of the most highly regarded presidents in American history?

Your two-part question goes to the heart of our mission at the Hauenstein Center. Using the presidents as case studies in leadership, we inquire into what makes some chief executives more effective than others in office, and what makes some greater than others to posterity.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt provides rich case studies in executive leadership and presidential rankings. He was a complex, controversial leader; but whatever combination of DNA and experience made him, he was extremely effective while in office, especially during his first and third terms, and posterity has persistently seen him as one of the most powerful leaders in U.S. history.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Love him or loathe him, most people admit that FDR was an effective leader. Numerous writers have tried to dissect the qualities that made Roosevelt able to attract followers. Better than most, Stanford historian David Kennedy has tagged several characteristics: the 32nd president, he notes, was a quick study; he could connect with people; he was self confident; he was committed to public service; he developed a strong character; he had a clear vision of the nation and its role in the world; he had the political skills to get his vision off the drawing board; and -- he had luck.[1] Let's examine these various elements.

1. FDR was a quick study. He possessed an insatiable curiosity, a boundless appetite for knowledge that combined with his capacity to absorb a striking range of facts through conversation. Talking was his preferred mode of learning -- there were not many books he had the patience to read from cover to cover -- and he supposedly could talk at length about anything.

2. FDR possessed the charisma to connect with large numbers of the American people. A good looking man, in his prime he stood 6 feet, 2 inches tall, and weighed 190 pounds. His stentorian voice made him one of the powerful orators of the twentieth century. It especially helped that he could project his voice, along with a sunny disposition, by means of that newfangled technology, the radio, to millions of people.

After Roosevelt had been in office a week, he delivered his first fireside chat, on March 12, 1933, to announce that the nation's banks would reopen. The president's performance was stellar -- in David Kennedy's words, cultivated yet familiar, commanding yet avuncular, masterful yet intimate. And the response was unprecedented: almost a half million letters poured into the White House over the ensuing week, written by Americans expressing appreciation for the president's reassurance. (For comparison, consider this: during the Hoover administration, the White House mailroom was staffed by one person; after FDR's first week in office, some 70 individuals were needed to staff the mailroom.) It might be said that FDR, like his cousin Theodore Roosevelt, founded the charismatic presidency. In an age of mass democracy, both leaders self consciously harnessed the power of their personality as an instrument of government.

3. FDR possessed vaulting self confidence. Indeed, he possessed such a high degree of self confidence that his utterly untroubled conception of the presidency conformed to the image he cultivated of himself in it. FDR's confidence would enable the president to disagree with advisors when confronting major decisions; his early support of Britain at the beginning of World War II confounded most of them.

4. FDR possessed noblesse oblige, a sense of patrician duty or responsibility toward others. His sense of service was ingrained by his parents, by his extended family (including TR), and by his headmaster and teachers at Groton. He apparently never contemplated any other career than that of public servant. Uncannily like cousin Theodore, FDR rose through the ranks from New York state senator, to assistant secretary of the Navy, to vice presidential candidate, to New York governor, and finally to the presidency. Virtually all his life was spent in public service.

5. FDR possessed a strong character. Look at the way he dealt with the polio he contracted at 39 years of age, and the resulting paralysis that made him handicapped. All those who knew him agreed: he faced the malady with courage, tenacity, and hopefulness. These same character traits would be communicated when, as commander in chief, he sought to encourage a nation struggling against the Great Depression and then against the Axis powers in the Second World War. As David Kennedy puts it, FDR's "polio proved to be a political and even a national asset."

6. FDR possessed a clear vision of America and her role on the world-historical stage. David Kennedy believes the 32nd president "made a shrewd appraisal of the vectors of development that had brought him and his countrymen to their own moment in time -- a rendezvous with destiny, he once called it; and he made a no less shrewd appraisal of what possibilities for change the great engines of history might now be compelled to yield up, if they were skillfully managed."

Take FDR's handling of the Great Depression. To him the Depression was not just another cyclical downturn, but a long-brewing crisis whose dislocations could wreak permanent economic, political, and social havoc if not managed smartly. Capitalism had been largely unregulated for more than a century. It had produced unprecedented wealth for unprecedented numbers of people but it had also been unstable and unsettling for millions of other people. During rough times, the temptation was to abandon free markets for statist isms. In the pressure cooker of the Great Depression, FDR wanted to steer a middle course between unregulated capitalism and socialism. The crisis-management plan he enacted came to be known as the New Deal, which represented new policies and attitudinal changes about the role of the federal government in American life.

Think of what the New Deal meant in U.S. history: Up to the Great Depression, the storyline of American history had been about freedom. During the 1930s, the storyline changed to security. Through such legislation as the National Industrial Recovery Act, National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), Fair Labor Standards Act, Securities Act, and Social Security Act -- an alphabet soup of programs, as detractors put it -- FDR tried to wrestle industrial capitalism to the ground. His aim was to expand security in American culture and reduce insecurity in modern life. The Depression showed that not enough people felt secure in their homes, secure at their jobs, secure in the marketplace, secure through the life cycle. So in his idiosyncratic, ad hoc way, Roosevelt "tested the Left-most limits of American culture" (David Kennedy's words) to bring about a revolution in security. According to some historians, it is not too much to say that FDR should be credited with saving industrial capitalism in the U.S., for his programs coopted and pre-empted more radical calls for a thoroughgoing revolution. The head of the Socialist Party, Norman Thomas, was once asked if FDR had not carried out socialism's aims in the U.S. Thomas answered, "Yes, he has -- on a stretcher."

