It was as governor of the Empire State that Franklin D. Roosevelt came into his own as the politician and leader his nation would elect four times to its highest office.

He began his campaign for the post some seven years after the summer day when polio struck a handsome, athletic thirty-nine-year-old FDR, paralyzing his legs and casting a shadow over what had seemed a charmed life. FDR emerged from his years of rehabilitation still unable to walk unaided, yet full of an unmistakable vigor. He was humbler but at the same time more confident, no longer the callow young state senator with the famous name whom many had found condescending, but the sort of man who could connect with all kinds of people.

In 1928, during his first run for governor, he would heave himself from his car to a standing position and deliver a pitch-perfect, homely speech, or arduously make his way toward a podium, smiling and looking people in the eye so they wouldn’t notice his slow progress. Perhaps this was...
something for which he had unwittingly prepared during much more relaxed drives around the back roads of Warm Springs, Georgia, in a Model T Ford modified for operation by hand controls. He would pull up to a drugstore, honk, and order a Coke, or drive up next to a field and discuss crops with the farmers. “He was a man that could talk to you,” one local recalled. “He had sense enough to talk to a man who didn’t have any education, and he had enough sense to talk to the best educated man in the world; and he was easy to talk to. He could talk about anything.”

If these were excellent qualifications for leadership, the governorship itself offered FDR a chance to try out a spate of progressive ideas, from prison reform to support for rural education and public utilities, but also delivered a lesson in the limits of executive power when matched against a resistant legislature dominated by the opposing party.

When, in the early ’30s, the country’s economic distress began to assume alarming scale, the time had come for progressive ideas—and for FDR’s active style. While governor, his leading advocacy for creative, government-led solutions to the suffering of the Depression (and his critique of President Herbert Hoover’s desultory response) raised his national profile, indeed made him a strong candidate for the presidency.

“The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation,” FDR said in a commencement address weeks before the 1932 Democratic Convention that would nominate him. “It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

Try something. This had been FDR’s instinctive response to polio. It was in his bones and would serve him well in the years ahead.

Top: During his campaign for president in 1932, New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt shakes hands with a farmer en route to his adopted home in Warm Springs, Georgia, October 23, 1932. While recuperating from polio in Warm Springs during the 1920s, FDR had developed a close rapport with the area’s farmers. “He was a man that could talk to you,” one local recalled. FDRL

Center, right and left: Franklin D. Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the navy (at front-center and far right in these two images), participates in early morning exercises with congressmen and members of Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet, 1917. The promising young navy official would face a terrible setback in the 1921 polio infection that left him paralyzed, but return to public office in 1928 as governor of New York. FDR’s idol, Theodore Roosevelt, had held both the navy post and the New York governorship on his way to the White House. FDRL

Left: Ohio governor James Cox and Franklin D. Roosevelt, shortly after winning the Democratic Party’s nomination for president and vice president, respectively, arrive at the White House for a meeting with sitting president Woodrow Wilson, July 18, 1920. The Cox-Roosevelt ticket would lose by a wide margin and in August 1921, FDR would be paralyzed by a sudden bout of polio, leading to an unexpected seven-year hiatus from public office. LOC
While Franklin D. Roosevelt was working to regain his health and mobility in the mid-1920s, one of the things he did to stay active in politics was support the aspirations of Al Smith, the progressive New York governor whose life and career had begun in the rough streets of New York City’s Lower East Side.

In 1924 FDR returned from Warm Springs, Georgia, to New York City to chair Governor Smith’s presidential campaign. His speech placing Smith in nomination before the Democratic National Convention that summer was his first since contracting polio three years earlier. It was an effective address, in which FDR famously labeled Smith a “Happy Warrior of the political battlefield” (a reference to Wordsworth). “He has a power to strike at error and wrongdoing that makes his adversaries quail before him,” FDR said of the candidate.

But FDR’s physical frailty was apparent. Delegates watched in silence as he approached the podium, leaning on his son, James, and clutching a crutch. Once there, he gripped the rostrum with both hands to keep from falling. He could not wave to thank the boisterously cheering delegates who celebrated his political rebirth, nor could he wipe away the sweat that poured down his face in a sweltering Madison Square Garden.

