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Rooseveltian Government

by John R. MacArthur

For all the loud talk about “saving Social Security” from the predations of George Bush and his right-wing legions, remarkably little is being said about the actual politician, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who founded the welfare state in America.

True, the media and political classes aren’t much interested in the past. For U.S. journalists, the death of Terri Schiavo rates as ancient history, and Vietnam never really happened.

But FDR remains a historic presence so palpable in contemporary America, so pertinent to its bitter political argument, that it amazes me how few people -- especially Democrats -- invoke his name or discuss his legacy. At a dinner party, you might hear historically inclined liberals discussing Lincoln’s selection of Civil War generals, or maybe Watergate, but you’re more likely to learn about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse than about Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms.

Franklin Roosevelt was famously sphinx-like -- he had neither the patience nor the introspection of a memoirist, and he died suddenly, at 63. So it was left largely to historians and contemporaries to make an accounting of the man. Indeed, his psychic impenetrability (and intermittent coldness to his wife) has become something of a cliché.

One of the most telling displays of FDR’s sang-froid followed his near-assassination, as president-elect, while riding in an open car with Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who took the bullet and died. An FDR “Brain Truster,” Raymond Moley, thought FDR’s public calm understandable. But when he saw Roosevelt later, in private, he noted “not so much as the twitching of a muscle, the mopping of a brow, or even the hint of a false gaiety.”

That FDR was made of tougher stuff than most men or women is indisputable. Overcoming crippling polio to become the longest-serving president -- then overseeing the U.S. government during cataclysmic depression and war -- would seemingly require a constitution of steel. With no autobiography, it’s left to screenwriters and novelists to plumb FDR’s emotions, and I strongly recommend HBO’s painfully explicit film *Warm Springs*, for a sense of just how hard, and humiliating, life must have been after he lost the use of his legs, in 1921. Kenneth Branagh brilliantly portrays the suffering, fearful FDR -- even better than he plays the healthy, vigorous version.

Today, it’s common knowledge that the political establishment and the press covered up FDR’s handicap. So I found it both fascinating and shocking to watch Branagh’s Roosevelt dragging his useless legs, falling out of bed, and grimacing with frustration.

But for all his grit and ambition, the evidence suggests that FDR’s generous spirit -- not some superhuman determination -- saw him through the greatest crises in American history outside of the Civil War. Physical vulnerability surely enhanced his compassion for the weak and the unlucky, but there must have always been some essential kindness beneath the patrician bonhomie.

And it is just this kindness -- even more than his monumental legislative record -- that is now under siege by the Bush administration. Yes, FDR’s New Deal is threatened in very concrete terms. Following Ronald Reagan’s vicious example, Karl Rove and Tom DeLay would dearly love to cripple FDR’s patrimony: massive public spending to protect the poor, the unemployed, and the aged; the Wagner Act, designed to encourage the formation of unions and collective bargaining; creation of the United Nations and a strengthened commitment to international law; and strict regulation of an out-of-control and arrogant Wall Street finance system.

Three of FDR's initiatives -- Social Security, the "make work" Works Progress Administration, and the Securities and Exchange Commission -- constituted the most radical political and social transformation in America since women got the vote.

But the Bush brothers, George W. and Florida Gov. Jeb, have a more pernicious ambition than mere civil devolution. They aim to wipe out the very idea of government as a positive, benevolent, and peacemaking force -- the idea that formed the heart of the New Deal.

In a real sense, they want to kill off the humanness embodied by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and their leftist entourage.

This is no exaggeration. "President George W. Bush has been a consistent advocate of Hardness," writes Michael Barone, in the book *Hard America, Soft America*, his recent tribute to Bushian steeliness. Though the current president was reared, like Roosevelt, in the "Soft" world of patrician privilege, "what is consistent about Bush's major programs is that they have promoted competition and accountability: Hardness."

Laugh at your peril. This is the Bush party line, and it now presents itself as mainstream journalism.

The Bush brothers are not madmen, of course; they hew to a pragmatic agenda, which has taken them far. They don't dare try to dismantle all of the New Deal (or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society), because liberal government and international law provide the indispensable enemies that fuel the resentments forming the Bush political base. Reagan courted the racist vote, by holding up the caricature of the indolent "welfare queen" to public scorn (despite his family's having been on the dole during the Great Depression); the Bushes court Christian fanatics by attacking "activist" judges for having prevented government intervention in the Terri Schiavo case.

The contradictions and hypocrisy don't matter, so long as the "base" gets the angry "hardness" it craves.

Contrast the Bush politics of moralistic hardness with FDR's politics of common-sense tolerance, and it almost makes you nostalgic for the Depression and World War II. At the Arcadia Conference, in December 1941, at which the Grand Alliance formulated its first Declaration of the United Nations (no relation to today's U.N.), Roosevelt persuaded the Soviets to accept the principle of religious freedom by reminding them, as Robert Sherwood wrote, "that the traditional Jeffersonian principle of religious freedom was so broadly democratic that it included the right to have no religion at all."

None of this is to minimize the "fox" in FDR -- the political deviousness detailed by James MacGregor Burns. The Roosevelt "coalition" was a study in contradictions, most notably the Democratic Party alliance of anti-union, racist white supremacists, in the South, with pro-labor civil-rights proponents, in the North. FDR was careful not to push Eleanor Roosevelt and his aide Harry Hopkins's social agenda so far that it would crack his delicate political construct. He never tried to integrate the Army, for example, and his administration shamefully discouraged Jewish immigration from Nazi-occupied Europe. In fact, left-wing historians argue that the New Deal was created not to reform American society, but to save American capitalism after the Crash of '29.

They have a point. But I don't think FDR ever thought in ideological terms so grand; his was a politics of instinct and of the moment. Fortunately, his instincts tended toward the moral side of the Christian ledger. "Vague though it was," wrote Burns, "this set of moral rules embraced one idea . . . the idea of man's responsibility for the well-being of his fellow man," which "underlay Roosevelt's single most important idea . . . that government had a positive responsibility for the general welfare."

Not a "faith-based initiative" in sight, and no empty slogans like "ownership society." It's not for nothing that bitter 1930s Republicans referred to FDR as "that man in the White House."

Today's Democrats rarely invoke FDR because, as the benighted Michael Barone points out, the

“opposition” party has embraced so many of the tenets of Bushian “Hardness” (witness how little the Democrats fought the anti-poor bankruptcy bill and so-called tort reform). Which makes it all the more difficult to mourn the greatest president since Lincoln on the 60th anniversary of his death. If you need help, ask an American over 70, and he or she will probably confirm Burns’s description of April 12, 1945: “Everywhere men and women wept openly, and without shame.”

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