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**"This is Roosevelt's World" - FDR as a Cultural Icon in American Memory**  
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## Conclusion

In *TIME 100* of April 13, 1998, one of the most authoritative American historians, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., assertively and eloquently espoused an essential interpretation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a key player in twentieth century world politics:

Take a look at our present world. It is manifestly not Adolf Hitler's world. His Thousand-Year Reich turned out to have a brief and bloody run of a dozen years. It is manifestly 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.

Schlesinger in 1998 – arguably at the height of global American power – read “our present world” as having been vied for in the 1930s and 1940s by four major ideologies, each with a historic statesman as its embodiment: Nazism and Hitler, communism and Stalin, imperialism and Churchill, and finally, victoriously, the proponent of freedom and democracy: Franklin Roosevelt, the personification of America. Hitler's “Thousand-Year Reich” was limited to the “dozen years” it turned out to last in reality; the “ghastly” quality of “Joseph Stalin's world”, up to and including its self-destruction, both revives the ghost that is elemental to communism, and highlights its inherent harmfulness. “Churchill's world” is shrouded in nostalgia, something that may have been glorious at the time, but has simply and passively “vanished”, floated away. The surviving paradigm for Schlesinger is Franklin Roosevelt's, and as if to hammer home that that paradigm reigns around the globe, the final short sentence starts and ends with “world.”

Even after 9/11, Schlesinger's interpretation of FDR's place in today's world continues to be embraced in some circles, albeit with more difficulty. That difficulty, however, is also already embedded in Schlesinger's statement, which in its lack of cynicism invites reading against the grain. Schlesinger unwittingly highlights the similarity between the leaders he cites, including FDR. The anaphora, presumably intended to point out that these four leaders, with their radically different ideologies, were competing for the same ground, actually stresses that similarity. However different their ideologies were, Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt had worldviews that were, to some extent, aesthetically comparable. Although their utopian ideals differed a great deal, they each believed that the organization of society – perhaps even of the world – was one vast project demanding a large-scale and integrated approach. Their various aesthetics took different forms, but overwhelming architecture and infrastructural projects were on each of their agendas, and their approaches to the mass media also had much in common. One reason why FDR was so early to grasp how serious the Nazi threat to European and world peace was,

is that he knew Germany well, and had an unusually profound understanding of – though no political affinity with – Hitler’s worldview.

While their politics were fundamentally different, there existed a real overlap between FDR and the other three leaders’ autofabrication styles, particularly in their visual and aural rhetoric, and use of modern mass media.<sup>1</sup> FDR, like Hitler and Stalin, believed in developing unprecedentedly large employment programs, often creating enormous bureaucratic and infrastructural apparatuses, and was also convinced of the suitability of film, social realist poster art and radio addresses for government communication and propaganda. Churchill and FDR both had intimate, personal, and persuasive radio styles, and while Churchill’s colonial imperialism was indeed outdated, the more Rooseveltian, still-current American forms of cultural diplomacy and the colonization implicit in US-driven global capitalism are hardly less imperialistic in nature. Finally, the point Schlesinger makes here is not all that obvious – few people would, having been provoked to “Take a look at our present world”, independently have come up with his conclusion that “The world we live in today is Franklin Roosevelt’s world.”

However, because of the United States’ continued cultural and military dominance in the world, and because of the still operative United Nations, the perceived universality of the Four Freedoms and the Declaration of Human Rights, this claim that the current world order is Franklin Roosevelt’s continues to ring true. Or at least, it continues to be popular in American cultural artefacts representing Franklin Roosevelt. Fifteen years after Schlesinger said the above, Ken Burns’ *The Roosevelts, An Intimate History* effectively resumes, and insofar as necessary revives, that frame. This view of Rooseveltian America as the world’s moral high ground also fits in perfectly with the ever popular perspective in which the US continues to occupy the pedestal John Winthrop put it on when he pronounced his colony a “City upon a Hill” in 1630. Following a tradition started by Winthrop on the May Flower, Schlesinger’s “The world we live in today is Franklin Roosevelt’s world” reinforces the idea that the United States, embodied in this case by Franklin Roosevelt, is the world’s moral focus.

