

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.

But in making that argument, observes Young, a political scientist at the University of Virginia, Hamilton and the other critics ignored the legislature's great successes "under the severest performance test possible—an unprecedented war of liberation by a hastily assembled league of colony/states against the world's most powerful nation." Soon after the British attacked a colonial arms cache at Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, delegates from the 13 colonies assembled in Philadelphia. "In short order," Young writes, "they organized themselves as a body, adopted rules of secrecy, digested reports of the battle and of British military activities elsewhere, and adjourned into a 'committee of the whole on the state of America' to hammer out a policy. Decidedly different views were aired, competing priorities were argued, and contending proposals were debated." And consensus on a plan of action was reached.

A final petition for redress was sent to the king. In anticipation of rejection, a policy of armed resistance to British use of military force was adopted—and, Young says, "pursued with Hamiltonian energy, secrecy, and dispatch." A committee chaired by George Washington came up with a scheme to supply the colonies with arms and ammunition. Another committee, chaired by Benjamin Franklin, oversaw the creation of a national postal service and of the Committee of Secret Correspondence, which ran an intelligence network. In June, Congress organized a volunteer army and named Washington to lead it. In July, after the Battle of Bunker Hill, Congress issued its unforgettable call to American arms.

During those early days of crisis, Congress also adopted a policy of peaceful coexistence with Indians, undertook to prevent British-sponsored terrorism, and mounted a campaign to drum up public support for the American cause.

If a president had said and done what Congress did in America's first hundred days—not to mention throughout the Revolution—Young observes, he "would surely be ranked high on the short list of great presidents." Perhaps, he concludes, legislative government deserves a second look.

Legislative Oversights

"A House Divided" by David Segal, in *The Washington Monthly* (Jan.-Feb. 1994), 1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Congress, the supposed watchdog of the federal government, has acted more like the proverbial pussycat in recent years, asserts Segal, an editor at the *Washington Monthly*. Not only has it failed to stave off such catastrophes as the savings and loan disaster of the 1980s but it has missed a depressing variety of smaller-scale governmental outrages. Why, to cite one minor example, is there someone in government called the "Federal Inspector of the Alaskan Natural Gas Pipeline," earning \$115,300 a year, "even though no such pipeline exists"?

Congress has plenty of resources to play its watchdog role, Segal notes. The House and Senate have an elaborate network of 247 committees and subcommittees run by a staff of some 3,400 people. Over the past 16 years, the House committees alone held a total of 54,034 hearings—about 20 each day the chamber was in session. "There's also a kennel of accountants and investigators in the General Accounting Office which can be sicked on any subject, not to mention inspectors general in the agencies themselves whose findings can be used to pursue inquiries," Segal observes.

But Congress seldom uses its investigative resources effectively, he says. Only two committees—Government Operations in the House and Government Affairs in the Senate—are exclusively devoted to oversight, and they are the least popular ones among members of the two bodies. Other committees have oversight subcommittees, Segal notes, "but their work has been extremely uneven. Today, only a few legislators—most notably John Dingell (D.-Mich.) of the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee of Energy and Commerce—have earned reputations as strong and thorough overseers. It's far easier, and more comfortable, to make a name as a participant in deals rather than a spoiler of them."

Of course, many legislators are reluctant to ask tough questions about federal dollars headed to their home districts or states. More often, as