Roosevelt's vision also led to boldness in the conduct of foreign affairs. Already in the 1920s and '30s, FDR was committed to transform the American people from isolationists to global citizens. He believed it would be fatal for the U.S. to do nothing in the face of militant Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. Long before Pearl Harbor he stubbornly persisted in wanting to help the British resist the Nazis, over the opposition of a majority of the American people as well as senior advisors like his Army chief of staff, George C. Marshall, and his ambassador to the U.K., Joseph Kennedy.

7. FDR possessed the political skills to get his vision communicated and his programs enacted. By the time he became president, he knew how to get things done. He understood the art of consensus building in Washington and the importance of mass communication to the nation.

8. As for reputation, FDR enjoyed an element of luck. He was in the White House during 12 event-packed years that saw huge developments unfold on the world-historical stage. Having to deal with the greatest economic depression of all time in the 1930s, and the worst totalitarian threat the U.S. ever faced in the 1940s, allowed Roosevelt to take center stage and make the best use of his talents. In photographs he cut a strong figure alongside Britain's great leader, Winston Churchill, and the Soviet Union's powerful dictator, Joseph Stalin.

Indeed, historian Robert Dallek notes that FDR's reputation was saved by World War II. The New Deal stalled out by the late 1930s, and if Roosevelt had been a two-term president, posterity probably would have ranked him in the middle of the pack, near, say, Lyndon Johnson. But the outbreak of war gave FDR a new focus that he handled masterfully. His handling of the war encouraged historians to look more favorably on his handling of domestic crises as well, so he tended to get higher marks all around. Such is the curious way luck works.

It is ironic that presidential rankings work like this, but the presidents who live in the darkest times usually get the greatest spotlight, and thus the highest rankings: Washington during the first unstable years of the republic, Lincoln during the Civil War, FDR during the Great Depression and World War II. Fewer historians and readers are drawn to presidents who kept crisis at bay -- James Monroe, Chester Arthur, Calvin Coolidge. For this reason, historian H. W. Brands jests that presidential historians are the "ambulance chasers" of the profession.

FDR'S FAULTS

Now, Franklin Roosevelt had his faults -- he was no marble statue. His self confidence could slide into hubris, as when he tried in 1937 to pack the U.S. Supreme Court; his overreaching in effect stopped the New Deal dead in its tracks. Likewise, he sought to stay in office -- successfully, we should add, since he was elected a record four times -- long after he should have retired from public life due to failing health. Also, argument has raged over Roosevelt's economic IQ; more than a few economists and historians have questioned whether his policies actually made the Depression worse.[2] Further, FDR was the consummate "party man"; no one questions his patriotism, but there is merit to the charge that his agenda was less about doing what was best for the nation and more about undercutting Republicans and making the Democratic Party the permanent governing majority.

On a personal level also, FDR could be duplicitous, as when he lied to Eleanor about the status of his love affair with Lucy Mercer, which supposedly had ended in 1918; recall that it was Lucy Mercer who was at FDR's side when he passed away on April 12, 1945.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Ultimately most presidents are measured by their achievements. Admirers believe that Franklin Roosevelt resolved the historic tension between two major strains in the Founders' thought -- between the Hamiltonians and the Jeffersonians -- between those who wanted a strong central government, and those who sought to champion the common man. To his admirers, FDR combined the best qualities of both sides of this very American argument -- he embraced "Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends."[3]

David Kennedy observes that FDR had three significant achievements to his credit. First, he successfully steered the nation through the Great Depression by fighting for lasting reforms that kept revolutionary change at bay. Second, he led a reluctant nation through the most devastating war in human history by actions that would minimize the war's negative effects on the U.S., yet maximize our nation's international leadership; let us recall that the United States was the only nation in the world to come through World War II with a higher standard of living than when we entered the conflict.

This combination -- of bringing about lasting reforms during the Depression, of minimizing the war's negative impact while maximizing the nation's international leadership -- contributed to the third great achievement: more than a half century of relative peace and prosperity. FDR's vision, policies, and style did much to make possible the American Century. As wrong-headed as he could be in his day, as controversial as he remains to this day, FDR's presidency nevertheless brought about structural changes that contributed to the U.S. remaining the most prosperous nation in world history, and avoiding a cataclysmic war with its archrival in the nuclear era. All in all, not a bad contribution. It is telling that his vision and policies, his style and manner of being president, would influence subsequent presidents in both parties (not least of whom was Republican Ronald Reagan). That's why Franklin Roosevelt is widely regarded as one of America's greatest presidents.

(Question from Douglas M. of Atlanta, GA)

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[1] From start to finish this answer draws heavily from a lecture by Stanford historian David Kennedy, "The Life of FDR and the Meaning of History," given at the National Conference for History Education, held in Los Angeles, October 16, 2003.

[2] See, for example, Jim Powell, FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression (New York: Random House/Crown Forum, 2003).

[3] James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn, George Washington (New York: Henry Holt/Times Books, 2004), pp. 89-90.