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

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## EPILOGUE

# Identity

### Comeback

FDR, Jr. stood at crossroads after his humiliating loss. In November 1966, FDR III candidly told his father that he faced a fundamental decision. He could hope for a political comeback. If FDR, Jr. would keep on advocating the right issues this might become a real possibility. Yet, the “odds were not very high in favor of this possibility.”<sup>1</sup> FDR, Jr. could also consider becoming a private person and “enjoy doing little things that help other people and cultivate relationship with friends and family.”<sup>2</sup>

FDR III illustrated this alternative approach to life with the example of his own life. He emphasized that he felt out of place in politics. This world that constantly identified him as a Roosevelt threatened him. He realized that his father had lived his life on the notion that “recognition by the voting public is the highest criterion of worth.”<sup>3</sup> FDR III stressed he had grown up without the feeling that politics was everything and had now found another goal in life in teaching at Columbia University.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than to search for a new identity FDR, Jr. immediately started working for a political comeback. This had already been clear on the night that the election results came in. FDR, Jr. claimed, “I have got to make clear that I’m going on with this fight. They are gonna try to finish me off. I’m not taking that.”<sup>5</sup> He was too proud on his name to play politically dead after the election had seen him fighting for his political life. At fifty-two, he felt too young to be out of public office.

In January 1967, FDR, Jr. rented a Manhattan town house and transformed it into a temporary political headquarters. He hired three staffers and eagerly spoke out at schools forums in the city on the issues he had addressed in his campaign. FDR, Jr. suggested a National Marshall Plan to attack the current domestic problems and to promote entrepreneurship. He emphasized the importance to adopt a statewide primary because

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1. FDR III to FDR, Jr., 11 November 1966, folder R, box 173, FDR, Jr. Papers, FDRL.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. James A. Wechsler, “Beyond Defeat,” *New York Post*, 9 November 1966, Personality Clippings Files, box 144, DNC Records, JFKL.

he knew it was his best opportunity to establish a comeback to a major elective office.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, FDR, Jr. needed the help from the state's most powerful Democrat. After a telephone call from Senator Ted Kennedy he endorsed Robert F. Kennedy for president in April 1968.<sup>7</sup> The next year, he remained involved in New York City politics and attached his name to candidates for city council and mayor.<sup>8</sup>

His political activities did not bring him the reward that business initially had produced. In January 1970, FDR, Jr. sold his stock in the Roosevelt Motor Company to Fiat. This deal made him a multi-millionaire. The negotiated check of six millions dollars brought him financial security. FDR, Jr. quickly reinvested the capital in a travel agency business and real estate ventures.<sup>9</sup> When the 1972 presidential campaign for the Democratic candidacy geared up, he applied his efforts for the frontrunner, Maine Senator Edmund Muskie. In early 1972, FDR, Jr. planned a campaign tour in the winter for his personal friend and fellow member of the Roosevelt Campobello International Park Commission. In return, he expected to be named secretary of the Interior. This turned out to be idle hope after Muskie self-destructed and withdrew from the race in mid-1972.<sup>10</sup>

## Crisis

FDR, Jr.'s salesmanship capabilities could not make up for the fact that his life had started to unravel. As the political future grew bleaker so did his personal outlook. He confided to Joe Lash that he had grown estranged from Sue. They had decided their marriage could not work. In the summer of 1969, he had met Felicia Warburg Sarnoff, the former wife of Record Company of America executive Bob Sarnoff and daughter of Felix Warburg, a wealthy philanthropist and international financier. By the end of June

6. FDR, Jr. to Stanley Hart, 28 September 1967, Personal Files box 317, FDR, Jr. Papers; Harold H. Harris, "Don't Count Out FDR Jr.," *New York World Journal Tribune*, 20 January 1967, Personality Clippings Files, box 143, DNC Records, JFKL; Timothy N. Thurber, *The Politics of Equality: Hubert H. Humphrey and the African American Freedom Struggle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 204–206.

7. Joseph P. Lash to Earl Miller, 8 April 1968, Interviews conducted by Joseph P. Lash, Roosevelt Study Center, the Netherlands (hereafter RSC); *New York Times*, 4 April 1968 (hereafter *NYT*).

8. *NYT*, 25 June and 1 August 1969.

9. Diary Entry 18 May 1970, Diary Joe Lash, folder Roosevelt, Franklin D. Jr. 1980–1981, General Correspondence, box 16, Joseph P. Lash Papers, FDRL; FDR, Jr. to AL, 28 June 1982, folder General (relates to farm) 1982, box 274, FDR, Jr. Papers.

10. Dorothy Schiff to Files, 1 February 1972, folder Roosevelt, Jr., Franklin D., 1966, October 10 – 1989, January 23, Editorial Files, box 65, Dorothy Schiff Papers, NYPL; *NYT*, 28 March 1972; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: America, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 759; Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America From Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 498–501.

1970, FDR, Jr. flew to Mexico to finalize his divorce. Custody of Nancy, eighteen, and Laura, eleven went to Sue.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, FDR, Jr.'s new commitment fell victim to the pitfall of most of his brothers' marriages. Their women had married into the family for their name and tradition. In February 1975, FDR, Jr. revealed to Dorothy Schiff that his marriage with Felicia was busted. She was an "anti-Semitic" and a "snob."<sup>12</sup> He realized that Felicia had always wanted to be in the Jet Set and marry a rich WASP. Her snobbishness also extended to his friends. She had no use for Joe and Trude Lash. Only after his book on Eleanor had become a great success, Felicia invited them to dinner. FDR, Jr. had been named his mother's literary executor after her death. He was responsible for her private papers at the FDR Library and had asked Joe to write a biography of Eleanor based upon this personal archive. In 1971, the book won a Pulitzer and National Book Award for biography.<sup>13</sup>

FDR, Jr. was also concerned that Felicia's tactlessness and bluntness would damage him politically because she wanted to join his Muskie campaign. He had thought he loved her but she could not stand the comparison with Sue who had been far more helpful at the farm. FDR, Jr. confided that he considered remarrying his former wife now that he had returned to be on speaking terms with Sue.<sup>14</sup> Schiff had invited FDR, Jr. to dinner to offer him a position as an associate publisher at the *New York Post* but expressed shock at his physical deterioration. FDR, Jr. looked awful and had "very, very bad shakes and was unable to hold a glass."<sup>15</sup> Schiff thought that he was over the hill.

Joe Lash did not think that FDR, Jr. was shunted out. In June 1975, he counseled his friend that he could still be politically effective. Lash claimed he possessed the spark of command and leadership. His name could "fire up the troops as a candidate" for the upcoming presidential election. Despite his lack of organization and the certain "merciless beating" in the media his claim on memory stood out in the field of mediocre candidates.<sup>16</sup> FDR, Jr. did not take the bait. In April 1976, he endorsed presidential hopeful Jimmy Carter. The Georgia Governor hoped that the reflected glory would strengthen his claim as heir to the memory of FDR and the New Deal. FDR, Jr. was present when Carter announced his candidacy from the steps of the "Little White House" in Warm

11. Diary Entry 18 May 1970, Diary Joe Lash, folder Roosevelt, Franklin D. Jr. 1980–1981, General Correspondence, box 16, Lash Papers; *New York Post*, 30 June 1970, Anna Roosevelt Halsted Papers, FDRL.

12. Dorothy Schiff to Files, 1 February 1972, folder Roosevelt, Jr., Franklin D., 1966, October 10 – 1989, January 23, Editorial Files, box 65, Schiff Papers, NYPL.

13. Ibid.; "Introduction by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.," in Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: Smithmark, 1995), xiii–xiv.

14. Schiff to Files, 1 February 1972, folder Roosevelt, Jr., Franklin D., 1966, October 10 – 1989, January 23, Editorial Files, box 65, Schiff Papers, NYPL.

15. Ibid.

16. Joe Lash to FDR, Jr., 2 June 1975, folder Roosevelt, FDR, Jr. 1986, General Correspondence, box 16, Lash Papers.

Springs, Georgia.<sup>17</sup> He later described Carter as his “personal friend” though these warm feelings did not result in the coveted appointment as the new president’s ambassador to the United Nations.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of that month, FDR, Jr. officially divorced Felicia. Shortly thereafter, he met Patricia Oakes during a foxhunt in the neighborhood of his farm. In May 1977, they married in a horseback wedding. The age difference underscored FDR, Jr.’s personal crisis. He was sixty-three while she had turned twenty-seven.<sup>19</sup> Their marriage produced a son, John Alexander, that year but was not a success. Patricia had personal problems of her own and was not at her place at the farm. The staff was unable to get along with the new Mrs. Roosevelt. They described her as “very abusive,” “crazy” and “unreasonable in her criticisms.” Patricia’s demanding treatment led many people who had been working for FDR, Jr. for years to leave the farm.<sup>20</sup>

Financial stress aggravated FDR, Jr.’s depression. Soon after he had placed his capital in the hands of the investment firm, FDR, Jr. had learned that they had lost most of his money from the sale of his company to Fiat. He was forced to sell his house in New York City and moved permanently to the farm. FDR, Jr. had kept up an aristocratic life. He vacationed on exclusive Martha’s Vineyard and visited Jackie Kennedy in Greece where he chartered a boat to cruise the Mediterranean. He regularly sailed in the waters around Campobello and traveled extensively.<sup>21</sup> Yet, failing businesses led him to cancel going to his beloved Campobello because he did not have the money.

FDR, Jr. had lost more money in a Moped venture he had started in 1977. The business had become a major flop after it developed a bad reputation among the public. When sales dried up during 1978 FDR, Jr. traveled, almost desperately to find solutions to rescue his investment without any loss. At the end of the year he had to take an additional mortgage on the farm to cover the liquidation of his stock. In October 1978, he admitted to FDR III he had become relieved because “the year of trial is almost over.”<sup>22</sup>

He started to concentrate his efforts on the horse breeding business to profit from the Thoroughbred boom in New York State. By the early 1980s, he proudly wrote Frank

17. NYT, 6 April 1976.

18. FDR, Jr. to Bert Lance, 3 November 1977, folder Jimmy Carter, Campaign, box 201, FDR, Jr. Papers; FDR, Jr., “The Roosevelt Legacy,” in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *Portraits of American Presidents*, vol. 1, *The Roosevelt Presidency: Four Intimate Perspectives of FDR* (New York: University Press of America, 1982), 52.

19. Statement marriage Felicia Sarnoff, folder Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Personal & Confidential 1969, box 351, FDR, Jr. Papers; NYT, 23 April 1976; *Newsweek*, 6 May 1977.

20. FDR, Jr. to AL, 6 October 1981, folder General (relates to farm) 1982, box 274, FDR, Jr. Papers.

21. Dairy Entry 18 May 1970, Diary Joe Lash, folder Roosevelt, Franklin D. Jr. 1980–1981, General Correspondence, box 16, Lash Papers, FDRL.

22. FDR, Jr. to FDR III, 10 July 1978, folder Roosevelt, F.D. III, box 343, FDR, Jr. Papers.

and Chris that he had built “the best horse breeding farm and facilities in the East.”<sup>23</sup> Success was only of short duration. FDR, Jr. had neglected to buy mares for his operation that could have produced yearlings to sell. His mistake of judgment made him unable to pay back the loans he had taken out to finance the horse business.

In December 1982, FDR, Jr. explained to his sons that within months he might have to shut down the business since he was unable to buy feed for the horses and meet the payroll. The last year and a half, he had been “totally absorbed” in solving his financial difficulties. He had tried to find syndicates who were willing to take over the farm and business. He feared his lack of success would force him into bankruptcy and that he would have to sell the farm.<sup>24</sup>

The tensions of financial insecurity had an immense impact on FDR, Jr. In late 1982, he revealed to his sons, “I have never worked so hard, with such total frustration and fear, and I cannot describe the depression, which results.”<sup>25</sup> His deepest concern had been to provide an opportunity for his babyson Jack for a start in life and for his heritage. He received reproachful letters from FDR III about his continuing absence. FDR, Jr. was “very hurt” and “desolated” by his son’s criticism. He accepted it and asked forgiveness. He had felt unable to pay attention to his family because of the “tremendous pressures” to remain financially afloat. FDR, Jr. had missed seeing his family and hoped that they could “forget the past” and look forward to “a happier future.”<sup>26</sup> Eventually the farm was placed on sale and he moved to the neighboring village of Millbrook.

## Identity

In those years of trial, FDR, Jr. remained committed to the Roosevelt tradition. He felt that the centennial of his father’s birthday on 30 January 1982 should start at Springwood and the Library at Hyde Park. He had invited President Reagan as the main speaker to commemorate his father. When Reagan declined, FDR, Jr. publicly criticized the president for his absence. He was also piqued that Reagan had not issued an official proclamation since the Post Office had issued FDR centennial stamps. This came on top of the public affront that Congress had only appropriated \$25,000 for the festivities whereas it had devoted \$7,5 million to celebrate Hoover’s centennial.

In early January, Reagan did invite the Roosevelt family to the White House. FDR, Jr. refused to attend the ceremony with two hundred other people and denounced the invitation as “too little, too late.” He claimed that Reagan wanted to play down the cen-

23. FDR, Jr. to FDR III, 2 December 1982, folder Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. Personal and Confidential, box 351, FDR, Jr. Papers.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. FDR, Jr. to FDR III, 10 July 1978, folder Roosevelt, F.D. III, box 343; FDR, Jr. to FDR III, 2 December 1982, folder Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. Personal and Confidential, box 351, both in FDR, Jr. Papers.

ennial year and refused to “help maintain his false image of great admirer and follower in the steps of FDR.”<sup>27</sup> Not only did the president fail to show up at the Hyde Park ceremonies James and Elliot were also absent. FDR, Jr. felt some vindication when he learned that the March of Dimes ball that James chaired had become a “total flop.” The fundraiser had been scheduled on the same night as the Hyde Park event.<sup>28</sup>

