Franklin Roosevelt

He supported fellow reformer Woodrow Wilson's Presidential nomination in 1912 despite Tammany's opposition. When Cousin Teddy's third-party candidacy opened a fissure in Republican ranks and led to an easy Wilson victory, Franklin won appointment as assistant secretary of the navy, "the one place, above all others, I would love to hold."

When the United States declared war in April 1917, the hawkish and politically ambitious Roosevelt wanted to serve in the military, as his cousin had done to his great political benefit during the Spanish-American War. In the summer of 1918 Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels finally allowed him to go to Europe, where he visited field hospitals and managed to get near enough to the front lines to pull the lanyard on a French artillery piece. At the time he wrote in his diary of "my partially successful efforts to see the real thing," but by 1936 he would embellish the story on the stump, "I have seen war on land and sea. I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs."

Democratic losses in the 1918 Congressional elections and the approaching end of Wilson's second term foretold a lean period for Democrats, and Roosevelt made plans to set up a law practice with two friends after he left the Navy. At the same time his famous name, his national visibility, and the importance of New York's electoral votes gave him some credibility as a candidate for Vice President in 1920. He worked hard to win Tammany's support at the convention in San Francisco, asking to second the presidential nomination of Governor Al Smith, who was running as New York's favorite son to hold the state's delegates for later bargaining. He also burnished his credentials as a progressive when he seized the New York banner from a Tammany stalwart to join in a demonstration in favor of the League of Nations. Future Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, whom he had not impressed during his days in Albany, considered him "one of the stars of the show. I recall how he displayed his athletic ability by vaulting over a row of chairs to get to the platform in a hurry." When the deadlocked convention turned to Ohio Governor James Cox on the forty-fourth ballot, Cox recommended the young and attractive Roosevelt, whom he had never met, as his running mate.

In early August 1921, Roosevelt arrived at his family's summer home on Campobello Island in the Bay of Fundy for a vacation. At the end of a strenuous day, he felt a chill and dragged himself to bed, assuming he was coming down with a cold. By morning he was unable to move his legs. After several painful and terrifying days and misdiagnoses by two doctors, a specialist determined that he was suffering from polio.

Two cover-ups started almost immediately. His close political aide, Louis Howe, hid from the press Roosevelt's need to be carried on a stretcher when he was taken off the island, and Dr. George Draper, his physician, deceived his patient as well as the public, telling reporters, "You can say definitely that he will not be crippled." Early in his treatment Draper wrote of his approach, "He has such courage, such ambition, and yet at the same time such an extraordinarily sensitive emotional mechanism, that it will also take all the skill which we can muster to lead him successfully to a recognition of what he really faces without utterly crushing him."

Roosevelt's condition was irreversible, but he seems never to have accepted this fact, nor did Draper push him to do so. Over the next seven years he struggled mightily to regain some use of his legs by swimming and exercising in warm water while Eleanor and Howe worked to keep him in the public eye. His most visible role was as titular chairman of Governor Al Smith's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1924. . . . He was able to keep his name in the news and his career hopes alive without extensive travel, and he relished the opportunity to issue statements on the candidate's behalf, to renew his 1920 connections by writing regularly to Democratic leaders around the country, and to give the national convention in August its most memorable moment with his electrifying nominating speech.

There would be no vaulting over chairs this time. Determined not to be wheeled into Madison Square Garden, he "walked" to his seat every day with most of his weight on a crutch under his right arm while he gripped his son James's arm with his left. When he struggled down the aisle and appeared at the stage for his speech, the delegates greeted him with thunderous applause, in relief and in appreciation of his obvious courage. Then James handed him his second crutch, and twelve thousand people seemed to hold their breath as he slowly and painfully struggled for the last fifteen feet alone, sweating heavily and twisting his shoulders back and forth to swing one braced leg forward and then the other—exactly as he had practiced it many times at home. When he reached the lectern and grasped it with both hands, unable to wave but with his head thrown back in what would become a signature gesture, the relieved crowd stood and roared for three minutes. He smiled and nodded, "seem[ing] to be sharing his personal victory," according to Frances Perkins.

The growing likelihood of U.S. involvement in the war in Europe was largely responsible for Roosevelt running for an unprecedented third term, although anti-New Deal conservatives, many of whom were isolationists, would portray the 1940 election as a showdown over Roosevelt's "socialist" policies. At the start of his second term in 1937 Roosevelt had probably not planned to run again, although he understood that ruling it out publicly would make him a lame duck. Although he had won re-election in a landslide, he faced the strong no-third-term tradition. A month after his victory, 69 percent of voters, including a majority of Democrats, said they opposed a third term. The president's equivocating about whether he would run had sparked a chorus of criticism, even

from some Democrats. “We have seen the examples of dictatorship in Europe,” said Senator Wheeler, his erstwhile ally, in early 1938, “and I think the vast majority of our people are very apprehensive lest some one get in power here and continue in power.”

But the setbacks the party had suffered in the 1938 Congressional elections and the ominous developments in Europe raised concerns among party leaders, progressive Democrats, administration insiders, and the party faithful at large about nominating a new candidate. When Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and Britain and France declared war two days later, the pressure on Roosevelt to run escalated. But he remained enigmatic.