

THE LEGACY OF FDR

by William E. Leuchtenburg

During his long Presidency, Franklin Delano Roosevelt so dominated the political culture that historians have called the period "the age of Roosevelt." In the years since his death, he has continued to cast a giant shadow, especially on the White House. He has had the greatest influence, understandably, on the first three Democrats to succeed him—Harry S Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. But he has left his mark, too, on Republicans and upon those more remote from the heyday of the New Deal, not excepting the present incumbent.

Each of FDR's successors has, in different ways, had to cope with the question of how to comport himself with respect to the Roosevelt tradition. Much of America's political history since 1945 is a reflection of their responses.

On April 12, 1945, as World War II neared its end, Vice President Harry Truman was presiding over a dull Senate debate on a water treaty. When it ended, shortly before sunset, he made his way to the office of the Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn. No sooner had he arrived than the Vice President was told to call the White House. The President's press secretary wanted him to come down right away, quickly and quietly. When he got there, Mrs. Roosevelt came up to him, put her arm on his shoulder, and said softly, "Harry, the President is dead." Franklin D. Roosevelt had died that afternoon in Warm Springs, Georgia. After a moment of shock, Truman recovered himself enough to ask Mrs. Roosevelt: "Is there anything I can do for you?" She replied: "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."

That was an odd remark to make to someone who had just ascended to the highest office in the land, but Truman saw immediately that he was indeed "in trouble." So totally had Roosevelt embodied everyone's notion of who "the President" was that it seemed incomprehensible that anyone else could hold the office. Many Americans could not remember when there had been anyone but Roosevelt in the White House, and they had assumed without thinking about it that he would be there forever. During the 1944 campaign, according to one story, a man said to a loyal Democrat who had just become father of a

baby boy, "Maybe he'll grow up to be President." "Why?" the man replied, "What's the matter with Roosevelt?"

Truman himself found it difficult to assume his role as Roosevelt's successor. Five months after he took office, he was still writing Eleanor Roosevelt, "I never think of anyone as the President, but Mr. Roosevelt." Truman's deference to Eleanor Roosevelt went well beyond personal solicitude. He began his Presidency, according to one account, by regularly phoning his predecessor's widow to find out "what *he* would have done about this or that great problem." The President "consulted Mrs. Roosevelt as he might have consulted a medium."

Roosevelt's "Fifth Term"?

Many of those who had been close to Roosevelt doubted that Truman had a proper appreciation of liberal values or the capacity to translate those values into action. The head of the Tennessee Valley Authority wrote in his journal his response to the news of FDR's death: "Complete unbelief. That was first. Then a sick, hopeless feeling. Then consternation at the thought of that Throttlebottom, Truman. 'The country and the world doesn't deserve to be left this way, with Truman at the head of the country at such a time.'" Some New Dealers decided to abandon the new administration, while others were forced out. By the time of the 1946 midterm elections, little more than a year after V-J Day, not one member of the Roosevelt Cabinet of April 1945 remained.

During the 1946 elections, Truman's stock fell so low that the Democratic national chairman told the President to stay out of sight, and the party turned to recordings of Roosevelt's voice instead. In one radio commercial, a discussion of the meat shortage, a voice announced, "Here's what President Roosevelt had to say about it," although the shortage had developed after Roosevelt was in the grave. Worse yet, the Democratic Party's congressional candidates, running for the first time in 16 years without Roosevelt in the White House, lost their majority in both House and Senate. Truman was blamed, not altogether fairly, for lacking FDR's magic touch.

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The end of World War II brought a burst of prosperity, not the new depression that many had predicted. New Deal-style programs, however, were not dismantled but expanded.



As Truman entered the 1948 presidential campaign, he found that much of the contest centered not on what new steps the country should take, but on who was the real heir to Franklin Roosevelt: Truman, or his predecessor in the Vice Presidency, Henry Wallace, who ran as the third-party Progressive candidate. One journalist commented, "Nothing quite like this has happened since the turbulent debate over Lenin's will."

To offset Wallace's appeal to liberals, Truman deliberately based his campaign on an appeal to memories of Roosevelt and the New Deal. "Think of the gains you've obtained in the last 16 years—higher wages, Social Security, unemployment compensation, federal loans to save your homes and a thousand other things," he said. Like Roosevelt after 1932, he campaigned less against his current Republican rival than against Herbert Hoover. Though the odds against him seemed insurmountable, Truman confounded the experts by coming home a winner. (The Democrats also returned to power in the Senate and House.)

Yet even his upset triumph did not get Truman out from under Roosevelt's shadow. True, people paid tribute to his grit. But all Truman had done, they said, was to scrape by on the basis of the political coalition that Roosevelt had put together.

One of Winston Churchill's American correspondents held a similar view. The victory, Churchill was told, was the result of the "continuation of the policies which had been in effect for the last 16 years." The author of the letter: Harry Truman.

The aftermath was even more troubling for Truman. He had, all along, viewed his role as being that of a caretaker President filling out Roosevelt's fourth term. But now he thought he had been elected in his own right, and everything would be different. It was not to be.

In 1949, Truman tried to establish his own identity by offering a program under a different rubric, the "Fair Deal," with some proposals—such as national health insurance, federal aid to education, and civil rights legislation—that moved a step beyond the Roosevelt agenda. (All of these proposals went down to defeat in Congress.) However, critics regarded the Fair Deal as little more than a warmed-over New Deal; one called Truman's tenure after 1948 "Roosevelt's Fifth Term."

As a consequence, Truman, who had thought of himself as FDR's faithful servant, took a more questioning look at the Roosevelt heritage, particularly in one respect. Long before his term was scheduled to expire, Truman decided not to run for re-election because he disapproved of his predecessor's example in breaking the two-term tradition.

In an April 1950 memorandum, Truman stated: "There is a lure in power. It can get into a man's blood just as gambling and lust for money have been known to do. . . . When we forget the examples of such men as Washington, Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, all of whom could have had a continuation in the office, then we will start down the road to dictatorship and ruin. I know I could be elected again and continue to break the old precedent as it was broken by F.D.R. It should not be done."

Frustrations

To Truman, who had a keen interest in his place in history, it could not help but seem unfair that he was being perceived only as FDR's stand-in. To be sure, Truman inherited a great many things from Franklin Roosevelt: a broad view of the prerogatives of the chief executive, a legacy of New Deal statutes and agencies, a legislative agenda, a matrix of foreign policy commitments and institutions, a corps of seasoned administrators with ties to academe, and a successful electoral coalition. Yet Truman made his own distinctive contributions—in domestic affairs, a greater emphasis on civil rights, notably in desegregating the military; in foreign policy, the Marshall Plan, the

Berlin airlift, and the intervention to rescue South Korea from communist invasion. But he never managed to walk out from under the giant shadow cast by FDR.

Ten days after Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933, a prominent financier wrote to him: "I just stopped off at Providence to see my oldest daughter at the Sacred Heart Convent. The Mother Superior of the Convent, a real saintly woman, said the nuns were praying for you and then made a remarkable statement for a religious woman to make, 'That since your inauguration peace seemed to come on the earth; in fact it seemed like another resurrection.'" The man who sent Roosevelt this report was Joseph P. Kennedy.

Family Feud

Five years later, a former Secretary of State met with Joe Kennedy and found that he had a very different attitude toward Roosevelt. Henry Stimson noted in his diary: "Speaking of the effect of [the New Deal] upon himself, Kennedy said that a few years ago he thought he had made money enough to provide for his children. He now saw it likely to be all gone and he lay awake nights over it."

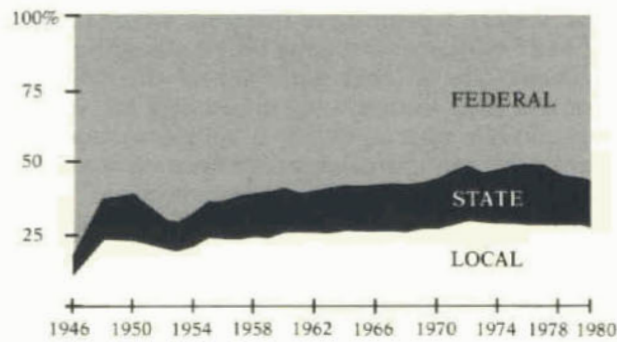
These two episodes indicate the parameters of the attitudes toward Roosevelt that John Kennedy absorbed as a young man. They may help to explain his failure to share the admiration of other Democrats of his generation for Roosevelt and the detachment with which he viewed the New Deal.

To be sure, the young Jack Kennedy could not escape an awareness of Franklin Roosevelt. He was 15 when Roosevelt came to power, 16 when his father became chairman of the Securities Exchange Commission and hence was linked to FDR in any newspaper Jack was likely to read. Furthermore, Joe Kennedy ran a remarkable dinner table. "I can hardly remember a mealtime," Robert Kennedy later said, "when the conversation was not dominated by what Franklin D. Roosevelt was doing or what was happening around the world."

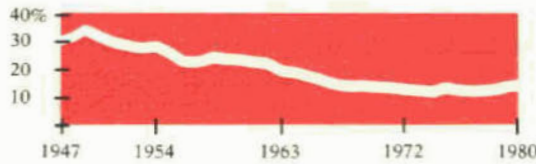
Still, it is striking how little impact Roosevelt appears to have had on Jack Kennedy in his youth. Much of the time he was at school, away from his father and cut off from the events of the Great Depression. "Please send me the Litary [sic] Digest," he wrote from the Canterbury School in the fall of 1930, "because I did not know about the Market Slump until a long time after, or a paper. Please send me some golf balls." More important, he displayed surprisingly little interest in national affairs as his schooling continued and no enthusiasm for FDR.

AFTER THE NEW DEAL AND WORLD WAR II

THE GOVERNMENT SPENDING "MIX"

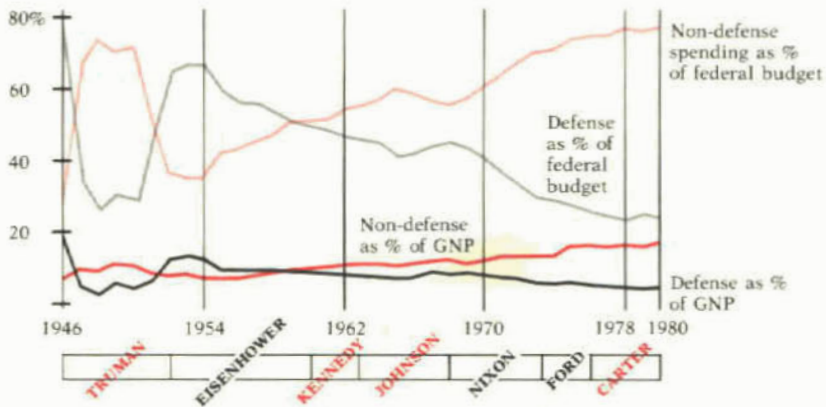


PERCENTAGE OF THE U.S. POPULATION IN POVERTY



Source: Office of Management and Budget; U.S. Council of Economic Advisors; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census and Bureau of Economic Analysis.

NEW TRENDS IN FEDERAL SPENDING



The signals Jack Kennedy received became even more confusing after December 1937 when Roosevelt appointed his father Ambassador to Great Britain. On the one hand, Jack, who was then in his third year at Harvard, understood that Roosevelt had bestowed a singular honor on an Irish Catholic of rude origins. On the other hand, Jack's father, as Ambassador, took an attitude toward foreign affairs markedly different from FDR's. The President became increasingly disturbed at reports that his envoy was saying that the Nazis could not be defeated, that the Jews were running America, and that Roosevelt would go down to defeat in 1940. At the 1940 Democratic convention, Jack's older brother, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., then being groomed for a political career, voted to deny Roosevelt nomination for a third term. The elder Kennedy resigned his post at the Court of St. James's the same year.

Less Profile, More Courage

Worse was still to come. During the war, Joe Kennedy, Jr., the apple of his father's eye, was killed, and Joe Kennedy never forgave Roosevelt for it. In 1945, when the nation was plunged into grief by the death of Roosevelt, Joe Kennedy wrote to his daughter, "There is . . . no doubt that it was a great thing for the country."

In 1946, Jack Kennedy was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. As a Congressman from a Boston waterfront district, however, he showed a curious lack of zeal to identify himself as a Roosevelt liberal. To be sure, he often voted with New Deal Democrats, but not always and with little ardor. He never joined any of the leading liberal organizations, did not seem to feel much empathy for the poor, and voted to slash funds for that archetypal New Deal project, the Tennessee Valley Authority. Furthermore, he more than once traced his country's difficulties in foreign affairs to "a sick Roosevelt" at the 1945 Yalta Conference with Stalin and Churchill.

If Kennedy expressed disdain (in private) for Roosevelt liberals during the 1950s, they returned it in kind. As Burton Hersh, Ted Kennedy's biographer, wrote: "The tendency among the . . . twilight-burnished New Deal liberals of the period . . . was to see this standard-bearer of a second generation bid for

Government spending (state, local, and federal) grew from 22 percent of GNP during the late 1940s to 40 percent in 1980. Postwar federal domestic outlays rose most rapidly under a Republican President, Richard Nixon. Economic growth and government programs, meanwhile, dramatically reduced poverty.



Courtesy of the New York Post.

Senator John F. Kennedy meets FDR's widow, Eleanor, in October 1960. Such symbolic acts helped bolster Kennedy's appeal to liberals.

political power as callow and opportunistic, able to summon up a little too self-consciously . . . a moderately recherché text from Burke or Stendhal or Dante or Duff Cooper.”

He had one particularly sharp critic, Eleanor Roosevelt, the keeper of the liberal flame. When Kennedy went after the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 1956, Mrs. Roosevelt embarrassed him in public by asking him why he had not spoken out against Senator Joseph McCarthy. Kennedy had made himself particularly vulnerable on this question by writing a book with the title *Profiles in Courage*. This opened him to the gibe that he should have shown less profile and more courage. Kennedy, for his part, demonstrated little interest in assuaging the doubts of the Roosevelt liberals.

But in 1960 a change came. When he sought the Democratic presidential nomination that year, a pollster told Kennedy that it was essential to identify himself with FDR and liberal ideals if he hoped to win the critical state of West Virginia, where pic-

tures of Roosevelt could be found in almost every coal miner's home. Kennedy took this advice. He even imported Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. to campaign for him. In one speech, FDR Jr. declared, "My daddy and Jack Kennedy's daddy were just like that!" as he raised two fingers tightly together, a notion that astonished those with long memories. In addition, at Joe Kennedy's suggestion, thousands of letters with FDR Jr.'s signature were mailed to West Virginia voters bearing the postmark of Hyde Park, New York, the ancestral Roosevelt home. Kennedy was victorious in the West Virginia primary and that put him well on his way to winning the presidential nomination.

Eleanor as Den Mother

John Kennedy had now crossed a divide. For the first time in his life, he was identifying himself with Franklin Roosevelt. Some liberals were quick to take him at his word, but one person remained unconvinced: Eleanor Roosevelt. In a last-ditch attempt to deny Kennedy the nomination in favor of Adlai Stevenson, she flew to the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. "It seems absurd," she said with a twist of the knife, "to accept anyone as second best until you have done all you can do to get the best." After Kennedy won the nomination, she left the convention in tears.

