THE DEATH OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
60 YEARS LATER, THE IMPACT IS STILL BEING FELT
The “War President” who led America through World War II and saved Democracy, who founded Social Security, who helped lift the country out of the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s legacy endures.

APRIL 12, 1945
In April 1945, America and its allies were nearing victory in World War II. In Europe, Germany was on the brink of defeat, while in the Pacific plans for the invasion of Japan were underway.

Three long years of wartime leadership took a grim toll on Franklin Roosevelt. By spring 1945 he was suffering from hypertension and heart disease. On March 29 he left Washington for a vacation at Warm Springs, Georgia. For years he had sought to restore his health at the rehabilitation center he founded there in 1927.

In the early afternoon of April 12, 1945 the President was in his private cottage at Warm Springs signing papers and sitting for a portrait painter. Suddenly, he raised his hand to his head, complaining of a headache. He slumped forward, losing consciousness.

At 3:35 P.M. the President was pronounced dead from a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Americans soon learned the news: the man who had led them through years of economic crisis and war was gone.

FDR’s sudden death stunned the nation. Few had known of the severity of President Roosevelt's health problems. The public's shock was magnified by the fact that Roosevelt had been America's chief executive for over twelve years. Young Americans had no memory of any other President. The timing of his death, at a moment when victory in World War II seemed at hand, added to the country’s grief.

THE LONG RIDE HOME
On the morning of April 13, President Roosevelt’s casket was carried to the railroad station at Warm Springs, Georgia, accompanied by a procession of 2,000 soldiers from Fort Benning. Moving no faster than thirty-five miles per hour, the train passed through the Carolinas and Virginia, arriving in Washington, DC on April 14. All along the way, at all hours of the day and night, people lined the route of the funeral train, paying tribute to their leader. President Truman, members of the immediate family, and high-ranking government officials met the funeral train at Union Station.

Full military honors were rendered in a procession from the railroad station to the White House through the streets lined with units of the nation's armed forces and thousands upon thousands of grieving citizens. The casket was carried on a caisson preceded by a riderless horse accompanied by two soldiers who bore the American flag and the presidential standard. At the White House, the casket was placed in the East Room where a private Episcopal Funeral Service was conducted at 4:00 p.m. The service lasted twenty-three minutes. President Roosevelt's body did not lie in state in the Capitol.

That evening the casket was removed from the White House and taken in a small procession of soldiers and police to Union Station for the trip to the President's Hyde Park home. The morning of April 15 the funeral train arrived at a siding on the Hudson River four miles from the Roosevelt home. Again all along the route, people lined the road paying homage to their President.

The casket was transferred to a horse-drawn gun carriage and carried up the hill to the estate along a route lined with soldiers, sailors and marines. The caisson was preceded by a military band and a battalion of West Point cadets and followed by limousines containing President Truman, the Roosevelt family, and close associates of FDR. Full military honors were rendered from the train to the burial site.

Internment was in the Rose Garden at the estate in Hyde Park. The rector of St. James Episcopal Church read the burial services, three volleys were fired over the grave, and taps were sounded as the casket was lowered to its final resting place.
FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

A memorial service for President Roosevelt was held before a joint meeting of the two houses of Congress on July 1, 1946. The FDR Presidential Library and Museum holds a copy of the proceedings. Below is an excerpt from the memorial address presented by the Hon. John G Winant, United States Ambassador to Great Britain during World War II.

In Franklin Roosevelt the qualities we knew were these—we who worked with him and watched him. He loved mankind. There was no one in public life in our time who had the confidence of a greater part of the people of the earth than Franklin Roosevelt. He had their confidence not only because he believed in them as men and women, but because he expected much of them as men and women. The world to him was not composed of nations only, nor the nations of classes. He did not believe in abstractions. He believed in individual human beings. The compact, as Walt Whitman put it, was always with individuals. The decisions, whether in war or in peace, were decisions which affected the lives of individuals. The friendship, the dissensions, the agreements were individual friendships, individual dissensions, individual agreements. He loved men, but he loved them to be free, to be themselves.

He was brave. There is no man in this room—not those who saw him in the weakest moments of a frightful illness—not those who saw him in the most terrible moments of the war—there is not one of us who can say that he saw Franklin Roosevelt afraid.

