6. The Long Transition: From Election Day to Inauguration Day

On November 8, 1932, Americans went to the ballot box and turned the electoral map blue for Franklin D. Roosevelt. The governor from New York carried all but six states and beat incumbent Herbert Hoover in the popular vote by 17 percent.

Voters, desperate for change as the Depression’s cruelest winter came on, had indeed wrought a historic transition, sweeping aside forty years of Republican majorities for forty years in which American politics would be dominated by the Democratic coalition FDR cobbled together—labor unions and city machines, Jews and Catholics, blacks and white southerners, industrial workers and farmers.

But the transfer of power was not accomplished in a stroke on Election Day. On the contrary, the transition between the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations was long and unusually bitter.

It was too long. In the next election cycle, a constitutional amendment ratified in early 1933 would shift Inauguration Day to January 20. But FDR’s swearing in took place on March 4—four months after the election—in keeping with a tradition
that reached back to an era when presidents needed time to journey with their households to the nation’s capital.

Now, the country could ill afford the delay. The economy sunk to appalling depths as a lame-duck president and Congress, feeling hamstrung by the people’s mandate for change, hesitated to act—and the president-elect, loath to commit himself while lacking official authority, insistently declined to do so.

Highly wary and increasingly testy relations between the two leaders aggravated the logjam.

In notes, calls, and three sit-downs, Hoover repeatedly tried to persuade FDR to join him in making statements or taking action on specific issues. FDR balked. He saw no benefit in roping himself to the positions of a leader whose views and approach differed from his own—meanwhile tainting his fledgling administration by association with Hoover himself, the object of intense public resentment. Hoover, in turn, believed a fatuous FDR was playing politics while the nation went to ruin.

More than once these tensions played out in the press. On December 22, 1932, for example, Hoover, incensed at FDR’s refusal to work with him on the issue of European war debts, released their cabled correspondence to the press. Dueling public comments followed. Hoover: “Governor Roosevelt considers it undesirable for him to assent to my suggestions for cooperative action.” FDR: “It is a pity . . . that any statement or intimation should be given that I consider it undesirable to assent to cooperation.”

These contretemps did nothing for either man’s popularity. Henry Stimson, who was Hoover’s secretary of state and would become FDR’s secretary of war, said the war-debt exchange in particular made FDR “look like a peanut.” Editorial pages also criticized FDR, although the Congress and a majority of the public remained in his corner.

When the sun rose at last on Inauguration Day, many Americans were ebullient with relief. The crowd erupted in applause as the new president declared in his powerful voice, “This Nation asks for action, and action now.” This was the FDR they’d come to know. The New Deal had begun.
Frosty Relations

The morning after he won the presidential election in an unprecedented landslide, Franklin D. Roosevelt sat in bed eating his breakfast and reading telegrams, including one from the defeated Herbert Hoover. “In the common purpose of all of us,” it declared, “I shall dedicate myself to every possible helpful effort.” FDR, along with his advisor Raymond Moley, sensed a veiled threat.

Such was the frosty state of relations between the two camps after a hard-fought campaign. Eleanor Roosevelt even suspected that, when Hoover and then-governor FDR had last met at the White House, Hoover had kept her husband standing an hour, in pain, to embarrass him and emphasize his disability.

The situation wouldn’t improve before Inauguration Day.

Hoover was not only stung by his dramatic loss, but also frustrated by what he saw as FDR’s failure to grasp fine points of the issues before him. After their first meeting at the White House in late November 1932, Hoover, known for his command of economic policy, came away feeling he’d been “educating a very ignorant . . . well-meaning young man.”

By January Hoover believed FDR’s resistance amounted to insincerity—that he’d told Hoover one thing and the press another; Hoover refused to talk to the president-elect over the phone without a stenographer present to record the dialogue.

Their last substantive exchange took place the day before inauguration. Instead of the traditional preinaugural dinner, Hoover threw the Roosevelts a cursory afternoon tea.
Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt did not manage to collaborate on pressing issues that arose in the transition period. In part, that’s because they didn’t agree on how to address them.

**Foreign War Debts**

Britain and France had heavy debts to the United States stemming from World War I. Germany in turn owed those countries huge sums in reparations, borrowing from the United States to cover them. Hoover believed the American economic crisis had roots in Europe and in this cycle of debt. So he wanted FDR’s acquiescence in relieving some of Britain’s war debts in exchange for certain concessions.

