Hail to the Chief: FDR’s Leadership Style

Introduction

Franklin Roosevelt’s leadership style was based on centralizing power into his own hands, particularly in foreign relations. He was also very conscious of, and sensitive to, public opinion. Neither of these traits was unique to Roosevelt. Many presidents have been noted for their leading role in foreign policy development and, in a democracy, all elected representatives are concerned with public opinion. It is useful, then, to begin a study of FDR’s leadership style by comparing it with that of other presidents to clarify features of his style that were most problematic. President Woodrow Wilson provides a reasonable case for comparison. Both led the US during global conflicts and each had a vision for the post-war world that included the creation of an international organization for the maintenance of peace. Of course there were circumstances that were unique to the situations in which Wilson and FDR governed, but there were also some common features that should be explored.

It is also fitting to compare these two presidents as Roosevelt was Woodrow Wilson’s Assistant Secretary of the Navy from 1913 until 1920. Wilson’s ideas about the presidency and how to operate in that office influenced Roosevelt’s thinking on the matter. Wilson was a believer in the strength of the presidency over Congress and other government institutions. FDR agreed with this principle and when he took office saw the presidency as a very strong position. There were other influences, apart from Wilson, that also shaped his thinking on the role of president and helped define his leadership style in that office. Theodore Roosevelt, his cousin, also had an influence, as did various other significant events in his life.

FDR’s Early Life and First Terms

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in 1882 in Hyde Park, in New York’s Hudson Valley. His family life was pleasant and he was very close to his mother. His father was a quarter of a century older than Franklin’s mother and the age difference, along with the fact that he was her only child, may explain the close relationship between the two throughout his life. FDR’s father died in Franklin’s early adulthood. His mother died only a few years before Franklin passed away.
Roosevelt studied at Harvard and graduated in 1903. He then undertook further study at Columbia Law School. He knew that he did not want to practice law, but rather wished to pursue a career in politics. Frank Friedel argued that his ambition was shaped by his desire to be a strong and energetic leader in the vein of his cousin, Theodore Roosevelt.\(^1\) It was during his time at law school, in 1905, that Franklin married Eleanor Roosevelt, a distant cousin. Theodore Roosevelt was her uncle. FDR’s political career was launched with his first campaign, in 1910, after receiving the nomination from the Democrats to compete for the strongly Republican dominated New York state senate. He won the seat and was elected to the New York Senate. Being a Roosevelt was a political advantage for Franklin who also won popularity and renown through his support of a progressive political agenda. After strongly supporting Woodrow Wilson in his run for president, Roosevelt was offered the post of Assistant Secretary of the Navy. This was the title he sought most, in order to follow the same path as Theodore did in his rise to the presidency. So began FDR’s entry into national politics. These two presidents shaped FDR’s own political personality and the style of his own presidency—still some years off.

Crossing the political party divide, FDR had close connections with associates of Teddy Roosevelt and also Woodrow Wilson, which showed his political acumen. He took office in the Department of the Navy in 1913, just in time to face the challenges of the First World War. Roosevelt’s mission was to build a strong navy to defend the great nation; a sizable challenge. In 1914, the navy, and the nation as a whole, was completely unprepared for the conflict that was about to engulf the world. The Assistant Secretary made known his preference for preparing for war; he even used his Republican connections to build pressure on Wilson to move towards this policy. Several key initiatives to build up the navy both in terms of personnel and ships were undertaken largely as a result of FDR’s work in the Department. In this role Roosevelt gained experience dealing with the military and handling foreign policy matters. There were several crises involving the use of Navy during his time in the Department. Wilson had occasion to order the occupation of Vera Cruz in Mexico and Haiti and Roosevelt saw these events as a time to express his preference for war preparedness. Despite the official policy of neutrality in the lead up to, and early stages of World War I, FDR advocated the build-up of the military. When Wilson was finally ready to accept the need for war preparations, FDR was relieved of the frustrations caused by the president’s reluctance to arm the

\(^1\) For a very comprehensive and readable biography of Roosevelt, see Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), and for this point see p. 17.