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Claim on memory : a political biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 1914-1988

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Claim on Memory

**A Political Biography of
Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.,
1914 –1988**

Erik van den Berg

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Claim on Memory:

A Political Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 1914–1988

Proefschrift

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Voor Lies

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

After George W. Bush had finished his work in his father's 1988 election campaign and transition he wondered what life would bring as "a first son." He asked an adviser to write a report on the lives of presidential children because he believed that historical examples were an instructive illustration. The outcomes were discouraging and disturbing. In comparison with the general population, the children of presidents suffered from higher measures of alcohol abuse, suicides and divorces. The document specifically mentioned the example of the life and political career of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.¹

FDR, Jr. was the fourth child of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt. During the immediate postwar years FDR, Jr. was considered as "one of the most promising young politicians in the country."² Politics was the Roosevelt family business and being Junior implied great benefits. He had inherited from his parents the invaluable assets of a political brand name and connections. However, despite being the most dynamic and natural campaigner of his era, FDR, Jr. did not electrify his generation. This failure is peculiar because he had, by birthright, a claim on the most compelling political memory of his time.³

As the thirty-second president, FDR had guided American capitalism through the Great Depression and World War II. In the process, he transformed the office of the presidency and invigorated the Democratic Party with a majority electoral coalition. FDR proposed a United Nations' structure to prevent further international conflicts to remake the post-World War II stage. His wife, Eleanor also became an American icon. Known later by her admirers as the "First Lady of the World" and as the conscience of America, she gave a voice to the plight of excluded groups as women, minorities, children and poor people. Eleanor confronted the leaders of society with moral obligations as a teacher, prolific writer and political adviser. Her crucial role in adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948 underscored this

1. Doug Wead, *All the Presidents' Children: Triumph and Tragedy in the Lives of America's First Families* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 1-5; Elizabeth Mitchell, *W: Revenge of the Bush Dynasty* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 234-235.

2. Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 163.

3. Stephen Hess, *America's Political Dynasties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 7.

attitude.⁴ Both balanced notions of pragmatic political realism and celebrated idealism. Where FDR had let pragmatic matters of style, personality and image prevail, ER had stressed her moral mission and idealistic commitments.

After the death of FDR in April 1945, the question FDR, Jr. faced was how to use this daunting and complex inheritance. As the trustee of his father's heritage the one thing FDR, Jr. could not do was live an average life. Life for a presidential child presented an incredible complicated challenge. The inheritance could help create his identity and role in society but could also contribute to the diminishment of it. Particularly, since he carried the same name life beckoned as a series of pitfalls and false standards because his inheritance involved a reputation to be lived up to or rebelled against.⁵ FDR, Jr. claimed he "was fully aware of the great advantages we boys enjoyed, father's prestige meant for us the friendship and intimacy of the prominent and the great but these privileges brought obstacles to our careers as well."⁶

This ambiguous blessing has become known as the dilemma whether to become "Dad's (and Mom's) describer" and to cash in on the name and memory, or to establish your own identity and to carve out an independent role of significance and distinction for yourself.⁷ As the political heir apparent the crux is then how FDR, Jr. used the magic of the name and assessed its value to learn to cope with these new responsibilities. Therefore, the key question of this study will focus on how FDR, Jr. interpreted the Roosevelt name and tradition during his life and political career.

FDR, Jr. faced the standards of implied success set by his distinguished parents. He wanted nothing more than to "emerge as a man of independent distinction" and to find ways to prove himself by standing on his own two feet.⁸ This analysis of FDR, Jr.'s personal and public struggle with his inheritance will demonstrate his attempts to fulfill the promise of his birthright, answer expectations and cope with pressures to defend the Roosevelt tradition and search for an identity, to interpret memory and achieve independence, to maintain commitment to public service and handle ambition.

This question is important against the background of the transformation of FDR from a popular president into a superhuman American icon. The spell of FDR continued to puzzle and fascinate contemporaries. Many people viewed him primarily in

4. "The Story of FDR, Jr.," folder FDR, Jr. biographies, box 236, FDR, Jr. Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY (hereafter FDRL); Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 192.

5. Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 192. Despite the pressures of the name, FDR, Jr. followed the patriarchal family tradition and junioried his first born son: Franklin D. Roosevelt III.

6. Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 285–286; Bela Kornitzer, *American Fathers and Sons* (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), 284–285; J.J. Perling, *Presidents' Sons: The Prestige of Name in a Democracy* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1947), 310–346; Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 192, 215–216.

7. Edmund Morris, "The Fathers' Curse," *Newsweek Memorial edition*, July 1999, 74–75; Adam Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1.

8. Peggy Noonan, "Grace Under the Glare," *Time*, 26 July 1999, 42; Morris, "The Fathers' Curse," 74–75.

personal terms as a wise, benevolent friend who understood their individual problems. When asked to list one personal characteristic that mirrored his father's memory, FDR, Jr. described FDR's "ability to come across in radio broadcasts in such a way as to make every listener feel that he was talking to each individual personally." People eulogized FDR as the champion of the common man who had guided the nation through the worst depression in its history and had committed the federal government to take care of its citizens.⁹

Recollections of Cabinet members, the White House staff, the Roosevelt family and early biographies helped shape this legendary status.¹⁰ The legend of FDR began where his life ended. "The Roosevelt Story," one of the first movies about FDR released in 1947, depicted him as a man of the people who had risen from simple Hyde Park origins, the proverbial log cabin, and had early on been inspired by a passion for social justice. The fact that FDR had come from a privileged aristocratic background, spoke with an upper-class accent and took no interest in the plight of the disadvantaged during the early stages of his political career apparently went unnoticed.¹¹ Though FDR, Jr. contributed

9. Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 50–51; Marquis Childs, "The Roosevelt Myth," *Look Magazine* (25 October 1949), 23–25 and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Roosevelt Literature," in *Americans for Democratic Action: The Roosevelt Yearbook*, vol. 1, 1949, 26–29, all in Lesley Kuhn Collection, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands (hereafter RSC).

10. William Harlan Hale, "Was There Really a Man Named Roosevelt?" *New Republic*, 3 January 1949, 22–26; Childs, "The Roosevelt Myth," 23–25, Kuhn Collection, RSC. FDR associates who publicized their recollections were Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking 1946); Raymond Moley, *After Seven Years: A Political Analysis of the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939); Edward J. Flynn, *You are the Boss* (New York, Collier Books, 1947) and Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938). Publications of the Roosevelt family included Elliott Roosevelt, ed., *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950); Eleanor Roosevelt, *This is My Story* (New York 1937); Sara Delano Roosevelt, *My Boy Franklin* (New York, Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1933); Early biographies included John Gunther, *Roosevelt in Retrospect: A Profile in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950) and Dexter Perkins, *The New Age of Roosevelt, 1931–1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

11. Hamilton Basso, "The Roosevelt Legend," *Life Magazine* (3 November 1947), 126–147, Kuhn Collection, RSC. Through these accounts the man behind the legend disappeared even more because they agreed on only one thing: FDR's contradictions. Frances Perkins concluded that the enigmatic FDR had been the "most complicated human being I ever knew." The secretary of labor who had known FDR since his days as Governor of New York described Roosevelt as evasive and frank, stubborn and flexible, frivolous and grave, traditional and pragmatic. David Potter, "Sketches for the Roosevelt Portrait," *Yale Review* (1950): 39–53; Lash, *ER: The Years Alone*, 247; Stephen Hess, *America's Political Dynasties: From Adams to Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 190–191; Patrick Maney, *The Roosevelt Presence* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 111, 168; James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, 1956); Hale, "Was There Really a Man Named Roosevelt?" 22–26, Kuhn Collection, RSC.

to the FDR mythology the claims on his father's memory that other people advanced hampered his political career.

