

An Unconquered Spirit
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The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” These words spoken by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), became the lifelong pursuit of an individual whom President Bill Clinton has called “The greatest president of this great American Century.” Elected four times, he defined leadership and action.

On May 2, 1997, a 7.5-acre memorial honoring the 32nd president opened in the monumental core of our nation’s capital. F.D.R. assumes his rightful place there among those other master architects of U.S. democracy: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. The memorial consists of four outdoor rooms, each one representing a term as president, and symbolizing the four freedoms outlined in his 1932 acceptance speech: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Many of F.D.R.’s inspirational quotes are sprinkled throughout the grounds, evoking the era as well as the man. Roosevelt died only months before the end of World War II, and a relief portraying his funeral can be seen in a small, quiet space between the third and fourth rooms. Carved in granite is his wish, “More than an end to war, we want an end to the beginning of all war.”

Although physically disabled by polio in 1921 — forever confined to using crutches, braces or a chair — his unconquered spirit was the catalyst for the establishment of his New Deal policies. Social Security, the abolishment of child labor, and the setting of a minimum wage were but a few of his humanitarian achievements. The Work Projects Administration — which he initiated as an antidote to the rampant unemployment brought about by the Great Depression — at one time or another employed 8 million individuals. Skilled laborers were used to erect schools, libraries, city halls, and other public buildings. Nearly 80 percent of the nation’s top artists, writers and musicians were paid for their creative skills by the WPA.

F.D.R. felt that effective political leadership in a democracy was synonymous with teaching. Press conferences were held in a “schoolroom,” his plan was called a “textbook” and his speeches were informal “seminars.” In his famous “fireside chats,” he explained in everyday language the nation’s problems, and outlined specific courses of action. Through these talks he forged unique and lasting bonds with the American people.

Despite his detractors — and there were many — the common person loved and respected Roosevelt. He was often at easy access to the public and emerged unharmed from a 1933 assassination attempt. The bullet killed Anton J. Cermak, mayor of Chicago.

Just before his death, Roosevelt offered the American people this final counsel: “The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong, active faith.”

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