

Newsweek

April 23, 1945 : p. 80

World Newspapers Give Roosevelt Top Coverage in Death as in Life



Scene outside a Roosevelt press conference: Hats and coats of the Washington press.

In death last week, as in life, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the biggest, most dramatic Presidential story of history.

There was no death watch on April 12. The White House press room was virtually deserted. Most Capitol Hill correspondents had gone home. Of the three press-association men who usually accompany the President out of town, the dean, Douglas Cornell of the Associated Press, had passed up the trip. In his stead D. Harold Oliver, Cornell's stand-in on the White House beat, had gone to Warm Springs along with Merriman Smith of the United Press and Robert Nixon of the International News Service.

At 5:45 p.m. telephones rang simultaneously in the Washington bureaus of the AP, UP, and INS on a conference call (all on the wire at the same time) from the White House. The familiar voice of Steve Early, who retired only recently after twelve years as White House press secretary, called the roll to make sure all were listening. Then: "Here is a flash. The President died suddenly early this afternoon."

Amid the hubbub that followed, an incredulous voice asked: "You mean President Roosevelt?" "Of course, there's only one President," Early* replied in a breaking voice.

Swiftly the news went around the world. INS claimed the briefest and first flash, "F.D.R. Dead," at 5:47 p.m. UP's cleared a minute later; AP's at 5:50. Eight to ten minutes later, the press-association men at Warm Springs were phoning in their flashes, following up with telegraphed on-the-scene accounts. Shortly after 7 p.m. the services flashed the swearing-in of Vice President Harry S. Truman as successor to Mr. Roosevelt.

No President had meant quite so much to the press as Mr. Roosevelt. Few in history had been more consistently and bitterly opposed by a majority of publishers. Perhaps none had more admirers and fewer detractors among working newsmen. No President since his cousin Theodore, who coined "muckraker," had on occasion denounced press and newsmen

*In 1923, Early scored a seven-minute beat for the AP on the death of President Harding.

The Fourth Estate

alike more harshly. Yet most newsmen forgave him his peevish moments. Certainly none had been more news-rich and none had ever received the voluminous coverage that President Roosevelt had. Over the years, the Roosevelt twice-a-week press conference was the Capital's biggest newsmaker.

Last week was no exception, at home or abroad. Not since D Day in Normandy (for which advance preparations had been made) had the press so taxed its slim newsprint stocks and depleted editorial staffs. The highlights:

The Nation: In New York, staffs of most afternoon papers had gone home. Almost singlehanded, Executive Editor Lee Wood of The World-Telegram put out an extra that reached the streets at 6:34 p.m., two minutes ahead of the Journal-American's extra. The Sun, holding till 7, had the most complete extra.

Press runs of morning papers ranged from 100,000 above normal for The Herald Tribune to 500,000 for the tabloid News. The staunch Republican Herald Tribune dropped all display advertising and printed a 28-page edition of which twelve pages were devoted to a complete coverage of the President's life.

The bitterly anti-Roosevelt-News pointedly ran as an editorial quotations from Roosevelt speeches, mainly pre-Pearl Harbor. Sample: "At Boston . . . Oct. 30, 1940: 'I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.'" Next day, The News promised President Truman at least three months' ungrudging support.

The World-Telegram and Post both listed Mr. Roosevelt at the head of their Friday war-casualty lists. The Post's listing: "Roosevelt, Franklin D., Commander-in-Chief, wife, Mrs. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, the White House."

- In Chicago, The Tribune carried a brief front-page editorial in early editions, much kinder in tone than that of its equally Roosevelt-hating cousin, The News in New York. The Tribune said: "The whole nation is plunged into mourning, those who opposed him . . . no less than those who followed him."

- In Kansas City, Mo., The Star was perhaps the luckiest paper in the country. It was holding its final edition for a late war story when the flash came. A quick-witted makeup man slapped an "Extra" ear on the page and let the edition roll.

- The San Francisco Chronicle on Friday cut out its woman's page and one sports page for space and its comics for taste.

The Capital: Aside from three men designated from the AP, UP, and INS, no other Washington correspondent except a foreigner saw Mr. Truman take the oath in the crowded Cabinet room of the White House. He was Lee Fitzgerald, sandy-haired correspondent for

The Fourth Estate

the Associated Newspapers of Australia. Well at the front of a milling throng of newsmen whom Secret Service agents were shooing away, Fitzgerald instead was shoved sideways along the wall until, suddenly, he found himself inside the Cabinet room. He stayed, unrecognized, through the ceremony, shook hands with Mr. Truman after it, and wished him success on behalf of Australia.

Abroad: To the Australian press, the quiet little cow town of Colac is synonymous with bad news. There in 1914 Prime Minister Andrew Fischer learned of the outbreak of the last war; there in 1939 Prime Minister Robert G. Menzies learned of Germany's march into Poland and, in 1941, of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. On the day of the President's death last week, Menzies, no longer Prime Minister, was due in Colac on a tour for the Liberal party. The Morning Melbourne Argus, recalling his past eventful visits in a page one box, asked superstitiously: "What News Will Mr. Menzies Hear at Colac Today?" Menzies shared the premonition. A policeman signaled his car to a stop as he rode into Colac. There he learned of Mr. Roosevelt's death.

● In London, Moscow, Paris, and Rome, war-slimmed papers devoted columns to Mr. Roosevelt:

"It's impossible to believe that Mr. Churchill could have got a bigger play," cabled NEWSWEEK's correspondent, Mary Palmer, from London. The Times ran a six-column biography of Mr. Roosevelt, a large portrait of him, a one-column sketch of Mr. Truman, and a long "leader" (editorial). Typical of other British comment, it said: "He is mourned here as perhaps no one of another country ever has been . . . Aloof for the most part from domestic controversies . . . [we] beheld him towering to his full height. If Lincoln be the patron saint of democracy, President Roosevelt will be remembered in his own day as its chief apostle."

● Of the Paris press, only the Communist Humanité did not lead with the President's death Friday morning. The Paris edition of The New York Herald Tribune jumped from two to four pages without permission; the next day the government doubled the paper allotment for everybody.

● In Moscow, Mr. Roosevelt's death shattered the newspaper tradition that all foreign news of whatever nature goes on back pages. The story was played on front pages, together with a black-bordered picture of the President. In death, as in life, Mr. Roosevelt still was setting precedents.