The last great liberal

A shameless opportunist who ripped up the rule book, Roosevelt never allowed principle to stand in the way of good politics. Why can’t today’s left-wing leaders live up to his example?

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Yet the beam cast by Roosevelt’s success is now flickering. If many of his achievements have survived, many others now lie in ruins. The UN is a shadow of what Roosevelt hoped it would be. Reagan and Thatcher did much to dismantle the Rooseveltian state. More recently, human-rights universalism has begun to retreat before a sovereigntist tide. And although the colonial period is largely over, independence has proved to be a cruel delusion for many of the poorer nations of the earth.

As for domestic politics, what the American political thinker Mark Lilla has called “the Roosevelt dispensation” has now been under attack for nearly 50 years. The neoliberal victories over the economically activist welfare state that have ensued since the 1970s are so familiar that there is no need to repeat them here.

Curiously, even though the 2008 financial crisis was a day of reckoning for neoliberalism, there was little attempt to relive Roosevelt’s approach. Barack Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy and to a lesser extent Gordon Brown bailed out the banks first, and worried about home-owners second. They failed to tackle inequality by seriously taxing the rich, and failed to seize the crisis to invest substantially in public goods. You can still see the bridges and post offices built in Roosevelt’s administration. Where are the Obama roads, schools and public parks?

Roosevelt didn’t have an anti-capitalist bone in his body, but he had a well-tuned ear for public rage at what he called “the selfish and opportunist” arrogance of the financial elite who had caused the Great Depression. His liberal successors in power through the 2008 crisis also heard rage, but neither their rhetoric nor their actions were equal to the moment. Roosevelt, it is always said, saved the capitalist system from itself. It needs saving again now, and the saving will require leaders as fearless and unsentimental as he was.

Robert Dallek’s new biography, A Political Life, disappoints in many respects—with few new revelations, and little insight into the many paradoxical elements of Roosevelt’s stunning success—but it does provide an opportunity to reconsider this great life and career. Biographies of FDR line the shelves, and Dallek himself has already written one book on his foreign policy. As its title reveals, this new one focuses on Roosevelt: the domestic politician. It recounts all the Machiavellian wheeling and dealing that went into the making of the New Deal.

The defining characteristic of Roosevelt’s leadership was to look forward, never back. A keen boatman, he could always see which way the wind was blowing—and he had an unflailing instinct for setting his sails to catch it. He was initially sceptical about organised labour, for example, and hesitated about the Wagner Act in 1935, which enshrined the basic right of workers to unionise. But with union might growing, and those unions mostly supportive of his New Deal, he picked up his pen and signed it, then made the law his own. On economics, Roosevelt himself never claimed to understand Keynes—“I saw your friend Keynes. He left a whole rigmarole of figures,” he told one visitor in 1933. He was, rhetorically and by intellectual instinct, a balanced-budget man. And yet, because the economics of the time demanded it, he cheerfully built his liberalism on the insight that government investment could prime the pump of domestic demand. Indeed, Dallek shows how Roosevelt managed to stay one step ahead of the business leaders who detested him, the press barons who campaigned against him and the demagogues who tried to dislodge his grip on voters’ loyalty.
Perhaps the greatest surprise about Roosevelt’s career is not so much that it was astonishingly successful, but that he took the path he did. A Hudson Valley aristocrat and scion of one of New York’s oldest and wealthiest families, he was also the cousin of a former Republican president (albeit the unconventional Teddy Roosevelt). And when he was in his twenties, no one thought that this agreeable, good-looking young man would turn out to have such an uncanny instinct for the yearnings of the American people. Not even his doting mother suspected he had it in him. Although he threw himself energetically into New York politics as a young lawyer, he showed no obvious ideological bent, and failed to exhibit even one even after a shrewd decision to get behind Woodrow Wilson’s 1912 run for the White House—a decision that saw him picked as Assistant Secretary to the Navy in his early thirties. In 1920, he was the Democratic pick for vice-president, yet few would have seen him as standing for much beyond the Navy.

The stroke of fate that changed everything was polio. Roosevelt contracted the disease in the summer of 1921, at the age of 39, and after hoping against all odds that he would recover, by early 1924 he accepted that he would never walk unsupported again. With the help of his wife, he slowly realised that politics was the only path that would restore his passion for living. In 1924, his advisers arranged for him to give the nominating speech at Madison Square Gardens, at the Democratic convention to nominate Al Smith as the candidate for governor of New York. As Dallek describes it, Roosevelt “practiced repeatedly walking the distance across the platform to the lectern to appear in command of himself as he took the stage.”

