By the time Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt began their White House years, they had proven their commitment to each other and to the promise of democracy. They had endured the loss of a child, the sting of adultery, and talk of divorce. They had confronted polio and refused to let it confine their lives or limit their dreams. They had learned to manage an aching loneliness and inject a new candor and boldness into their marriage.

They also had seen a world scarred by war, an America polarized by suspicion and divided by religion and custom, and a failing economy that threatened to destroy the American dream.

How they responded to these private and public challenges—and what they learned from them—not only inspired FDR and ER to pursue an unorthodox marital partnership, but also deepened their understanding of human experience, sowing the seeds of the New Deal and the Four Freedoms.
On March 17, 1905, Eleanor Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt were married in New York City, after a two-year courtship that they had mostly kept secret. The bride and groom were distant cousins, representing two separate branches of the patrician Roosevelts. The couple’s journey toward leadership would be rocky, unconventional, brave, and surprising.

Although FDR had told a few friends that he would be president one day, no one who knew him in 1905 expected that to happen. At twenty-two, FDR was cavalier, pampered, somewhat condescending, and more focused on expanding his social network than building a career. ER, on the other hand, struggled to balance the glow of romance against the chronic abandonment that had defined her orphaned childhood. She missed the happiness and confidence she had found at boarding school outside London, studying with the headmistress Marie Souvestre, who had taken a special interest in her. At twenty, ER was unsure of herself, quiet, serious, and pining for a home of her own.

But the young couple would make their first home and embark upon married life under the watchful, proprietary eye of FDR’s mother, Sara Roosevelt, who had not supported the match. She ruled the Roosevelt family estate (FDR’s childhood home) in Hyde Park, New York, built adjacent New York City townhouses for herself and the couple, controlled the family wealth that helped support the couple’s lifestyle, and monitored FDR and ER’s social life. Sara’s only child, FDR reveled in his mother’s fierce and unconditional devotion, but wanted to spare his own children the isolation he often felt growing up. He craved a large family.

ER would spend half of her first ten years of marriage pregnant and out of the public eye, while FDR, on the contrary, spent more and more time outside of and away from their home. By 1914 five children filled the Roosevelt homestead. All tended to circumvent their parents, turning instead to Sara for the same unquestioned support she gave FDR.
Into the Fray: Entering Politics and Government, 1910

When Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt married, their only significant experience of the White House had been spending most of New Year’s Day 1902 there with ER’s uncle and FDR’s idol, Theodore Roosevelt. A few years later, the president gave ER away at her wedding—and very nearly became the center of attention. TR’s larger-than-life reputation would also have a part in introducing the couple to politics.

This fateful moment came in the fall of 1910, when Democrats from Dutchess, Putnam, and Columbia counties—hoping to capitalize on Republican Theodore Roosevelt’s name as well as Sara Roosevelt’s substantial wealth—asked FDR, a young lawyer, to run for the New York State Senate. After securing TR’s blessing, FDR campaigned with gusto, crisscrossing the district in a rented red roadster, promising to fight corruption and urban political bosses and to represent his constituents “every day of the 365, every hour of the 24.” He was, by all indications, a natural. ER, meanwhile, having just given birth to the couple’s third surviving child, Elliott, stayed at home with Sara, FDR’s mother.

FDR unexpectedly won the senate seat, and the family—this time without Sara—moved to Albany. The change redefined and invigorated FDR and ER’s marriage. For the first time, they had a home of their own, in a fresh environment that challenged their ambitions and fostered a new kind of intimacy.

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A twenty-eight-year-old Franklin D. Roosevelt works the crowd in his home territory, Dutchess County, during a campaign stop in his 1910 run for New York state senator. While FDR embarked on his first political campaign—and proved a natural—Eleanor Roosevelt stayed home with their newborn son, Elliott, and his two siblings. FDR.
As a newly minted state senator, Franklin D. Roosevelt plunged into the business of government. Inspired by Theodore Roosevelt's legacy and eager to make a name for himself, he organized progressive Democrats to oppose the confirmation as U.S. senator of a corrupt character named "Blue-Eyed Billy" Sheehan, who was backed by the powerful and notoriously crooked New York Democratic Party machine known as Tammany Hall. For two and a half months, the Roosevelt home served as the progressives' rallying headquarters, with anti-Tammany senators caucusing morning and evening in the library.

