

The FDR Memorial's Deeper Meaning: For Many Older Americans, Roosevelt Symbolizes Their Triumph Over Adversity

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

Fifty-two years later, tears still tumble down June Stephens's cheek when she recalls Franklin D. Roosevelt's death. She is embarrassed for a moment. She is not usually so emotional. But the recollection brings too many memories, both painful and warm.

Memories of her father, desperate to get work as a wallpaper hanger. Memories of rural poverty in Pennsylvania: "It was hard to put food on the table and clothes on your back." And memories of a young man working on a WPA road crew in front of her house who became her husband.

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"Part of the reason Roosevelt endures is that he symbolizes what a generation went through -- both the Depression and the war," Newton said. "People feel that the younger generations don't understand what they went through. There is an apprehension that 'when we go, will the people understand?' "

They want younger people to understand times that were difficult but somehow less morally cluttered, times that raced from the darkest apocalypse to the relief of salvation, times that molded this nation into what it is.

Roosevelt embodies those memories. He presided over those times during 12 years as president. And, after all, said Stephens, now of Cartersville, Ga., as though stating the perfectly obvious, "he was the greatest president that lived on Earth."

The man who designed the FDR Memorial, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, recognized that memories of a time -- 1933 to 1945 -- would be the central focus, not just Roosevelt.

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"Somehow I needed to evoke in each visitor a deep and emotional understanding of how these years changed the lives of the people who lived through them," he said.

Halprin's own recollections of the times include summer stints in the Civilian Conservation Corps and World War II service on a destroyer that was split by a kamikaze plane at Okinawa.

"Maybe when my kids go through it, it may cause them to ask me some questions and I could explain some things," said William Bailey, 75, who worked at a CCC camp in rural Nebraska in 1940 for \$30 a month. "A lot of younger folks have no idea what the memorial is about or what we went through. And everything's a circle. I expect there will be some more bad times."

The monuments to Washington and Jefferson were opened (in 1888 and 1943, respectively) long after contemporaries of those presidents had died. The Lincoln Memorial was dedicated 57 years after the president's assassination. The FDR Memorial is being dedicated 52 years after Roosevelt's death, and in an age of greater longevity, the dedication will be watched by many with their own memories of his times.

The dedications of the Vietnam Veterans and Korean War memorials in Washington also brought outpourings of personal memories, though for different reasons. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, helped cauterize what was still an open wound in this country. The Korean War Memorial, dedicated in 1995, was a melancholy tribute to the sacrifices of an incomplete war in an unheralded time.

But the Great Depression and World War II were the cataclysms in which modern America was shaped. Those who are old enough to remember find the reflection an affirmation of their survival and a measure of the changes they have seen since then.

"I remember air raid drills . . . blackout curtains . . . air raid wardens...I recall my mother being very discouraged over rationing coupons, not being able to buy shoes for one of my siblings," recalled Ann Colliver, 63, of Frederick, Md. "I remember a hush fell over the living room at our house when the president spoke over the radio. I remember people applauding in the movie theater when the newsreels showed pictures of him."

Unless you were there, perhaps it is hard to feel fully what America went through. When Roosevelt took office, 12 million people were unemployed -- one in four able-bodied workers. In some cities, the jobless rate was 50 percent. Nearly 1,300 local governments were in default. The stock market was at 17 percent of its level three years earlier. The banks had failed. Forty percent of home mortgages were in default. The income of farmers had dropped 70 percent.

Economic depression had gripped the world, confounding the usual assumptions about labor and productivity and supply. No one was sure what to do or how to do it.

Not even Roosevelt, but at least he did something. His First Hundred Days set a standard for action that presidents ever since have envied. Not all of his alphabet soup of New Deal programs were good ideas -- some economist historians argue that some of Roosevelt's moves actually hindered the economic recovery. But eventually they worked, and -- just as importantly -- Roosevelt made people feel that they could work.

"Roosevelt swallowed our depression. He has inhaled fear and exhaled confidence," political satirist Will Rogers said of Roosevelt's fast-from-the-gate start.