When the moment came, Roosevelt was bathed in sweat, barely able to stand without clutching the sides of the podium, but he made the speech nonetheless, calling Smith a “happy warrior of the political battlefield,” before finishing and making his way unaided back to his seat. It was a courageous piece of acting. It was also hugely successful: everyone in the hall knew that it was in fact Roosevelt who was the happy warrior and that he, not Smith, was the future of the party.

Having broken into the top rank of New York Democratic politics, Roosevelt rapidly assembled a coalition of labour and Jewish leaders and municipal politicians, and swept into office in New York’s gubernatorial election in 1928, picking up the reins at the start of 1929. Home to the Wall Street Crash, New York City felt the Depression early, and Roosevelt soon gained national attention with bold measures to help unemployed people, building a platform for his ultimate aim—a run for the presidency.

During the general election of 1932, with the Depression deepening, Roosevelt bet his political fortunes on hope and “bold, persistent experimentation” at a moment when hope was the last thing anyone could see and experimentation seemed to put the whole economic system in jeopardy. The message won over the country: Roosevelt carried 47 states, leaving the discredited Herbert Hoover with just six.

Perpetually forward-looking, Roosevelt realised, earlier than Republicans or many in his own party, that the Depression had created a chasm between the world in which he was raised and the one he was fated to govern, and that there was no safe way back. As he told a college graduating class the spring before he won the White House, “we need enthusiasm, imagination and the ability to face facts, even unpleasant ones, bravely. We need to prevent, by drastic means if necessary, the faults in our economic system from which we now suffer. We need the courage of the young. Yours is not the task of making your way in the world, but the task of remaking the world you find before you.”

The New Deal put the unemployed to work rebuilding roads and bridges and re-foresting national parks. Farm subsidies rescued the farmers. Government infrastructure programmes like the Tennessee Valley Authority brought electricity to American regions that had been left behind. Other schemes set artists and photographers to work documenting the impact of the Depression; their work built further support for Roosevelt’s policies.

Some of this worked; some of it overreached. After the Supreme Court blocked a series of New Deal measures, Roosevelt tried to “pack” the Court with judges sympathetic to his demands, and was forced to retreat. But he never lost the initiative. He showed consistent brilliance in maintaining his coalition, and was also shrewd enough to make a few carefully chosen enemies. When the president put a wealth tax before Congress in 1935, he exuberantly said that it would “throw to the wolves the 46 men who are reported to have incomes in excess of $1m a year.” Compare that to the approach of donor-dependent Democrats today. He attacked the “malefactors of great wealth”—the Senators, Congressmen, and Supreme Court Justices who stood in the way of New Deal reforms. By vanquishing many of them, he gave the “forgotten man” of American life an unbreakable conviction that he would never let them down.

Like Churchill, Roosevelt was a renegade patrician, someone with the serene self-confidence to revel in the fury he provoked within his own class. “Even though the orthodox protest and the heathen roar,” he proclaimed to a confident in 1934, the New Deal would forge ahead. He joked to students in 1936 that while it was rumoured that he breakfasted every morning “on a dish of grilled millionaire,” he actually preferred scrambled eggs. Unlike many patricians, however, he was not remotely gentlemanly when crossed. Instead of cowering before the press, he exulted in the opposition of the Hearst empire, realising what a useful enemy a rich media mogul could be. He could hate fiercely, and he meted out punishment from his inner circle to anyone who defied him.

His management skills were somewhat erratic: “bold and persistent experimentation” was often chaotic in execution in the early years. One of his closest advisers complained of Roosevelt’s “almost impenetrable concealment of intention.” He often left aides—“the boys,” as he called them—in darkness about whose advice he had actually taken.

Roosevelt also told lies to the American press about his health. His security detail had to carry him to the bathroom, lift him in and out of toilets and bed, and yet for 12 years, in the glare of
Happy warrior: above left, Roosevelt with Eleanor after the 1941 inauguration; above right, with Churchill and Canadian leaders in Quebec two years later. Opposite, a campaign badge from the 1932 election.

public scrutiny, he projected a carefully disciplined image of ease, gaiety and glamour. Over time people actually forgot that he was disabled. To this day, he remains the only great leader to use a wheelchair.

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Perhaps Roosevelt’s greatest duplicity, of course, concerned America’s response to the rise of Fascism in Europe, which came to dominate his first and second terms in office. Regret at US involvement in the First World War left many Americans staunchly isolationist through the 1930s, and he won elections in 1936 and 1940 by promising to keep America out of the new conflict. Yet through 1940 and 1941, Roosevelt managed to keep Churchill believing, at least most of the time, that American entry was only a matter of time. How duplicitous was this? Isaiah Berlin, who wrote weekly reports on US domestic opinion that were read by Churchill, always believed that Roosevelt wanted to win the war without actually fighting it; he would have done so by arming the British and the Russians. Yet according to Roosevelt’s son James, the president said in 1940: “I knew we were going to war, I had to delay until there was no way out.” In the end, it was Pearl Harbor that forced his hand.

