

FDR: A PUBLIC CAREER

A Brief Chronology of Major Events

1910 - Election to the New York State Senate

When Dutchess County Republicans split between old guard conservatives and progressives it became possible for a Democrat to be elected. A colorful, dynamic campaigner, FDR toured dirt roads in an open red Maxwell automobile, soliciting the votes of normally Republican farmers.

FDR gained quick recognition by his leadership of upstate New York Democrats in a fight against Tammany Hall, the New York City Democratic party machine.

1912 - Supports Woodrow Wilson's Bid for Presidential Nomination; Re-elected to New York State Senate

At the 1912 Democratic National Convention he backed Woodrow Wilson against Champ Clark, the candidate of populist William Jennings Bryan, in a bitter contest for the party's presidential nomination.

1913 - Appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy

Named Assistant Secretary of the Navy by President Wilson, he was to serve in that post throughout the Wilson presidency (1913-20). Although much more knowledgeable about naval matters than his superior, Josephus Daniels (who had been a North Carolina newspaper editor), he initially lacked Daniel's considerable ability to function in the Washington political scene. A strong advocate of navy interests, FDR became a "hawk" in the Wilson administration as the war in Europe began to impinge on the United States.

1918 - Supports Wilson's Foreign Policy Objectives

After America's entry into World War 1 in 1917, President Wilson emphasized that the United States had no territorial objectives and that this was a war to make the world "safe for democracy", a "war to end all wars". By 1918 he had enunciated the "fourteen points" he hoped would provide the basis for a peace treaty, including the establishment of a League of Nations. FDR was a strong supporter of these objectives.

1920 - Runs as Democratic Party Candidate for Vice - President

A rising political star, the Roosevelt name and his progressive image won him the Democratic Party's vice-presidential nomination on the ticket with the conservative newspaper publisher Gov. James M. Cox of Ohio. The Democrats had little hope of victory. Americans, tired of war and Europe's problems, opted for Warren G. Harding's promise of a "return to normalcy." FDR's campaign, regarded as a sacrificial gesture, was highlighted by a vigorous defense of Wilson's advocacy of U.S. membership in the League of Nations.

1921 - Contracts Poliomyelitis

In the summer of 1921, while vacationing at the family summer home on Campobello Island (New Brunswick, Canada), FDR was stricken with poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis). Recovery was slow, as was the recognition that he had permanently lost the use of his legs. While his mother argued for a genteel retirement to the Hyde Park estate, Eleanor - together with his political mentor and advisor Louis Howe - urged FDR not to give up his aspirations and public career.

During the 1920's Eleanor became an important figure in the Democratic Party in her own right.

1924 - Makes Nominating Speech for Al Smith at the Democratic National Convention

FDR signaled his active return to politics by his nominating speech for New York Governor Al Smith, the "Happy Warrior". Davis, who was chosen by the Convention as the Democratic Party candidate for President, went down to defeat against Calvin Coolidge.

1928 - Again Nominates Al Smith; Election as Governor of New York

Al Smith, after being placed in nomination by FDR, was accepted as the candidate by the Democratic Party. Smith then persuaded FDR to run for the New York governorship. Smith's identification with New York City's Tammany Hall was a liability. He hoped that Roosevelt's appeal to Protestant, rural upstate voters would swing the Empire State to him in the presidential contest with the Republican Herbert C. Hoover. Although Al Smith lost New York and the traditionally Democratic South in the national elections, FDR, in a strenuous campaign, managed a narrow victory.

1930 - Reelection As Governor of New York.

During his two terms as governor of New York, FDR established a reputation as a reforming progressive in the Theodore Roosevelt tradition and as a champion of relief for impoverished upstate farmers. His greatest struggle-for control of the Saint Lawrence River waterpower resource by the state rather than private utilities-aimed at providing cheaper electricity for the rural consumer. With the outbreak of the Great Depression, he identified himself with the urban relief cause by appointing Harry Hopkins to head the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. As the depression deepened, he assembled the "Brain Trust," a group of faculty members from Columbia University, to formulate with him a comprehensive program for resolving the economic collapse that had begun in 1929.

1932 - Elected President

FDR was nominated at the Democratic National Convention over the active opposition of Al Smith, who had become estranged from FDR (on becoming Governor of New York, FDR had decided to keep neither Al Smith's political advisor, Belle Moskowitz, nor Robert Moses, Smith's Secretary of State). In a dramatic gesture, FDR flew to the Convention in Chicago to accept the nomination. This was the first time that a nominee had gone to a convention to make an acceptance speech. It was in the course of that speech that he said: I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." - thus coining the phrase that would describe his administration's economic recovery and social reform programs.

1933 (March) - Combats the Banking Crisis; Makes First "Fireside Chat"

On the eve of the inauguration, the nation's banking system had collapsed as millions of panicky depositors tried to withdraw savings that the banks had tied up in long-term loans. Approximately 12 to 14 million Americans were unemployed, and business had nearly ground to a halt. In his inaugural address, President Roosevelt told the nation that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" and promised effective leadership in the crisis. That same day he closed the banks by proclamation, summoned a special session of Congress for the passage of emergency banking legislation, and began the process that within a week provided the liquidity that banks needed in order to reopen. The banks also had to regain public confidence, and in his first "fireside chat" radio broadcast to the American people the new president explained his actions and urged the people to stop hoarding cash. Millions obliged as the self-assured new chief executive offered a new, vigorous approach to the nation's problems.

1933 ("The First Hundred Days") - Creation of the "Alphabet Agencies"

During the first three months of the administration there was a flood of legislation which involved all the major economic sectors in an attempt to help rebuild the country's infrastructure and to bring relief and jobs to millions. After a decade of wrangling, Congress enacted a complex new farm bill, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). It provided several mechanisms to help raise agricultural prices, but the one most extensively used involved contractual reductions of surplus crops in return for government payments. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), was the most innovative early New Deal measure. It provided for two major recovery programs-a vastly expanded public works effort, carried out by a Public Works Administration (PWA), and a complex program to regulate American business and ensure fair competition. A National Recovery Administration (NRA) approved and enforced a set of competitive codes for each industry.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established for the conservation of the natural resources of the country - timber, soil, and water - and to provide employment and training for unemployed young men as long as the depression lasted.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) became one of the outstanding and striking successes of the New Deal program almost from its inception and continuing on to the present day, but was the target of bitter attacks by business spokespersons, who considered its program a socialistic, unconstitutional threat to competing private industries. By the terms of the Act, the TVA was directed to operate and build dams; to produce munitions for national defense; to develop new types of fertilizers; to develop the Tennessee River and its tributaries in the interest of navigation, flood control, and the production and distribution of electricity.

Emergency expenditures for relief, also designed to "prime the economic pump," poured into the economy through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).

1935 - Creation of the WPA; Social Security; and Labor Legislation

This year saw the enactment of three of the most significant and important pieces of legislation of the whole New Deal period. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) became the federal government's largest jobs program for unemployed workers. It encompassed an extraordinarily wide array of activities, varying from large construction projects such as Grand Coulee Dam, to employing artists to decorate schools and public buildings such as Coit Tower, to supporting acting groups such as Orson Welles' Mercury Theater, to hiring photographers - such as Dorothea Lange - to document conditions in the country.

The Social Security Act created a program to provide the primary means of assuring a continuing income when family earnings stop or are reduced because of the retirement, death, or disability of any person who contributes to the support of the family.

The Wagner Labor Relations Act governs the labor-management relations of business firms, with the general objective of guaranteeing to employees "the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection." To safeguard these rights and to ensure the orderly exercise of them, the act created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Before the enactment of the NLRA, the federal government had refrained almost entirely from supporting collective bargaining over wages and working conditions and from facilitating the growth of trade unions. The new law marked a significant reversal of this attitude.

1936 - Elected to Second Term

Running on the record of the New Deal, President Roosevelt secured an overwhelming victory over the Republican candidate Alfred M. Landon, Governor of Kansas, who carried only two states - Maine and Vermont

1937 - Conflict Over Supreme Court

In 1935 and 1936 much of the legislation vital to the president's New Deal program such as the National Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act had been held to be unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Referring to them as the "nine old men", President Roosevelt proposed enlarging the size of the Court by adding one new justice for each current justice failing to retire by the age of seventy (up to a maximum of six). Accused of trying to pack the Court in order to secure a more sympathetic forum, he was soundly rebuffed by Congress.

1940 - Runs For an Unprecedented Third Term

The decision to run for reelection reflected both domestic and foreign considerations. Domestically, no clear successor acceptable to the President had emerged during the course of his second term. Overseas, there had been the increasingly aggressive policies of Japan, Italy and Germany during the late thirties; and now there had been the stunning fall of France.

The campaign was fought over domestic issues, not foreign policy. Earlier in the year, President Roosevelt's opponent, Wendell Wilkie, had supported passage of the Selective Service Act (which provided for the first peacetime draft in U.S. history). Although President Roosevelt decisively won, the margin of victory was not nearly as great as in the 1936 election.

1941 - U.S. Becomes the "Arsenal of Democracy"

The crisis in Europe had already led, in 1940, to the buildup of America's defense industries, as well as several actions in support of Britain: the sale of surplus war material in June; and the transfer in September of 50 overaged destroyers in exchange for several naval and air bases.

1941 saw the signing, in March, of the Lend-Lease Act - which would provide billions of dollars in military credits to Britain (and later, the Soviet Union). In July, the U.S. occupied Iceland to deny it to Germany and to provide a base for naval escorts to shipping.

In August, the Atlantic Conference, the first summit meeting between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, resulted in an 8-point declaration of principles outlining aims for a post - war world.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941 - "a day that will live in infamy" - and the subsequent declarations of war on the United States by Germany and Italy, America entered the Second World War.

1942 - President Signs Japanese Internment Order; First Turns in the Tide of War

Ten weeks after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed the executive order which resulted in the internment of over 100,000 Japanese - Americans, the overwhelming majority of whom were American citizens. As a racially based, politically motivated action it stands as a major blemish on the President's wartime record.

In mid year Japan suffered her first military defeat in the naval battle off Midway Island. By year's end, Britain had stood firm in Egypt and the U.S. had invaded North Africa.

1943 - Exercises Personal Diplomacy

Three times during 1943 - at the Casablanca Conference in January, and at the Cairo and Teheran Conferences in November- summit meetings were held to set strategy, enunciate conditions for the ending of the war ("unconditional surrender") and plan for the post-war world.

1944 - Conducts Fourth Campaign for the Presidency

Aging, worn and in ill health, President Roosevelt nevertheless won the election against Thomas E. Dewey in one of the bitterest campaigns ever. Not wishing to have a fight in the Democratic Party over a Vice - Presidential candidate, the President had passed over the sitting Vice - President, Henry Wallace, and selected Senator Harry S. Truman of Missouri.

1945 - Attends His Last Summit Meeting; Death of the President

In early February the "Big Three" - Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin - met at Yalta to resolve questions on Poland and the occupation of Germany, to clarify when the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan and to formulate the structure of the United Nations.

In late March, having returned exhausted from Yalta, the President went to Warm Springs to recuperate. Two weeks later, on April 12th at 3:35 PM, the President died from a cerebral hemorrhage.