But FDR believed the Depression had mainly domestic roots, and he was leery of forgiving obligations to the United States, a move that would surely be unpopular with the public.

**The Gold Standard**

Hoover urged FDR to preserve the value of a dollar by cleaving to the gold standard—a requirement that dollars be backed by gold reserves. But there were increasing calls in the country to abandon the gold standard and pump more dollars into the economy to stimulate spending. FDR would take the latter course.

**A Bank Holiday**

Hoover was unsure he had the legal authority to close banks nationwide to stop runs on America’s ailing banking system. He asked FDR to do so jointly with him in the days before he left office. FDR believed the president did have authority to shut banks, but refused to take the action with Hoover. FDR closed the banks his first full day in office.
I have looked into the faces of thousands of Americans, FDR told a reporter not long after his election, as he waited to assume the country’s highest office. “They have the frightened look of lost children.” The Depression was reaching its bottom. Though Americans didn’t know it yet, their situation would not get worse than this.

“I haven’t had a steady job in more than two years,” one father confessed. “Sometimes I feel like a murderer. What is wrong with me that I can’t protect my children?” A doctor in a free clinic said he regularly observed people fainting from hunger on the streetcar. The Brookings Institution found almost 60 percent of Americans lived in poverty. Roughly 30 percent of families had no income at all.

The Gross National Product had dropped 60 percent. Manufacturing revenues were down more than 50 percent. Four out of five steel mills stood idle. Urban unemployment reached approximately 38 percent. Very few worked full time.

Farm income, depressed even before the crisis, had fallen by a third. In Oregon, apples rotted on the ground because growers could not afford to spend forty cents to pick, pack, and ship a crate that would fetch only thirty cents at market.

Foreclosures and evictions displaced millions. The newly homeless piled in with relatives, lived on the streets, or spent a nickel a night to sleep on a urine-stained mattress in one of the nation’s few homeless shelters. Others erected shacks from scrap metal, crates, or cartons and built shantytowns they christened “Hoovervilles.”

One unemployed Iowa teacher and her two children prepared for a second winter in the pit they’d dug the year before, only a tarp separating them from the snow and cold. Others lived in caves in New York’s Central Park or under bridges and inside sewer pipes, tunnels, and abandoned cars.

Schools closed as cities, drained of property-tax revenue, ran out of funds. One of three American children now had no public school to attend. In rural areas it was worse. Eight of ten rural children in Alabama had no school at all.
In Los Angeles, homeless youngsters fought over food decaying in garbage cans. Nine of ten West Virginia and Kentucky children were malnourished. More than a million teenagers became “boxcar kids” and hid in freight trains as they sought jobs and food in towns along the railroad tracks. Many children of tenant farmers and sharecroppers battled starvation.

“Why does Every Thing have Exceptional Value. Except the Human Being,” a man asked in a letter to Herbert Hoover. “Can you not find a quicker way of Executing us than to Starve us to death?”

A Harlem man protesting a neighbor’s eviction said to the police, “You can’t shoot all of us so you might as well shoot me. I’d just as soon die now as any time.”

In its final report, the Hoover-appointed President’s Committee on Social Trends warned of “violent revolution.” Indeed, in 1933 worldwide depression was helping to sow terrible seeds in Germany, where Adolf Hitler rose to power, and Japan, which withdrew from the League of Nations unchastened by rebukes for its invasion of Manchuria.

In the United States, on the other hand, there would be a democratic transfer of power—long in coming and ill-tempered, to be sure, but peaceful and orderly.

From top: A car that serves as home for an Iowa family of nine hit hard by the Depression, August 1936. The Depression was not over by 1936, yet Americans would reelect Franklin D. Roosevelt in a huge landslide, in part because they saw him help ordinary people directly rather than focus on stimulating business as Herbert Hoover had done. As FDR himself said at the 1936 Democratic Convention, “Presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that Divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales. Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference.” LOC

A child at the Hooverville in Circleville, Ohio. With more than a quarter of the American work force thrown out of a job in 1933, many families had no income at all. Parents faced the anguish of seeing their children hungry and homeless. Even schools were shuttered as municipal coffers ran dry. LOC