FDR, Jr. found solace in his role as the protector of his parents’ memory and served as an example for his children. He devoted his efforts to highlight their achievements at countless official events. He supported the Four Freedoms Awards ceremonies and helped establish the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute in Hyde Park, NY. Often, he attended these events with his new wife, Linda McKay Weicker, whom he had married in 1984 after his divorce from Patricia. FDR, Jr.’s last years were happy ones after Toby, as she was called, contributed to the revival of his spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Campobello had his special attention because he had been born on the island. He devoted his energies as a long-term member of the Roosevelt Campobello International Park Commission to make the place a landmark and to honor his father. In 1986, FDR, Jr.’s efforts and the spirit of international cooperation also led to the establishment of the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, the Netherlands. He claimed that the foundation of the institution had been “an historic occasion which opens the door to scholars, teachers and students for a better understanding of America and the Roosevelt era.”<sup>30</sup> It was his last major accomplishment. On 17 August 1988, FDR, Jr. died of lung cancer at Vassar Brothers Hospital in Poughkeepsie. It was his seventy-fourth birthday.

27. FDR, Jr. to Clayton Faulkner, 9 February 1982, folder Roosevelt, FDR, Jr. 1981–1986, General Correspondence, box 16, Lash Papers, FDRL.

28. Ibid.

29. Memorial Service for Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 15 September 1988, *Funeral Book Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.*, 1–24, RSC.

30. “Transcript of Speech by Cornelis Boertien,” Held at the Memorial Service for Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 15 September 1988, 18, *Funeral Book Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.*, RSC.

# Conclusion

## Name as an Asset to be Sold

The morning after his shocking defeat on 5 November 1954, Louis Harris recalled FDR, Jr.'s revealing reaction. "We were in this suite in the Lombardy Hotel, our campaign headquarters, and Franklin is in the bathroom. And all of a sudden I hear this strong man, a 6 ft. 4 strapping man of strength and self-possession, weeping in the bathroom, weeping openly." After FDR, Jr. came out, his eyes red, Harris asked him, "Frank what in the world is [the] trouble? Do you want to tell me what happened?" FDR, Jr. shook his head and said, "Lou, I must tell you, it is just too much. Just too much for one individual to bear." "What do you mean?" a puzzled Harris asked. "To be the son of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt," FDR, Jr. admitted, "it is too much to live up to. And I guess I have not done it."<sup>1</sup>

Presidential children were usually eclipsed by their famous fathers. The experiences of FDR, Jr. were no exception to this rule. The compelling memory of his father ran FDR, Jr.'s life and framed his decisions. FDR, Jr.'s life and political career signaled an effort to come to terms with this birthright, the Roosevelt name and tradition. These efforts, to find a way of living up to expectations, remains fascinating because FDR, Jr. used his name and tradition as a claim on memory. More than other presidential children FDR, Jr. interpreted this claim as a political asset to be sold. He believed that "his name and popularity could win any elective office he desired...."<sup>2</sup> FDR, Jr. was a salesman who founded his ambition upon the political capital represented in his name and sold this brand name to run for elective office.

His name and the examples of his parents' distinguished service in public life drove this ambition to enter politics. In public service FDR, Jr. found a goal in life. Yet, his claim on memory was overshadowed by a strong sense of entitlement, ambition and independence. This focus on dynastic status had originated during FDR, Jr.'s upbringing and education.

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1. Author interview with Louis Harris, New York City, 15 July 1999.

2. Jacob K. Javits with Rafael Steinberg, *Javits: The Autobiography of a Public Man* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 201.

FDR, Jr. grew up in an environment where public life overshadowed family care.<sup>3</sup> It turned his upbringing into a complex experience without any real sense of security to define his life. The communication between Sara, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and between parents and children was distant and often tense. FDR's political career, his recovery from polio and ER's emancipation implied a frequent absence and unavailability. These struggles for independence in public life signaled the Roosevelts' inability to stabilize at a normal family life.

This had a strong impact on FDR, Jr. In the relationships with his parents he created attitudes of strong admiration and attention neglect. FDR, Jr. did also develop attitudes that he found difficult to control. This strong streak of independence, arrogance and carelessness underscored the lack of parental guidance and lame discipline. Like all his brothers, FDR, Jr. demonstrated this search for individualism by driving recklessly, rushing into a jet-set marriage that embarrassed his father politically and celebrating a glamorous life. Unlike his brothers James and Elliott though he did not succumb to the temptation of quick promotional money.

FDR, Jr.'s (grand)parents had also instilled in him a sense of entitlement and tradition. This set of values FDR, Jr. was brought up to believe in determined the role he played. As a political son, he based his life and career on the notion, as his son Franklin D. Roosevelt III perceptively described, "that recognition by the voting public is the highest criterion of worth."<sup>4</sup> In 1949, the victory in the special election for a seat in Congress successfully fulfilled this need for approbation. Public office and public approval gave FDR, Jr. a notion of security and identity.

In the New York City election, FDR, Jr. imitated the model of his father. FDR had also used the name and fame of TR to start and advance his own political career. FDR, Jr.'s entry in the twentieth congressional district evoked memories with Roosevelt supporters and haters of "good old times" and became a referendum on the memory of the late president. FDR, Jr. emulated his father's campaign style, tactics and strategy. His smile and voice were a copy of FDR and he displayed the quick charm and easy assurance on the campaign trail his father had been known for. FDR, Jr. established a brain trust, a liberal-labor coalition and ran on New Deal issues. The opposition of Tammany Hall gave him the anti-bossism campaign theme to deflect the inevitable attacks that he was trading on his father's name. FDR, Jr.'s victory reinforced old sentiments and served as a tribute to the memory of FDR amidst a conservative political resurgence.

Astonishingly, the 1949 election was FDR, Jr.'s only real victory for public office. This lack of success at the ballot had everything to do with his notion that the Roosevelt memory was an asset to be sold. If FDR, Jr. could only gain public approval through the ballot, every political campaign became a naked pursuit of office and sheer self-advancement. He always saw an opportunity to run for "something" on the basis of his brand name.

3. Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 457.

4. FDR III to FDR, Jr., 11 November 1966, folder R, box 173, FDR, Jr. Papers, FDRL.

His tenure in Congress and the 1950 and 1954 gubernatorial elections in New York demonstrated that FDR, Jr. built a record of public service for political gain and to satisfy individual ambition. During the first half of the 1950s, these were the only answers, FDR, Jr. was able to provide to crucial questions of how important public office was to him and what he wanted to use it for.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the advantages of his inherited political capital, campaign skills and natural charm FDR, Jr. was a “national figure without being ready for it”.<sup>6</sup> He established himself in the field of civil rights and advocated extension of New Deal measures but did not follow through on his commitments. As heir apparent, FDR, Jr. displayed sheer effectiveness on the stump but lacked the essential political skills and shrewdness of his father. FDR, Jr. acted frequently as above the political handwork of creating a coalition, carefully cultivating and cooperating with colleagues. FDR, Jr. became overexcited and considered himself the political star in the ascendant. He ambitiously built a national reputation rather than educating the voting public on issues. Frustrated by his new responsibilities, his congressional seat quickly became a launching pad for higher office such as the 1950 and 1954 New York gubernatorial elections.

FDR, Jr. distinguished himself by his desire for independence that built upon his claim on memory. By virtue of his name and inherited advantages he did not conform to the applied rules of predictability that defined the political culture of the 1940s and 1950s. Democratic leaders in New York and Washington, D.C. resented this birthright attitude. They reasoned FDR, Jr. needed more seasoning in Congress. More than annoyance and dislike they feared FDR, Jr.’s independence.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing him as a great threat these political professionals began to thwart the rise of the young man in a hurry. This was very damaging because FDR, Jr.’s political fate was still tied to these party leaders who wielded enormous power. Politics in the 1940s and 1950s remained the prerogative of a small number of political bosses whom in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms decided upon the candidates for public office.<sup>8</sup> In such an environment of contrived elections the bosses based their power and positions on predictability. FDR, Jr.’s impatience to wait for his turn to run and his impossibility to be controlled yielded a risk they were unwilling to take. These circumstances sharply reduced the value of the asset FDR, Jr. could sell.

In contrast to his political opportunism in the 1950s, FDR, Jr. hoped to show a more profound commitment to political principles in the 1966 election for governor. Sadder and wiser, the proverbial “New Roosevelt” wanted to achieve political and personal

5. Joe Lash to FDR, Jr., 2 April 1950, folder Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr. 1940–1965, box 16, Joseph P. Lash Papers, FDRL.

6. Mitchel Levitas, “Rise, Fall and ... of FDR, Jr.,” *New York Times Magazine*, 23 October 1966, 27, 42, 44, 49–52, 57–70.

7. “Transcript of Speech by Justin N. Feldman,” Held at the Memorial Service for Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., 15 September 1988, 15, *Funeral Book Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.*, RSC; Stephen Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties: From Adams to Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 212.

8. *Washington Post*, 18 September 1999.

respect.<sup>9</sup> This revised meaning for the use of political office had been prompted by FDR, Jr.'s new attitude after the death of Eleanor in 1962. During the election, he distinguished himself by his dedication and commitment. As the candidate of the Liberal Party, FDR, Jr. assumed leadership by taking independent and principled stands on a number of issues that were ahead of his times, and stuck to those positions.

