

The Inimitable Presidency

"FDR: The Illusive Standard" by Patrick J. Maney, in *Prologue* (Spring 1994), National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408.

Should President Bill Clinton and his top aides have spent so much time and effort devising a detailed health-care reform bill? The legendary example of Franklin D. Roosevelt, brilliant mastermind of all that famous New Deal legislation, suggests that Clinton, an FDR admirer, was doing the right thing. But the Roosevelt of legend, warns Maney, a Tulane University historian, is not the same as the Roosevelt who occupied the White House. Awed by his inspiring leadership of the nation through economic depression and war, we have exaggerated his legislative accomplishments, overlooked his misdeeds, and forgotten the extent to which he was the servant rather than the master of events.

Much of the New Deal, Maney points out, was not FDR's work. His role as a "legislative mastermind," for example, has been greatly exaggerated. "Of the 15 major pieces of legislation passed during the first Hundred Days [in 1933], only two originated with him": the Economy Act, which gave him the power to slash veterans' pensions and government workers' salaries, and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Congress took the "leading role" in the New Deal, Maney contends, "although it never received the star billing that it deserved."

Roosevelt himself would have been surprised at his posthumous reputation for legislative wizardry, Maney writes, "for he believed that moral leadership and public education, not law making, were the primary functions of the president." During both the first Hundred Days and the second, in 1935, he "issued a dramatic call to action and then allowed Congress to respond to the challenge." He was hailed as a champion of the American worker after the landmark 1935 National Labor Relations Act became law, but, as his labor secretary Frances Perkins later recalled, he never "lifted a finger" to help advance the measure.

Some of the things Roosevelt did do, Maney argues, are not worthy of emulation. "He and his aides smeared the so-called isolationists, who, before Pearl Harbor, opposed American entry into World War II. Roosevelt misrepresented their views, impugned their patriotism, and accused them of being Nazi sympathizers." He also authorized the FBI to tap their phones and open their mail. Finally, Maney argues, much of the Roosevelt record is irrelevant today. Race relations is an example. "For his time, and with help from Eleanor, Roosevelt compiled a respectable record on racial matters," Maney notes. But it offers no guidance today.

Reading into Roosevelt "things that may not have existed" is nothing new, Maney observes. Ever since he was first elected president, people "have projected onto him their hopes and fears, imposing a mastery of events that he did not have, indeed which no person could have had." FDR's great asset may have been his ability to seem so godlike to so many Americans—not something one can achieve through emulation.

A Kind Word For Congress

"America's First Hundred Days" by James Sterling Young, in *Miller Center Journal* (Spring 1994), 2201 Old Ivy Road, P.O. Box 5106, Charlottesville, Va. 22901.

Poor Congress. It is branded cumbersome, meddling, incompetent, and everything in between. As if to compensate, critics often say that it is not the individuals who are at fault but the institution. Legislative government, they say, is a contradiction in terms. This is an American chestnut, one heard two centuries ago. During the constitutional debates of 1787–89, Alexander Hamilton and other advocates of an independent executive made much of the failings of legislative government. No legislative body, they said, could act with the energy, speed, efficiency, consistency, secrecy, and responsibility that the survival and well-being of the nation require.