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FDR: 'He Knew How to Be President'

It is fashionable today to say the problems of the '30s and '40s were essentially simpler than those that face us now, and it may even be true. But perspective should also persuade us that those same problems were far more serious than those of today and, in some respects, anyway, even more difficult to solve. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had to cope first with the Great Depression and then with World War II. It is a matter of faith among his advocates that he did so magnificently. In general, the historians seem to agree.

President Roosevelt presided over his small White House staff, no swollen bureaucracy in those days, with infinite charm and an encompassing friendliness. We called him "The Boss" when we spoke to each other, but to his face it was always "Mr. President" or, occasionally, "Sir."

The explanation of why FDR was our only four-term President (and, some think, our best) was that he knew how to be President. That connoisseur of Presidents, Professor Richard Neustadt of Harvard, has written that this quality was FDR's most outstanding characteristic. Neustadt, himself a practicing White House staff man with Truman, Kennedy and Johnson, and a close academic student of the other modern Presidencies, once said of Roosevelt:

"No President in this century has had a sharper sense of personal power, a sense of what it is and where it comes from; none has had more hunger for it, few have had more use for it, and only one or two could match his faith in his own competence to use it . . . No modern President has been more nearly master in the White House . . . Roosevelt had a love affair with power in that place. It was an early romance and it lasted all his life.

" . . . Once he became the President of the United States that sense of fitness gave him an extraordinary confidence. Roosevelt, almost alone among our Presidents, had no conception of the office to live up to; he was it. His image of the office was himself-in-office. The memoirs left by his associates agree on this if nothing else; he saw the job of being President as being FDR."

This writer was an appallingly young, overly confident Administrative Assistant to the President. I was, one day, directed by FDR to find a way to shift an able but somewhat troublesome government servant from one agency to another without causing too much trouble in either place. In due

Leaving aside their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon's tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the character of the President and the men around him, and of their way of transacting business. Today, in the fifth of a series of articles by associates of other Presidents, former White House Administrative Assistant James Rowe reminisces about the ambiance in the Roosevelt White House.

course my recommendation was reported back to the President who agreed the shift should be made but thought he would do it in a different way from that which his assistant recommended. I remember arguing, perhaps too vehemently, that my way of doing it was better than his and would cause much less trouble in the bureaucracy. And finally I said "Mr. President, you should do it my way and not yours."

He replied with a beaming smile, "No, James, I do not have to do it your way and I will tell you the reason why. The reason is that, although they may have made a mistake, the people of the United States elected me President, not you." To which the only possible answer was a very quick "Yes, sir!"

FDR believed the way to run the New Deal was by competitive administration and not by the use of orderly channels. The White House was an open place, and access to the President by staff, Cabinet and Congress was relatively easy to gain, at least until Pearl Harbor when the grinding pressures of World War II forced him to become Commander-in-Chief. He felt he learned more about what he should do on various public issues from the public battles and clashes of his Cabinet officers and the bureaucrats who, then as now, would find their way on to the front pages. He received all sorts of information through his own channels from all sorts of people all over the country and the world, not least of whom was Eleanor Roosevelt.

He always seemed to have acquired more knowledge about any issue than his staff had.

Roosevelt was the creator of the modern Presidency. President Hoover, for instance, had one or at most two secretaries. With the expert help of the great Louis Brownlow and with legislative authority from the Congress Roosevelt fashioned the Executive Office of the President. The Executive Office he deliberately kept separate from his personal White House staff. He also received authority to add the "assistants with a passion for anonymity" as part of his personal staff and this writer was one.

FDR drew a sharp line between the President and the Presidency. The Executive Office, which consisted of the Budget Bureau and several other staff agencies, was to serve the institution of the Presidency, whoever might be the incumbent and thus it would fur-



nish continuity. It was not to worry about politics. While it was vastly interested in the merits and costs of legislation, the Executive Office never indulged in negotiations or compromises on such legislation. The White House staff, on the other hand, was to serve and protect FDR himself.

The President had rather definite ideas about keeping his White House

staff small and shunting much of the hard policy work out of the White House to the departments and agencies. He once told Miss Frances Perkins, perhaps the best Secretary of Labor the country ever had, "Fanny, keep that steel strike down in your department, at least until 10 minutes before you have a settlement and then you can bring it here and I will take credit for it!"

Occasionally when he wanted to keep his own strong hand on his "must" legislation he would field his own drafting and lobbying teams, such as Tommy Corcoran and Ben Cohen on financial legislation, backstopped by scores of bright young lawyers around the town who were somewhat derisively nicknamed the "Happy Hot Dogs" (after Felix Frankfurter who had recruited them for Washington service). While technically not on the White House staff, the Corcoran-Cohen team was called in on almost all important matters.

At one time, a Cabinet officer mistakenly thought this writer was keeping him from access to the President and so complained. FDR told me, "If you even give the appearance of blocking off Cabinet officers from me you will need to get another job!" And once when he saw my name mentioned in the papers as attending one or two parties, he told me I was not working hard enough and if I kept getting my name in the society columns I would be looking for another job. Later when I was working day and night and felt

exhausted I told him I needed at least one assistant. He said: "If you need an assistant you aren't doing the job the way I want you to do it!"

Actually he ruled the White House by undiluted charm. No one, particularly members of his own staff, could resist him. I remember a newly elected congressman named Mike Mansfield returning from a stag party FDR had given that night for first-term congressmen telling his wife, Maureen, that he had been prepared, from everything he had read about him, to resist the famous Roosevelt charm. "But," said Mansfield, "he is irresistible." "The Boss" could be, and often was, strictly cold business with plenty of steel. Yet if he had a few minutes of free time he was easily the best conversationalist of this century, with the possible exception of Winston Churchill.

His language was stylish and good but hardly Anglo-Saxon. I cannot remember ever hearing him swear. Grace Tully, his famous secretary, has said he might occasionally utter a "damn" or so in a fairly large meeting while she happened to be taking notes. Invariably, he would turn to Grace and apologize: "Sorry, Grace, I forgot you were here." Evidently, fashions do change.

His one touchstone, his standard, was his country. He seemed prepared to do anything required to advance the public welfare. During the years of preparation for World War II and when the United States was, in one of his immortal phrases, "the Arsenal for Democracy" John Lewis pulled his coal miners out on strike, nearly paralyzing the nation and causing considerable injury to the Allies fighting Hitler. FDR denounced him. There was bitterness everywhere. One day, several weeks after the strike began, I was called into the President's office on an unrelated matter. Just as I walked in he was hanging up the phone and, turning to me with a pleased smile, he said "James, I'll bet you can't guess who I was talking to." It had been Lewis. I said "Mr. President, I hope you told the blankety-blank to go to hell." He replied, "I did nothing of the sort. I have been making peace with him. I have to have that coal, and I'll tell you a secret. I am willing to crawl over to his office on my hands and knees to get it, because the country has to have it." A day or so later the strike was over.

FDR, the first of the modern Presidents, is long gone. But those of us who served him could well borrow from a famous quotation by Mr. Justice Holmes, uttered in another connection:

"Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing."