

Edited from 'Art of Fairness'

Before looking at how the American President FDR triumphed, I began by showing what he was up against, focusing on the Third Reich's masterful Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels.

For several years in his 20s Goebbels had tried to be a decent person, influenced by his Jewish girlfriend Else Janke. But as his career as a budding playwright stalled, he turned away from her, becoming more and more enamored of the Nazi Party, where his skill with words soon brought the domination he sought.

In an earlier Chapter Nine I show him achieving success through a range of innovative approaches: attacking opponents with scurrilous nicknames (knowing that through repetition the labels would stick); with a wink and nod encouraging violence at his rallies; insisting that any critique was a sign that the Lügenpresse – the lying press – was at work; wherever possible, boosting boosted anger, resentment, divisiveness.

By early December 1941 his country's successes made it seem impossible to say that bad people lose. Germany's conquests stretched from the English Channel to the outskirts of Moscow; from the Arctic Circle to the Sahara. Britain and Russia were on their knees.

Something awful in human nature was being touched. In 1864 Dostoevsky had written: 'I would not be the least bit surprised if suddenly, out of the blue, amid the universal future reasonableness, some gentleman of jeering physiognomy should emerge and say to us all: "Well, gentlemen, why don't we reduce all this reasonableness to dust with one good kick . . . and [live] once more according to our own will!" He'd be sure to find followers: that's how man is arranged.'

But did that have to be the end of the story...?

Britain was still holding out against invasion, protected behind its narrow sea barriers by the RAF and the Royal Navy. But it would need help to strike back. Russia was struggling too hard to provide direct aid. The answer would have to be America.

Yet America, in recent years, had not been in any shape to defend the world.

The Great Depression that began on Wall Street in 1929 had hit hard. Since there was almost no unemployment insurance, poverty was everywhere. The fabled Empire State Building had been completed in record speed, but now stood nearly tenantless. New York's multitude of unemployed derisively called it the Empty State Building as they walked past the once-bustling site.

We know today that the 32nd President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt – FDR – turned his country around, preserving capitalism as an economic motor, while reconfiguring it for wider benefit.

There's then a chapter looking at what happened in Roosevelt's life to develop those skills. It wouldn't have been expected, for he was the quintessential gilded youth: raised in a family which for generations had lived off inherited money; a 'dynasty of the mediocre' one commentator put it. When he was a young New York state legislator, the social reformer Frances Perkins had tried to get his support for a bill that would keep children from working more than 54 hours a week in factories. He brushed her off. 'Can't do it now. Can't do it now. Much more important things,' is all she remembered him mumbling.

Only after being struck low by polio did Roosevelt transform, yet when he became President in 1933 he seemed to be facing an impossible task. Democracy was being widely questioned; more authoritarian nations mocked America's squabbling factions; there were riots and shootings. At one point, double lines of police stood guard on the Capitol steps, carrying rifles: the sole way that Congress could safely meet. In that setting, Goebbels r laid into Roosevelt for wasting his time with ideas about fairness, and decency, and kindness.

But yet, applied with skill, they're exactly what turned the country around:

1) Not silencing, but listening

Goebbels had destroyed Germany's independent press. He wanted information to pass in one direction only: outward from those in the Nazi innermost circle, whose insight it was forbidden to question. In the White House by contrast, at the start of each day, propped up against his pillows in bed, Roosevelt liked to skim through his country's independent press: the *Herald Tribune* with its grand pedigree, but also the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the Chicago papers and others.

This took a thick skin, for most newspaper proprietors feared what he was doing, and the editorials they pushed in their pages generally matched. He didn't, as Goebbels had however, charge them with being part of a *Lügenpresse* – a lying press. Nor did he surround himself with yes-men who agreed that every critique was wrong. Why would he blind himself that way? It was important to know what opponents were thinking. In any event their actual reporters often disagreed with their proprietors, and the news pages were filled with observations and facts he needed to know. He had aides prepare a daily package of clippings from yet more papers, again with instructions not to spare him from negative remarks.

He knew he needed to be supremely well informed. Jump-starting employment across an entire continent was going to be no easy task. It was, as one adviser

put it, 'As if the Aztecs had been asked suddenly to build an airplane.' Keeping a sharp eye on Germany and Japan's expansion – and not falling for biased, pro-Communist reports coming out of Moscow – also needed multiple, independent information sources. Roosevelt wouldn't possibly jeer at experts, as Goebbels and the rest of Germany's leadership automatically did.

The key was to be confident enough to ask questions. After one briefing he said he was still confused, and couldn't grasp why there was such a difference in how old vs new mortgages were being treated: could somebody fill him in? Another time, after listening to a phone briefing about an economic issue, he mumbled agreement, then hung up, thought about it, and quickly called back: 'I don't understand it yet.'

2) Not undermining, but giving

Next for the generous giving that others from refined Ursula Graham Bower to the crotchety contractor Paul Starrett were so good at. Roosevelt knew he needed a lasting system to protect workers from the worst fluctuations of the market. In the city of Chicago, the visiting writer Edmund Wilson was startled to see hundreds of old people, many who'd clearly spent their lives working hard, reduced to scrabbling through garbage dumps to get enough to live on ('digging in with sticks and hands . . . [even] in hot weather, when the smell was sickening and the flies were thick'). But what would the new system be, and how to get it enacted?

Elites and much of the middle class in America in the 1920s had been locked into the belief that raw capitalism was best. With the Depression, however, the country was adrift, vulnerable; briefly open to change.

Roosevelt had been in that position in his first years after suffering polio in his 30s, and used that enforced idleness to leave the meaningless jollity of his wealthy upbringing behind. What he wanted to do now was shift the entire country in a similarly more generous direction, most of all through the creation of Social Security.

I describe how Frances Perkins, who he had scorned in his younger years, was now his natural choice to carry that goal forward. She was a tough character:

When Perkins had been an investigator with New York State's industrial commission, she'd stood up to rock-throwing strikers, and even went undercover to break up a group that had stockpiled dynamite to use in their fights. 'You sure had your nerve,' a sheriff of New York County told her when she emerged: 'It was risky business.' Not a lot fazed her.

In February 1933 [[shortly before his taking office]] Roosevelt had invited Perkins to his New York townhouse to offer her the position of Secretary of Labor. For a

brief moment, forgetting what she was like, he might have imagined it would be a polite, pro-forma interview. But Perkins wasn't there as a supplicant for Secretary of Labor: rather, she had questions for *him*.

She read Roosevelt her list. On it she had items that would be taken for granted by subsequent generations, but at the time were the wildest of heresies: a minimum wage. Maximum hours. Retirement benefits. Unemployment insurance.

'Nothing like this has ever been done before,' she concluded. 'You know that, don't you?' Then she remembered what her father had taught her: if you have anything to say, say it definitely and stop. So that's what she now did.

When Roosevelt had first met Perkins he'd been a spoilt young legislator, in the New York state capital. He hadn't 'heard' anything she'd said about improving conditions for people in hard times. Now though his experience with polio had changed him.

There was silence in Roosevelt's study till, finally – not looking down his nose at anyone – he nodded agreement. 'I'll back you,' he said. His inauguration was coming up soon, and Perkins would be with them in the White House. They had a lot to do. The first hundred days of his presidency were about to start.

They worked through the bureaucracies in Washington: Roosevelt correcting Perkins when needed, but otherwise giving her encouragement and space. It was the opposite of Goebbels crushing his own staff, sending them off to prison when he was dissatisfied with them, or even when he was just toying with them.

Organizations copy their leader, and Perkins shared Roosevelt's disciplined generosity with her own staff. This wasn't always easy:

Two of Perkins's specialists planning the complex topic of social security were the stately, dark-haired Edwin Witte and the glamorous, red-haired Berkeley economist Barbara Armstrong. They had strong disagreements about how to proceed.

Witte was convinced Armstrong didn't know what she was talking about. He said so. Armstrong felt Witte didn't know what he was talking about. She said so too: repeatedly, vigorously, and – where possible – using leaks to the press to let others know. The fact that she began to call him 'half-Witte' delighted reporters.

Roosevelt knew Perkins had to stop this, and on one occasion, Perkins remembered, chatting with her after a Cabinet meeting he ever-so-casually asked, 'Did you hear from my missus?'

'Yes, it's bright of you to communicate with me like that,' Perkins answered. Cabinet officers aren't supposed to be sarcastic to their president, but in cases like this he deserved it. Roosevelt had asked Eleanor to deliver a difficult message about strategy to Perkins. It was his job to do it himself, and before long Perkins had both Witte and Armstrong working together.

Finally, Social Security was ready. Perkins outdid herself in constructing it so that workers felt they'd personally paid for the benefits, by a tax directly on their wages. Roosevelt appreciated that ingenuity. Payments that go to everyone are deeply embedded. He hoped it would future-proof their bill, undermining appeals to go back to more cold-hearted, winner-take-all times. And since the benefits felt deserved, not a handout, in 1935 Social Security passed.

The bill's success in 1935 was one of the high points of American civilization: ending extremes of poverty, and soon underpinning a stable middle class that endured for nearly half a century.

In all this New Deal legislation, great sums of money were at stake. Little would have worked if the President had let corruption get a start:

Roosevelt put all his own money in a blind trust, and when news came out that his son James had been using a White House position and the family name for personal gain, he insisted James release his income tax returns; he also saw to it that James was not employed in any way at the White House again. According to William O. Douglas, who first delivered the news, Roosevelt bowed his head in sorrow for a long time at his desk in the Oval Office when he heard how his son had fallen.

Then I go on to the next fairness tools Roosevelt used with success:

3) Not attacking, but defending

From the time Roosevelt first took office, in 1933, he knew America was caught in the most dangerous of situations. As one of his supporters remembered: 'Revolution is an ugly word to use, but I think we were dangerously close at least to the threat of it.'

It didn't help that part of America's ruling elite, including many people the wealthy Roosevelt grew up with, had always looked down on the masses: 'is country should be governed by the people who own it,' John Jay, first Chief Justice, famously said. And when Roosevelt's programs did start putting people back to work, Fortune magazine sniffed: 'It creates for [its recipients] the fiction that they are still useful citizens.'

People fought against corporations that lowered wages; against sheriffs and sometimes national guardsmen who tried to enforce the sale of farms to banks that had scooped up distressed mortgages. Ever more armed troops were brought out: in the Midwest, in San Francisco, in steel towns.

Just as in Goebbels's Germany, there were many individuals eager to benefit from this, and bring out the worst that lurked within. Potential Caesars like Douglas MacArthur were on the loose, along with demagogues like Huey Long from Louisiana and the popular fundamentalist Gerald L. K. Smith. 'I'll teach them

how to hate,' Smith said. 'Religion and patriotism: keep going on that. It's how you get them really het up.'

America needed to be protected: reconfigured so those dangers wouldn't get worse and the economic problems that triggered them could be brought to an end. But even in those emergency defences Roosevelt insisted on proportion.

Goebbels had criticized financiers as a conspiracy of blood-sucking vermin. Bankers in America were similarly little-loved (especially when, after creating the conditions for the Wall Street Crash, they begged the government to rescue them). On the one hand, Roosevelt knew that he had to stop their excesses. He pushed to end insider trading, and encouraged Senator Glass and Representative Steagall in introducing legislation that blocked investment banks from scooping up retail banks to pilfer.

But that was as far as it went. Bankers weren't blood-suckers. They were human, and their jobs as worthwhile as everyone else's. 'Capital must be invested in enterprise,' Roosevelt said. Making a fair profit while doing so was good for everyone. It's just that it was to be done '[without] the manipulation of professional gamblers' from now on.

Because Roosevelt's instinctive habit was to be proportional, it was easy for him to open gateways. Bertrand Russell once said that if you declared all Englishmen were fools, you'd be attacked by an irate nation. But if you said that ninety per cent of Englishmen were fools, then everyone in the nation would comment on your perspicacity: how had you managed so well to recognize the idiots they were surrounded with?

By not insulting businessmen as a category in the early years of the New Deal, Roosevelt had avoided making the heads of America's greatest corporations feel they were pariahs. Diehards would never be persuaded, but there were many waverers, including the chief executive of General Motors, who were won over.

Roosevelt had also known it would help to get the backing of at least some Republicans. This too was the opposite of Goebbels's style of approach, where turning on anyone who isn't fawningly on your side is always right. In the very period of Roosevelt's first months, numerous German political leaders and union officials who resisted Hitler's new government were arrested and sent to the newly created Dachau concentration camp.

There were plenty of voices in America that wanted to do the same. Huey Long had been broadcasting on the dangers of leaving opponents on the loose. Roosevelt, however, took the most public possible way to show he was at ease with Republicans who weren't blindly obstructionist: he appointed three of them, from the Republicans' moderate wing, to his Cabinet. (Eisenhower, elected as a Republican president two decades later, similarly appointed a prominent

Democrat to his first Cabinet; John F. Kennedy, his successor and a Democrat, selected two Republicans for his Cabinet as well.)

This wouldn't work in all circumstances. Sometimes people who dislike you are never going to change, and Roosevelt knew when only *force majeure* made sense: against enemies such as Germany; against the most recalcitrant of big-business lobbyists and their paid-for Congressmen.

His reflex was to be implacable when necessary, but otherwise almost always offer redemption. It was an effective way to work. His exasperating wife, for example, had been a bigot when she was younger: once saying she wouldn't read a particular book because the author 'was such a loathsome little Jew'; another time writing about a luncheon guest that he was 'an interesting little man, but very Jew'.

