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Book Review

Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Political Life
by Robert Dallek, Viking, \$40, 692 pp.

How Providence and hunches guided FDR



Franklin D. Roosevelt served as president from 1933 to 1945. His four term presidency oversaw the United States rise from the Great Depression and entrance into World War II.

by Douglas Brinkley

Sometimes Franklin D. Roosevelt could be a man of superstition. When he left New York for his presidential inauguration in early March 1933, he insisted on symbolically taking the exact train route to Washington as Abraham Lincoln had in 1861. And why not? The national malaise and fear were the highest since the Civil War. Unemployment was at a dismal 25 percent. Thirteen million jobless men were looking for work. Hunger and starvation cursed the land. Trust in banks, thousands of which had foreclosed, was almost nonexistent.

Pondering all of these Great Depression woes, Roosevelt invited Democratic operator Jim Farley into his train compartment to kibitz about the dark uncertainty. Everything in America was unraveling. Roosevelt grimly confessed to Farley that no New Deal economic plan would save the cash-strapped nation, only a wellspring of faith in the Almighty God. That Roosevelt's nostrums were anchored around Providence shocked Farley; he didn't know that the president-elect, a nominal Episcopalian, was very religious. Sure enough, in the opening line of his famous "Nothing to Fear" inaugural speech, Roosevelt designed March 4 as a "day of national consecration." And, true to form, throughout his four-term presidency (1933-1945), he delivered radio prayers to God with drumbeat regularity.

Historian Robert Dallek tells this Farley story at the outset of "Franklin Roosevelt: A Political Life," his meticulously researched and authoritative biography of our 32nd president, to remind readers that FDR constantly governed on whims, hunches and hail-Mary passes. His ballyhooed Hundred Days programs — including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which put unemployed men to work planting trees; the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which built dams to create cheap hydroelectricity in the South; and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), which raised crop prices to help farmers — were off-the-charts experimental. The early New Deal was like a county fair where grand policy ideas were hurled against the national barn to see what stuck. Roosevelt's guiding ethos was giant steps aimed at humanizing the U.S. industrial system. "The truth is that Roosevelt had no more idea of how he would restore the country's prosperity," Dallek writes about 1933, "than Abraham Lincoln had in trying to persuade the rebellious southern states to remain in the Union."

Adequate single-volume biographies about FDR abound. But none are as heroically objective and wide-angled as this fine Dallek effort. A master synthesizer of primary sources, Dallek, who previously won the Bancroft Prize, brilliantly deliberates on Roosevelt's Hudson Valley childhood, tenure as assistant secretary of the Navy (1913-1920) and years as a progressive New York governor (1929-1932). The anchor of this book, however, is the White House years. While thoroughly admiring of Roosevelt's savvy World War II commander in chief decisions such as in French Morocco and Algeria (Operation Torch), Sicily (Operation Husky), and Italy (Operation Avalanche), Dallek doesn't flinch from tackling low-water marks such as his lackluster assistance to European Jews being mass slaughtered by Adolf Hitler. Truly reprehensible to Dallek was Roosevelt's horrific mistake of opening Japanese American internment camps in Western states after Pearl Harbor. Concerning the latter, Dallek offers that President Trump's proposal to "round up" American Muslims in 2016 invoked the "injustice visited on Americans of Japanese descent decades ago and Roosevelt's expediency in the matter."

I found Dallek's spirited examination of how Roosevelt interacted with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill from 1940 to 1945 the most enthralling part of this biography. Starting in 1940, Churchill's plea for U.S. intervention in World War II became increasingly desperate. With what Labor Secretary Frances Perkins called a "flash of almost clairvoyant knowledge," Roosevelt determined that what Britain needed, pure and simple, was massive financial assistance to outlast Germany. Constrained by Congress from appropriating U.S. foreign aid to Britain, Roosevelt constructed an elaborate Lend-Lease deal, a political masterpiece that ended any pretense of neutrality. Billions of dollars worth of war materiel made its way across the Atlantic. "Now, what I am trying to do is eliminate the dollar sign," Roosevelt said of his scheme, "and that is something brand new . . . get rid of the silly, foolish old dollar sign."

By tapping into the vast correspondence between Churchill and Roosevelt, Dallek discerns a more strained relationship between the leaders than presupposed. In the crucial days following the D-Day invasion (June 6, 1944) Churchill berated the president for promoting a wrongheaded military strategy. Churchill wanted to abruptly abandon the slated Allied assault on southern France (ANVIL) in favor of a swift liberation of Yugoslavia and Greece, with the ultimate trophy being the capture of Vienna. Roosevelt, quite correctly, worried that Churchill's plan would unnecessarily provoke Joseph Stalin's paranoia about British troops invading the Eastern Front. Waving off Churchill's dissent, Roosevelt stubbornly ordered the ANVIL attack to commence.

A feud, or what Churchill called a "very full argument," ensued. The prime minister virtually begged Roosevelt to deviate from the script; he stubbornly refused. "History will never forgive us if we lose precious time and lives in indecision and debate," Roosevelt tried to calm Churchill. "Let us go ahead with our plan. Finally, for purely political consideration over here I would never survive even a slight setback . . . if it were known that fairly large forces had been diverted to the Balkans."

Roosevelt was running for reelection, for a fourth term, against New York governor Thomas Dewey. To suddenly back a radical Yugoslavia-Greece plan, Roosevelt intuited, wasn't smart politics. This rationale infuriated Churchill. "The whole campaign in Italy is being ruined," he fumed, "and ruined for what?" Churchill, in a last-ditch effort, savaged FDR for his "absolute perverse strategy," sarcastically offering to travel to Washington to help him run the White House. Eventually, Churchill calmed down, but he couldn't resist throwing the last fiery dart, falsely prophesizing that ANVIL was "the first major strategic and political error for which we two have to be responsible."

Not everything is political in Dallek's biography. There are emotional stories of FDR's strained marriage to Eleanor Roosevelt, worsened because of his relationships with Daisy Suckley and Lucy Rutherford. A sense of guilt, it seemed, haunted Roosevelt for betraying his marriage. When Eleanor asked him to proofread her 1937 book, "This Is My Story," he tellingly persuaded her to excise one line: "If you love a person, you can forgive big things. Infidelity under certain circumstances need not ruin a relationship."

Echoing much of what Joseph Lelyveld documented in "His Final Battle" (2016), Dallek ably analyzes Roosevelt's litany of illnesses in physician-like detail. By late 1944 and early 1945, he

makes it abundantly clear, Roosevelt was dying. Those close to the president pleaded with him to dial back obligations, to stop the frenetic traveling, to take regular naps to avoid cardiac arrest. When Woodrow Wilson's widow visited FDR at the White House around Christmas in 1944, she was aghast at his physical deterioration. "He looks," she told Perkins, "exactly as my husband looked when he went into his decline." Even FDR himself complained of "coughing & sneezing & feeling like a boiled owl."

When Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, at his home in Warm Springs, Ga., even foes and adversaries wept. Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio, a tough critic of the New Deal, acknowledged openly that FDR's passing removed the "greatest figure of our time." Churchill was devastated to learn the news. "I felt," he said, "as if I had been struck a physical blow."

Luckily for us, Roosevelt is with us again in Dallek's outstanding cradle-to-grave study. When it comes to choosing the two indispensable presidents in U.S. history, Dallek places Roosevelt alongside Abraham Lincoln, the other great improviser with Providence on his side.

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