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IDEAS

## To emulate FDR, Biden needs to combine decency with a steely edge

The secret to a transformative presidency: being fair but firm.

By David Bodanis January 21, 2021

In his victory speech in November, President Biden said he was going “to marshal the forces of decency, the forces of fairness” — and invoked the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR’s legacy is often misunderstood, however. Although he did indeed channel decency and fairness, Roosevelt also had a steely edge that Biden appears likely to emulate.

When FDR was first elected in 1932, the country was divided almost as deeply as it is now. On the Capitol steps that year, double lines of police stood guard at times, carrying rifles: the sole way that Congress could safely meet. Potential Caesars, like General Douglas MacArthur, were on the loose, along with demagogues like 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.”

Roosevelt took office with a much stronger congressional majority than Biden has. Many supporters — like the AOC wing of the Democrats today — encouraged him to lay into bankers, whose greed had seemingly triggered the Great Depression. Certainly he did work to stop their excesses: pushing to end insider trading and encouraging legislation that would block investment banks from scooping up retail banks for often dubious intent.

But that was as far as it went. Despite his majority, FDR knew about hubris, and he also knew what was fair. To Roosevelt, bankers weren’t bloodsuckers. They were human, and their jobs were as worthwhile as anyone else’s. “Capital must be invested in enterprise,” he said. Making a fair profit from investments was good for everyone. It’s just that it was to be done without “the manipulation of professional gamblers” from then on.

The consequences go well beyond abstract morality. By not insulting businessmen as a category in the early years of the New Deal, Roosevelt avoided making the heads of America's greatest corporations feel like pariahs. Although diehards would never be persuaded, many waverers were won over, including the chief executive of General Motors.

FDR showed in the most public possible way that he was at ease with Republicans who weren't blindly obstructionist: He appointed three of them to his Cabinet.

Not only did that bring their expertise onto his side and skillfully divide the opposition, it also showed committed socialists in his own party that they didn't have as much control over him as they might have thought.

If Biden is to match that — with moderate Republicans or apolitical Bill Gates sorts within his administration — he'll buttress his own position against the Democrats' left wing. He'll also have a better chance of holding on to the benefit of the doubt that middle-of-the-road voters have shown him.

Another of Roosevelt's strengths was listening. At the start of each day in the White House, Roosevelt liked to prop himself up with his pillows in bed and skim the country's main newspapers.

That took a thick skin, for most had proprietors who feared what he was doing. He didn't, however, charge them with being part of a *Lügenpresse* — a lying press — as the German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels did in Germany. Nor did he surround himself with yes men who agreed that every criticism was wrong.

Why should he blind himself like that? Without hearing others, you stumble through the world. As a wealthy young man, Roosevelt had been known for his arrogance. But the years he spent using a wheelchair after contracting polio at the age of 39 changed him, making him much more understanding. He didn't fall into trying to persuade them differently, as Obama had a tendency to do; nor did he reflexively demean them, as was Trump's wont.

As Senator Huey Long remembered: "You go in there and see FDR wanting to tear him apart. You come out whistling Dixie."

All the compassion in the world, however, will fail if you lack street smarts. From his extensive previous experience in Washington, Roosevelt was all too well aware how many crooks there were, eager to take advantage of any naivety. He relished stories like the one about the Texas poker shark who

leaned across the table and said to his mark: “Play the cards fair, Reuben. I know what I dealt you.”

Accordingly, Roosevelt made sure teams of auditors were employed to follow the billions of dollars that his social welfare programs were spreading around the country. Then he encouraged his cabinet to send out independent auditors to check the original ones.

This insistence on fairness went further. To give to someone who doesn't deserve it is the essence of unfairness. Understanding that, he and his labor secretary Frances Perkins constructed their breakthrough Social Security legislation so that workers could feel everyone covered was personally paying for their benefits, by a tax directly on their wages. Had he given in to the overconfidence having a majority affords, he might have ignored that. But in that case, his majority would likely not have lasted for long.

Largely because humans hate cheats and appreciate honesty, Social Security became the core of Roosevelt's support and was central to his three re-elections. Although the mechanisms of government have changed since Roosevelt's time and Biden will be able to do a lot through executive action alone, the wisdom of such properly employed fairness remains. However much other voices in the Democratic Party protest otherwise, if Biden offers up what appear to be naive giveaways, he'll lose a lot of moderate support.

Roosevelt never heard the baseball manager Leo Durocher's famous quote “Nice guys finish last,” for that came in 1946, the year after FDR's death. In one sense, though, he would have agreed. In the era of his presidency, when autocrats were gaining ground abroad and wildly unequal incomes and local demagogues were leading to near civil war at home, being “merely” nice clearly would lead to your being crushed. Roosevelt showed that calling for unity is meaningless unless it's followed by consequences for obstructionists.

But — the insight that made the masterful Roosevelt revered — you don't have to go to the other extreme, being cruel or a bully, to succeed. The middle ground, where you insist on being fair but firm, is far from being weak. Let the new president handle himself with Roosevelt's aplomb, and all the benefits — of clear information, of gratitude, of alliances — that Roosevelt reaped for the sake of the United States a near century ago can be his to use today.

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