Franklin was not impressed with those views, yet instead of rebuking her directly he let her get to know that luncheon guest a little better. It was his friend Felix Frankfurter, Harvard professor, stalwart of the New Deal (and later outstanding Supreme Court Justice). Spending time with Frankfurter, Eleanor, to her credit, changed her attitude and in later years became a great advocate for those downtrodden in life.

When the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to let the black American contralto Marian Anderson sing at Washington's Constitution Hall, Roosevelt didn't attack them as out-of-date elitists either. Although he defended Anderson – helping arrange for her to sing at the Lincoln Memorial instead; inviting her to the White House during an official visit from King George VI – when he later addressed the DAR he made his points with a humor they could join with. How curious it was, he said, that both he and they were descended from immigrants. But none of them should be ashamed: it had happened 'through no fault of their own'.

What he was saying, in the gentlest possible way, was that if it wasn't their fault their ancestors had been on the Mayflower, it certainly wasn't something they could take much credit for either. He wasn't weak in doing this – he ensured Anderson sang, and at the most glorious of venues. But here again, the door was open for those who'd opposed him to switch.

The final tool he used was inclusion:

4) ...and including

This was Roosevelt corollary to his more general defenses: widening, universalizing, including. Instead of Goebbels's rallies with screamed-out threats

against enemies, almost immediately upon taking office he'd begun a series of quiet fireside chats delivered over the new national radio networks.

His tone was easy, relaxed, inviting: 'My friends,' the first radio speech began, 'I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States...' By itself that could simply be an effective way to deliver propaganda, but the content of what he said was different. There was no resentment against mysterious opposition forces; no cascade of abuse and vilification. Everybody was going to be brought inside.

Religion was as great an issue then as now. Along with bringing political opponents into his Cabinet, and treating bankers as fallible humans, Roosevelt happily told one interviewer that '...in the dim past [my ancestors] may have been Jews or Catholics or Protestants. What I am more interested in is whether they were good citizens and believers in God.' In the most extreme possible rebuke to anti-Semites, both German and domestic, he selected numerous Jewish advisers; in a rebuke to racists at home he appointed America's first black district judge, and had black advisers regularly visit the White House.

Every nation – just like every individual – has different potentials waiting inside it. In America of the 1930s, great racism still existed. When the black Olympic star Jesse Owens came to New York one week, for example, he was forced to use a side entrance at the luxury hotel where he was staying. But great openness also existed: Owens was in the city because of a ticker-tape parade in his honor, where he had been cheered on by hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, black and white alike. Goebbels aimed his ministry to bring out the worst in his people, but Roosevelt was aiming to bring out the best.

It didn't always work. Roosevelt had wanted New Deal money to go equally to everyone who needed it, in addition to being used to raise standards. But once Southern Democrats in Congress saw that Hopkins was serious about enforcing the minimum wage rules they rebelled. Their price for keeping the New Deal going, they said, was to end the nonsense that black Americans in their states should be included in the same regulations as everyone else. Roosevelt, to his shame, gave in.

Luckily such actions were rare. Roosevelt could be cantankerous, and had very flexible notions of keeping his word. But aside from socialites who considered him a class traitor, and the portions of the business community that never accepted profits couldn't come first, almost everyone felt with reason that here, finally, was a president on their side. Despite his partial surrender to Southern Democrats, black Americans began shifting their traditional support from Lincoln's Republican Party to Roosevelt. One millworker explained the feelings shared by many: 'Mr. Roosevelt is the only man we've ever had in the White House who would understand that my boss is a sonofabitch.'

All of us are shaped by our companions, yet we usually have a choice in who those companions are going to be. Goebbels ultimately preferred the thuggish

volunteers in his local Nazi party over the friends of the Jewish schoolteacher who'd been his sweetheart for key years in his 20s. Roosevelt ended up with Harry Hopkins – a gentleman to the tip of his fingers – living in the White House as his closest adviser; as well as Marguerite LeHand another intimate friend, whose role was halfway between administrative assistant and White House Chief of Staff (and had been on the cover of *Time* magazine for her success).

LeHand and Roosevelt swam most mornings, and after 7 p.m. drinks with others they would often end up together. The importance wasn't just whatever physical intimacy they shared. It was their values. Although LeHand was a devout Catholic and Roosevelt at most an occasional Episcopalian, both had wanted the Bible at his first inauguration to be opened to 1 Corinthians 13: 'And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.'

They believed that those words of Paul to the Corinthians, along with the world's other great moral traditions, were constraints no mortal should dare to break.



Roosevelt as a young man, 1913. "He was a patronizing son of a bitch," one politician who knew him well said.



Roosevelt exercising in pool, 1932, the year he was elected President.