As President, Kennedy satisfied some of the skeptics by showing an abiding interest in the style of Franklin Roosevelt. So many of the people who joined Kennedy's White House staff had intellectual backgrounds reminiscent of the New Deal bureaucrats that one Republican, eyeing a cadre of presidential assistants on Capitol Hill, said, "All they need now is Eleanor Roosevelt to be den mother." Kennedy took pains to seek Mrs. Roosevelt's counsel. The political scientist Lawrence Fuchs of Brandeis has observed that as early as the spring of 1961, "the relationship between the President and the Lady was blooming." By the end of Kennedy's first year in office, one could no longer discern even a smoldering ember of the old Kennedy-Roosevelt family animosity.

At a policy level, too, Kennedy drew upon the Roosevelt tradition, at least in part because there was no other source for a Democratic President to turn to for ideas. In the realm of domestic affairs, he reinstated a modest food stamp plan that had originated in the New Deal, put through a watered-down \$900 million Public Works Acceleration Act that derived from the Public Works Administration, modeled both his farm support and conservation programs in part on the legislation of the

1930s, and sketched out plans for an assault on poverty that drew upon FDR's relief operations. No less revealing was the lineage of his foreign policy. He instructed his advisers to come up with a catch phrase like FDR's "Good Neighbor" policy ("Alliance for Progress" was the answer), and he appropriated Roosevelt's term, *quarantine*, for his strategy during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. On the eve of taking office, he said: "In the final analysis, our foreign policy, our relations with other countries, will be most affected by what we do here in the United States. It was Franklin Roosevelt's compassionate actions here at home that built his great reputation abroad. What we are speaks much louder than what we say."

Yet, for all he owed to Roosevelt's style, for all of his efforts to cultivate the Roosevelt family, for all of his indebtedness to particular ideas of the earlier period, neither Kennedy nor the men around him thought that the Roosevelt legacy was really pertinent to the 1960s. On one occasion, holding up a memo from a White House aide, he said to a caller, "Look at that, will you? Seven single-spaced pages. And what a lot of blankety-blank. I dearly love this man. He has a fine mind and some fine ideas, but in this case. . . ." He paused, then said with a trace of a smile, "He is proposing that I conduct myself as Franklin Roosevelt did in 1933, but this fellow can't get through his head that first, I'm not FDR and this is 1963, not 1933. . . . Roosevelt faced one central problem, the Depression, and he could take more liberties with domestic matters than I could possibly enjoy today. Also, in 1933, there were no nuclear bombs or missiles or jet aircraft or Cold War."

Escaping History

No sooner had Kennedy died than historians and publicists felt compelled to assign him a place in history, and once more the comparison to Roosevelt seemed inevitable. Some regretted the fact that Kennedy's premature death denied him the chance to roll up the achievements of an FDR. It was, wrote Arthur Schlesinger, the sympathetic biographer of both men, as if Roosevelt had been killed at the end of 1935. However, other writers, recognizing how much Roosevelt had accomplished by 1935, emphasized how thin Kennedy's record was.

But while historic assessment was going on, something more important was happening: Kennedy was becoming part not of history but of myth. As Theodore White has written: "More than any other President since Lincoln, John F. Kennedy has become myth. The greatest President in the stretch between

them was, of course, Franklin D. Roosevelt; but it was difficult to make myth of Franklin Roosevelt, the country squire, the friendly judge, the approachable politician, the father figure. . . . Kennedy was cut off at the promise, not after the performance, and so it was left to television and his widow, Jacqueline, to frame the man as legend."

Had Kennedy lived, he could not have escaped comparison to Roosevelt, and he might well have been judged never to have measured up to him. But by becoming part of myth rather than history, Kennedy was at last outside the shadow cast by FDR.

The Greatest of Them All?

A short time after Harry Truman left Speaker Rayburn's office on the afternoon of April 12, 1945, a young Texas Congressman showed up. He had first come to Congress in the spring of 1937 in a special election at a crucial moment for President Roosevelt. Only 29 years old, he had run as an outright supporter of FDR's controversial plan to "pack" the recalcitrant Supreme Court with New Deal supporters.

