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Leaders in Crisis - Franklin D. Roosevelt

By Toni Lee Robinson

Franklin Roosevelt was born into wealth. He attended the best private schools and dabbled in the study of law. Then he found politics. On that stage, he became a bright new star. Then, at the age of 39, the young man of privilege was stricken with polio. He was paralyzed. With his legs withered and useless, Roosevelt's career appeared to be over.

But Roosevelt battled his way back to health. In a wheel chair and leg braces, he went on with his career. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Roosevelt was governor of New York. His state plunged into economic chaos with the rest of the nation.

President Hoover and the country's leaders struggled with massive problems. More businesses and banks closed every day. The nation's farms were dying. Millions of unemployed people looked to the government for help. Hoover's cautious policies seemed to produce little fruit. Americans cried out for solutions.

Roosevelt ran for president in 1932. He offered voters a "New Deal." He promised to work for the average American, the "forgotten man." He gave few details of what he planned, but voters liked what they heard. Roosevelt was elected by a landslide.

Meanwhile, the nation sank deeper into decline. On March 3, 1933, over 5,000 banks closed. Roosevelt took office on March 4. He immediately set about reassuring the American people. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!" Roosevelt declared.

The next day, the new president announced a "bank holiday." All banks were closed. The U.S. Treasury Department inspected bank records. Banks found to be solvent were re-opened. Those teetering toward bankruptcy remained closed until they were healthy again. This action stabilized the banking system. People felt that a re-opened



bank carried a federal stamp of approval. These banks were safe places to leave their money.

A flurry of activity marked Roosevelt's first three months in office. This period came to be known as the "Hundred Days." First, the president called Congress into special session. Everyone worked at a furious pace. Roosevelt submitted bill after bill aimed at reviving the ailing nation. Relief, recovery, and reform were his priorities.

Laws were passed to help those in need. Several programs were enacted to provide jobs. Some bills provided funds for cities and states to help the needy. Other measures dealt with business. Some called for widespread changes in labor practices. Funds were allotted to award contracts to private companies for construction of public buildings, dams, bridges, and roads. Thousands of people were put to work.

Bills were passed to help farmers. Production limits were set so that farmers could sell products for better prices. Money was set aside for loans to strapped farmers. Other laws limited the power of banks to foreclose on farm mortgages. Then, banking reform laws were passed. Most of these were aimed at protecting investors from fraud. Other measures backed bank deposits with federal guarantees.

Through all the activity, contact with the people was an important element of Roosevelt's plan. He called frequent news conferences. He also held informal "fireside chats" on radio. In these broadcasts, he explained what he was doing to help the economy. He took great pains to encourage people and to voice his concern for their plight.

Roosevelt's active approach to the presidency was a new path for America. Up to this point, the practice had always been to limit government influence on the lives of citizens. Roosevelt firmly believed that government should be proactive. He thought federal power should be used to create a climate of well-being for the common people.

Not all of Roosevelt's many experiments worked. Some were abandoned. Some were struck down by the Supreme Court. Critics thought Roosevelt was undermining private enterprise. He was accused of steering the nation towards socialism. Neither did Roosevelt cure the nation of its economic ills. In spite of all he did, the Depression dragged on through most of his long tenure as president.

But in the nation's darkest days, people found hope in Roosevelt's



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leadership. Things were getting better, he told them. There really was nothing to fear. Four times in succession, Americans voted for him as their leader. His confidence and charm captured the nation. His energy and compassion made people believe his message.

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Questions

1. Explain how elements of Roosevelt's life might have shaped his character and ideas.

2. What job did Roosevelt have while running for president in 1932?

- A. Secretary of Defense
- B. Governor of Maryland
- C. Vice President
- D. Governor of New York

3. Describe the state of the nation at the time of the 1932 election. Why was the outcome so decisively in Roosevelt's favor?

4. Describe the events of March 3, 4, and 5 of 1933.

5. The "Hundred Days" was:

- A. the period of time the Depression lasted after Roosevelt took office
- B. the length of time Republicans predicted Roosevelt would last in office
- C. the first three months of furious activity of the Roosevelt administration
- D. the length of time between the election and Roosevelt's assuming office

6. List and explain three priorities of the Roosevelt "New Deal" programs.

7. What were the "fireside chats"?

- A. Roosevelt's radio broadcasts explaining his policies to the people
- B. newspaper articles written by Roosevelt outlining his plans
- C. informal meetings wherein Roosevelt and his staff planned strategy
- D. Roosevelt's visits to the living rooms of private citizens