Fascinated by the action and intrigued by the conversations taking place in her home, Eleanor Roosevelt found herself drawn, for the first time, into the drama of politics. She listened to the talk while serving the legislators food and drinks, and regularly sat in the gallery during senate debates, returning home in the afternoon to be with her children. As FDR learned to navigate the political pitfalls and turf battles of the state senate, ER discovered fundamental truths about the life of a politician's wife—"the first requisite . . . is to be able to manage anything," as she wrote—and about her own nature. "Something within me," she would observe, "craved to be an individual." It was a very busy year.

Although FDR quickly developed a reputation as a determined reformer, political life in Albany was not easy for him. Sheehan's defeat only paved the way for Tammany to nominate another candidate, and FDR's slow response to this countermove left him more vulnerable to the machine's retaliations. Both he and ER watched in helpless outrage as Tammany took its revenge on the reformers, pulling advertising from their newspapers, revoking state funds from programs in their districts, and encouraging clients to retain the services of pro-Tammany businesses and lawyers. Limited to the Forest, Fish, and Game Committee, FDR devoted his legislative career to reforestation, watershed restoration, and other conservation goals. Although he fully intended to run for reelection, he now knew the state senate would not be the path for advancing his political career in the long term.

In the meantime, securing reelection to the seat in 1912 proved more challenging than FDR had imagined, even though it was a Democratic year. After returning from the Democratic National Convention, both he and ER contracted typhoid fever. Forced to remain in New York City to receive medical care for this dangerous condition, FDR became an easy target for rivals in both parties, who tarred him as a wealthy city playboy rather than a serious anti-Tammany candidate from Dutchess County. Too weak to return to Hyde Park, much less replicate the energetic campaign he had run two years earlier, the bedridden FDR asked a recovering but still weak ER to summon Louis Howe, the reporter who had most befriended FDR during the Sheehan battle, to help him return to the senate.

Howe, an odd-looking, chain-smoking journalist for the New York Herald whom other reporters would later liken to a "medieval gnome," already harbored dreams of an FDR presidency. Howe took over FDR's state senate campaign and, using posters, letters, newspaper ads—a marketing campaign as varied as it was omnipresent—made the incapacitated candidate as visible to voters as he'd been when he crisscrossed the district in 1910. Meanwhile, the voters Howe targeted were energized by a presidential election campaign featuring Theodore Roosevelt's run on the newly formed Progressive ticket, a popular Democratic reformer (Woodrow Wilson) on the Democratic ticket, and incumbent President William Howard Taft representing a weakened Republican Party. On Election Day, Howe's efforts prevailed. FDR won reelection by a wider margin than he had received two years earlier. The victory sealed FDR's trust in Howe and began the inseparable, inventive political bond that would eventually take them to the White House. Howe would also play an important role in the career of ER, encouraging her to take hold of her gifts as speaker and writer to become an invaluable surrogate for her husband and a powerful public figure in her own right.
The Roosevelts Take Washington, 1913–15

In January 1913, Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt, still recuperating from typhoid fever, returned from New York City to Albany for the new legislative session. FDR, now chair of the Forest, Fish, and Game Committee, hoped that once the session was completed he could join the administration of newly elected Woodrow Wilson. He had campaigned vigorously for Wilson before typhoid struck, and thought that a move to the federal executive branch would allow him to elude Tammany’s grasp and perhaps follow Theodore Roosevelt’s path to the White House. When the president-elect summoned him for a meeting, FDR traveled to Trenton expecting to secure appointments for himself as well as a few of his New York colleagues. He may even have told Wilson that he hoped to serve as assistant secretary of the navy, the position TR had used to introduce himself to the nation. One thing is certain: FDR wanted to move to Washington, DC. The only questions were whether Wilson (who didn’t much care for FDR) would offer him a position, what that position might be, and how ER could support his career and care for their family.

The Roosevelts spent most of inauguration week in Washington, DC, where FDR rejected offers to serve as assistant secretary of the Treasury and collector of the Port of New York (a federal post from which he might have challenged Tammany’s influence in the state). As ER took in the impressive spectacle of newly elected Woodrow Wilson. She noticed how the Navy Department with its budget—20 percent of the entire federal budget—was spent. But Daniels dismissed their concerns. He found FDR’s charm and ambition attractive and wanted a northeastern liberal in the position to offset his southern conservatism.

FDR began work as assistant secretary of the navy on March 17, 1913, his eighth wedding anniversary. ER remained in Hyde Park, New York, with the children, but political ally Louis Howe joined FDR in Washington as his secretary, aide-de-camp, and alter ego. Neither man had any clear idea of what their jobs entailed. They didn’t yet understand how the Navy Department with its staff of sixty-three thousand officers and enlisted personnel was organized, or how its budget—20 percent of the entire federal budget—was spent. But they hit the ground running.

Within days FDR assumed responsibility for organizing navy relief efforts to assist Ohio and Indiana communities ravaged by floods, overseeing the construction of new docks and caissons at Pearl Harbor, and creating a plan to streamline the naval bureaucracy. When he learned that a significant number of sailors could not swim, FDR insisted that every recruit learn before setting sail, and he required junior officers to pass a swimming test before they could be promoted.

Together, throughout the summer of 1913, he and Howe stoked FDR’s public image. They arranged for shipboard inspections, press coverage of the inspections, speeches before industry groups and key constituencies, and meetings with naval leadership. FDR spent his time away from the office courting senior administrators at dinner parties, club events, and White House gatherings. Most colleagues and the Washington, DC, press noticed his blatant ambition—especially when FDR designed a flag for the assistant secretary of the navy and ordered it flown on naval vessels whenever he was on board. Yet Howe, ever attuned to FDR’s public profile, was ready to say no to his boss or, as Howe put it, “to provide the toe weights” necessary to keep FDR’s ego from floating to unseemly heights.

While FDR and Howe navigated Washington, ER organized the family for
yet another move and prepared for her new role as the wife of a junior cabinet official. Everyone was offering her advice. TR urged her to be “particularly nice” to naval officers’ wives, who struggled to meet exacting social demands on limited incomes. TR’s sister, ER’s beloved Auntie Bye, concurred—“Everything that can properly be done to make things pleasant for them should be done,” she said—but also urged ER to “call upon” the wives of cabinet secretaries and undersecretaries and other prominent Washingtonians. Another aunt, Corinne Robinson, coached her on this process and advised her to respect the custom. ER would throw herself earnestly (though not with relish) into both efforts—spending almost every weekday afternoon visiting between ten and thirty women married to men whose support FDR required to advance his career.

As the Roosevelts settled into Washington, ER’s shyness abated and her talent for organizing grew. Almost nightly during the fall and winter, she accompanied FDR to dinner parties, dances, White House social events, or public recitals. She coordinated formal dinner parties in the N Street house they rented from Auntie Bye, entertaining Henry Cabot Lodge and his wife, Nannie; the British ambassador to the United States, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice; senior staff of the French embassy; and other neighbors. Although she still battled intense self-doubt and loneliness (her closest friend had moved to Arizona) and shrank from the stiff formality of “calling,” life in Washington steadily challenged her to see beyond herself and the society in which she was raised. She even confronted her propensity to seasickness to accompany FDR on battleship inspections, once—to the stunned admiration of her naval escort—donning “a suit of dungarees, trousers and all” to climb a skeletal mast to better observe target practice. As she wrote her aunt Maude Gray, “There seems to be so much to see and know and to learn to understand in this big country of ours and so few of us . . . realize that we ought to try when we’ve lived in the environment that you and I grew up in.”

By 1915 some Washingtonians saw ER’s reputation as a kind, efficient, and proper young matron as a counterweight to FDR’s indiscreet criticisms of his boss and impatience with Washington hierarchy. FDR’s persistent disagreements with Secretary Daniels over the size of the navy had become an open secret in the nation’s capital. War was afoot in Europe, and FDR tended to agree with his idol, TR, that the United States should side with Britain, arguing strenuously for an expanded navy to meet that exigency. Daniels’s vision of the navy accorded with President Wilson’s policy of neutrality toward warring nations. FDR’s frustrations increased.

In May 1915, after vacationing on Campobello Island off the coast of Maine, FDR returned to the capital to learn that German submarines had sunk the British ocean liner RMS *Lusitania*, killing more than a thousand passengers and crew. He wrote ER that he found “everything asleep and apparently utterly oblivious to the fact that the most terrible drama in history was about to be enacted . . . These dear good people like W.J.B. [Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan] and J.D. [Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels] have as much conception of what a general European War means as Elliott [their young son] has of higher mathematics. They really believe that because we are neutral we can go about our business as usual.” Although ER hoped the United States could stay out of the war, she told FDR she was “not surprised” by Bryan’s and Daniels’s inaction, “for one could expect little else. To understand the present gigantic conflict one must have at least a glimmering of foreign nations and their histories. I hope you will succeed in getting the Navy together and up to the mark for I think we’re going to need its moral support.”

Linked to the same distinguished American family and joined as spouses and parents, FDR and ER had also come to discover in each other a deep interest in national affairs and a prodigious energy for engaging in public life that seemed to make them an unusually compatible pair.

A group of officials including (at the head of the table) Josephus Daniels, secretary of the navy, and (at right in a light suit) Franklin D. Roosevelt, who served under Daniels as assistant secretary of the navy. FDR’s stint in the post from 1913 to 1920 was his introduction to political life in Washington, DC. FDRL.
Despite the candor Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt shared on administration politics, an unspoken tension had crept into their marriage. FDR’s work for Woodrow Wilson’s 1916 reelection campaign and a polio epidemic that kept Eleanor and their young children at the family’s Canadian retreat on Campobello Island prolonged the months that FDR and ER spent apart that year. When they were together in Washington, DC, war work also kept them apart. FDR, thoroughly impatient with the administration’s insistence upon neutrality and struggling to circumvent it, worked late into the night at the Navy Department and sailed to Europe for a month-long inspection of the U.S. fleet. ER, shocked by the horrors of World War I, abandoned the social customs prewar Washington demanded of her, especially after the United States finally joined the conflict in April 1917. She threw herself into war-related volunteer work, staffing a canteen in Union Station, ministering to veterans in trauma centers, organizing relief activities for the Navy Red Cross, and convincing the secretary of the Interior to modernize the treatment of traumatized (“shell-shocked”) veterans. When she and FDR did attend dinner parties together, he invariably stayed later than she, flirting with his dinner companions and, as the historian Geoffrey Ward has noted, refusing to “shield her from gossip.”

By the time America entered World War I, FDR and ER had become very different people than when they married thirteen years earlier. FDR was still ambitious and impatient, as critical of his superiors in Washington as he had been of colleagues in Albany. But with Howe’s assistance, he had developed administrative skills and a political savoir faire that helped him skirt the retaliations his criticisms might provoke. FDR pressed the administration to create the National Council of Defense, a cabinet-level committee that would be charged with coordinating war-related labor and production initiatives, despite Wilson’s repeated refusals to do so. He allied with the Navy League, Theodore Roosevelt, and other “Big Navy” advocates—all fierce critics of his boss, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, and the administration—and, while Daniels was away, appealed directly (albeit unsuccessfully) to the president to have American ships “cleaned and fitted out” for war. “There is no other navy in the world that has to cover so great an area of defense as the American navy,” he told a Saint Louis audience, “and it ought, in my judgment, to be incomparably the greatest navy in the world.”

