

9 Franklin D. Roosevelt

Top 100 Americans

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (January 30, 1882 – April 12, 1945), commonly known by his initials FDR, was an American statesman and political leader who served as the 32nd President of the United States. A Democrat, he won a record four elections and served from March 1933 to his death in April 1945. He was a central figure in world events during the mid-20th century, leading the United States during a time of worldwide economic depression and total war. His program for relief, recovery and reform, known as the New Deal, involved the great expansion of the role of the federal government in the economy. A dominant leader of the Democratic Party, he built the New Deal Coalition that united labor unions, big city machines, white ethnics, African Americans, and rural white Southerners. The Coalition realigned American politics after 1932, creating the Fifth Party System and defining American liberalism for the middle third of the 20th century.

Roosevelt defeated incumbent Republican president Herbert Hoover in November 1932, at the depth of the Great Depression. Energized by his personal victory over polio, FDR used his persistent optimism and activism to renew the national spirit. In his first hundred days in office, which began March 4, 1933, Roosevelt spearheaded major legislation and issued a profusion of executive orders that instituted the New Deal—a variety of programs designed to produce relief (government jobs for the unemployed), recovery (economic growth), and reform (through regulation of Wall Street, banks and transportation). He created numerous programs to support the unemployed and farmers, and to encourage labor union growth while more closely regulating business and high finance. The repeal of Prohibition added to his popularity, helping him win reelection by a landslide in 1936. The economy improved rapidly from 1933 to 1937, but then relapsed into a deep recession in 1937–38. The bipartisan Conservative Coalition that formed in 1937 prevented his packing the Supreme Court, blocked all proposals for major liberal legislation (apart from a minimum wage law), and abolished many of the relief programs when unemployment practically vanished during World War II. Most of the regulations on business continued in effect until they ended about 1975–1985, except for the regulation of Wall Street by the still existing Securities and Exchange Commission. Along with several smaller programs, major surviving programs include the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and Social Security.

As World War II loomed after 1938, with the Japanese invasion of China and the aggression of Nazi Germany, Roosevelt gave strong diplomatic and financial support to China and Great Britain, while remaining officially neutral. His goal was to make America the "Arsenal of Democracy", which would supply munitions to the Allies. In March 1941, Roosevelt, with Congressional approval, provided Lend-Lease aid to wartime allies Britain and China. Assisted by his top aide Harry Hopkins, he worked closely with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in leading the Allies against Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan in World War II. With very strong national support, he made war on Japan and Germany after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, calling it a "date which will live in infamy". He supervised the mobilization of the U.S. economy to support the Allied war effort, but also ordered the internment of 100,000 Japanese American civilians. As an active military leader, Roosevelt implemented an overall war strategy on two fronts that ended in the defeat of the Axis Powers and the development of the world's first nuclear bomb (commonly called the atom bomb at the time). His work also influenced the later creation of the United Nations and Bretton Woods. During the war, unemployment dropped to 2%, relief programs largely ended, and the industrial economy grew rapidly to new heights as millions of people moved to wartime factory jobs or entered military service. However, Roosevelt's health seriously declined during the war years, and he died three months into his fourth term. Roosevelt himself now became the touchstone of polarization in American politics. He had become the great hero to liberals and the great villain to conservatives. He is consistently rated by scholars as one of the top three U.S. Presidents, along with Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.