

The Roosevelt Myth

A Review of *FDR, 1892–1945: A Centenary Remembrance*,
by Joseph Alsop

by Murray N. Rothbard

When Ronald Reagan highlighted a quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt in his acceptance speech at the 1980 Republican convention, it seemed like a clever tactical ploy to gain the votes of blue-collar workers with long memories. But it has since become clear that this was a mark of genuine devotion, and that FDR truly serves as a presidential model for Reagan. In this Roosevelt centennial year, moreover, the conservative, movement, led by journalists George Will and Vermont Royster, has hastened to celebrate what Will has called "the splendid legacy of FDR" and what Royster has termed – in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* no less – the "greatness" of FDR, "that quality of being larger than other men, seeming larger than life." While not exactly a conservative, Joseph Alsop is at least a Rockefeller Republican, and so it is fitting that this kinsman of FDR should now be performing the major act of integrating Roosevelt into the pantheon of American heroes. A gushing memorial valentine, Alsop's book has been excerpted, cited, and generally treated as the official line on Franklin Roosevelt.

[The Antidote to Alsop](#)

What's going on here? How can men who aim to Get The Government Off Our Backs apotheosize the very man who entrenched the welfare state in America? Surely the perfervid conservative embrace of the shade of FDR suggests far more than the usual centennial pieties and the fact that, with the striking exceptions of Hitler and Stalin, the mere passage of time for most Americans seems to cast a fuzzy bipartisan glow upon all defunct heads of state.

In fact, there is a far more sinister process at work. Americans have long shown an inclination to invest The President with mythic powers and significance not even accurately attributable to absolute monarchs and tribal chiefs of yore. Whatever happens in any era, in the

economy, the society, or the culture as well as to all individual goals and aspirations is loaded onto this chimerical figure. The president becomes the embodiment of the entire country, even of much of the globe. But in that case, for *us* to be great, we must have a Great President; hence the continuing quest for chief executives who can be made to fit the mold of the mythic hero. We have heard much in recent decades of the dangers of "elitist history"; but this is elitist history gone berserk.

All this, of course, fits with the modern buildup of the Imperial Presidency, of which FDR is the founder and grand exemplar. If one reads the simpering tributes of Reagan and other conservatives, as well as of liberals, centrists, and the myriad other worshippers at the Rooseveltian shrine, one sees always the theme of the Leader: "He brought us hope." "He saw us through hard times." "He brought greatness to the presidency."

For Ronald Reagan himself, the role model is even clearer. Reagan sees FDR as his prototype, the Great Communicator. What "Ronnie" is to the age of television, FDR was to the age of radio. He was virtually Mr. Radio, as Roosevelt's mellifluous voice, in the unfamiliar patrician tones that Americans admire, played on his audience in masterly fashion. Reagan gushes in remembrance: "When he came on, it was *the* biggest radio audience ever.... This was one of his great strengths...his ability to communicate." One consummate actor salutes another.

A hallmark of myth is that the mythmakers don't seem to care that their generalizations cannot be grounded in hard facts. Roosevelt brought us hope in the depression? Perhaps. But in the concrete all he brought us was a decade more of depression, which we did not get out of until World War II. If we wished to be unkind, we might surmise that Reagan is enchanted with FDR's ability to hang the Depression as an albatross around the neck of Herbert Hoover forever, and to absolve himself of all responsibility, while he basked in the glow of appreciation for bringing us the tinsel of good cheer in hard times. Reagan is attempting the similar ploy of blaming Jimmy Carter and other predecessors for his own record deficits, but *this* time the hokum doesn't seem to wash.

None of the mythmakers excels Joseph Alsop in sundering the glittering and dearly cherished generality from the hard facts. Thus, in summing up FDR's personality, Alsop reveals an unlovely picture: a man who enjoyed encouraging his subordinates to fight it out in public; a man who discarded people "when they ceased to be useful to him"; an obtuse and insensitive husband; an enigmatic pragmatist interested only in "results"; and – what Alsop doesn't sufficiently stress – a politician notorious even in that hypocritical company for giving any man he saw the strong impression that the two of them were in complete agreement. But, after that damning litany, Alsop leaps to the conclusion that FDR was a "truly good man." Why? In an unconscious self-parody, because Roosevelt "was the unrelenting enemy of misery, poverty, oppression, cruelty... and every other form

of nastiness and source of unhappiness that human beings and their societies are given to, and he was the stout friend of plenty, generosity, decency" and on and on. "In truth," Alsop concludes, "he loved the light and loathed the darkness...." Will the friends of misery, darkness, cruelty, and nastiness, and the enemies of plenty, generosity, and decency please stand up? The author of this mawkish claptrap is called by his publishers "coolly admiring" of FDR; one would hate to see what Viking Press might consider an excess of hot-eyed adulation.