"My father and grandfather, both Pennsylvania coal miners, would sit in a chair, listening to those fireside chats," recalled Robert Jenkins, 72, who grew up in Houtzdale, Pa., and now lives in Waldorf. "They never criticized Roosevelt. My dad said, 'He's just a man who's trying to do the best for the country. He's an honest man.' "

Even as the country's economy was slowly rising from its knees, America was rocked by Pearl Harbor and thrust into World War II. Here, too, Roosevelt was a reassuring figure. He did not underestimate the size of the task or the loss that would be suffered. But he kept the country fixed on the necessity -- and in his unflinching optimism, the inevitability -- of winning the war. He inspired.

"Roosevelt was dinner table conversation," recalled Carl M. Levin, who was only 11 when the president died in 1945 but clearly remembers flattening cans and collecting cigarette wrappers for the war effort. "He was one of my parents' heroes in the family. He was the guy who is leading our nation against enemies -- one of them a mortal enemy. He gave us confidence that we could do it.

"You could even hear it in his voice. Even as kids, we knew there was someone strong, a parental figure who would help make sure that it would come out okay," said Levin, now a Democratic U.S. senator from Michigan and member of the FDR Memorial Commission. "He assured us if we pulled together as a people, we could lick the Depression and the enemy in World War II. I think that is what this monument, and America, is all about -- our ability to overcome challenges."

Certainly, there were critics of Roosevelt, and much to criticize. His attempt to pack the Supreme Court by adding to its membership provoked an outcry. The courts rejected some of the New Deal's most ambitious plans, especially the National Recovery Act, which many saw as an attempt to put the government in charge of the economy -- for which FDR also was criticized.

Many critics, especially Republicans, believe Roosevelt's rapid creation of federal agencies -- which spawned the slang word "boondoggle" -- is still today the root of government evil. And historians looking back have faulted FDR on a variety of issues, from his decision to build an atomic weapon to his internment of Japanese Americans and his failure to act on evidence of the Holocaust.

But for the voting majority, Roosevelt captured a feeling that Americans today can only vaguely recall, a memory briefly reawakened for some by President John F. Kennedy. Roosevelt was admired and trusted. His jaunty grin was a torch in very cloudy times.

Barbara Handman was a teenager in Philadelphia when she saw Roosevelt for the first time as he campaigned against Thomas E. Dewey in 1944 at a rally in old Shibe Park. She sold fliers for \$1 a day to get into the rally, and what she saw stretched a youthful adoration of Roosevelt into what is now her 69th year.

"There was this magnificent creature -- full of charm, full of connection with the people. They went wild for him," she recalled. "He had a contagious smile. It just lit up everything. It made you feel good about yourself and your times. It was so awesome, so vigorous. It was almost interactive."

Such a description of politicians seems alien today. Peter Kovler, a local investor and philanthropist, is only 44 but has championed Roosevelt's legacy and contributed \$500,000 to the memorial. He said he understands why older Americans cherish their memories of FDR and why younger Americans puzzle over them.

"We have two or three generations that are so cynical, based in part on Watergate and Vietnam, that they can't even conceive that an American president could be the grandest figure of the century in the world," he said.

"Anti-heroism is in full force in this country. But how can you blame people whose life experiences as adults start in the mid-1970s? They haven't seen that much to cheer about."

For those who lived in the Roosevelt times, though, the memories of him are wrapped up in the triumphs of the time, Kovler said.

"What memory is more important to the country than winning World War II, and overcoming the greatest financial disaster the country had? A man who can't get out of his chair but beats Adolf Hitler, a man who takes a country from a 15th military power in the world to the mightiest military power in the history of Man, who electrified the country, gave us schools and dams and even football stadiums, the National Airport, Fort Knox . . . so many of the things you see and touch and feel in this country. That's why there is such appeal."