This question is even more important against the background of the rise and fall of liberalism. FDR, Jr.'s (political) life shed light on its evolution. Despite FDR's enigmatic character and the New Deal's confusing "potpourri of policy initiatives" the notion of liberal reform dominated the political tradition between 1945 and 1968.¹² The most important liberal vision of the 1930s that survived was the new role of the government as the defender of economic opportunity for its citizens. FDR's innovations of a rudimentary welfare state and federal intervention in the economy remained powerful enough to help translate the postwar decades in an era of liberal consensus.¹³ Most liberals accepted its fundamental beliefs: the basic soundness of American democracy, society and economy.

This is not to say that New Deal liberalism did not change. Under the prevailing anti-Communist Cold War mentality liberals focused on economic growth to increase opportunities rather than on class-based reforms. Even more important was that the 1940s saw an increasing number of individuals and groups stand up to claim their basic rights. This development revealed the ideological flaws of the liberal orthodoxy. When liberals began to put equality of result rather than equality of opportunity on the agenda by the mid-1960s they ran into the limits of their ideology. The inclusion of this rights revolution on the liberal agenda provoked a conflict between a white backlash over preferential treatment and a violent black reaction drawing attention to continuing social and economic deprivation. American liberalism also experienced the international limits of its power that helped trigger the break up of the domestic status quo. The war in Vietnam became the vehicle for a new generation of students, women, minorities and artists to highlight the alleged fundamental flaws in the nation's society.¹⁴ The politics of race and the war in Vietnam accelerated the return to conservative policies after 1968.

12. William H. Chafe, "Introduction." in William H. Chafe, ed., *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xiii.

13. Timothy N. Thurber, *The Politics of Equality: Hubert H. Humphrey and the African American Freedom Struggle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 8–9; Chafe, "Introduction." in Chafe, ed., *The Achievement of American Liberalism*, xi–xviii. On FDR and the New Deal: David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14. Chafe, "Introduction." in Chafe, ed., *The Achievement of American Liberalism*, xi–xviii. See Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995) for the evolution and transformation of New Deal liberalism. William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Bill Clinton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) is a classic on the legacy of FDR; See for the liberal consensus theory Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Vintage, 1976); James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: the United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University, 1996) and Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) are noted works for the rise and fall of liberalism. Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience:*

FDR, Jr.

When I attended the conference of the Organization of American Historians in Los Angeles in April 2001, Blanche Wiesen Cook, the feminist author of a multi-volume biography of Eleanor Roosevelt was asked why she had not devoted more attention to Eleanor's role as mother. Cook replied that in her book she had paid as much attention to this maternal role as Eleanor had spent on her children. She pointed out that it was up to somebody else to describe and analyze the lives of the children.¹⁵

Obviously, FDR, Jr. has been a minor figure when compared to his illustrious parents. Yet, among the Roosevelt children, he deserved to be rescued from oblivion. FDR, Jr. was most fully immersed in the Roosevelt tradition and became inextricably bound up with his inheritance. To the extent that the Roosevelt memory lived on, "it lived through the family, and above all through the son who bore the name, the charm, and the burden."¹⁶

FDR, Jr. exemplified the set of self-evident assumptions within the Roosevelt family culture. This commitment to public service remained a constant factor in his life and as the heir apparent he became a national figure in American politics. James Roosevelt argued that of all his siblings FDR, Jr. truly represented the political memory of their parents because he had come closest to "continue the Roosevelt dynasty in the White House."¹⁷

FDR, Jr.'s political career offered a fascinating angle to steer him away from the footnotes of history. He was the golden boy of the family, self-reliant and confident. Since his youth he had demonstrated a clear interest in politics and the Roosevelt family considered him the budding politician. Journalist Louis Howe, who had masterminded FDR's career, predicted in 1931 that of all the Roosevelt's sons FDR, Jr. was destined to have a great future in politics. At that time he was only seventeen years old but Howe saw in FDR, Jr. the same qualities he had discovered in FDR twenty years earlier.¹⁸ Another close associate of his father agreed that FDR, Jr. was the son most likely to follow in the footsteps of his father. Admiral William Leahy observed that "he was the most interesting and promising of the President's children."¹⁹ FDR, Jr. claimed to *New York*

Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) discusses the rights revolution.

