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H. W. Brands

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# Franklin Delano Roosevelt

His Life and Times

By H. W. Brands

H. W. Brands, professor of history at the University of Texas, was recently in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to give a talk on his forthcoming biography of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The event was organized by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, in partnership with the Gerald R. Ford Foundation and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum. During his stay, Brands answered the following questions.

## Question: Did you admire Franklin Roosevelt growing up?

**Brands:** I was never particularly impressed with Franklin Roosevelt from what I knew second-hand about him. In part, this falls in the category of -- I wasn't impressed with Franklin Roosevelt because the things that Roosevelt accomplished got woven into the fabric of American life, so that it seemed as though it had always been such. I remember when I was back in graduate school, I had this fellow graduate student who had this stock phrase and he would use it in all sorts of circumstances. He always would say, "That Shakespeare is a pretty good writer but he uses too many cliches." Of course, his point was that they weren't cliches at the time that Shakespeare coined the phrases.

Well, I felt that way about Roosevelt. For example, I didn't realize what a big deal Social Security was, because in my lifetime Social Security had always existed. I didn't realize what a big deal the New Deal was -- this notion that if there are problems out there that afflict American society it is the responsibility of government to do something about it. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. I was a child of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Johnson's notion of the responsibility of government went far beyond Roosevelt, and so what I knew of the New Deal paled by comparison to Johnson's Great Society. So what was the big deal about that?

## Q: Why is Franklin Roosevelt consistently rated so highly among presidents?

**Brands:** Historians and political scientists take polls asking who are the most important presidents in American history. There is a regular top three: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. Do you know why those three are consistently the top three? It's not simply because they are the wisest -- not because they had the best policies. It's because they led the country through crises. If you want to make the top level of any historical category you have to rise to a challenge.

This is what really galled Theodore Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt realized that he would never be considered one of the truly great presidents, and he knew perfectly well why. He was enough of a student of history to know that if you're going to get to the top you have to be president during a crisis.

Here's the irony of it. Great presidents presided over moments in American history that you wouldn't have wanted to live through. The Civil War was the worst disaster in American history -- 600,000 Americans murdered one another in the name of the Union or in the name of the confederacy.... Lincoln is considered right up in the top because he led the Union through this crisis. Franklin Roosevelt, he led the country through two crises -- the two greatest crises of the 20th century -- the Great Depression and World War II. You wouldn't have wanted to live through that period.

## Question: What made you decide to write a biography about FDR?

**Brands:** There have been probably a dozen pretty substantial biographies written about Franklin Roosevelt before now. So the obvious question any potential reader would ask is why is Bill Brands writing about Franklin Roosevelt? I have to explain it in one form or another....

One version of my preface starts off like this -- Franklin Roosevelt was not my president. He was my parents' president. My father is almost 93-years old; he was 18 when Franklin Roosevelt was elected president. He didn't like Franklin Roosevelt. My father was a Republican, raised in a Republican family, and he didn't like Franklin Roosevelt through the first eight years of his presidency. If Franklin Roosevelt had of left office after eight years, as every one expected he would, then my father would have never like him at all. He thought that the New Deal was spendthrift. He didn't like the intrusion of government into private life and the private sector. He didn't like the high expenses, the high tax bills the New Deal ran up.

But then along came World War II, and Franklin Roosevelt, who had by his own description shifted from being Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win-the-War, all of the sudden took on a new meaning to Americans. Once the war in Europe began, once the war in the Pacific loomed larger, once the United States entered the conflict itself, then all of the sudden this president who was a Democratic president, who was a liberal president, who was something of a divisive figure was now commander in chief. He commanded the respect of the American people -- he won the respect of the American people -- in a way that simply as a domestic president he hadn't. Even my father grudgingly came around to respect Franklin Roosevelt.

I'll tell you the really flippant reason why I'm writing about Franklin Roosevelt, and it has to do with the fact that I have written about Benjamin Franklin and I have written about Theodore Roosevelt. When I give lectures and draw examples from history, I often cite an example from Franklin's life, an example from Roosevelt's life, and I often get them confused. I would say Franklin when I meant Roosevelt, so I thought I would really confuse audiences by throwing in somebody who's named for both of them. Then if I said Franklin and meant Roosevelt, you wouldn't know if I meant Roosevelt, Franklin, or Franklin Roosevelt.

I really decided that I needed to take on Franklin Roosevelt because I knew that if I was going to understand American history, if I was going to try to relate the story of American history, I was going to have to come to terms with Franklin Roosevelt. I also came to appreciate that the kinds of things that were accomplished during Roosevelt presidency were absolutely critical to understanding why America is the way it is today.

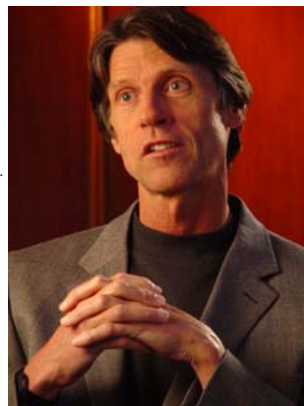
## Question: What will be unique about your book?

**Brands:** I have an alternative beginning for my book and it goes like this. For three and a half years in the early 1940s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the most powerful man in the history of the world. He held the fate of humanity in his hand.... What do you think? Is it a grabber? Now needless to say, this is not something that I can assert. I would have to go on and justify it and explain it.

But I think it's absolutely true and it comes down to this. The United States in the early 1940s was far and away the most powerful country in the world. Uniquely among the belligerents in World War II, the United States came out of the war absolutely stronger than when it went into the war. Everybody else lost the war -- even those allies of the United States on the winning side. The United States won the war, everybody else lost -- some lost absolutely, Germany and Japan preeminently. Britain lost its empire; France lost its empire or would shortly. The Soviet Union lost tens of millions of people, and even though they claim with some justification that they were the ones who defeated Hitler -- true enough, something like 75% or 80% of German casualties were taken on the eastern front -- but the Russians lost more than the Germans did.



Franklin Roosevelt established the Tennessee Valley Authority 74-years ago this week. Sunday marks the 71-year anniversary of FDR's signing of the Rural Electrification Act.



H. W. Brands

Roosevelt commanded the American military, and he commanded the American government during a wartime -- presidents during wartime have a great deal of scope for controlling the government in ways they don't during peace time. You can see this to some extent in the current war in Iraq and President Bush -- the greater authority that the executive branch claims during wartime. Roosevelt commanded the greatest economic power in the world, the greatest military power in the world, and he commanded it more forcefully than presidents almost ever command the American system. But beyond that, it was Roosevelt who controlled America's secret weapon -- a vision of what the world could be after the war.