Rumors swirled throughout the Capitol that Wilson would tap FDR to replace the outgoing Lindley Garrison as secretary of war. In fact, Wilson, who tolerated FDR only because his last name was Roosevelt, never considered him for the post. Nor did Wilson allow FDR to follow TR’s example by resigning his position to enlist in the navy. “Tell the young man,” the president ordered Daniels, “to stay where he is.” The “Big Navy” men agreed. “Franklin Roosevelt,” General Leonard Wood declared, “should under no circumstances think of leaving the Navy Department.” His departure would be “a public calamity.”

The war also emboldened ER. A fierce independence began to emerge in the young political wife. She no longer deferred to her mother-in-law, Sara Roosevelt, and chafed when relatives refused to see how their world was changing. She relished a growing sense of being needed and seeing her own organizational talents respected. ER’s rigorous relief work startled and impressed her peers, veterans, the Navy Department, and TR—who donated a third of his 1906 Nobel Peace Prize money to support her work. Washington soon saw her as “a willing horse,” as a friend wrote Sara. “They call upon her at all hours, all the time.” Even the British noticed ER’s abilities and invited her to travel to London to develop a canteen program for their military.

These intense experiences, ER later recalled, inspired “a certain confidence in myself and in my ability to meet emergencies and deal with them.”
Eleanor Roosevelt’s growing confidence notwithstanding, in the fall of 1918 there came an emergency—a personal one—that cut very close to the bone. ER would deal with it, as she had other painful experiences. It would change her, setting her on a course toward a more unconventional, independent life.

The crisis began when Franklin D. Roosevelt returned from a naval inspection in Britain and France so ill that four orderlies had to carry his stretcher down the ship’s gangplank and, later, into the New York City home of his mother, Sara Roosevelt. As ER unpacked his luggage, she discovered a packet of love letters her social secretary, Lucy Mercer, had written FDR. While ER may have suspected FDR of infidelity—he was a consummate flirt—this evidence of a passionate love affair stunned and crushed her. “The bottom dropped out of my own particular world,” she later told a trusted friend.

ER offered FDR a divorce. After a short separation and consultations with political operative Louis Howe and Sara—who both opposed a divorce as ruinous to FDR’s reputation and career—the couple decided to remain married. They knew it would not be easy. Their dreams of romantic love had been extinguished. Deep wounds would linger in both their hearts. “This past year has rather got the better of me,” ER confided to her dear friend Isabella Greenway in July 1919. “It has been so full of all kinds of things that I still have a breathless, hunted feeling about it.”

Yet FDR and ER had entered 1919 determined to continue their work, rekindle affection, and restore a modicum of trust. That summer FDR had asked ER to accompany him to Europe as he oversaw the post-World War I liquidation of the American fleet. Although she was glad to join him on the trip, the experience haunted her. No stranger to military hospitals and suffering soldiers and sailors, ER found the scorched terrain of European battlefields brought the war home in a visceral way. “I do not think one can quite realize [the devastation] without seeing it,” she wrote Greenway. France’s denuded Belleau Wood, scene of a ferocious battle in 1918, “gave one an even more ghastly feeling than the shelled and ruined towns,” ER added. “What the men who fought there lived through is inconceivable.”

When the Roosevelts departed Europe for home, they shared the return voyage with President Woodrow Wilson, who had just completed negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the war, and championing the creation of the League of Nations, an international body that he hoped would prevent future wars. The energy onboard ship was infectious, and it reinforced the pair’s decision to reconcile.
The year 1920 began with another dreadful event for the Roosevelts: on February 4, 1920, Eleanor Roosevelt's beloved but moody Aunt Pussie, who had helped raise ER after her mother's death, perished along with her two daughters when they could not escape a fire that consumed their Greenwich Village home. A distraught ER ("It was one of those horrors I can hardly think of," she later wrote) coordinated their funerals and burials.

The couple had faced illness, war, and great personal upheaval, but they were people who kept going, and they were soon taken up once again in the political world to which they had chosen to devote their lives.

