In the Shadow of the Centenary: Franklin D. Roosevelt at 125

by Cynthia M. Koch
Director, Roosevelt Library

Twenty-five years ago, in the absence of a major national observance of Franklin Roosevelt’s centenary, his admirers in New York State took up the cause of organizing a fitting celebration. Led by Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., they gathered on the steps of the Roosevelt Home on a cold and blustery January 30, 1982—one hundred years to the day of FDR’s birth. The facade of the famed “Big House” was chanted and boarded up, the air still acid from a fire that had destroyed the home’s third story the week before.

The combined effect of the fire and the still-new Reagan presidency with its challenge to the New Deal added poignancy to the day’s observations. After Governor Carey declared Franklin Roosevelt “a man for the present . . . who belongs to this day, to an anxious and confused time when the country again seems unsure of its future,” wreaths were laid on FDR’s grave. In the Roosevelt Library, the U.S. Postal Service held a First Day of Issue ceremony for a new FDR stamp—a fitting tribute for the stamp-collector president whose own postmaster general, James A. Farley, had originated such ceremonies back when FDR had stood as a first front of every new stamp.

Garment Workers’ Union Chorus, and Congressman Claude Pepper, who served in the Senate beginning in 1936 and had long championed federal arts programs as a staunch New Dealer.

At the UN a day-long conference dedicated to Roosevelt’s vision for the United Nations was moderated by television news commentators John Chancellor and Robert MacNeil. Senator Edward M. Kennedy urged an immediate nuclear freeze declaring “the greatest challenge of our time—and perhaps of all time—is the effort to stop the arms race, and then put it in reverse.” The first international Four Freedoms Awards were awarded in October 1982 following a June State Visit to Albany by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Four scholarly conferences, including the first international conference on FDR, were also part of this robust celebration of a life that at its centenary continued to spark deeply held political passions. A few years later, under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., William vanden Heuvel, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Fendrica Goodman, who served as the executive director of the New York State Centennial Commission, the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute was organized to perpetuate Rooseveltian ideas and activities. Now, as we prepare for a year-long observance of FDR’s 125th anniversary, it seems a fitting moment to consider how Americans’ understanding of Roosevelt and his legacy have changed in the past quarter century.

Today FDR ranks consistently second or third in scholars’ polls of presidential greatness (behind Lincoln and sometimes besting Washington), while in public opinion rankings—which are more akin to popularity contests—FDR is holding his own in second place, despite the dwindling number of Americans who remember his presidency, behind top-ranking John F. Kennedy (Zogby, 2006) and Ronald Reagan (Gallup, 2005).

Here at the Library, Deputy Director Lynn Bassanese tells me that it was not uncommon twenty-five years ago for family groups to arrive in Hyde Park together and then literally divide into two opposing political camps at the door to the Library: the Roosevelt lovers were drawn to this place so symbolic of all that they held dear about the man and the era, while other family members sat outside and refused to enter this building dedicated to the president of the man whose politics they still found deeply abhorrent.

The 1990s saw us celebrate the “Greatest Generation,” whose courage and willingness to sacrifice for the good of the country brought this nation through the Great Depression and World War II. As the nation celebrated that generation’s achievements, old animosities between the generations slipped away; at the same time, FDR too began to become more iconic than politically contested.

The years since FDR’s centenary also brought us the dedication of the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial in 1997. It now joins memorials to the nation’s capital honoring Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson (whose own memorial was dedicated by FDR in 1943). Established by Dwight Eisenhower in 1955, for many years the FDR Memorial Commission was unable to move forward. With a site and design finally settled upon in the late 1970s, funding for the memorial’s construction was signed into law by Ronald Reagan in July 1982—FDR’s centennial year. Fifteen years later, amid controversy over his depiction in a wheelchair, the FDR Memorial was dedicated by President Clinton. Former Presidents Bush, Carter, Ford, and Reagan were honorary co-chairs of the bipartisan Memorial Commission. David B. Roosevelt represented the family.