15. Biography Session, Annual Conference of the Organization of American Historians, 2001, Los Angeles, CA.

16. Nancy Gibbs, "... The Lost Horizon," *Time*, 26 July 1999, 29.

17. James Roosevelt with Bill Libby, *My Parents: A Differing View* (New York: Playboy Press, 1976), 313; James Roosevelt, *Affectionately, FDR* (London: George C. Harrap, 1960), 142.

18. Lela Stiles, *The Man behind Roosevelt: The Story of Louis McHenry Howe* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1954), 159–160.

19. Henry H. Adams, *Witness to Power: The Life of Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 244.

Post publisher Dorothy Schiff that he distinguished himself from his sister and brothers because “Mother always said that I looked more like him than the others did.”²⁰

Presidential Children

FDR, Jr. was not the first and would not be the last political successor to face this silver spoon dilemma. A number of presidential children has published recollections on the relationship with their famous fathers. Alice Roosevelt Longworth wrote a memoir of her life. Michael Reagan also published an autobiography a half century later. Anna, James and Elliott Roosevelt published books on their presidential parents. So did Maureen Reagan in the 1980s. John Quincy Adams edited the letters of his father. Margaret Truman, an accomplished writer, wrote biographies on her parents. Some offspring like Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who became a famous Washington socialite and Senator Robert Taft have been themselves the subject of extensive biographies.

In 1841, President John Tyler had issued a code for president children. “I hope that you [his children] will conduct yourselves with more than the usual propriety and decorum ... You are to know no favourites You are to accept no gifts whatsoever. ... You are to allow no one to approach you on the subject of office or favors.”²¹ Yet, what a presidential child should do in life, how to earn his own living and search for an identity always remained an issue full with conflicts that created potential political controversy and public curiosity.²² In the 1830s and 1840s, John Van Buren, the second child of President Martin Van Buren had developed a notorious reputation. Despite his brilliant political potential Van Buren’s lifestyle of womanizing, alcohol abuse and gambling marked his bad name. The public derided his cultivation of the rich and powerful at the royal courts in Europe and labeled him the “American Prince.”²³ His epithet of a poster boy for bad behavior foreshadowed the vicissitudes of a number of presidential children.

Despite this ongoing public fascination as field of study the attention for presidential children has been underexposed. Presidential studies have focused upon politics and policies rather than devote attention to the consequences of a presidency, at least before George W. Bush, Jr. became president in 2001. There were some exceptions to this lack of scholarly interest. J.J. Perling’s *Presidents Sons: The Prestige of Name in a Democracy* focused upon to what degree presidents have affected their offspring. Published in 1947, the author only studied presidential sons and his record ended with the sons of FDR. Nearly sixty years later, former presidential adviser Doug Wead wrote an analysis of presidential offspring entitled *All the Presidential Children*. In this summa-

20. Dorothy Schiff, “Interview with FDR, Jr.,” 9 January 1973, box 258, Dorothy Schiff Papers, Manuscript division, New York Public Library (hereafter NYPL).

21. Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *America’s First Families* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 323–324.

22. Anthony, *America’s First Families*, 324.

23. Wead, *All the Presidents’ Children*, 56, 63–64.

riking account Wead also recognized the unique position presidential sons and daughters inhabited.

