1. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Models: Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson

Theodore Roosevelt, who was president from 1901 to 1909, and Woodrow Wilson, who occupied the office from 1913 to 1921, inspired, guided, and taught Franklin D. Roosevelt. TR, a distant cousin some twenty-five years older than FDR, showed him how a president could dominate the American political landscape and, through the force of his personality, redefine the presidency and America’s place in the world. Wilson’s regulation of corporate trusts, banks, and the money supply showed FDR how effective a president could be as legislator. FDR watched their triumphs and learned even more from their failures. These two leaders, more than anyone, helped shape FDR’s vision as president.

FDR followed the examples of TR and Wilson because he shared their fundamental strengths and values. As historian Geoffrey Ward has noted, all three men possessed “an unfeigned love for people and politics, an ability to rally able men and women to their cause, and an unbounded optimism and self-confidence.” They all rejected the notion that “the mere making of money should be enough to satisfy any man or any nation” and accepted “a sense of stewardship” of the nation’s land and resources. Even more important, all three brought active, indeed transformative, leadership to the presidency, taking “unabashed delight,” Ward writes, “in the great power of their office to do good.”
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Awe and Admiration: Theodore Roosevelt as Role Model

Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fifth cousin, fascinated him. As a young boy, FDR took great pains not to tax the energies of his ailing, elderly father and learned to spend hours entertaining himself on the grounds of his parents’ Hyde Park, New York, estate. He delighted in rambunctious visits with his older cousin TR at the latter’s Long Island estate, Sagamore Hill. There, the ordinarily solitary FDR joined TR and his six children on strenuous hikes, swims, and horseback rides. TR returned FDR’s affection, telling FDR’s mother Sara, “I am so fond of that boy, I’d be shot for him.”

While the teenage FDR studied at Groton, a boarding school in Massachusetts, TR rode a high-flying career to increasing fame. First he headed the New York City Police Department and tackled its notorious corruption, then he served as assistant secretary of the navy before resigning from that position to organize a volunteer cavalry unit—the famous “Rough Riders”—to liberate Cuba, and finally he developed a nationwide reputation as progressive governor of New York. Among TR’s many admirers was Groton’s beloved but exacting headmaster, Endicott Peabody, who invited the Rough Rider to address the Groton student body. After eagerly awaiting his famous relative’s arrival, FDR left TR’s presentation “wild with excitement.” FDR so admired his cousin that he began sporting TR’s trademark pince-nez glasses and decided that he too would attend Harvard and eventually enter politics.

While at Harvard, FDR watched his cousin reshape the presidency. Energized by TR’s domestic program to rein in corporate power, protect consumers, and conserve natural resources—TR’s “Square Deal”—FDR grew even more determined to follow his path to the White House. He enrolled in Columbia University Law School but found
the life overly sedentary and dull, and, just as TR had done before him, left law school without completing his coursework. In the meantime, he had married TR’s niece, Eleanor Roosevelt, in a 1905 ceremony in which their celebrated relation gave away the bride.

FDR did take and pass the New York State bar exam and, upon leaving school, joined a law firm. But he yearned to run for office. In 1910 Dutchess County Democrats (eager to capitalize on FDR’s famous name and ability to fund his own campaign) asked him to run for the state senate. FDR sensed that to win the race he had to remind Democratic rural voters of his ties to TR without appearing to be beholden to him or his urban Republican constituents. He turned to humor to make his point. “I’m not Teddy,” he often jokingly told his constituents. “A little shaver [a young boy] said to me the other day that he knew I wasn’t Teddy. I asked him why, and he replied, ‘because you don’t show your teeth!’”

The strategy worked. Dutchess County had never sent a Democrat to Albany. FDR would be the first. He moved his family to the capital, opened the Roosevelt home to anti-Tammany reformers, and developed a reputation as an ambitious if inexperienced progressive politician.
Despite Franklin D. Roosevelt’s admiration for Theodore Roosevelt, FDR did not support his cousin over Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the dramatic, hotly contested 1912 presidential election. As governor of New Jersey, Wilson had earned a reputation for progressive leadership rivaling TR’s, but his academic credentials—he was a respected political scientist and former president of Princeton University—also intrigued FDR, who campaigned for him vigorously. When Wilson won, FDR lobbied to be his assistant secretary of the navy.

Again following his cousin’s example, FDR used his position to press for a more assertive foreign policy and a larger navy than the administration wanted. As World War I intensified overseas, he worked around the clock to modernize the American fleet. When Wilson clung to the hope that the United States would not become entangled in the war, FDR, like TR, urged the administration to abandon its neutral policies.

Yet after the United States entered the war in 1917, it was hard for FDR to sit out the fight in Washington, DC, ever mindful that some twenty years before, when the United States joined Cuban revolutionaries in their fight for independence, TR had resigned his administration post, formed the Rough Riders, and charged up San Juan Hill against the Spanish, returning home to tumultuous acclaim. When FDR thought he had completed the most important administrative tasks to prepare the navy and its sailors for war, he submitted his resignation, hoping to enlist. The administration, however, would not allow it. His departure from the Navy Department would be “a public calamity,” his superiors insisted.

Bitterly disappointed, FDR remained in Washington, DC, helping administer a growing navy and, later, promoting Wilson’s armistice. The political, administrative, and diplomatic lessons FDR learned watching Wilson manage the war profoundly influenced the decisions he would make twenty years later when America once again confronted global armed conflict. As FDR later told a friend, senior military and diplomatic officials had often worked at cross-purposes, and Wilson’s insistent, lofty, but ultimately unsuccessful promotion of the League of Nations showed him “the perils of too high public ideals.”
Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the National Park System

Theodore Roosevelt loved the outdoors. He camped, swam, hunted, hiked, roped cattle on a dude ranch, and he delighted in challenging his companions to mirror his “strenuous life.” Asthmatic and frail of constitution as a child, TR had embraced vigorous outdoor activities as part of his determination to make himself into a robust and manly adult. Nature was the arena in which he rejuvenated his spirits and triumphed over his own frailties. Love for the majesty of American landscapes also formed an important part of TR’s patriotism.

Repeatedly he told the nation that it must cherish and protect its wilderness. “Of all the questions which can come before this nation, short of the actual preservation of its existence in a great war,” TR declared, “there is none which compares in importance with the great central task of leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us, and training them into a better race to inhabit the land and pass it on.” Insisting that only the federal government could “jealously safeguard . . . the scenery, the forests, and the wild creatures,” TR doubled the size of the country’s national forests and created four national game preserves, five national parks, eighteen national monuments, and fifty-one federal bird sanctuaries.

Franklin D. Roosevelt shared TR’s instinct for vigorous action, and though FDR’s disability would limit his access to remote wilderness in later adulthood, he certainly shared TR’s love of the land and commitment to conservation, stemming from a boyhood spent among the trees and animals of Springwood. In FDR’s first one hundred days as president, he used executive orders to transfer sixty-four national monuments to the National Park Service, thus doubling the amount of land the service stewarded. He provided the extra funds required to create the Great Smoky Mountain and Everglades national parks and made sure they would be preserved as wilderness areas. He fought the timber industry over logging in Olympic National Park, blocked utility company plans to convert John Muir’s beloved Kings Canyon in California into a hydroelectric plant, and proposed that the Department of the Interior be reorganized and renamed the Department of Conservation.

With the American frontier closed and urbanization advancing, FDR urged America to recognize the value—and the vulnerability—of its natural resources. “We used up and destroyed much of our natural heritage just because that heritage was so bounteous,” he said. “We slashed our forests, we used our soils, we encouraged floods . . . so greatly that we were brought rather suddenly to face the fact that unless we gave thought to the lives of our children and grandchildren, they would no longer be able to live and to improve upon our American way of life.”

He wanted new generations of Americans to respect and enjoy the land, convinced that when they “touched mother earth,” they would arise “with strength renewed a hundredfold.”

President Theodore Roosevelt in Yellowstone National Park, created in 1872, the first national park in the world, 1903. TR expanded national parks and wildlife refuges. His distant cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, followed his example some thirty years later. LOC
Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Presidential Leadership

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s service in Woodrow Wilson’s Navy Department, historian John Milton Cooper writes, transformed FDR into “a thoroughgoing political professional.” His difficult but close working relationship with his North Carolina–born boss, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, helped strip FDR of his “upper class WASP New England provincialism” and led him to appreciate the skills brought to bear by southern and western policymakers and politicians. FDR’s wartime work with British and French counterparts introduced him to the intricacies of personal diplomacy and to the horrors of war.

Wilson’s leadership made a lasting impression on FDR. He watched Wilson expand economic opportunity by lowering tariffs, regulating trusts, and relaxing the gold standard to make credit more available and the nation’s currency more flexible. FDR learned the importance of a strong (but not too independent) cabinet in persuading Congress to adopt administration policy, and he came to understand the critical role a president’s vision plays in mobilizing popular support.

Ironically, though, FDR learned more from Wilson’s most notable failure—the Senate’s rejection of the peace treaty ending World War I, along with its provision for a League of Nations—than he did from Wilson’s legislative successes. Although FDR shared Wilson’s belief that a well-structured international governing body could prevent future wars, Wilson’s disastrous one-man campaign for the Treaty of Versailles left FDR convinced that vision alone could not effect change. Before plunging down any path, however well justified, a president had to bring along the Congress and the American public.

Above: President Woodrow Wilson at his desk with his wife, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, at his side, June 1920. Wilson had suffered a massive stroke in October, for all practical purposes bringing to an end his campaign for United States support of the planned League of Nations. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wilson’s assistant secretary of the navy, shared the president’s enthusiasm for the international peacekeeping body and learned much from Wilson’s mistakes. LOC.

Left: Woodrow Wilson. As assistant secretary of the navy in Wilson’s administration before and after the United States entered World War I, Franklin D. Roosevelt learned a great deal about Washington politics, international diplomacy, and the logistics—as well as the horrors—of war. LOC.