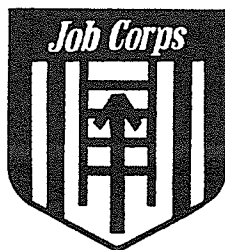
Opponents of Roosevelt's scheme, including most of the press, said that the country was against it, while the President claimed that the people were with him. When the young outsider was victorious, his triumph was hailed as a vote of confidence for Roosevelt. The President himself, then on a fishing vacation in the Gulf of Mexico, arranged to have him at the Galveston pier when his yacht docked and invited him to ride with him on the northbound train from Houston. The new Congressman's name: Lyndon Baines Johnson. Roosevelt offered Johnson some fatherly advice and gave him the telephone number of one of his closest aides.

Washington quickly reached the conclusion that Johnson was FDR's pet Congressman. Roosevelt was once heard to remark, "That's the kind of man I could have been if I hadn't had a Harvard education." The President understood that on most issues he had Johnson's vote in his pocket, and Johnson in turn had easy access to the White House. When Johnson learned the news of Roosevelt's death in Speaker Rayburn's office, he was grief-stricken. "He was like a daddy to me, always. He was the one person I ever knew—anywhere—who was never afraid."

When in November 1963, Johnson succeeded to the Presidency, he declared openly that Franklin Roosevelt was his model. Johnson surrounded himself with advisers who had been luminaries of the New Deal—Abe Fortas, Jim Rowe, Tommy Corcoran (the man whose telephone number FDR had given him

LBJ's GREAT SOCIETY

"We stand at the edge of the greatest era in the life of any nation," President Lyndon Baines Johnson declared in 1964. "For the first time in world history, we have the abundance and the ability to free every man from hopeless want . . . [T]his generation has man's first chance to create a Great Society."



During the next two years, under LBJ's prodding, Congress established no less than 21 new health programs, 17 others for assisting education, 15 for economic development, 12 for urban aid, and four for manpower training. The initial cost when all was in place: \$11 billion in 1966, only 10 percent of the federal budget, which was then just beginning to feel the impact of the Vietnam War.

Some of the Great Society measures were simple (albeit generous) extensions of federal transfer payments, conceived during the New Deal, to the needy. Thus, the number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (first set up under FDR) rose from 3.5 million in 1962 to five million in 1967 (and to 10.8 million in 1980). Created in 1965, federal health insurance for the aged (Medicare) and for the poor (Medicaid) represented steps toward universal coverage that had been on the Democrats' agenda since FDR's day. Together, they cost \$64 billion in 1980.

In various minor ways, Washington had long been involved in local public education. But under LBJ's Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Congress authorized no less than \$1 billion to fund "compensatory" classes for "disadvantaged" children. The Head Start program (first appropriation: \$96 million) was designed to provide special instruction, nutrition, and guidance for some 200,000 disadvantaged preschoolers. And in 1965, Congress passed the Higher Education Act, providing (among other things) loans and

26 years before), Ben Cohen—and he borrowed freely from the New Deal experience. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps served as the inspiration for the Job Corps of Johnson's War on Poverty, and the National Youth Administration of the 1930s became the basis for the Youth Corps of the '60s.

President Johnson's chief assistant, Bill Moyers, once told me: "Johnson's relation to FDR was like that of Plato to Socrates. He was Roosevelt's pupil. Roosevelt may not have known

grants to low-income college students.

Social engineering began with LBJ's ambitious 1964 Economic Opportunity Act — creating the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). One new program was the Job Corps, which brought 30,000 poor teenagers each year to live in 95 special camps where, it was hoped, they would learn both a trade and good work habits. The short-lived Model Cities program — “the Johnson administration's great adventure in structural tinkering,” according to legal scholar Lance Liebman — was supposed to renovate slums and reinforce local social services in a carefully targeted drive to break the “cycle of poverty” in 150 cities.

Much Great Society legislation was aimed at ending racial discrimination. Through such measures as the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which banned discrimination in voting, employment, and public facilities), and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (which outlawed “Jim Crow” restrictions on blacks' right to vote), Congress tried to bring blacks and other minority groups into the American mainstream.