The offspring of other (non-political) famous parents also occupied an exceptional position. Yet, presidential children distinguished themselves because they faced the impact of the most powerful and influential office in the world. Therefore, they were unable to “rationalize away the success of their parents.”²⁴ This exceptional place also offered them a unique perspective on the presidency. They lived “their lives on a separate and different level than their presidential parents” and saw the presidency in a whole new light.²⁵ One of the consequences of a presidency was that the lives and careers of presidential children like FDR, Jr. signaled a dynamic life full of multiple conflicts. This minefield of balancing public and private spheres was a recipe for a complex life. It compromised and established an identity, inspired and intimidated, and involved invaluable benefits and immense burdens.²⁶

For the vast majority of presidential sons the burdens of expectations and inherited status have meant imprisonment rather than empowerment. Historian Edmund Morris has argued that, “if the greatest gift our constitution can bestow is the presidency of the United States, one of its worst curses is to be the son of a chief executive.”²⁷ Morris, who wrote before the rise of George W. Bush, analyzed that of eighty-nine presidential sons born to forty-two chief executives only a handful have stepped out of the shadow of their father. The prime example was John Quincy Adams who became a president in his own right.

Other presidential sons often have had to relinquish their political ambitions. By entering fields other than politics, the heirs of Theodore Roosevelt partly solved the issue of political identity. Only his eldest son, TR, Jr. attempted to step in his father’s political shoes. He experienced that, “the children of a public man learned early that they cannot be ‘first’ with their father. They are robbed of much of his time and companionship and he of his children’s.”²⁸ The worst thing that could have happened to him was his father being President. It was not only the physical and emotional abandonment that made TR, Jr. acquiesce in his inevitable fate. He reasoned, “No matter what you do or don’t, I

24. Ibid., 106–107.

25. Ibid., 162–164.

26. “Transcript of Speech by William J. vanden Heuvel,” Held at the Memorial Service for Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 15 September 1988, 16–17, *Funeral Book Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.*, RSC; Perling, *Presidents’ Sons*, 310–346; Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 192, 215–216.

27. Morris, “The Fathers’ Curse,” 74–75. John Q. Adams, 6th president (1825–1829) was the son of John Adams, 2nd president (1797–1801). Others also developed successful political careers of their own. Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln, 16th president (1861–1865), became his own man after he became secretary of war and ambassador to Great Britain in the 1880s. Robert A. Taft, nicknamed “Mr. Republican,” son of William H. Taft, 27th president (1909–1913), earned respect and independence as leader of his party in the Senate during the 1940s and 1950s.

28. Joseph P. Lash, *Love Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and her Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 136; Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 215–216.

will always be spoken of as TR's son."²⁹ The position of a presidential child seemed to involve more difficulties than opportunities. Wead argued that despite a number of success stories they faced "higher than average rates of divorce, and alcoholism, and even premature death."³⁰

Presidential children also stood out because their political ambitions demonstrated the tension between America's meritocratic ideal and hereditary practices. FDR, Jr. played down the appearance of hereditary claims. He argued that his father "was enough of a realist to realize that in American politics there are no dynasties, ..., and that there really has never been a father-son relationship in American politics or equal success."³¹ FDR, Jr. rejected the epithet of royal families and maintained that every generation had to find the ability to stand on its own feet. James also stated that the Roosevelts were an average family. If the circumstances of their public parents would be disregarded, "we Roosevelts were a family with human problems not much different from those of any average family," ... where parents had "the same high hopes, ambitions and disappointments" as any other family.³²

Their meritocratic claims for anonymity were understandable. Despite their conferred aristocratic status, the history of the two branches of the Roosevelt family had hardly given any indication of producing royal leadership. The Hyde Park and Oyster Bay clans had lived inconspicuously for generations on their estates and had occupied themselves with making money. Until the rise of TR and FDR there was no foreboding of any imaginative public leadership. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, TR's eldest daughter and a sniping critic of FDR and ER, jested that their ancestors were only "upstart Dutch who made a couple of bucks."³³