Illustration

PHOTO: Bill O'Leary. CAPTION: Dealing with the Dedication

DEDICATION CEREMONY + The dedication, which will be open to the public, is scheduled for 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. tomorrow. A tour for dignitaries is expected to last until 11:30 a.m. The ceremony will be held at the entrance near West Basin and Ohio drives SW in West Potomac Park on the west side of the Tidal Basin. About 20,000 people are expected. About 3,000 seats will be reserved for "invited guests," including public officials, Roosevelt family members, the diplomatic corps, and members of the FDR Memorial Commission, according to a spokeswoman for the ceremony. An additional 2,000 seats will be available to the public on a first-come basis. Others will have to stand. Two large television screens will be erected for the crowd. **TRAFFIC** + Morning rush-hour commuters who normally cross the Memorial Bridge are advised to use the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge or the 14th Street bridges to avoid traffic congestion near the FDR Memorial. **METRO** + Foggy Bottom, at 23rd and I streets NW and on the Blue and Orange lines, is the preferred stop, although it's 1 1/3 miles away. The Smithsonian stop, at 12th Street and Independence Avenue SW and on the Blue and Orange lines, is about the same distance. But the station is often crowded, and the route to the memorial lacks sidewalks and crosswalks the entire way. Arlington National Cemetery, a Blue Line stop, is another option: Cross the Memorial Bridge to Independence Avenue and Ohio Drive. The Arlington station closes at night, however. **PARKING** + Spaces will be scarce tomorrow morning. The closest are the 160 unmetered spaces on the Potomac River side of Ohio Drive. An additional 247 free spaces are about 2,000 feet south of the memorial, off Ohio Drive under the 14th Street bridges. At the Jefferson Memorial, there are 65 more spaces that can

be used for visiting both memorials. Six handicapped spaces are at the FDR Memorial's main entrance; an additional 14 are at the lots under the bridges. SHUTTLE BUS (tomorrow only) + Free shuttle buses will run from 7:30 a.m. until noon

between the FDR Memorial and the Foggy Bottom Metro station and a bus stop at 23rd Street and Independence Avenue SW near the Lincoln Memorial. TOURMOBILE + Tourmobile, the narrative shuttle service sanctioned by the National Park Service, will have a stop near the entrance to the memorial as part of its route between the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials. Charge is \$12 for adults, \$6 for children. Phone: 202-554-5100. HOURS + After the dedication, the memorial will be open to the public from 8 a.m. to midnight every day except Christmas. CAPTION: FDR MEMORIAL OPENING EVENTS TODAY A National Archives exhibition, "A New Deal for the Arts," on the cultural impact of FDR's New Deal legislation on the arts. The exhibition runs through Jan. 11, in the Circular Gallery of the National Archives from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. For more information, call 301-713-6000. Public tours of New Deal art in government buildings will take place throughout the day. For more information, please contact the following: + General Services Administration, Murals by Harold Weston, 7th and D streets SW. 7th Street lobby open to the public. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. + Voice of America, Murals by Ben Shahn, 330 Independence Ave. SW. Call for an appointment. Contact Beth Knisley, 202-619-2538. + Department of the Interior, Murals by Mitchell Jamieson and William Gropper, 1849 C St. NW. Two tours, one starting at 10 a.m. and another at 2 p.m. Visitors must present photo identification. For more information, call 202-208-4743. + Department of Justice, Murals by George Biddle, Maurice Sterne and Emil Bisttram, Constitution Avenue, and 10th Street NW. Call for an appointment; visitors must present a photo identification. Call Kathy Thrift at 202-616-TOUR. FRIDAY President Clinton will dedicate the memorial at 9:30 a.m. near the entrance to the memorial site on the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. The dedication is free and open to the public. Speakers will include Vice President Al Gore; David B. Roosevelt, grandson of Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Princess Margriet of the Netherlands and Denyce Graves, opera singer. After the president and the dais guests leave, about 11:30 a.m., the memorial will be opened to all of the guests and the public. Thursday's arts and exhibition events continue through today. SATURDAY The Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill will host a showing of the film "The Eleanor Roosevelt Story" at 2 p.m. at the Department of the Interior. To reserve a seat, call 914-229-5302. CAPTION: During a media tour of the FDR Memorial, sculptor Neil Estern reaches toward his figure of Fala, FDR's renowned little dog. CAPTION: Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, at center wearing hat, leads members of the news media on a tour of the memorial, which Halprin designed.

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