

FDR and Me

The final segment of Ken Burns' "The Roosevelts" described FDR's last years. They are years that I remember vividly. From the time I was in elementary school, I worshipped FDR. He was more than my hero. I deified him. To me, he saved America from the depression, then saved the world from Hitler. He was concerned about the poor, the powerless, minorities (me), even though he was rich, Protestant, and from one of America's most prominent families.

I was born in 1927, grew up in the depression. My father died in 1931. When FDR was elected in November 1932, and I was almost five, it was clear that Herbert Hoover did not know what to do about the depression, but FDR was going to end it. He created the WPA, CCC, NRA, and provided relief for the poor and unemployed, including my mother and me.

In 1936, my mother bought our first radio in order to listen to the speeches of FDR, and to his Fireside Chats. When school started in September 1936, I filled my pockets with chalk, and for the next two months wrote all over the neighborhood, "VOTE FOR FDR." I never left the house without my FDR button on my shirt or sweater. I had collected lots of FDR buttons in 1936, which became the start of my political button collection. For the next several years, I kept scrap books filled with pictures of FDR. Everybody knew Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays. I knew FDR's birthday.

To me, FDR could do no wrong. He was going to get America out of the depression, get people back to work. He was a friend of the poor, and he was a friend of the Jews, and since I was poor and Jewish, he was my friend. And he was a friend of the workers. After a few years, my mother found a job in a WPA garment factory, and when we entered World War II, the depression ended, and she was able to return to work in a union shop as a cloak finisher.

I felt certain that FDR wanted America to fight Hitler, but he had to deal with the isolationists. He transformed the US into the "arsenal of democracy," and workers had jobs again. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, I listened, spellbound, in our school auditorium the following day as he denounced the attack as "a date which will live in infamy." I grew up—from the age of 9 to 17—listening to FDR. No one had a voice like his. No one could speak to the American people like FDR.

I knew there were a lot of things he would have liked to do, but there was opposition from Republicans in Congress, isolationists, Southern Democrats, and anti-Semites. I couldn't have asked for a President more pro-labor. He appointed Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor, he supported every piece of pro-labor piece of legislation. Labor leaders had access to the White House, which they never had before. I loved the pictures of FDR with David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, Phil Murray, William Green, Walter Reuther, even John L. Lewis.

In 1944, FDR had been in office for more than 11 years, the only President I knew, and the only president who served more than two terms. He ended the depression; now he had to end the war. I was shocked when I looked through my pictures of him and saw how old he had become. And he was going to run for a fourth term! I campaigned for him in 1936, in 1940, and now again in 1944. In October, he rode in a motorcade in New York, in the rain, in an open car. The route passed my neighborhood, Prospect Avenue, and I was there. He waved to me, and I waved back and cheered. He looked tired, but he had a big smile. I followed the news obsessively during this period.

My cousin Gabie was in the Army, and he was shipped overseas in March 1945. We had been corresponding from the time he was drafted. I had an image of Gabie as a GI, fighting for his country, and an image of FDR as Commander in Chief, overseeing America's role in the fighting. In April, FDR went to Warm Springs to rest, and on April 12, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Gabie was killed in Germany on April 29, 1945. Spring of 1945 was a time of deep mourning for me. Both losses were devastating. I felt both of them personally. The war in Europe, VE Day, ended in May. But at what cost.

Addendum. During FDR's lifetime, I saw him as the best friend the Jewish people could have. I wanted to believe that FDR did all he could to rescue Europe's Jews from the Holocaust. Anti-Semitic Roosevelt-haters said he was controlled by the Jews. They called him "Rosenfeld" and his Administration "The Jew Deal." Wasn't Henry Morgenthau in his cabinet? Weren't Samuel Rosenman and Bernard Baruch his advisors? Didn't he appoint Felix Frankfurter to the Supreme Court? In 1944, they said that whatever he did, he had to "clear it with Sidney." Sidney, being Sidney Hillman, President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

I also wanted to believe that he was committed to racial equality, and that he opposed discrimination and segregation. He spoke out against lynching. Blacks found work in the various Federal jobs programs that he initiated: the WPA, PWA, CCC, and the NYA. And in June 1941, he signed an Executive Order creating a Fair Employment Practices Commission, banning job discrimination by Federal agencies and Federal contractors.

Years later, I heard that he did not do that much to save the Jews. He deferred to the State Department, which was filled with anti-Semites. He did not intercede to rescue the 900 Jewish refugees on board the SS St. Louis in May 1939. In 1956, I heard Jan Karski, a leader of the Polish underground, describe his meeting with FDR prior to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Karski told him of the plight of the Polish Jews, and the inevitable fate of the Jews herded into the Warsaw Ghetto. He told FDR about Nazi death camps, and FDR assured Karski that he would take action, but he did nothing.

Years later, I learned that FDR did little with regard to civil rights. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who spoke out for racial equality, who was instrumental in having Marian Anderson sing at the Lincoln Memorial when denied the use of the DAR's Constitution Hall. And it was Eleanor who persuaded FDR to issue the FEPC Executive Order, when

A. Philip Randolph threatened the first March on Washington if it was not issued. FDR was worried about race riots, and, as a politician, losing the support of the Dixiecrats. It was Eleanor who visited workers in their factories and mines, and the poor and minorities in their slums and ghettos. (In 1952 when I was an organizer for local 38, ILGWU, we invited Mrs. Roosevelt to address our local union meeting. She did.)

Not only did FDR not press for anti-lynching legislation he did nothing about segregated Federally assisted housing. The armed forces were segregated, and in February 1942, he issued another Executive Order, which put Japanese citizens in internment camps. It was painful to learn that the President that I worshipped was not as committed to equal rights as I would have liked. True, we are all a product of our times. I wanted my FDR to be ahead of his times. None of us is perfect, except maybe Eleanor Roosevelt.

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