FDR, Jr.'s observation denied the strong American tradition of dynasticism. Par-

29. Edward J. Renehan, Jr., *The Lion's Pride: TR and his family in Peace and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 67–68; Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 1, 8, 215. TR, Jr. emulated his father's political career by serving as a New York State assemblyman and as an assistant secretary of the Navy in the Harding Administration. After he was soundly beaten by Al Smith, his Democratic opponent in the 1924 campaign for New York governor TR, Jr. left elective politics. He became governor of Puerto Rico and subsequently of the Philippines. When FDR assumed the presidency in 1933, TR, Jr. disappeared from the scene altogether. He became a mere ceremonial figure. Outside the political sphere he continued to chase the ghost of his father in planning exotic adventures that he modeled on the Rough Rider's earlier hunting trips to Africa. Yet, TR, Jr. reemerged in World War II as a military hero when he served as a Major General in the Normandy invasion. Collier, *Roosevelts*, 302, 388–389; Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 195–196.

30. Wead, *All the Presidents' Children*, 1.

31. Schiff, "Interview with FDR, Jr.," 9 January 1973, box 258, Schiff Papers.

32. James Roosevelt, "My Father FDR," *Saturday Evening Post* (10 October 1959): 96, Kuhn Collection, RSC; William A. Degregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents*, 4th ed. (New York: Barricade Books, 1993), 482.

33. Betty Boyd Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 4; Editorial, *Life Magazine* (20 June 1949): 24–25, Kuhn Collection, RSC; Hess, *America's Political Dynasties*, 170–216.

ticularly, his appeal to an undistinguished middle class normality must be seen in the light of the fundamental American notion that nobody could claim a “hereditary right to public office.”³⁴ In the Constitution the anti-monarchal Founding Fathers specifically and purposely banned any titles of nobility and European dynastic rule. In 1947, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. reaffirmed the denial of caste privileges when he stated, “as a democracy the United States ought presumably be able to dispense with dynastic families.”³⁵

Since its inception, however, the American people had demonstrated a sneaking weakness for upper-class political dynasties to lead their country, both in business and politics.³⁶ The phenomenon of family dynasties and its inherited leadership capabilities had been an American tradition and ingrained in its national history but particularly in

34. Adam Bellow, “American Dynasty,” *Newsweek Special Edition Issues 2004*, December 2003 – February 2004, 85.

35. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Two Years Later: The Roosevelt Family,” *Life Magazine* (7 April 1947): 113, Kuhn Collection, RSC.

36. Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women*, 3–4; Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism*, 1–7, 485–508; Bellow, “American Dynasty,” 82–85; Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 1. From the end of the eighteenth century onward, clans like the Adamses of Boston, Livingstones of New York and Virginia, patrician Roosevelts of New York, Tafts of Ohio, Progressive LaFollettes of Wisconsin, Populists Longs of Louisiana, Catholic Kennedys of Massachusetts, Stevensons of Illinois, and Bushes of Connecticut and Texas have been dominating the political scene. Before World War II the family dynasties generally represented the upper class of American society. This political elite had been born into privilege, wealth and connections that remained unavailable for the remainder of the population. In each generation they had transferred power upon political elites to which they attributed exceptional, hereditary qualities. Influenced by the noblesse oblige ideal, this political nobility established a family tradition out of public service. The rise of the Catholic Irish-American Kennedys after 1945 reflected the decline of the old WASP Establishment. The political elite expanded and shifted in character. The growing economy and processes of individualism and mobility helped enter a wave of diverse middle class, merit-based, groups. The 1990s also witnessed the return of the WASP-related dynastic nepotism. This phenomenon was capped by the infamous 2000 election year contest that pitted the Juniors of two distinguished families against each other. George W. Bush and Albert Gore, Jr. epitomized the comeback of the political dynasties and the debate on the desirability of political and dynastic succession. The phenomenon of successor generations has become much more ingrained in state and local politics. According to Bellow, “the Longs of Louisiana had a family member in public office from 1917 to 1987.” Even more illustrative is the example of the grip the Daley family had on the municipal offices of the city of Chicago. The Chicago Tribune estimated that since Daley was reelected as mayor in 1989, “at least sixty-eight relatives by blood or marriage have drawn city paychecks,” their combined salaries totaling over \$3 million. The rise of a generation of successors had not been confined to the creation of the political governing caste. Americans had historically grown dependent upon the notion of families in big business and finance like the Rockefellers and the Morgans. In the last decade though partly based upon merit, the proliferation of family ties permeated also artistic fields like Hollywood, the music industry, literature, television, and sports. This leads one to conclude that despite imagining themselves as a society of self-made men and women, the increasing spreading of family ties suggested that the tradition of dynasticism was every inch an American phenomenon as the traditional meritocratic notion.