The evolution of FDR’s reputation from partisan political leader to revered icon did not come easily; neither is it necessarily complete. A few years ago, there was a movement to replace Roosevelt’s image on the dime with that of Ronald Reagan. It took a public statement in the Wall Street Journal from Mrs. Reagan to set that controversy to rest: “When our country chooses to honor a great President as Franklin Roosevelt by placing his likeness on our currency, it would be wrong to remove him and replace him with another.” The last few decades have also produced an undercurrent of public dissatisfaction that has less to do with politics than with new issues that have recently come to the forefront of public consciousness. Fed by a lively scholarship that some would call “revisionist,” segments of the public now ask new questions of the Roosevelt presidency—questions about the Holocaust, Japanese Internment and Pearl Harbor that were seldom raised by the public and scholars who lived through the Roosevelt years.

Yet, continuing public and scholarly interest in the Roosevelt presidency is in many ways a measure of the critical importance of those years. As Arthur Schlesinger so aptly put it in an essay published in Time magazine on the eve of the millennium, “Take a look at our present world. . . . It is misleadingly not Joseph Stalin’s world. That ghastly world self-destructed before our eyes. Nor is it Winston Churchill’s world. Empire and its glories have long since vanished into history. The world we live in today is Franklin Roosevelt’s world.”

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The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute has appointed John Boyer as Executive Director and President and CEO. For the past 16 years, Boyer was the Executive Director of the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut promoting an awareness of and appreciation for a beloved historical figure.

As an historian, Boyer understands and respects the value of historical perspective in the formation of public policy. For him, the mission of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute “represents the best interaction between historical understanding and public policy formation and how they unite for the greatest national and community benefit. As I see it, the President of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute has the opportunity to advance that concept through public discourse around issues that are the core of the Roosevelt legacy.”

Boyer is a fourth-generation Californian, born near Bakersfield and raised in Palm Springs. After high school, he developed an interest in architecture, worked as a carpenter and went to Europe to examine European architecture first-hand. At 25, he returned to the U.S. and enrolled in college to study art history, making him the first in his family to go to college.

He was drawn to teaching along the way, and after graduate school, took a position at Trinity College in Hartford teaching architecture and history of photography. After teaching for a number of years, he joined the Mark Twain House.

As president and CEO, Boyer will lead the FERI's fundraising activities and work to find new ways to communicate the legacy of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to a new generation.

The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute unveiled an exciting new work of art based on the Four Freedoms by the noted kinetic sculptor, Henry Lounau. The sculpture was unveiled at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library on November 3, 2006. The sculpture is located on the grounds of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum and will ultimately travel to other locations. Commissioned by the Institute as a way to bring the meaning of the Four Freedoms to young people, the work captures the essence of the Four Freedoms and the meaning of American democracy. This work of art is unique as it incorporates such familiar symbols as gold stars, bold stripes, and the incorporation of the colors red, white, and blue.

Four Freedoms Sculpture Unveiled at Roosevelt Library

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News from the Archives - Library Archivist Bob Parks Retires

The year 2006 has seen many exciting happenings in the Roosevelt Library Archives:

In cooperation with the Southeastern New York Library Association, the Library launched its online book catalog, providing researchers access to more than 50,000 volumes. At the heart of the book collection is President Roosevelt's personal library of approximately 18,000 volumes. The archives also began this year to segregate from the general book collection the personal library of the President, which has been inter-shelved with the general collection since the Library's beginning.

Happenings in the Roosevelt Library

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Getting the Word Out

As part of the Dyson Foundation's two-year marketing grant, the partner organizations of Historic Hyde Park have been running advertisements in The New Yorker magazine. The small advertisements have generated a big response. For more information about Historic Hyde Park, please visit www.HistoricHydePark.org.

