



## FDR

By Jean Edward Smith

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### FDR By Jean Edward Smith

One of today's premier biographers has written a modern, comprehensive, indeed ultimate book on the epic life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In this superlative volume, Jean Edward Smith combines contemporary scholarship and a broad range of primary source material to provide an engrossing narrative of one of America's greatest presidents.

This is a portrait painted in broad strokes and fine details. We see how Roosevelt's restless energy, fierce intellect, personal magnetism, and ability to project effortless grace permitted him to master countless challenges throughout his life. Smith recounts FDR's battles with polio and physical disability, and how these experiences helped forge the resolve that FDR used to surmount the economic turmoil of the Great Depression and the wartime threat of totalitarianism. Here also is FDR's private life depicted with unprecedented candor and nuance, with close attention paid to the four women who molded his personality and helped to inform his worldview: His mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, formidable yet ever supportive and tender; his wife, Eleanor, whose counsel and affection were instrumental to FDR's public and individual achievements; Lucy Mercer, the great romantic love of FDR's life; and Missy LeHand, FDR's longtime secretary, companion, and confidante, whose adoration of her boss was practically limitless.

Smith also tackles head-on and in-depth the numerous failures and miscues of Roosevelt's public career, including his disastrous attempt to reconstruct the Judiciary; the shameful internment of Japanese-Americans; and Roosevelt's occasionally self-defeating Executive overreach. Additionally, Smith offers a sensitive and balanced assessment of Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust, noting its breakthroughs and shortcomings.

Summing up Roosevelt's legacy, Jean Smith declares that FDR, more than any other individual, changed the relationship between the American people and their government. It was Roosevelt who revolutionized the art of campaigning and used the burgeoning mass media to garner public support and allay fears. But more important, Smith gives us the clearest picture yet of how this quintessential Knickerbocker aristocrat, a man who never had to depend on a paycheck, became the common man's president. The result is a powerful account that adds fresh perspectives and draws profound conclusions about a man whose story is widely

known but far less well understood. Written for the general reader and scholars alike, *FDR* is a stunning biography in every way worthy of its subject.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* Independent biographer Smith (1996's *John Marshall: Definer of a Nation* and 2001's *Grant*) crafts a magisterial biography of our most important modern president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Scores of books have been written about Roosevelt, exploring every nook and cranny of his experience, so Smith breaks no "news" and offers no previously undisclosed revelations concerning the man from Hyde Park. But the author's eloquent synthesis of FDR's complex and compelling life is remarkably executed and a joy to read. Drawing on the papers of the Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library as well as Columbia University's oral history collection and other repositories, Smith minutely explores the arc of FDR's intertwined political and private lives. With regard to the political, the biographer seamlessly traces Roosevelt's evolution from gawky, aristocratic, political newcomer nibbling at the edges of the rough-and-tumble Dutchess County, N.Y., Democratic machine to the consummate though physically crippled political insider—a man without pretensions who acquired and performed the jobs of New York governor and then United States president with shrewd, and always joyous, efficiency. As is appropriate, more than half of Smith's narrative deals with FDR as president: the four terms (from 1933 until his death in 1945) during which he waged war, in turn, on the Depression and the Axis powers. As for the private Roosevelt, Smith reveals him as a devoted son; an unhappy husband who eventually settled into an uneasy peace and working partnership with his wife and cousin Eleanor; an emotionally absent father; and a man who for years devotedly loved two women other than his wife—Lucy Mercer Rutherford and Missy LeHand, the latter his secretary. This erudite but graceful volume illuminates FDR's life for scholars, history buffs and casual readers alike. Photos not seen by PW. (May)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

As Franklin Roosevelt approached the stage at the 1936 Democratic Convention, the steel braces on his useless legs and the support of his son's arm allowing him, in great pain, to simulate walking, he was jostled, and he crashed to the ground, scattering the pages of his speech. "Clean me up," he said, "and keep your feet off those damned sheets." Minutes later, utterly poised, he told an audience and a nation ravaged by the Depression that they had "a rendezvous with destiny." Smith, in this remarkable, sympathetic biography, doesn't flinch at Roosevelt's mistakes; the sections on the court-packing scheme and the internment of Japanese-Americans are painful to read. Smith also does a fine job with a complex marriage, avoiding the F.D.R. biographer's trap of being either annoyed or enraptured by Eleanor. The Roosevelt who emerges here—neither a stranger nor a painted icon—is flawed and magnificent.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The legacy of FDR is safe in the hands of Jean Edward Smith, a renowned academic and author of a dozen books, including the acclaimed biographies *Grant* (a 2002 Pulitzer Prize finalist), *John Marshall: Defender of a Nation* (1996), and *Lucius D. Clay: An American Life* (1990). *FDR*, which captures the energy, courage, and contradictions of a full life well lived, is considered by many here as the best one-volume biography of that president to date. Several critics comment that in making exhaustive use of existing research, Smith has uncovered little new. Instead, the strength of this book lies in the author's pacing and his ability to capture the triumphs and disappointments of his subject. Jonathan Yardley, comparing Smith's effort to other one-volume accounts—James McGregor Burns's *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1956), Nathan Miller's *FDR: An Intimate History* (1983), and Ted Morgan's *FDR: A Biography* (1985)—concludes: "Each has its merits, but none matches the commanding authority of this one."

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