With the war over, President Woodrow Wilson launched an inept and divisive nationwide campaign to urge Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles that closed World War I, and join the League of Nations. When a stroke confined him to the White House, partially paralyzed and embittered, the Democratic Party began to implode. Labor turmoil, a weakened economy, and disaffected out-of-work veterans all cast a pall over the administration and the party. Franklin D. Roosevelt, meanwhile, had barely survived his insubordinate attacks on his boss, most notably his public declaration that he, not Daniels, had undertaken the necessary "illegal acts" to prepare the navy to defend the nation. He worried that his lack of military service would tarnish his political career. Plus, now that he was headed back to New York, he realized that a powerful Tammany machine could damage his prospects.

FDR planned carefully for the 1920 Democratic nominating convention. First, he seconded the nomination of his Albany rival Al Smith as president of the United States. Then he outmaneuvered Tammany delegates to lead the New York delegation in a boisterous tribute to Wilson. After Smith withdrew, FDR bucked the New York bosses to support William McAdoo for president. When the convention appeared deadlocked between McAdoo and the Tammany-backed Ohio governor James Cox, FDR made his move. In exchange for Tammany not opposing his next campaign for elected office, he endorsed Cox. In turn, Cox, hoping to capitalize on the Roosevelt name and Theodore Roosevelt's legacy, asked FDR to be his running mate. ER was at Campobello Island when FDR wired her the news.

At thirty-eight, FDR began his first nationwide campaign. Hoping to attract the
I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

votes of newly enfranchised women, FDR invited ER to join his campaign train as he barnstormed the South and the Midwest. The Warren Harding-led Republican ticket would trounce the Cox-Roosevelt Democratic slate—even in New York State. But FDR would return home exhilarated by the campaign experience and confident that it had enhanced his political future.

For ER, the campaign was a far cry from the reunion with her husband she had anticipated. She spent her days either standing alongside FDR as he repeated his stump speech and wooed women voters, or alone in her railroad car, reading, knitting, and worrying about how her children were faring at home. Nevertheless, political aide Louis Howe, recognizing ER’s complexity, began to treat her less as the candidate’s wife than as an interesting woman in her own right. The former reporter exposed her to the art of speechwriting, the craft of journalism, and the friendship journalists can offer. By the time the train returned to New York, ER and Howe were solidifying a friendly alliance.

The Roosevelts handled defeat and their return to New York in ways that would soon redefine their marriage and shape their political careers. FDR joined the Fidelity and Deposit Company, an insurance and bonding firm that hoped to capitalize on his name and vast connections. He also supported charities and worked assiduously with Howe to bolster the Democratic Party and his own standing in it. It was in this period that FDR, at his wife’s suggestion, hired as his personal secretary the soon-to-be-indispensable Marguerite “Missy” LeHand, whose work on the 1920 campaign had impressed ER.

As for ER, she dreaded the winter in New York City with, as she put it, “nothing but teas and luncheons and dinners to take up my time.” Instead of soldiering through it, she mapped out a schedule allowing her to spend long weekends in Hyde Park, New York, with daughter Anna and son James, while taking on challenging political activities in the city. She cochaired the legislative affairs committee of the newly formed national League of Women Voters, and she quickly developed, to her surprise, friendships with progressive women activists who would become lifelong friends and confidants.

During this phase she herself would characterize as “the intensive education of Eleanor Roosevelt,” ER was drifting away from the old influences in her life. The Roosevelts, as historian Geoffrey Ward has observed, found they could stay together by staying apart.