A similar perspective is borne out in the many uses of the moral and military success of the American intervention in World War II as an argument in favor of American intervention in conflicts overseas. Former Bush speechwriter David Frum’s coinage “Axis of Evil”, for instance, consciously echoed the “Axis powers” of World War II, drawing a parallel between that and the War on Terror, which was important to the rhetorical justification of latter. Frum wrote about this in his book *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (2003): “By identifying the Iraqi and Iranian regimes with the Axis of the 1940s, Bush was challenging all those European governments that had denounced the rather pallid menace of Jörg Haider in Austria

<sup>1</sup> This is for instance also reflected in Nancy Mitford’s 1935 novel *Wigs on the Green*, in which FDR is habitually listed among European dictators: “the rooms had been hung with life-size photographs of Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt and the Captain” (65).

to join him in confronting the transplanted fascism of the Islamic world.” (Frum 244). Politically speaking, Jörg Haider is, certainly from a European perspective, a more obvious reincarnation of fascism than the Islamic world, but in rhetorical terms the association between the Axis Powers and the Axis of Evil is understandable, as an extrapolation of the endlessly echoed parallel between Pearl Harbor and 9/11. And in both cases the contrasting body is “the free world”, an international coalition led by the President of the United States. Within this frame, Franklin Roosevelt continues to operate as an archetype, a blueprint of modern American presidents with enormous domestic and international authority.

This image of Franklin Roosevelt as a personification and architect of a modern America prevails in American cultural memory, even among haters in some form or another. Several factors conspire to lead to FDR’s position as an icon of America, which I have discussed in this thesis. Some of those have in the first place been generated by him as a historical figure shaping his own public image and future remembrance, others are the product of a later cultural environment that could appropriate the FDR icon to meet a particular need in the present. But mostly these two driving factors of FDR’s iconic remembrance coincide, an effect he steered towards, although sheer luck was no doubt also involved. His efforts to associate himself with modern media and technology have ensured in many cases that he seems unexpectedly contemporary in later contexts, for instance as a president who smiles in photographs or who habitually travels by airplane. On the other hand, associating himself so strongly with radio, a medium that was soon overtaken by television in importance, he actually was modern but also part of a relatively short-lived radio culture that soon vanished in youthful beauty. As such, Roosevelt is remembered often as the first modern media president, but also as a kind of precursor of the really contemporary mass media.

In any case, Franklin Roosevelt was not only an important president, but also an unusually successful cultural icon. He was extremely astute at presenting himself – both to his contemporaries and to future memory: open and visible as an approachable and authentic leader, while simultaneously veiling his less mediagenic aspects and acts. These include his wheelchair, but as importantly: the less picturesque exertion of the executive power at his personal discretion. As discussed in Part I, various factors in FDR’s presidency and performance can be identified which explain his success as a cultural icon.

Roosevelt was particularly successful at interweaving his self-fashioning and autofabrication: the culture and environment that shaped him as an individual might not have seen in him the most viable candidate for the presidency, but that situation also provided space for him to take the initiative in defining the parameters of his position at an early stage. He then continued assertively to construct his public image. This public image was, on the one hand, geared primarily to making himself appear attractive to his audiences, but on the other, that attractiveness included a strong impression of congruence with his innate personality.

He also influenced both future remembrance and cultural memory. The set-up of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library FDR built between 1938 and 1941 in Hyde Park elucidates the difference between the two: the first floor is an FDR museum, curated initially by Roosevelt himself to showcase his collections, gifts, and letters he had received, and as such is a carefully composed selection of objects and documents he and his staff had chosen for him to be remembered by. The second floor houses the archive, containing the seemingly non-selected body of FDR's presidential and personal papers, made accessible to the public, but not usually accessed by most tourists. The first floor thus offers a remembrance practice, one that has changed since the 1940s but has always remained celebratory of FDR, and has both become more explicitly remembrance and more clearly a practice, an invitation to particular acts. The second floor is rather FDR's addition to cultural memory, the broader more serendipitous collection of memories and traces of the past that can feed into cultural memory.

Chapter 3 could be considered a concrete realization of the argument in the first chapter that FDR fruitfully intermingled the complex collective effort that constituted his autofabrication and self-fashioning FDR achieved this through allowing different modalities of his voice to amalgamate: his literal voice synecdochically represented his body, his voice metonymically constructed himself as a mass-mediated presence, and his collectively authored official voice indexed him as a persona. The enmeshing of these literal and figurative voices is similar to, indeed a concrete effect of Roosevelt's merging of self-fashioning and autofabrication. Chapter 4 shows how cultural memory and remembrance interacted to make space for the depoliticization of FDR's cultural legacy – depoliticization that is all but a-political. Because FDR seemed a nonpartisan and practical searcher for consensus, he precluded a great deal of political agonism. Indeed, because FDR was so efficacious at turning cultural heritage preservation into a habitual federal engagement, it has, since in the early 1940s no longer seemed surprising that his own house and archive are federally preserved and managed cultural heritage, instituting a range of remembrance practices. Other federally created sites too became indexically representative of him, and therefore contributed to his position in cultural memory.

