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Lessons From FDR

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MY SPIN

Lessons From FDR



By Robert A. Slayton

Obama will have to dig deep, to believe, as FDR did, that there is no problem too big for America to confront, and resolve, under his leadership.

President Barack Obama has made it clear that FDR is one of his key role models. The appeal is understandable. Both men assumed the presidency during a major economic crisis. Both men were also the first of their respective minorities to gain the White House. Thus, it might help to consider what Obama could learn from studying his predecessor's life: Roosevelt, in dealing with his disability, learned the importance of working with others and bringing them into his decision-making loop. He also learned to draw on personal strengths as well. For FDR, the private became political.

My perspective on this is both professional and personal. I have been an historian of the 20th century United States for many years and am also newly disabled. In August 2008 I came down with transverse myelitis, a disease of the spinal cord, and am now hemiplegic.

For me, my voyage of personal discovery is just beginning. By the time FDR was first elected president in 1932, he had been dealing with polio for about 11 years (some now think it may actually have been Guillain-Barré syndrome). During this time he learned, as many of us do, that whether we like it or not, those of us with disabilities become more dependent, or perhaps, more interdependent. While FDR was a keen observer, he could not get out as much as he used to,

so he would send his wife Eleanor out as his ambassador. Whenever she came back from a trip, he would quiz her, not only about affairs of state, but details about the people around her: What did their clothes and their homes look like, how were their spirits, what was on their faces? In effect, at times she became his eyes and ears.

FDR went even further. As president, he created the Brains Trust (the original term), a private group of top advisors who would provide even more ideas and insight. Because of his disability, FDR knew more than any other president that he had to rely on others in everything from day-to-day living to devising strategies to beat the Depression, and he fostered myriad relationships to enhance his professional life.

At the same time, however, FDR also found that he had to have faith in himself, believe that he could make this new body of his, and this new life, work. By all accounts Roosevelt had to rediscover his own sense of self. He went into depression those first months of living with his disability, then gradually overcame it, largely by sheer strength of will. Above all, he had to believe he had no limits in order to continue to have a successful career as a politician, just as he did before his illness.

Much of this story applies to President Obama. He has to show that America is part of a larger world, and that our well-being, just as in FDR's time,

depends in part on the good will and the work of others. Obama will also have to develop, and lean on, an even broader circle of advisors than he has now.

Some of these represent our own community. President Obama has appointed Kareem Dale, a partially blind attorney, as special assistant to the president for disability policy. This is the first appointment of its kind in our history.

It's a good start, but Obama should go even further. Roosevelt, because of his limited personal access, felt he had to reach out. The current president should do the same simply because he wants to succeed, wants to have feedback from all segments of our nation's population, including ours.

At the same time, he will also have to be sure of his own inner strength. To tackle the current economic crisis, Obama will have to dig deep, to believe, as FDR did, that there is no problem too big for America to confront, and resolve, under his leadership. Like FDR, Barack Obama will have to know that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." As it was with FDR, Obama will have to develop and depend on new relationships, while maintaining a profound inner strength. ■

Robert A. Slayton, professor of history at Chapman University in California, has authored several books, including a major biography of Al Smith, FDR's mentor and later, his rival.