Some endeavors went further. Through creation of OEO's nationwide Legal Services Program, Congress gave minorities a powerful advocate in local courts. The OEO's Community Action Program was designed to enlist the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor in administering local antipoverty efforts. Such federal efforts soon sparked opposition from jealous local elected officials. Apathy, confusion, and red tape plagued urban uplift. Legal services lawyers were accused of radicalism and worse.

Community Action, OEO, and Model Cities no longer exist, even as civil rights laws remain in force. The future of the Legal Services Program (now Corporation) is uncertain. Medicare, Medicaid, student aid: These are the major Great Society innovations that will probably survive in some form for generations. Their intent was clear; their goals were attainable. They involved direct financial help to the needy. These measures, ironically, were closest in spirit to the main thrust of the New Deal that Lyndon Johnson had hoped to leave in the shade.

this, but Johnson was always studying him. The influence of Roosevelt on Johnson is like the mark a prehistoric river leaves in a cavern. If you go to some place like the Luray Caverns, you may not see the old river but you sense its presence everywhere.”

Johnson, though, wanted a great deal more than to be FDR's follower. He had gargantuan ambitions. He would not be content to go down in the history books merely as a successful

President in the Roosevelt tradition. He wanted instead to be "the greatest of them all, the whole bunch of them." And to be the greatest President in history, he would need not merely to match Roosevelt's performance but to exceed it. Indeed, on Election Night 1964, a reporter, expecting him to be jubilant over his landslide victory over Senator Barry Goldwater, was startled to find him peevish instead. He had no doubt that he had beaten Goldwater, but he was still not sure that his percentage of the vote was greater than FDR's in 1936. (It was; Johnson won 61.1 percent of the popular vote versus FDR's 60.8 percent.) Johnson was not running against Goldwater. He was running against Roosevelt.

When I spoke to President Johnson at the White House in the fall of 1965, he made clear to me exactly how he measured himself against Roosevelt. He said: "He did get things done. There was regulation of business, but that was unimportant.



Courtesy of Wide World Photos (Associated Press).

Representative Lyndon Johnson joins FDR in Galveston in May 1937. Johnson's district was a top federal aid recipient during the New Deal.

Social Security and the Wagner Act (the National Labor Relations Act) were all that really amounted to much, and none of it compares to my education act.”

If Johnson’s claims were excessive, it was because Roosevelt was such a hard act to follow. Roosevelt did so many things for the first time that he pre-empted a huge amount of territory. Johnson could rightly claim that “the fabulous 89th Congress” had enacted a bevy of laws that went beyond the New Deal—not only federal aid to education but also Medicare, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and even a program to create “vest pocket” parks in cities. And Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), established in 1964 by the previous Congress, went well beyond the New Deal in attempting to enlist the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor in federal efforts to *eradicate* poverty.

Yet the OEO, budgeted at only \$237 million in 1965, was a small part of Johnson’s program. Much of what he did was merely a gloss on the legislation of the Roosevelt years. Commentators had no doubt about the pedigree. One called the Johnson program a “Second New Deal,” while another wrote flatly, “The Great Society is an attempt to codify the New Deal’s vision of a good society.”

Stumbling over Vietnam

Johnson was unwilling merely to remain in Roosevelt’s shadow not only because of his vaulting ambitions but also because, in one crucial aspect, Johnson thought of FDR as a bad example. He had seen a President win an overwhelming victory at the polls in 1936 and then have his expectations explode only a few months later when the Court-packing bill went down to defeat. Never again would the prospects for New Deal reform be so promising. Johnson, too, had just won a landslide victory. But over lunch in 1964 Johnson told reporters that he meant to avoid Roosevelt’s error. One of those present that day, Tom Wicker, later wrote: “Lyndon Johnson would not . . . carelessly throw away the fruits of his great victory for some unattainable goal, as Roosevelt had done in trying to pack the Supreme Court. But he did. . . . Like Roosevelt before him, he . . . scaled the heights only—in the blindness of his pride—to stumble and fall.”