Clockwise from top: Franklin D. Roosevelt with James Cox, around 1920, the year the two made a bid for the White House, with FDR as the Ohio governor’s vice presidential running mate. Their slogan: “Peace—Progress—Prosperity.” The following August, polio would strike FDR. The long, brisk stride that carried him to meet voters in the 1920 campaign would not be seen again. LOC

Marguerite “Missy” LeHand, personal secretary to Franklin D. Roosevelt, around 1938. FDR hired LeHand following his failed campaign for the vice presidency in 1920. She would work for him for the next twenty years and become a close friend, caring for FDR during his polio rehabilitation in Warm Springs, Georgia, and accompanying him to Washington, DC, in 1933. LOC

Eleanor Roosevelt hosts a League of Women Voters (LWV) meeting at her home in Hyde Park, New York, 1927, to support the Kellogg-Briand Pact, an international agreement to outlaw war. Next to ER are Mary Garrett Hay, a key organizer for women’s suffrage in New York City, and Carrie Chapman Catt, a prominent suffragist on the national and international stage and founder of the LWV. ER joined the League in 1920, the year of its founding. In this period she would call “the intensive education of Eleanor Roosevelt,” ER plunged into activist politics and formed connections with progressive women, strengthening the independent identity she would bring to the White House. Cornell
An Uncommon Partnership: Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt

I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

When FDR’s condition worsened, they reached night. Eager to get additional medical opinions, they turned sitting by his bed throughout the day and maintained a determined optimism as they took turns caring for him. She and political operative Louis Howe bathed him, and tending to his every biological need. She in New York. But ER’s support for his aspiration to lead an active, independent life strengthened their partnership. LOC

Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt’s struggles to reorder their marriage and resuscitate his political career faced a sudden and all but overwhelming challenge in the summer of 1921. In August, while vacationing with his family on Campobello Island off the Maine coast, FDR, over the course of just a few hours, developed severe paralysis. For two weeks, attending physicians misdiagnosed FDR’s condition—first as a response to a horrific cold and later as the result of a blood clot in his lower spine. One prescribed counterproductive and agonizing massage. FDR could no longer stand, sit up, urinate unassisted, or hold a pen. His fever spiked and he feared he would die.

ER went into action as nurse, inserting catheters to relieve his bladder, feeding and bathing him, and tending to his every biological need. She and political operative Louis Howe maintained a determined optimism as they took turns sitting by his bed throughout the day and night. Eager to get additional medical opinions when FDR’s condition worsened, they reached out to medical specialists in New York City and Boston. All agreed that FDR had contracted polio.

The Roosevelts and Howe remained at Campobello until September 15, 1921, when Howe helped FDR elude the press and board a train to New York and its Presbyterian Hospital. Though paralyzed from the chest down, FDR, at the age of thirty-nine, began to regain his characteristic optimism and concentrate on trying to strengthen his legs and become as self-reliant as possible. This immensely distressed his mother, Sara, who waged a determined campaign to take her son back to Hyde Park, New York, for a life of leisure and support. ER disagreed with her mother-in-law. With her support, Howe’s constant counsel, and Missy LeHand’s administrative assistance, FDR resisted his mother’s efforts and built a new life for himself. He dabbled in business and formed a new law practice. Convinced his paralysis was temporary, he threw himself into a punishing regimen of exercise and continually sought out new medical treatments. Although his stamina returned and he developed the upper body of a wrestler, his frail, withered legs would not recover; he would never walk unaided again.

Polio matured FDR, giving him, as Labor Secretary Frances Perkins would put it, “a firmer grip on life and on himself than ever before . . . He had become conscious of other people, weak people, of human frailty. . . . His viability—his power to grow in response to experience—was beginning to show.” With Howe at his side, FDR monitored state and national party politics and plotted his return. In 1924 Al Smith asked FDR to make his first public appearance since contracting polio by nominating Smith as the party’s candidate for president at the Democratic National Convention. FDR, the charming politician born to advantage, had now faced a devastating personal setback and shown what he was really made of. His dramatic return to the public stage—combined with his stirring endorsement of Smith as “the Happy Warrior of the political battlefield”—revived his popularity and secured his political future.

Polio also jump-started ER’s political career. It gave her the cover she needed to challenge social customs and develop the independent persona she craved, an arena in which to champion a more humane society, and the opportunity to build a new network of colleagues, friends, and fellow activists. No longer battling a crushing sense of rejection, despair, and fatigue, she became not only FDR’s surrogate, but also (as major reporters noted) an influential woman who spoke her own mind.