Still, his belated re-invention in 1966 was unconvincing. FDR, Jr.'s main goal remained self-advancement to satisfy political ambition. He wanted to resuscitate his career and use a good result at the ballot as a springboard to future elective offices. The outcome of the election demonstrated that in number of votes FDR, Jr.'s claim on memory had been devaluated. His actions to sell his magic name to advance his career failed to make much political impact. Nor did the efforts enhance his political stature within the Democratic Party. FDR, Jr.'s decision to use the "bossism" issue to capture the nomination antagonized Democratic leaders. This expedience also showed when he turned his back on the party of his father and allowed Alex Rose to use the prestige of his name to rescue the Liberal Party from oblivion, without success.

### Guardian of his Father's Place in History

The conception that his claim on memory was an asset to be sold also characterized FDR, Jr.'s responsibilities as the guardian of his father's place in history. After FDR's death the Roosevelt family had become trustees of his heritage. Yet, financial disagreements, political competition, marital and health problems among the children and Eleanor stretched the loyalty of the family ties. Their display of strong individualism hampered the Roosevelt family to unite behind an approach to preserve and use FDR's name and tradition.

Though FDR, Jr. became the family's legal representative, what he really wanted was to profit politically from the trusteeship of FDR's heritage. He used the efforts to defend the accomplishments of FDR to enhance his opportunities for political office. In the immediate postwar years, this behavior of individual ambition shaped his attitude toward President Truman. FDR, Jr. became impatient with the accidental president whom he felt lacked style, inspiration and personal leadership qualities. He wanted to assure that FDR's liberal vision would survive under the new administration and determine where his father would stand on current issues.<sup>10</sup> Truman issued a rivaling claim on memory. Several times the president tried to commit the Roosevelt name to his administration but FDR, Jr. held back.

He built upon his disdain for Truman and the unpopularity of his administration

9. Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: Norton, 1971), 343.

10. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Two Years Later: The Roosevelt Family," *Life Magazine* (7 April 1947): 113–119, Kuhn Collection, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands (hereafter RSC); Peter Collier with David Horowitz, *The Roosevelts: An American Saga* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 450.

to lead the effort to draft staunch conservative Dwight Eisenhower as candidate for the Democratic nomination in the 1948 election. In this flawed Eisenhower draft he imitated the model of his father to create a political base by opposing Truman and the party establishment. The impulsiveness and expedient nature of the dump-Truman movement demonstrated FDR, Jr.'s eagerness to reap the profits of a political office.

The opportunity to sell the prestige of his name also defined FDR, Jr.'s relationships with the politicians of his generation. After 1954, when his career in public office was halted, FDR, Jr. lent the prestige of his name to sell fellow politicians as heirs to the throne of his father. After unsuccessful efforts that involved Eisenhower in 1948 and Averell Harriman in the 1952 presidential election, FDR, Jr. managed to sell John F. Kennedy to the American public as FDR's successor. FDR, Jr.'s independence bypassed the wishes of his mother and a part of the Democrats to lift his adopted candidate on the Roosevelt shield.<sup>11</sup> Though his interventions in the 1960 West Virginia primary did have a decisive impact, FDR, Jr.'s hopes of acquiring a position in the new Kennedy administration quickly dashed. He had helped to facilitate the transition between the two dynasties but the new sense of relevance that the prestige of the Roosevelt name had acquired only underscored the recurring theme of his service to the Kennedy family. This development signaled that FDR, Jr. had lost the command of his life. Politicians now started to use his claim on memory to pursue their goals rather than the other way around.

When FDR, Jr. joined the Kennedy administration in early 1963, the nature of his claim on memory changed. He employed the prestige of his tradition to work in fields where the Roosevelt name was traditionally held in high regard: poverty relief and civil rights. The dedication to the Appalachian Regional Program was obvious. Lyndon Johnson used FDR, Jr. and the memory of his parents to sell the program to the region and to Congress.

FDR, Jr. also displayed a commitment for the pressing civil rights issue. As the first chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1965 he gave the new civil rights organization unprecedented exposure. Despite the concern FDR, Jr. demonstrated for the issue that went back to his efforts on the 1946 Committee on Civil Rights, his mind remained set on the next available opportunity to run for elective office. The exposure of the high-profile position became a way to stage a comeback in New York politics. In what became his final political campaign in 1966 he, once again, failed to convert the magic of his name to satisfy political ambition.