The stumble and fall came in foreign affairs, where, at least as much as in domestic policy, Franklin Roosevelt served as his model. Johnson was certain that in pressing the war in Vietnam he was doing only what Roosevelt would have done. (It is by no means clear that this is so—Roosevelt, in fact, had been sym-

pathetic to the anti-colonialists in Indochina.) Not only did Johnson analogize the communist challenge in Southeast Asia to that posed by Hitler at Munich, but he even proposed to establish a TVA in the Mekong Basin. By carrying the ideas of the Roosevelt years far beyond FDR's achievement, he anticipated that he would be rewarded with glory that would put Roosevelt in *his* shadow.

However, by early 1968, Johnson had come to realize that he had reached the end of the road. The outcry and domestic disorder over Vietnam led Johnson to recognize that he had not escaped FDR's difficulties of 1937 after all. Roosevelt survived the Court-packing crisis, but for Johnson it was all over.

As he contemplated the painful decision not to seek reelection, the most vivid memory of the Roosevelt years returned to him. "He recalled coming in as a Congressman and seeing FDR immobilized domestically over the Supreme Court issue," Walt Rostow has reported. "He felt that he could beat Nixon but wouldn't be able to accomplish anything in his second term. He had too many 'tin cans' tied to him."

Fading Away?

Even after he left office, he continued to claim that history would vindicate him, but not even a man of Lyndon Johnson's enormous ego could any longer believe that history would say that he had placed Roosevelt in his penumbra.

To some, it seemed that Johnson had come to grief because he had tried to apply FDR's ideas when they had ceased to be germane. The historian Eric Goldman, who served on Johnson's White House staff, has written: "America had been rampaging between the 1930s and the 1960s. The alterations were so swift and so deep that the country was changing right out from under President Lyndon Johnson. [Johnson] was about as contemporary as padded shoulders, a night at the radio, and Clark Gable."

Implicit in such an analysis are two assumptions: that Johnson's last year spelled the end of the Roosevelt tradition and that the Roosevelt legacy is no longer usable.

But both of these contentions are open to challenge.

Every four years, the pundits say that the Roosevelt coalition is finished, and every four years the Democratic voting configuration, though modified, bears a striking resemblance to what it was under FDR. When Jimmy Carter launched his presidential campaign in 1976, he did so not in the traditional place—Detroit's Cadillac Square—but in Warm Springs, Georgia; when he chose to address the country on the energy crisis,

he deliberately chose the format of the fireside chat.

Even Republican Presidents have bowed to the Roosevelt tradition. Eisenhower, though he did not wish to emulate Roosevelt, strengthened many New Deal programs, such as Social Security, and dismantled none. Richard Nixon borrowed from Roosevelt's experience with price controls, while allowing, however grudgingly, rapid growth in the social spending that had begun in the 1930s and increased during the '60s. During the 1980 campaign, Ronald Reagan, who had voted for Roosevelt four times, quoted from FDR so extensively that the *New York Times* entitled its lead editorial on the Republican convention "Franklin Delano Reagan."

Still, the legacy of FDR appears to be waning. Nixon, Carter, and Reagan all have acknowledged the influence of Roosevelt, but largely as a matter of ritual. Carter, the technocrat from Georgia, failed to inspire the elements of the FDR coalition in his party in good part because he was so far removed from the Roosevelt tradition in spirit and substance. Reagan may quote at length from Roosevelt, but at the same time he seeks to dismember New Deal-style programs. He has even suggested that the New Deal was modeled on Italian fascism. And some see evidence in the 1980 election that we have entered a new age in which the shadow of FDR will disappear.

That is not a conclusion one should embrace too quickly. The 1980 outcome gives little evidence of being a radical realignment like that of 1932, and the Republican success may prove to be short-lived. Though there is a widely felt sense that liberal Democrats must rethink their premises, the leaders of the party—Fritz Mondale and Ted Kennedy—are both Roosevelt legatees. No one will any longer live in FDR's shadow, as Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson did, but it may be a considerable time before Roosevelt's presence is not felt at all.