In one of his most bizarre judgments, solemnly repeated by *Time* magazine, Alsop asserts – again without the slightest evidence – that Roosevelt put an end to WASP rule in America and brought the Catholic ethnics into the American system. *How* he is supposed to have done so, Alsop keeps to himself. And one can only comment that when Alsop goes on to attribute all opposition to Roosevelt to the virus of WASP bigotry, he forgets that there were a host of Catholic ethnics second to none in their intransigent hostility to FDR.

One test of the mettle of any Roosevelt biographer is how he handles the Warm Springs Foundation story. Alsop repeats the self-serving half-truth trumpeted by FDR himself that he lost two-thirds of his personal funds investing in the Warm Springs spa for polio victims. What he conspicuously fails to add is that Roosevelt's condition for running for governor of New York in 1928 was that DuPont magnate John J. Raskob, the major backer of Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, bail out his Warm Springs losses. Nor is there any mention of FDR's pioneering the kind of spying on law-abiding American citizens that became notorious among his successors. As political scientist Allen Weinstein pointed out in a refreshing article in the *Washington Post*, the recently discovered fact that Roosevelt secretly bugged the Oval Office and discussed with aides the possibility of using "dirty tricks" on Wendell Willkie in the 1940 campaign should be seen in a wider context: the use of secret agents and wiretapping to keep track of and harass his political opponents. Roosevelt, for instance, had a wiretap as well as an informer planted in the offices of the great anti-interventionist paper, the *Washington Times-Herald*. Other critics of Roosevelt's war policy were similarly bugged; and J. Edgar Hoover was given instructions to monitor the affair going on between young John F. Kennedy and Inga Arvad, a young reporter on the *Times-Herald*. In short, many of the excesses we associate with the subsequent baddies in the Oval Office have their real origin in the "great" FDR.

But Reagan and his fellow conservatives are not merely engaged in embracing the Imperial Presidency. In hailing FDR they are symbolizing their enthusiastic acceptance of the whole welfare-warfare state, which a domineering executive power has built in America. Standing on the shoulders of his political mentor, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt was the premier figure in converting America from roughly a land of individualism to a country dominated by a Big Government wielding imperial power at home and abroad. Despite all the rhetoric about Getting Government Off Our Backs, the conservative movement intends nothing of the kind. In the course of a

paean to FDR, George Will hails Roosevelt's irrevocable redefinition of the relationship of the citizen to the central government." The "redefinition" was in fact a restructuring of an entire country. Once a land where the citizen had been sovereign and the government at least apparently his servant, FDR above all others forged a nation where the government is master and the citizen a hapless pawn.

As Will puts it, before Roosevelt "government had acknowledged only a duty to produce 'conditions' in which people could pursue happiness." But since FDR, government "has the final responsibility for the well-being of its citizenship"; it is an "agency for delivering a measure of happiness." I don't know how much happiness government has brought to any of us lately, but in any case if government has final responsibility it must have the ultimate power to tell us what to do and to make sure that we do it. In that sort of a post-Rooseveltian world, our happiness and well-being are highly problematic; but the power over us is not.

But it is the world empire Roosevelt gave us that truly enchants conservatives of every stripe, from Will to Reagan to Alsop. As George Will rhapsodizes: "When FDR died in 1945 America was more supreme than Great Britain after Waterloo, than the France of Louis XIV – than any power since the Roman Empire. And it had a central government commensurate with that role." *That's* what the current apotheosis of FDR is all about. Conservatives

may quarrel with the details of what Roosevelt did with the American empire, but they can forgive him everything for the mighty power that he has secured. (Both Will and Alsop dismiss Roosevelt's dealings with Stalin as of little moment, though Will is a bit more critical. Alsop manages to shift the blame to FDR's fatigue and ill-health combined with pro-Soviet misinformation disseminated by the *New York Times*.)

Reaganites might subtract a few food stamps here and add a few missiles there, they might transpose a few of the formerly designated "good nations" and "bad nations," but they are clearly content with the legacy of Big Government at home and abroad that Franklin Roosevelt left us. Conservatives, liberals, and all breeds in between are content to salute the centennial and dance together around the Maypole of the status quo.