Smith failed to win the nomination. And FDR, though urged by state party leaders to consider running for governor or U.S. senator, insisted he needed more time to recoup his strength.

But four years later, a rejuvenated FDR once again left his beloved Warm Springs to support Smith’s second campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. FDR used a cane and the support of his son, Elliott, to make his way to the podium, yet to the Democratic delegates assembled in Houston, he seemed tireless, charismatic, and almost recovered. He managed the convention floor for Smith, ensuring that delegates pledged to Smith voted for him.

FDR told the crowd, "It is that quality of the soul which makes a man loved by little children, by dumb animals; that quality of the soul which makes him a strong help to all those in sorrow or in trouble; that quality which makes him not merely admired but loved by all the people—the quality of sympathetic understanding of the human heart, of real interest in one's fellow men. Instinctively he senses the popular need because he himself has lived through the hardship, the labor, and the sacrifice which must be endured by every man of heroic mold who struggles up to eminence from obscurity and low estate. Between him and the people is that subtle bond which makes him their champion and makes them enthusiastically trust him with their loyalty and their love.”

FDR intended his remarks, broadcast nationwide across the radio, to combat the prejudice Smith’s Catholicism generated among some voters. Instead, the remarks drew the nation’s attention to the special “quality of the soul” FDR himself possessed—and to the “subtle bond” he was forging with the American people. The buzz about FDR’s political future began in earnest.
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s political star was clearly ascendant after his speech nominating Al Smith as the Democratic candidate for president in 1928. Nevertheless, he returned to Warm Springs, Georgia, where he delighted in avoiding phone calls from party leaders who wanted him to run for governor of New York. He enjoyed long drives and lingering picnics. Finally, when all the Democratic county chairs urged him to run, FDR broke his silence long enough to wire, “As I am only forty-six I owe it to my family and myself to give the present constant improvement a chance to continue.”

With help from Eleanor Roosevelt, presidential candidate Al Smith and Democratic National Committee Chair John Jakob Raskob managed to get FDR on the phone the very night before the state Democrats would nominate a candidate for governor. After countering each of FDR’s objections, they asked, “If those fellows nominate you tomorrow and adjourn, will you refuse to run?” FDR hesitated, and the deal was struck.

On October 2, FDR’s party put him up for governor. ER wired her husband, “Regret that you had to accept but know that you felt it obligatory.” Close friend and advisor Louis Howe was more blunt: “Mess is no name for it. For once I have no advice to give.” Attacks on FDR’s mental and physical health came in short order. “There is something both pathetic and pitiless in the ‘drafting’ of Franklin D. Roosevelt,” the New York Post declared. “Even his own friends, out of love for him, will hesitate to vote for him now.”

But on October 17, FDR launched a three-week campaign that even his critics conceded was a daunting display of energy and political charisma. He barnstormed the state, traveling 1,300 miles by car, visiting areas statewide candidates had never seen, and delivering as many as fourteen speeches a day.

FDR turned the campaign into a contest of ideas one reporter described as “reactionaryism versus progressivism.” Large crowds gathered to hear him assail religious bigotry, champion hydroelectric power, support a minimum hour and wage bill and the right to collective bargaining, insist that the elderly had a right to old-age pensions, and promote state aid to farmers.

By November 6, he had done all he could. He voted in Hyde Park that morning, then drove to New York City to await returns. Early numbers indicated a crushing defeat for Smith. When FDR retired a little past midnight, he thought he’d lost, too. The era’s booming prosperity had all but ensured a banner year for Republicans. But at 4 a.m. FDR took a slim lead and held it. Labor activist Frances Perkins and FDR’s mother, Sara, grabbed a taxi to the Roosevelt home to awaken the new governor.
Early in 1929, Franklin D. Roosevelt went to the governor’s office with a hefty progressive agenda. He wanted to win new legislation for industrial workers and farmers, and harness the state’s waterpower to make cheap electricity for its people. He also wanted to aid the disabled.

However, he would soon find himself tussling with a Republican-led legislature instead. It began in January, when legislators launched a bid to wrest from the governor the power to craft the state budget—a right granted by a voter-approved amendment to the state constitution in 1927 and aimed at curtailing preference for powerful cronies and special interests. In November the state Court of Appeals affirmed the governor’s right to veto large lump-sum appropriations—and thus control the budget.

But the legislators rejected sixteen of FDR’s proposals. By the end of the first session, his only major achievement was a farm aid bill giving more support to rural schools and reducing taxation of rural counties for highway construction. FDR decided to press his cause outside the state capital, calling lawmakers’ resistance to his legislative agenda “a splendid opportunity for carrying matters straight to the people.”

He took to the radio (a precursor to his presidential fireside chats) and left Albany to speak against economic “oligarchy” at Hobart College in upstate New York and against the consolidation of industry and utilities in New York City’s Tammany Hall. He appeared at the Gridiron Dinner roast in Washington, DC, along with President Hoover, then returned to New York to travel by barge, boat, and car, meeting farmers, small business owners, and local Republican and Democratic leaders. By the end of 1929, he was the most popular leader in the state of New York.
Beginning in 1930, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s successes began to accrue. That year he pushed through a bill establishing old-age insurance for New Yorkers over seventy. He won a second term in November, the first FDR landslide. In April 1931, he signed the Water Authority Act, authorizing the construction of a public hydroelectric facility on the Saint Lawrence River (long delayed in execution) “to give back to the people the waterpower which is theirs.” In September, responding to swelling unemployment and impoverishment, FDR created the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, making New York the first state to have its own agency coordinating relief. Harry Hopkins, a brilliant forty-two-year-old social worker hailing from Iowa but trained on New York’s Lower East Side, became the agency’s executive director. By January 1932, the program had helped one out of ten New Yorkers, through direct “home” relief as well as work-relief jobs at prevailing wages—although 1.5 million remained out of work.

All these initiatives were forerunners of the New Deal FDR would advance on a national scale as president. Indeed, it was by his work in shaping and promoting policies with national application in a time of crisis that FDR rose to greater and greater prominence.

With state labor department head Frances Perkins as his tutor, FDR became the first governor to support the concept of unemployment insurance at the National Governors’ Conference in July 1930. “This form of relief should not, of course, take the shape of a dole in any respect,” he said. He also advocated for a federal old-age insurance program. “Our American aged do not want charity,” he once again insisted, “but rather old-age comforts, to which they are rightfully entitled by their own thrift and foresight in the form of insurance.”

In his last annual address to the legislature in 1932, FDR proposed regulating banks to protect deposits, separate commercial deposits from personal savings, and require brokers to disclose the “true value” of securities they sell.

Meanwhile—and this won the hearts of many hard-pressed Americans—FDR assailed the “Pollyanna attitude” of President Hoover and those who counseled the dispossessed and unemployed to simply grin and bear it. He was forming the concept of a new and more active role for government. “More and more,” he remarked, “those who are the victims of dislocations and defects of our social and economic life are beginning to ask respectfully, but insistently of us who are in positions of public responsibility, why government can not and should not act to protect its citizens from disaster. I believe that the question demands an answer.” Government, he said, “must accept the responsibility to do what it can... along definitely constructive, not passive lines.”
Franklin D. Roosevelt could be blunt when displeased, but what struck most people about him was his buoyancy and warmth. He had a way of inspiring intense personal devotion—so did Eleanor Roosevelt—and one of his great strengths as a leader was recognizing and using the talents of a wide variety of people.

A good example: a handful of academics the press dubbed FDR’s “Brain Trust.” Not long after FDR announced his run for president in early 1932, his counsel and speechwriter, Sam Rosenman, realized he lacked the in-depth knowledge to craft speeches on the many complex issues the candidate had to address. Rosenman reached out to Raymond Moley, a Columbia University professor who had helped FDR reform the state criminal-justice system. With FDR’s enthusiastic assent, Moley recruited fellow Columbia professors Rexford Tugwell, an economist who became FDR’s principal advisor on agriculture, and Adolph Berle Jr., who agreed to brief FDR on policies related to credit and corporations. Other topics tackled by the Brain Trust included trade and tariff policy, constitutional law, and administrative reorganization.

At FDR’s suggestion, they met Sunday nights in Albany, with core advisors bringing visitors to meet FDR over dinner. Later Moley would recall that the governor “was at once a student, a cross-examiner, and a judge. He would listen with rapt attention for a few minutes and then break in with a question whose sharpness was characteristically blurred with an anecdotal introduction or an air of sympathetic agreement with the speaker.”

Brain Trust members had an important role in shaping policies of the New Deal, and some continued to advise FDR, formally or informally, for years.

Two of the most influential individuals FDR brought with him to Washington from Albany were Harry Hopkins, who had efficiently organized a work-relief program for New York and would do the same for the nation, and Frances Perkins, the state labor commissioner who as U.S. secretary of labor would help design social security and unemployment insurance.

Above: Rexford Tugwell testifies before a Senate committee on his nomination as undersecretary of agriculture, 1934. After advising Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt as an agricultural economist and member of FDR’s Brain Trust, Tugwell followed President-elect FDR to Washington and served in the Agriculture Department. He was instrumental in shaping New Deal farm policy. LOC

Left: Senator William E. Borah greets Raymond Moley as he arrives at the Senate to oppose Franklin D. Roosevelt’s plan to restructure the Supreme Court, March 23, 1937. As a Columbia professor of public law, Moley had worked with FDR while he was governor of New York, advising him on criminal justice and other matters, writing speeches for him, and assembling his informal group of academic advisers—the Brain Trust. A talented speechwriter, Moley coined the term “the New Deal.” He served as a lead presidential policy adviser and liaison with Congress during FDR’s historic first one hundred days in the White House. But Moley grew disaffected with FDR’s policies by 1936. LOC
“Happy Days Are Here Again!” Franklin D. Roosevelt’s sunny campaign song reflected his own vibrant, optimistic nature—a boon to a country whose destitute wandered streets and byways in ever increasing numbers, sometimes setting up camp in shantytowns called Hoovervilles or sleeping under “Hoover blankets” (newspapers).

Herbert Hoover had not in fact been idle in the face of spiraling economic conditions. He had secured private pledges to maintain wages and employment, helped temporarily suspend international debt payments, supported high tariffs on foreign goods, raised taxes to increase revenue, instituted federal loans to banks and railroads, and promoted public-works projects. But none of these moves had demonstrably improved the situation. And Hoover had refused to embrace large-scale programs aimed directly at the suffering masses. After a lackluster Republican nominating convention, Hoover faced angry audiences that sometimes heckled and booed.

FDR, by contrast, thrilled the Democratic Convention of 1932 by breaking tradition to accept the nomination in person. He flew into Chicago in a summer storm, cannily displaying both physical courage and a spirit of change—and brought a crowd of thirty thousand to its feet roaring with approval. At the podium that night, FDR derided the ideology that “first sees to it that a favored few are helped, and hopes that some of their prosperity will leak through, sift through, to labor, to the farmer, to the small business man.” He labeled the Democratic Party “the bearer of liberalism and of progress.”

FDR promised government action to usher in happier days—reductions in mortgage interest rates for farmers and homeowners, a plan to limit agricultural surpluses (and falling prices), federally sponsored jobs for useful projects like reforestation, regulation on Wall Street, and repeal of Prohibition.

“On the farms, in the large metropolitan areas, in the smaller cities and in the villages, millions of our citizens cherish the hope that their old standards of living and of thought have not gone forever,” FDR told the delegates. “Those millions cannot and shall not hope in vain. I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.”

He campaigned hard over the next few months, though some remarked that it was hardly necessary. On election night, the dramatic results already in evidence, an Illinois man cabled Hoover with the quip, “Vote for Roosevelt, and make it unanimous.”