political life it found its critics.³⁷ In *America's Political Dynasties*, Stephen Hess focused upon this continuity and transfer of power from father to son. This alleged hereditary right was felt as “shockingly undemocratic and un-American.”³⁸ Despite constitutional guidelines Americans had always turned to political dynasties for leadership. Public service developed into a family tradition of “People’s Dukes” in the words of reporter Stewart Alsop. In a sense, American politics became a family business filled by a generation of successors.³⁹

This “equalitarian blind spot” suggested that presidential children were “exceptional people [who] ought to get exceptional consideration.”⁴⁰ President Harry Truman described them as “the offspring of hereditary rulers ... expected to be out of the ordinary and to maintain a special prominence ...”⁴¹ Perling underscored this illustration of the sensitivity and vulnerability of American democracy to privileged treatment. He stated, “in a democracy where every boy is said to have an equal opportunity” the study of the lives and careers of presidential sons are a way to put this thesis to the test.⁴² Hess also concluded, “the question of class leadership in a democracy deserves careful scrutiny.”⁴³

Political Biography

How to treat FDR, Jr. as a subject of a historical study? I have cast this story into the mold of a political biography. The complex interaction and inevitable connection between private life and public figure and the handling of the silver-spoon dilemma have dictated this approach of FDR, Jr.’s political career. This characteristic that has been so striking among presidential children signaled the need for FDR, Jr. to balance identity and memory. His political motivation and decisions were directly interwoven with his name and tradition. This story of FDR, Jr. takes the shape of a political biography to illuminate the consequences of a presidency, how he interpreted the Roosevelt memory and dealt with ambition, promise, expectation and entitlement.

A biography is the story of a life. It is a fascinating genre because, in principle, it gives the impression that everything is possible. Some would argue that this argument demonstrates exactly why it is an impossible genre. Biography becomes a Don

37. Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism*, 1–7, 485–508; Bellow, “American Dynasty,” 82–85. I have been inspired regarding the argument of dynasticism by Bellow’s incisive book.

38. Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 1–2.

39. Ibid.

40. John Fisher, “The Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s* (August 1957): 16, quoted in Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 1.

41. Quoted in Anthony, *America’s First Families*, 325.

42. Perling, *Presidents’ Sons*, vii.

43. Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 7.

Quichotte-like undertaking that involves respectable, yet unattainable goals.⁴⁴ Literary scholar Stanley Fish therefore ridiculed the genre. He dismissed the biography as “minutiae without meaning” while “biographers can only be inauthentic, can only get it wrong, can only lie, can only substitute their own story of their announced subject.”⁴⁵

The biographical genre does have pitfalls. FDR, Jr. cannot be considered as part of “Great Men” history. Yet for the reasons outlined above his claim on memory and political career have made him exceptional. The aim of this study is not a full-scale biography of FDR, Jr. The interpretation and my astonishment focused upon FDR, Jr.’s life and active political career between 1945 and 1966 to understand him to a certain extent as a political son. A comprehensive and definite portrait that got to the bottom of his life and explained his character in full would be impossible.⁴⁶ Rather than being *le dernier mot* this study should therefore be considered as a starting point to strike up an acquaintance with a complex and controversial scion of one of America’s leading dynasties. It might satisfy your curiosity about a famous historical figure that operated against the background of the rise and fall of liberalism.

