



William Jefferson Clinton

FDR Memorial Dedication Address



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Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Senator Inouye, Senator Hatfield; Your Highness, my longtime friend, David Roosevelt, and the members of the Roosevelt family, Mr. Vice President, to all those who have worked to make this day a reality: Let me begin by saying to Senator Inouye and Senator Hatfield, the United States proudly accepts the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. Fittingly, this is the first occasion of its kind in more than 50 years. The last time the American people gathered near here was in 1943 when President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the memorial to Thomas Jefferson.

Today, we honor the greatest President of this great American century. As has been said, FDR actually wanted no memorial. For years, none seemed necessary -- for two reasons:

First, the America he built was a memorial all around us. From the Golden Gate Bridge to the Grand Coulee Dam; from Social Security to honest financial markets; from an America that has remained the world's indispensable nation to our shared conviction that all Americans must make our journey together, Roosevelt was all around us.

Second, though many of us never lived under his leadership, many who did are still around, and we have all heard about him from our parents or grandparents -- some of us, as we pass WPA [Works Progress Administration] or CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] projects along country roads; some of us as we looked at the old radios that our parents and grandparents



kept and heard stories about the Fireside Chats and how the people felt. Today he is still very real to millions upon millions of Americans, inspiring us, urging us on. But the world turns and memories fade. And now, more than a half-century after he left us, it is right that we go a little beyond his stated wishes and dedicate this memorial as a tribute to Franklin Roosevelt, to Eleanor, and to the remarkable triumphs of their generation.

President Roosevelt said, "We have faith that future generations will know that here, in the middle of the 20th century, there came a time when men of goodwill found a way to unite and produce and fight to destroy the forces of ignorance and intolerance and slavery and war." This memorial will be the embodiment of FDR's faith, for it will ensure that all future generations will know. It will ensure that they will all see the "happy warrior" keeping America's rendezvous with destiny.

As we stand at the dawn of a bright new century, this memorial will encourage us, reminding us that whenever America acts with certainty of purpose and FDR's famous flexibility of mind, we have always been more than equal to whatever challenges we face.

Winston Churchill said that President Roosevelt's life was "one of the commanding events in human history." He came from privilege, but he understood the aspirations of farmers and factory workers and forgotten Americans. He electrified the farms and hollows, but even more important, he electrified the nation, instilling confidence with every tilt of his head and boom of his laugh. His was an open, American spirit with a fine sense for the possible and a keen appreciation of the art of leadership. He was a master politician and a magnificent Commander-in-Chief.

And his partner was also magnificent. Eleanor Roosevelt was his eyes and his ears, going places he could not go to see things he would never see to come back and tell him how things actually were. And her reports were formed as words in his speeches that touched little people all across America who could not imagine that the President of the United States knew how they lived and cared about them. She was his conscience and our nation's conscience.

Franklin Roosevelt's mission was to change America to preserve its ancient virtues in the face of new and unprecedented challenges. That is, after all, America's mission in all times of change and difficulty. The depth and sweep of it was unprecedented when FDR asked a shaken nation to put its confidence in him. But he had no doubt of the outcome. Listen to what he said in September of 1932, shortly before he was elected for the first time. He proclaimed his faith: "Faith in America, faith in our tradition of personal responsibility, faith in our institutions, faith in ourselves" demanded "we recognize the new terms of an old social contract." "New conditions imposed new requirements upon government and upon those who conduct government."¹ That was his faith. He lived it, and we are here as a result.

With that faith, he forged a strong and unapologetic government, determined to tame the savage cycles of boom and bust, able to meet the national challenges too big for families and individuals to meet on their own.



And when he restored dignity to old age, when he helped millions to keep their farms or own their homes, when he provided the simple opportunity to go to work in the morning to millions, he was proving that the American Dream was not a distant glimmer, but something every American could grasp. And then that faith of his infused all of his countrymen.

With that faith he inspired millions of ordinary Americans to take responsibility for one another -- doing their part, in his words, through the National Recovery Administration, reclaiming nature through the Civilian Conservation Corps, gathering scrap, giving up nylons, and eventually storming the beaches at Normandy and Okinawa and Anzio.