## Presidential Son

The life and political career of FDR, Jr. demonstrated that the interpretation of FDR's

11. Kathleen H. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 126–127.

memory and the emulation of his political model not only proved difficult for presidential successors but particularly produced pitfalls for his children. FDR, Jr. had admitted so himself, after the defeat in the 1954 election, that the heritage was too much to live up to.<sup>12</sup>

This complex memory was overwhelming. During his four terms in the White House, FDR had recognized the burden of the presidential office. He had bluntly admitted, “one of the worst things in the world is being the child of a president. It is a terrible life they lead.”<sup>13</sup> Since FDR had reigned longer in the White House than any other president, his daughter and four sons were the first presidential children that became national celebrities. FDR, Jr. operated in the relentless and ruthless spotlight of national publicity and his reputation suffered from it.<sup>14</sup>

The deep-seated ambivalence about presidential children helps explain FDR, Jr.’s failure to answer the expectations of shoes to fill. The American public perceived the abstract notion of this hereditary principle as threatening to democracy and equal opportunity.<sup>15</sup> The treatment of FDR, Jr. exemplified the distinction made between the family dynasty and its political successor.

Author Theodore White stated that, “all contemporary national politics descend from Franklin Roosevelt.”<sup>16</sup> Despite revisionist claims, the popular reputation of FDR has remained largely intact and his legacy has continued to cast its shadow over the postwar decades. In their admiration for the Roosevelts as aristocratic icons most people respected its definition of a common purpose and cultivated ideal of public service. They began to refer to the Roosevelt dynasty as the “royal family.”<sup>17</sup>

How different people perceived and treated political heirs. FDR, Jr. had to establish himself to a doubtful audience. He had to show that he had been humbled to transform his image that he was coasting on his parents’ name. FDR, Jr. walked a tightrope to face high standards and meet built-up expectations. He could achieve political success only by exceeding those excessive expectations. Yet, he would still have to deal with accusations of entitlement and self-indulgence.

The point was that during the era when FDR, Jr. was an active politician people still measured contemporary politicians by the memories of FDR and ER.<sup>18</sup> This definition

12. Author interview with Louis Harris, New York City, 15 July 1999.

13. Quoted in: Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 466.

14. J.J. Perling, *Presidents’ Sons: The Prestige of Name in a Democracy* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1947), 310–311; Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 192.

15. Adam Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 5; Adam Bellow, “American Dynasty,” *Newsweek Special Edition Issues 2004*, December 2003 – February 2004, 85.

16. Theodore H. White, *America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President, 1956–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 47.

17. Bellow, *In Praise of Nepotism*, 7.

18. William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry S. Truman to Bill Clinton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 57.

caused FDR, Jr. to feel accountable and to be made publicly accountable by friends and critics alike for the reputation and achievements of his parents.<sup>19</sup> Author Stephen Hess rightly considered this life as an unfortunate paradox: if FDR, Jr. succeeded “it was because of his parents’ achievements, if he failed it was his own fault.”<sup>20</sup>

FDR, Jr. paid more dearly for mistakes than non-political successors because he was held to this higher and admittedly unrealistic standard. Laboring under these ambiguous circumstances he inherited the enemies of his parents who continued the tradition of Roosevelt bashing. They matched him against the shadow of his reputation and denounced him as “nothing more than a Junior.” Adolph Berle, a former official in the administration of his father, scoffed FDR, Jr. for being a “young man in a hurry, filled more with ambition than ability or ideas.”<sup>21</sup>

### Rise and Fall of Liberalism

By 1966, longstanding sectional, urban and racial conflict had shattered the superficial consensus of the two preceding decades. The collapse of this liberal consensus contributed to FDR, Jr.’s bumpy ride. This development also made it more difficult to sell his brand name because the Roosevelt memory became less and less attractive during the two decades after 1945.

FDR, Jr.’s efforts in the EEOC to put equality of result rather than equality of opportunity on the agenda reflected these limits of liberalism. FDR, Jr. came to advocate a group-centered enforcement of affirmative action and legal means to fight discriminatory practices rather than stress economic justice for a disadvantaged class like his father had done. The resulting conflict between a white backlash over preferential treatment and a violent black reaction that drew attention to continuing social and economic deprivation triggered the break up of the domestic status quo.

This was also evident in the Civilian Review Board controversy of the 1966 New York gubernatorial election. The issue had split the New York community between a liberal-minority coalition, including FDR, Jr., who championed the review board and angry white conservative groups including the police union, who strove to abolish the board. Its defeat reflected the national climate of white resentment over civil rights successes and also demonstrated the limits of liberal reform.

This white backlash fueled the resurgence of conservative policies. The melting away of labor support and major Republican gains among white Southern and blue-collar voters weakened the New Deal electoral coalition. Radical activists of the “New Left” generation on the other end of the political spectrum faulted FDR and the New Deal

19. Brock Brower, “Last Chance for Junior,” *Saturday Evening Post* (27 July 1963): 32–33.

20. Hess, *America’s Political Dynasties*, 215.

21. Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City* (New York: Columbia University Press), 104, 110.

for the persistent inequalities in American society such as poverty and racism. These charges also contributed to the diminished attraction of the New Deal memory.