In the decades since his death, FDR has been represented in cultural artefacts mostly as the winner of World War II, the international champion of democracy and human rights, but also as modernizer of the welfare state, emancipator of people with disabilities, and the first US President to give space to and profit from an activist First Lady. I have identified these four themes as the most evident and noticeable categories in representing FDR, in the present and in the period since 1945. Each theme has evolved over time, meeting as a result of constantly emerging cultural needs for new interpretations of the past, depending primarily on developments in the present. All four of these themes, however, cover the majority of later Roosevelt representations that were widely disseminated in the period 1945-2014, and more importantly: they each point to some of the key mechanics by which FDR has become such a popular cultural icon in American memory.

Cultural artefacts remembering the New Deal distinguish themselves by a progressive depoliticization of the Roosevelt icon – a trend FDR himself instigated. As I have argued on the basis of two diachronic case studies, this depoliticization happened in two ways: through an increasing focus on FDR as a person, a character with individual traits, away from the political aspects of the New Deal, and through the creating of progressively ritualistic media customs, invoking the First Hundred Days as a presidential communication and media practice without referencing their actual political impact. In representations of World War II FDR often has the role of an allegorical figure. In a manner similar to the paradigmatic example at the beginning of this conclusion, allegorizations of FDR function to cross the divide between past and present. When FDR is taken out of a representation of World War II, a firmly ensconced cultural memory of that war starts to slide in unwanted and uncomfortable directions, as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* exemplifies.

Chapter 7 explored how Roosevelt's disability appeared in cultural memory. While FDR's legs were paralyzed, as many knew, very few people were aware that he was wheelchair-bound, implying that the wheelchair can only have made its entrance in memory later on. Such memories nonetheless seem authentic, because even if few people never saw him in a wheelchair, he did use one, and later cultural artefacts have ensured that he is portrayed as such. This artificial memory is credible in part because it is close to what some people alive now still actually lived through, and in part because remembering FDR's disability and the wheelchair fulfills a cultural desire in the present. A Roosevelt allegory in which FDR and the prosthetic devices he employed together can both embody traumas and gaps in the past and present of the United States, and confirm the potency of its technological solutions. If FDR was in some ways a regal figure, the wheelchair was his throne, the object that empowered him and showed this power. This reading, while it might have been harmful of FDR's image at the time, now operates as a powerful testament to FDR's and the United States' ability to resolve internal invalidity.

In a sense, chapter 8 extrapolated that perspective: Eleanor Roosevelt was not a prosthetic device, but she did operate to expand FDR's reach in every possible direction: temporally beyond his death, and both during his own life and after, into spheres where, traditionally, politics had little place. Moreover, within the public sphere, because ER engaged herself intensively with civil rights, labor and women's rights leaders, she provided her husband with the political leeway to operate in the political center. Eleanor Roosevelt moreover functioned often as the narrator, in the present and for the future, of the normative universe FDR helped shape. Through her role as non-elected associate of the President, she could depoliticize issues, and she assumed a key role in drawing the attention to her husband from the public into the private, and from the official into the officious. This worked both during his life and in the years after his death, in which she became the key agent of his legacy. This clearly expanded FDR's reach and impact as a cultural icon, but it gave her great agency too. ER used this agency on the one hand to further her own ideals as if they were her (late) husband's, and on the other hand, consistently

avoided drawing too much attention to herself in this pursuit. Thus, her key role in transposing FDR's ideals to the present is made invisible through her own belief in the need for women to capitalize on their "casual unawareness" of the magnitude of their contribution. As such, unlike the wheelchair, her role in FDR's politics as well as in the construction of the FDR icon continues to be underestimated and underrepresented.

Finally, the most important, and also the most seemingly self-contradictory, key to FDR's achievement in shaping himself as a vehicle for a wide range of changing narratives in American memory, is his plasticity. The FDR icon remains attractive because it is highly malleable to suit the needs and ideologies of many different audiences over time and in the present. Schlesinger's claim as a historian that "The world we live in today is Franklin Roosevelt's world," is an ideologically problematic overstatement, but the power of the cultural icon does indeed lie in the fact that FDR lends himself so well to being cast as such.