With that faith, he committed our nation to lead the world, first as the arsenal of democracy, and then at the head of the great crusade to free the world from tyranny. Before the war began, the four freedoms set the foundation for the future and made it clear to the whole world that America's goal was not domination, but a dominion of freedom in a world at peace.

With that faith, as the war neared an end he would never see, he traced the very architecture of our future, from the G.I. Bill to the United Nations. Faith in the extraordinary potential of ordinary people sparked not only our victory over war, depression and doubt, but it began the opening of doors and the raising of sights for the dispossessed in America that has continued down to the present day. It was that faith in his own extraordinary potential that enabled him to guide his country from a wheelchair. And from that wheelchair and a few halting steps, leaning on his son's arms or those of trusted aides, he lifted a great people back to their feet and set America to march again toward its destiny.

He said over and over again in different ways that we had only to fear fear itself. We did not have to be afraid of pain or adversity or failure, for all those could be overcome. He knew that, of course, because that is exactly what he did. And with his faith and the power of his example, we did conquer them all -- depression, war, and doubt.

Now, we see that faith again alive in America. We are grateful beyond measure for our own unprecedented prosperity. But we must remember the source of that faith. And again, let me say to Senator Inouye and others, by showing President Roosevelt as he was we show the world that we have faith that in America you are measured for what you are and what you have achieved, not for what you have lost. And we encourage all who face their difficulties and overcome them not to give into fear, but to believe in their possibilities.

And now again we need the faith of Franklin Roosevelt, in an entirely different time, but still no ordinary time, for in this time new livelihoods demand new skills. We have to fight against the enormous, destructive influences that still grip the lives of too many of our young people. We must struggle to make our rich racial, ethnic, and religious diversity a source of strength and unity when such differences are the undoing of millions and millions around the world. And we must fight against that nagging old doubt.



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It is a strange irony of our time that here, at the moment of our greatest prosperity and progress in so many years -- in 1932, one in four Americans was out of work; this morning we learned that fewer than one in 20 Americans are out of work, for the first time in more than two decades.

And at this time, where the pinnacle that Roosevelt hoped America would achieve in our influence and power has come to pass, we still, strangely, fight battles with doubts -- doubts that he would treat with great impatience and disdain; doubts that lead some urge us to pull back from the world at the very first time since Roosevelt's time when we actually can realize his vision of world peace and world prosperity and the dominance of the ideals for which he gave his life.

Let us honor his vision not only with this memorial today, but by acting in the way he would tell us to act if he were standing here, giving this speech, on his braces, looking at us and smiling at us and telling us we know what we have to do. We are Americans. We must have faith. We must not be afraid. And we must lead.

The great legacy of Roosevelt is a vision and a challenge -- not a set of specific programs, but a set of commitments -- the duty we owe to ourselves, to one another, to our beloved nation, and increasingly, to our fellow travelers on this small planet.

Now we are surrounded by the monuments to the leaders who built our democracy -- Washington, who launched our great experiment and created our republic; Jefferson, who enshrined forever our creed that it is self-evident that we are all created equal, with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; Lincoln, who gave his life to preserve Mr. Washington's republic and to make real Mr. Jefferson's words. And now, Franklin Roosevelt, who saved freedom from tyranny, who restored our republic, who defined Mr. Jefferson's creed to include freedom from want and fear. Today, before the pantheon of our democracy, let us resolve to honor them all by shepherding their legacy into a new century, into a new millennium.

Our mission is to prepare America for the time to come, to write a new chapter of our history, inspired always by the greatest source of hope in our history. Thomas Jefferson wrote the words, but Franklin Roosevelt lived them out every day. Today, I ask you to remember what he was writing at Warm Springs when he died, that last speech: "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith."

My fellow Americans, every time you think of Franklin Roosevelt put aside your doubts, become more American; become more like him; be infused with his strong and active faith.

God bless you. God bless America. And may God always bless the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Commonwealth Club Address