He was steadfast. Once the decision had been made, he stood to it. Strong-willed and stubborn of purpose, he chose the men and framed the plans to bring to bear upon his country's enemies the full and overwhelming power of its strength, turning the first and terrible defeats to victories unprecedented in the history of war. Those who know of their own knowledge what risks he had to take, what burden of responsibility he had to bear, know how to estimate his steadfastness.

He saw the facts and faced them. Even in the brief perspective of a year we have learned how well he saw the facts of danger to his country. At a time when few men other than he, whether in positions of responsibility or not, understood the meaning of the history of our time, he understood it. We know now from the mouths and records of our enemies how well he understood. At a time when it was intellectually unpopular and politically dangerous to face the facts, he faced them. Neither the initial indifference of many among our people upon whose understanding he must have counted, nor a campaign of personal vilification in certain sections of our press, rarely equaled in any country, deterred him. He carried the distasteful burden of an unpopular awakening and brought the people, not of his own country only, but of the democratic world, to see their danger while yet there was time—how little time—to save themselves and save the world they live in.

He dared to act. It is not always that those who have the courage to see have the courage to act on what they see. Franklin Roosevelt acted. In two great crises, one within, the other without, his acts changed history. That the confidence of the American people in themselves and in their Nation was restored and strengthened by the vigor and decisiveness of his action of 1933, all of us here know, for many have shared in that action and remember well. That Britain was saved to fight the war through by the courage and decisiveness of his action of 1940 we know also. None of us who knew of that decision and its consequences can forget it now that the war is won.

He believed. There was no American of his time who believed more deeply in America than he, and no believer in democracy who had a firmer faith in man. Freedom to him was not a word but a reality; not a sentiment to which men might aspire, but a reality they might possess. The reaffirmations of the rights of man to which he committed his administration and his country in the domestic and the foreign crises of his years as President were reaffirmations not of word but fact. They stand with the great charters of mankind.

And finally, and most important of all perhaps for us who have out lived him, he dared to hope. There was never a time in the dark years of the depression, of the black years of the war, when he lost hope. And as the end of the war drew near, and the end of his life with it, his hopes grew greater, grew beyond the war, beyond the victory to peace. He dared to hope for peace, to believe in peace, and to act for peace. Young in heart himself, he always thought of his country as young also, as the New World, as the builder of new worlds of peace. Believer of man, and believer therefore in men, he thought of this Republic of ours as part of that greater republic of mankind on which alone a true peace can be rested. He never thought the labor would be easy. He never questioned—he least of all men—that differences and difficulties would arise. But neither did he cease to hope. Nor would he now.

These then were his qualities as President and foremost citizen of the United States. Brave, steadfast, one who dared to see the facts, to face them, and to act; one who believed, who hoped. Whatever verdict history writes down; this much we know who knew him—that he was a man. God give us heart and will to take this Nation as he left it—not only powerful, not only rich but young and hopeful and confident and believing and strong—God give us heart and will to take this Nation forward as he meant to take it to a new, more daring future, a new world of peace.

On February 15, 2005, Rivington R. Winant, the Hon. John Gilbert Winant’s son and member of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute Board of Directors, provided Rendezvous the following recollections of his father’s address:

“When my father was notified of this singular honor, he had already been scheduled to make a number of other speeches, a good number of which were at university and college commencements. He did manage to fulfill that schedule, but was pressed for time to prepare the address in honor of FDR.

My father valued the opinions of others and a number of knowledgeable people came to our apartment in New York to give advice. Two of them I remember best. One was Lloyd Garrison, a distinguished lawyer who was a former student of my father’s and I believe one of the founders of the Liberal Party. The other was Judge Samuel Rosenman, who had been FDR’s senior speech writer. The advisers met on and off for several days.

I drove my father to Concord, New Hampshire from whence he was scheduled to drive to the Dartmouth commencement the next day. On the way Concord, . . . [we had] . . . a rather lengthy conversation with poet Archibald MacLeish . . . After attending the Dartmouth commencement, my father immediately returned to New York and spent a day or two working over the FDR address. Among other things, he delivered the Vassar College commencement address on June 30 in Poughkeepsie. From there, we took the train to Washington; he to speak and we to listen.”