

The American Idealist

THE mind of Franklin Roosevelt was young and spacious. There was a lot of room in it, room for imagination, room for the freshness of ideas and room for the future. He was not content to live by formulas or under the pressure of the routine and the antiquated. He was never deluded by the lies and phrases which try to conceal reality and deaden truth. He saw our dangers and our weaknesses and he pioneered to save us from them. For, among our various statesmen, he was a pioneer in the establishing of social and economic responsibility. He believed in the notion of community within our own nation and beyond in the entire world. From the moment of his taking office he revealed his own sense of responsibility towards the whole people, not to any single class or group. And he instructed—sometimes bitterly—the people of power and fortune so that they would recognize their obligations towards the less powerful and the less fortunate members of society. With grimness and reluctance this teaching was often received. Nevertheless it was instructive and it was inescapable. No man could fail to learn the great lesson—that he was not to be alone and self-concerned, that he was rather to be conscious of his responsible membership with other men in an American community.

And when Franklin Roosevelt had made this lesson clear in the nation it was put upon him to make it clear in the world. He believed with radiant conviction in the international community, where it would no longer be possible for nations to rise like devouring monsters or to ignore, in miserable complacency, the woe and the wickedness of the whole earth. I think that, much more than the other heads of the United Nations, he understood and spread abroad the idea of the responsibility of the individual nation for the good and evil of time and the vast human significance of the gathering together of the nations. No single nation could be the salvation of the nations. Only a real sense of community—“one mind one towards another”—could be their salvation. This was no new idea, of course, but he was the dauntless and warm-hearted one in pursuing it and in making it effective. Momentary failures never checked the cheeriness of his spirit, his smiling confidence in himself and in the present and the future which, in a titanic way, it was his task to direct and influence. I think the best

praise I heard of him during the first days after his death was to this effect: he was not narrow or sullen or cynical; and only the narrow, the sullen and the cynical resented him and assailed his name and person. He was without doubt a man who was greatly alive and there was in him kindness and a wonderful hope. He was, simply, an idealist—and everywhere esteemed as such, a man who, without suspicion or meanness, grinned out upon the terrifying world.

But he was the American version of the idealist. That is, as George Santayana said of the Universal American, Franklin Roosevelt was “an idealist working on matter.” Santayana remarked of this kind of idealist: “Understanding as he does the material potentialities of things, he is successful in invention, conservative in reform, and quick in emergencies. . . . He dreams of helping to carry on and to accelerate the movement of a vast, seething, progressive society, and he actually does so. Ideals clinging so close to nature are almost sure of fulfillment; the American beams with a certain self-confidence and sense of mastery; he feels that God and nature are working with him. . . . He is not a revolutionist: he believes he is already on the right track and moving towards an excellent destiny.” If this is the American type, then Franklin Roosevelt is its prototype. In fact, these words, quite unchanged, would do well to describe him.

Naturally he had his weaknesses and he made his mistakes. For these he got the honest criticism of sincere men. Too often, however, irresponsible reviling was poured out upon him. Some of it came from the perfectionists, some from the vicious, some from the senseless, some from his professional political foes. But this abusiveness against a great human man was clearly unwarranted. By any view, in his tremendous assignment he could not have been expected to move without some falterings and misdirections. There is a passage in one of the sermons of John Donne which wonderfully applies here: “Upon this earth a man cannot possibly make one step in a straight and a direct line. The earth itself being round, every step we make upon it must necessarily be a segment, an arc of a circle. But yet though no piece of a circle be a straight line, yet if we take any piece, nay, if we take the whole circle, there is no corner, no angle in any piece in any entire circle. A perfect rectitude we cannot have in any ways of this world; in every calling there are some inevitable temptations. . . . A compass is a necessary thing in a ship and the help of that compass brings the ship

home safe, and yet that compass hath some variation; it doth not look directly north; neither is that star which we call the North Pole or by which we know the North Pole the very pole itself; but we call it so and we make our uses of it and our conclusions by it as if it were so because it is the nearest star to that pole. He that comes as near uprightness as infirmities admit is an upright man, though he have some obliquities." A perfect rectitude Franklin Roosevelt could not have had. He did not always go in a straight line but he went with fewer angles and corners than his smearing enemies would acknowledge, than even some of his more responsible judges would recognize. Whatever his infirmities and obliquities, he was an upright man.

Certainly the people who freely chose him to be their leader in overwhelming numbers saw him as an upright man. But an upright man with style and vividness and unlimited personal appeal. The people were drawn to him with respect and with affection and with confidence in his leadership. Although by heritage and circumstance an aristocrat, he was the people's man. They seemed to know what he was talking about and to appreciate what he was doing. And they liked the way he said things and did things, his talent in the high points of drama and in the brightness of moments of surprise. But he was not, like Mussolini, a self-appointed leader or, like Hitler, the hypnotist of the people. Franklin Roosevelt did not have to delude the people into giving him his power; and it is now recorded with what brilliance and beneficence he used the power given to him by the people whom he, in turn, respected and trusted and upon whom he always looked with good-humored eyes. I believe that Georges Bernanos, in his remarkable "Letter to the Americans," has addressed to Franklin Roosevelt the truest words that could be said: "There is an appellation common to all Christians, that of men of good will. You are a man of good will. Furthermore, you have power and genius. Your reshaping of American opinion can justly stand as a masterpiece of applied thought and intention, a work of art of proportions quite beyond reproach, a model of style, if style be the perfect moulding of expression to subject."

It was thoroughly reasonable that, when the news of Franklin Roosevelt's death struck, the people should have stopped in the streets and cried, aloud or in their hearts. For he was the leader of the people and their hero and their artist.—*Frank O'Malley.*