Sources

This study will be the first monograph on the life and political career of FDR, Jr. Scholarly works have mentioned the activities of FDR, Jr. only in the shadow of his parents and in the margin of presidents Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. Therefore, this study is based on the personal and political papers of FDR, Jr. in de Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. The findings of these largely unused sources have shed light on FDR, Jr.’s involvement in elections, his positions on political issues as civil rights and anti-communism, and his relations with local and national politicians and with members of his family.

FDR, Jr. did keep a fragmented diary but only during his service in the Navy in World War II and in the immediate postwar years. He did not publish a memoir on his life. The correspondence with Eleanor, Anna, James, Elliott and John revealed how the family dealt with the responsibilities of guarding the memory of FDR. Particularly, the candid letters between FDR, Jr. and his eldest son, FDR III, the diary of his friend Joe Lash and the private memos of *New York Post* publisher Dorothy Schiff tell us about his inner life, his hopes and fears, dreams and deeds.

Many politicians and public figures have been associated with FDR, Jr. I have focused my research on their correspondence with FDR, Jr. in their archival collections. I limited myself to the main supporters and opponents such as John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Senator Jacob Javits, Senator Herbert Lehman, Governor Averell

44. S. Dresden, *Over de Biografie* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2001), 239–250.

45. NYT, 7 September 1999 quoted in *Reviews in American History* 28 (2000): 45–49.

46. Dresden, *Over de Biografie*, 186–194, 223–238.

Harriman, Joe Lash, former New Dealers such as Ed Flynn and James Farley, Dorothy Schiff and labor leader David Dubinsky of the Liberal Party of New York State.

I have used the *New York Times* to establish a chronological order of FDR, Jr.'s political activities. Numerous magazine articles and other newspaper accounts have supplemented the set up of this timeline. I have conducted interviews with two of FDR, Jr.'s former wives. Suzanne Kloman was married to FDR, Jr. during his active political career between 1949 and 1970. Linda Stevenson Weicker, his last wife, gave insight in the final decade of FDR, Jr.'s life. Political advisers and close friends as Justin Feldman, Louis Harris and Trude Lash have offered their opinions on the successes and setbacks of FDR, Jr.'s political career. Curtis Roosevelt, William vanden Heuvel, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. talked to me about the way FDR, Jr. interpreted the Roosevelt name and memory. I have applied these interviews to complement my picture of FDR, Jr. and his time and my findings in the archives and literature. Obviously, in these personal and colored reminiscences you have to take into account the defect of human memory and the passing of time.

The answers to the question I raised above are detailed in the following chapters. The first one, "Growing up in public" will discuss FDR, Jr.'s upbringing and education. This chapter emphasizes the impact of his parents' public careers that culminated in the presidency after 1933. The next three chapters "Ambition," "Heir Apparent" and "Entitlement" is a triptych that will focus on FDR, Jr.'s efforts to follow in the footsteps of his father between 1945 and 1954. These attempts in Congress and New York State will address issues of promise and expectations that FDR, Jr. faced. These chapters also discuss the way he dealt with the responsibilities as a guardian of FDR's memory and the subsequent disagreements with his siblings.

Chapter 5 "Salesman" will investigate FDR, Jr.'s fall after his defeat in the 1954 New York gubernatorial election and the rise from the political woods as a salesman in the service of the Kennedy clan. Chapter 6 "Achievement" will discuss his independent accomplishments in the Democratic administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. FDR, Jr. worked in areas as poverty relief and civil rights where the Roosevelt name and memory were traditionally held in high regard. Chapter 7 "Respect" will analyze FDR, Jr.'s attempts in the 1966 New York gubernatorial election to demonstrate his commitment to issues and to receive respect. It outlines the ways he hoped to shed the label of naked ambition for political office from the 1940s and 1950s. The epilogue describes how FDR, Jr. dealt with the loss of personal and financial security after he had left active politics in 1966.