In an age when western politicians are compelled to be “ordinary,” it is heartening to recall a time when an aristocrat whose trademark was a cigarette holder clenched jauntily between his teeth, and whose hobbies included cruising on the presidential yacht, could be a hugely popular leader. Despite his upper-class diction, Roosevelt maintained a magnetic hold on forgotten Americans in the valleys of Tennessee and the dust bowls of Kansas. Partly this was because of his use of the technologies of the age—the radio most especially. His “fireside chats” remain some of the most beguilingly personal exercises in democratic communication. In March 1933, in his first such broadcast, when there was fear of a run on the banks, he said to the 60m people anxiously listening that the country-wide bank closure he had ordered was just “a holiday” and that the system would soon re-open as normal.

Roosevelt’s most enduring legislative successes have lasted because they were crafted with sharp political common sense. His greatest domestic achievement, the Social Security Act of 1935, remains intact today—despite intermittent Republican interest in privatisation—because he understood that once people pay their own money into a benefit, it is all but impossible to remove it. As he said in 1941, “with those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security programme.” Obama must be hoping that the same will hold true for his altogether scrappier Affordable Care Act.

Much has been made, rightly, of the famous “Roosevelt coalition” of Jews, black people, women and the labour unions. Using the rhetoric of common betterment and shared public goods, he created a point of identification that allowed each group to transcend sectional grievance. It was all the more paradoxical
an achievement because the president disappointed all of these groups at least some of the time. He enlisted Jewish support to the Democratic Party, but when Jewish leaders begged him to do something for Jewish refugees fleeing Europe in the 1930s, he did little or nothing. As for the working man, Roosevelt was never as pro-labour as he seemed, yet he managed to create the Democratic-union alliance that still endures.

When it came to women, Roosevelt was no feminist—with the striking exceptions of Eleanor, his wife, and Frances Perkins, his Labour Secretary, he didn’t do much to advance women into leadership positions. Yet women seem to have voted for him because they sensed that he understood their fears about holding life together in the American household.

As for African Americans, as Ira Katznelson and others have pointed out, the New Deal was, in one sense, a pact with the devil. Roosevelt left the institutions of Southern racism untouched in return for Southern senators’ support and kept silent about lynchings of black men—and yet millions of African Americans voted for him anyway because they sensed he was on their side. As for other minorities, he interned Japanese Americans in 1942, before switching tack and allowing them to enlist. In all these twists and turns, he navigated with guile, unbothered by scruple or backward glances.

His gift for foresight meant that he knew instinctively when his time was up—telling his cousin Daisy in 1943 that he would retire when the war was over, since Americans would never reelect a liberal president. In the end, of course, he didn’t get that far; in April 1945, exhausted, ravaged by heart disease and the effects of smoking two packs of Camels a day, he suffered a stroke and died. He was just 63.

What can we learn from Roosevelt? Can his moment ever reappear? I fear the answer is no. Identity politics, culture wars and decades of prosperity have fractured the sense of common cause in the United States. And if we won’t see Roosevelt’s like again, it’s not just because his talents are unlikely to be combined in one person. It’s also because times have changed and the all-powerful presidency he forged—bending the legislature to do so—has lost its command over the American political system. The party bosses who once pulled African Americans, women and workers into line behind the president are gone. Few of these groups will allow themselves to be spoken for; fewer still see the class and economic interests that link them beneath the identifiers of race and region.

Yet something like that grand Roosevelt coalition will have to be reborn if the problems all liberal democracies face—rising inequality, institutional fragmentation, environmental destruction, and above all, a sense of helpless drift—are to be overcome.

Hillary Clinton, Obama and Blair were weakened by their unwillingness to challenge economic power, oligopoly, corruption or tax evasion, and ceded these issues to the socialist left-wingers like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. On the other side, of course, there is Trump. The vital centre, as Arthur Schlesinger called it—which Roosevelt created by discrediting both big-business Republicanism and the anti-capitalist left—is empty. The void has been filled with a cacophony of noise.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from Roosevelt is his lack of nostalgia—to which the liberal left, continually glancing back at the Kennedy or even the Clinton years, is as prone as the right. Had Roosevelt been minded to, he could have built a politics on “making America great again,” promising to guide the country back to the lost certainties of pre-First World War America. Instead, he was fearless enough to face the future; in so doing, he created a politics that governed the strong while protecting the weak.

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