In addition to serving as vice president and finance chair of the state Democratic Women’s Committee and an officer of the Women’s City Club, she helped lead state chapters of the National Consumers Union and the Women’s Trade Union League, and developed close ties with unions and other labor organizations.

She and FDR were becoming not just a political couple, but a political team. ER shared her insights with FDR and, when she met leaders she thought he should meet, arranged for them to have extensive, private, and informal conversations. She had spent the 1920 election inside a railroad car, standing beside her husband. Now, as his husband devoted most of his energy to regaining the use of his legs and feet, it was she who crisscrossed the state securing the women’s vote for Smith. She even cochaired the Bok Peace Prize Committee, designed to win congressional support for an international peacekeeping organization that could replace the League of Nations, and testified in support of the plan before the U.S. House of Representatives.

Their combined political activities kept them united in ways their marriage could not. They increasingly spent long stretches of time in separate states. In late 1924, FDR fell in love with a decaying South Georgia resort whose buoyant warm waters had helped another polio patient strengthen his legs. Warm Springs quickly became more than a rehabilitation clinic to FDR. There he built a one-story, completely accessible cottage that would provide what his New York homes could not—independence, mobility, and complete relaxation. By 1926, as ER expanded her networks throughout New York State and beyond, FDR spent half the year at the cottage exercising, working (with LeHand at his side and Howe feeding him information from New York City), getting to know his rural neighbors and fellow “polios,” designing new rehabilitation facilities for Warm Springs patients, and planning his political comeback. He conferred regularly with party leaders, invited key aides to join him for extended visits, drafted party platforms, wrote articles, and advised candidates. His intention: a return to the campaign trail in 1932. A call from his wife would change his plans.
I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

Return to Public Office, 1928

On October 1, 1928, Franklin D. Roosevelt took a phone call at Warm Springs, Georgia, from his wife. When he came on the line, she handed the phone to the Democratic candidate for president, Al Smith. Smith, along with senior party leaders joining in the call, pressed FDR to run for governor of New York. After they assured him they would help raise money to support his plans for Warm Springs, FDR yielded to their request. He had intended to give himself more time to regain his physical strength. Eleanor Roosevelt wired her husband, “Regret that you had to accept but know that you felt it obligatory.”

But FDR quickly put aside any reservations about the campaign. Building on the networks he, ER, and political ally Louis Howe had built, he barnstormed the state in an open touring car, speaking as often as fourteen times a day, while ER traveled the state for Smith. Smith lost. FDR won by a very slim margin. The Roosevelts would now have to live in the same state—and, once again, learn to give each other the independence each required.

After New Yorkers elected FDR to the state’s highest office, he concentrated on selecting his key aides, fleshing out his legislative agenda, and navigating a Republican state legislature. ER strove to balance her commitment to social reform with her husband’s political agenda. She knew that as New York’s First Lady, she had to stop giving political speeches on specific issues, but she wanted to continue challenging women “to learn to play the game as men do.” As FDR expanded his circle of advisors, ER stayed in constant contact with her vast social-reform network, often bringing key reform leaders to brief and argue with FDR. Her greatest joy, however, came from teaching at the Todhunter School for Girls. There she worked to instill in her students the curiosity and confidence the young ER had learned as a favorite pupil in an English boarding school run by the celebrated educator Marie Souvestre.

By 1929 the Roosevelts, after enduring heartbreak and paralysis, were a team. They were united by progressive values, an incessant curiosity about the challenges their fellow Americans faced, and a determination to transcend the social limitations of the upper-class world into which they were born. Politics and shared commitment to social reform now provided the comfort and community their marriage could not. They moved into the governor’s mansion as two individuals who had conquered their own fears; listened to and learned from laborers, farmers, activists, corporate titans, and immigrants; observed the devastation and havoc of rural and urban poverty; and seen firsthand the wretched religious prejudice Smith (a Catholic) endured throughout his presidential campaign. FDR and ER were motivated, and ready, to lead.