### Personality and Reputation

Even more important was the notion of his claim on memory as an asset to realize his political ambitions, to explain for FDR, Jr.'s failure to answer the expectations. This idea determined his reputation as a presidential son. Journalist Arthur Krock stated that, "the sons of famous men labor under the special difficulty that they are expected to live up to their immediate heredity. Sometimes endeavouring to do this in the same pursuits, they have become inferior and often ludicrous caricatures of their progenitors."<sup>22</sup>

FDR, Jr. struggled with the choice, as historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. defined it, "between a social conscience and the bright lights."<sup>23</sup> He tried to become a political heir to live up to expectations. Having imitated his father's education at Groton and Harvard, FDR advised him to become a lawyer before jumping into politics. Yet, this option involved accomplishment, commitment to fighting for ideals, hard work and discipline.

FDR, Jr.'s dependence on the family tradition fostered illusions that undermined the credibility of his claim on memory. Voters, who had familiarized themselves and were looking for the Roosevelt memory, became disillusioned with FDR, Jr. when they discovered he suffered from ordinary human weaknesses. People recognized that for the political son, for whom life had been too easy, there had been no need to discipline himself or test his political principles.<sup>24</sup> FDR, Jr. failed to master a thorough form of self-discipline to surmount personal sins. The struggle with polio had largely resolved the conflict for his father. The sense of entitlement and overconfidence applied to FDR, Jr. Feeling that he did not have to prove who he was, FDR, Jr. founded his political ambition on the asset of his name.<sup>25</sup>

This misconception linked up with personal mistakes that reinforced FDR, Jr.'s image as a man whose only qualification was his name. During a youthful period of aimless drifting his image of a reckless and pampered playboy had been imprinted in the public mind. This reputation stuck despite his heroic actions in the Navy during World War II. Even after FDR, Jr. left his familiar New York City nightclub-crowd behind him,

22. Kay Halle, ed., *The Grand Original: Portraits of Randolph Churchill by His Friends* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 176.

23. Schlesinger, Jr., "Two Years Later: The Roosevelt Family," *Life Magazine* (7 April 1947): 119, Kuhn Collection, RSC.

24. Murray Kempton, "Can Rockefeller Win?" *New York World Telegram*, 30 March 1966, folder Gubernatorial Campaign Organization and Murray Kempton, "The King in Exile," *New York Post*, 12 October 1966, both in box 260, FDR, Jr. Papers.

25. Author interview with Curtis Roosevelt, 22 June 2000, Middelburg, the Netherlands; Edna P. Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls: The Devoted Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. David Gurewitsch* (New York: Plume, 2003), 147, 149.

the label of a party animal and womanizer remained affixed to his name, highlighted by a number of highly publicized marriages and divorces.

## Conclusion

Despite his abundance of political talent, FDR, Jr.'s inclination to spoil his own chances saw to it that this reputation remained tainted in the eyes of the public. Notorious political gaffes such as the careless Trujillo affair and the impulsive West Virginia draft dodge accusation continued to haunt him. These allegations of political expedience and arrogance caught up with FDR, Jr. Critics denounced his reputation of spoiled opportunism and blatant sense of entitlement. Close associates dismissed the claims that FDR, Jr. had squandered his promise and not lived up to the name. They portrayed the Roosevelt heir as an indefatigable natural campaigner with a good record of government service and exciting political credentials whom "carried with honor the most noble American patronym of this [twentieth] century."<sup>26</sup>

Despite this praise for being the committed guardian of the Roosevelt memory and intrinsically representing its ideals and dreams, FDR, Jr. failed to imbibe his parents' sense of public service. He sold his claim on memory for a political career, ran for office because he felt entitled to and built a political record for self-advancement rather than principles.

These unsuccessful efforts to sell his claim on memory defined FDR, Jr.'s life. He felt the weight on his shoulders as a curse rather than as a blessing and he crumbled under the pressure of shoes to fill. His failure to become a political heir meant that FDR, Jr. remained a ceremonial figure. He led a life that tied up "the loose ends of a larger story" and that was distinguished by expediency and entitlement.<sup>27</sup> All in all, he remained a man more imprisoned and intimidated than empowered and inspired by the legacy of his parents.

In this sense, FDR, Jr. was a unique figure among presidential children. No other presidential son or daughter faced the daunting legacy of both their parents. The political influence of Eleanor and the competition of his brother James also made FDR, Jr.'s life and career exceptional. He did not apply the personal and political crises he went through between 1954 and 1960 as a way of reflection. The continuing demand for the use of his claim on memory prevented him to learn from adversity and fundamentally rethink his outlook on life and politics. This absence of any real sense of catharsis such as JFK or George W. Bush had experienced contributed to make FDR, Jr. a tragic figure.

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.

27. Collier, *The Roosevelts: An American Saga*, 471.

