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The Roosevelt Legacy: How FDR Shaped the Modern Presidency

A Conversation with Patrick Maney

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Q: You wrote in your book *The Roosevelt Presence* that FDR was an incredibly private person, both personally and publicly. And today it seems that politicians have lost any hope of privacy, whether these intrusions are into their personal lives or actively promoted as in their ubiquitous campaign biographies. Are the American people any better off as a result of this, and what components of privacy do you think we should reclaim?

MANEY: Roosevelt was private in the sense that he didn't put his inner life on public display, and partly it came from that patrician upper-class background. Because Roosevelt didn't bare his soul for all to see, many commentators, at the time and later, read into him a huge complexity that I just don't think existed. If you will look at my book, you will find there is an acknowledgement to a student that I had in a class shortly after I had started at Tulane. I was lecturing about Roosevelt – this was long before I wrote this book – and kind of spouting the conventional wisdom that he was an unusually complicated or complex character. And then the student raised his hand, and he said human beings are enormously complex by nature. Wouldn't any historical figure display all sorts of bewildering attributes if subjected to the same scrutiny as FDR, he asked?

And I have no idea what I said in response to that question, but about five years later, I started researching a book on Roosevelt, and that question was really the core of that book. And my argument is that people have read into Roosevelt, including this complexity, things that didn't really exist, attributing to him a mastery of events that neither he nor anyone could have had.

Q: Do you think that's possible today?

MANEY: I don't think so. We live in the age of Oprah, where it's almost required that you have to display your deepest emotions. It's sort of a therapeutic society, but that was not at all Roosevelt's style. He was outgoing. There's no question about that, and very social, but not at all in a personal way. But that is partly the time period; more people were like that then than now. But that was also a good part of the background he came from – that upper-class background, where people of his so-called “station in life.” It was sort of “beneath them” to show a whole lot of personal emotion.

I think that is one of the ways in which American politics has declined or degenerated since Roosevelt's time. It's less policy oriented and focused more on personality, and I think that's relatively recent. The turning point in that development was really with the Kennedys, but particularly with Ted Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. I think it's after that point that private life and public life become one, and they have never been separated since.

Q: Also, in the same sort of vein, you wrote that FDR was a great leader, but largely by nature of his circumstances, as opposed to any moral fiber or training. Could you speak a bit more about that? I'm curious whether you think this applies to our current presidential election, where we're faced with a putative choice between experience and change?

MANEY: Part of my argument is that Roosevelt was really a product of his time. There is this age-old question – Do leaders shape the times or did the times shape them? And I think Roosevelt's greatness is confined in some ways to that time during which he served, and it's not really possible to export the qualities that made him a great president to other times and other places.

One of my arguments is that in trying to emulate Roosevelt, his successors have gone astray because the qualities that made him great were not necessarily the qualities that we needed in a president in the 1970s or '80s or even now. During the Depression, and then later, during the war, his buoyant, life-affirming optimism, was what the country needed most. There are other times when people need to be shaken out of their complacency. And I think maybe we're in those kind of times now, or we have been at least in my lifetime.

Q: In terms of the parallels to the president, it caught our eye when we were looking at your book, about FDR's suggestions that do what Americans have continued to do, and do more of it. Go shopping. Buy things. Sell things, etc., and of course, ringing parallels come up with George W. Bush after 9/11. Do you see a legitimate parallel there?

MANEY: Yes and no. FDR asked people to do those things to help stimulate the economy during the Depression. But during World War II he asked them to sacrifice even when it wasn't necessary for the war effort. For example, his administration

encouraged people to grow vegetables – plant victory gardens in their back yards. There was enough food supply so that people didn't have to grow vegetables for their survival. He realized something that President Bush hasn't. He gave the public a sense of personal stake in the war effort, even those who weren't serving abroad. So for most people it became America's war, not Roosevelt's war. And that sense of participation was critical to the success of the war. So there's much Bush could have learned from Roosevelt on that.

Another thing FDR's administration did that was opposite to Bush was to raise taxes. Roosevelt believed it was immoral for one generation to saddle future generations with heavy debts. But he also believed that if people paid taxes they might complain but they would also have a feeling that they had a greater stake in the war. The withholding of income taxes starts during World War II. Moreover, for the first time in history, a majority of Americans begin to pay the income tax.

Q: That's fascinating, and thank you, for all that context because that stuff is not well known. And I know your talk today is about the legacy of FDR and the modern presidency. Could you say a bit about how the modern presidency has been shaped in the light of FDR?

MANEY: Well, the modern presidency is in some ways the creation of FDR, or at least the legend of FDR. Historians, biographers and the public have a perception of Roosevelt that in some key respects bears only faint resemblance to the real Roosevelt, and it is this perception of Roosevelt, rather than Roosevelt himself that has shaped the modern presidency. Since 1945, he's been the gold standard of presidents, the one most Americans have wanted all of his successors from, Truman to Bush, to be like. The irony is that not even Roosevelt was the Roosevelt of our imaginations. So there have been false expectations, and that's led to easy disillusionment when presidents haven't achieved the Rooseveltian feats that not even Roosevelt achieved.

And then another thing, since Roosevelt, we had kind of a fixation of the presidency. As a result Congress has atrophied. During FDR's years you had some of the greatest and most productive congresses in history. We talk about Roosevelt's New Deal. We could just as easily call it Congress's New Deal. But the false perception that Roosevelt did it all has greatly expanded the president's legislative role and diminished Congress's. It's unbalanced the balance of powers that the Founders envisioned. So that's a way FDR shaped the presidency but not necessarily positively.

Q: Was Roosevelt also the de facto or leader of his party at the time in the same way that presidents are today?

MANEY: Back in the '30s and '40s, parties were much more cohesive and powerful. So the answer is yes and no. Roosevelt was much more of a party leader in his time than presidents now. But that's because the parties just don't carry the weight that they did then. On the other hand, Roosevelt really offended a lot of partisan Democrats because he supported some independents and even a few Republicans for office.

Toward the end of his life, he even talked about forming a third party. Of course, he talked about a lot of things that he wasn't necessarily serious about and this may be one example. But during World War II, he talked with Wendell Willkie, whom he had defeated for the presidency in 1940, about the two of them starting a third party. Willkie died shortly thereafter, so we'll never know. Roosevelt was probably just talking. But the fact he did even raise the possibility, however unlikely it was, suggests that he wasn't the partisan figure some presidents have been.

You also have to remember that FDR came from a patrician upper class that looked down their noses at politicians. Even though he became one of the great political leaders of all time, he still retained some of that inherited disdain for elected officials.

Q: Thank you very much.