Education at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

Just as FDR adapted his programs and policies to the changing needs of his time, so too does the Roosevelt Presidential Library's education department. In recent years there has been a trend at the state and national levels to adopt and implement certain standards in the study of history and the social sciences. At the core of these standards is a focus on helping students explain and interpret historic actions and events. The time-honored tradition of field trips as a ‘talk and tour’ has given way to the modern participatory field trip, which calls upon the student to take a much more active role. In essence students become ‘history detectives’ and are charged with discovering and interpreting the clues and evidence left behind in historic places by equally historic people and events.

At the heart of these investigations are primary source documents: letters, journals, reports, maps, drawings, and photographs produced and used by the people who were first-hand witnesses to or participants in historic events. With over seventeen million pages to select from, the Roosevelt Library is a treasure trove for teachers and students interested in learning how to work with primary source documents. In the past twelve months a record 13,459 students from seven states and from countries as far away as New Zealand have participated in one or more of the Library's many educational programs. Many of the Library's education programs are offered in partnership with the National Park Service, which administers the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site. The Library’s programs are generously supported by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute.

Recognizing the value of our collection to teachers in need of primary source documents, the Library’s education department developed a series of half-day, full-day, and two-day Teaching with Primary Source Documents workshops. Last year nearly one thousand teachers from across the country attended.

In June the Four Freedoms essay contest concluded with six winning entries selected from seventeen finalists. More than six hundred junior and senior high school students from five Hudson Valley counties were invited to participate. The winning entries are posted on the Library’s website and appear in the local paper. The contest was the result of a partnership with the Poughkeepsie Journal and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute.

Subscribing To The Email Bulletin

To learn about programs and events at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum and the Henry A. Wallace Visitor and Education Center sign up for our Email Bulletin by sending an email to clifford.laube@nara.gov and typing “SUBSCRIBE” in the subject line.
JOIN THE WORLD OF THE ROOSEVELTS

Become a member of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. Enjoy the benefits—and the knowledge that you are providing vital support to the FDR Presidential Library and Museum.

Membership Benefits

**Individual**
- $35
  - Unlimited free admission for one adult to the Roosevelt Library and Museum for one year. *Children 15 and under admitted free*.
  - 10% discount at the New Deal Museum Store.
  - Subscriptions to *The View from Hyde Park*, the FERI newsletter, and *Rendezvous*, the Roosevelt Library newsletter.
  - Discounts for conferences, lectures, and seminars sponsored by FERI and the Roosevelt Library.
  - Free admission to all Presidential Libraries administered by the National Archives and Records Administration. [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)

**Family**
- $60
  - Includes all of the benefits of Individual membership plus unlimited free admission for two adults.

**New Dealer**
- $100
  - Includes the benefits of Family membership plus unlimited free admission for four adults and a subscription to *Prologue*, the quarterly magazine of the National Archives.

**Cuff Links Club**
- $250
  - Includes the benefits of New Dealer membership plus free admission to all Roosevelt Library and FERI seminars, conferences or lectures, where a fee is required.

**Brains Trust**
- $500
  - Includes the benefits of Cuff Links Club membership plus a behind-the-scenes tour for up to four people of the Roosevelt Library archives.

**Student (age 17-22)**
- $15
  - Free admission for one to the Roosevelt Library; free admission to all seminars, conferences and lectures; free admission to all presidential libraries of the National Archives; and subscriptions to the FERI and the Roosevelt Library newsletters. *Current student ID required.*

**New Member**
- $100
  - Includes the benefits of Family membership plus unlimited free admission for four adults and a subscription to *Prologue*, the quarterly magazine of the National Archives.

**Gift Membership**
- $0
  - Includes all of the benefits of Individual membership plus unlimited free admission for two adults.

Membership Form

To become a member, please fill out and return the form below, or join online at [www.feri.org](http://www.feri.org). Call (845) 486-7769 for information.

- **Student** $15
- **Individual** $35
- **Family** $60
- **New Dealer** $100
- **Cuff Links Club** $250
- **Brains Trust** $500

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