

# Liberty

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## ROOSEVELT AS I SEE HIM

Completing a memorable series: In conclusion and rebuttal, a plain-spoken critic voices his views

BY GEORGE CREEL

Chairman of the U. S. Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919



Above: The President enjoying himself, in the high spirits that are characteristic of him. According to Mr. Creel, it is in "irrepressible youthfulness" that the answer to the "Roosevelt riddle" is to be found.

Liberty's publication of Mr. Creel's opinions is not an endorsement of them. We reserve the right to reach our own conclusions. Some of them are presented on page 6 this week. But, as always, we believe in "giving both sides." And we think it a heartening thing for democracy that Mr. Churchill can still face his critics in London and that an article like this can still be published in the U. S. A.—THE EDITORS.

**F**OR the most part, only two kinds of articles have ever been written about Franklin D. Roosevelt. Those who know him well are charmed to the point where they cannot deal critically with him, and those who do not know him well carry dislike to a point where they cannot write any way except critically. As always, the truth lies in between. Looking back over an acquaintance that covers twenty-five years, it seems to me that the man's essential greatness is no less obvious than are his weaknesses.

As an inspirational leader, a dynamic and propulsive force, a clarion call to courage and high resolve, the President is in a class by himself. Not even Winston Churchill may be ranked with him. As an administrator, however—a workaday executive—he is almost incredibly inefficient.

No man ever dreamed more nobly or had less skill in making his dreams come true. Like Michelangelo, he can see the statue in the unhewn block, but all too often his impatience makes him turn aside before he has so much as chipped the marble. The very gifts that give the President his vision and daring, his fresh and eager mind,



Donald Nelson, who, Mr. Creel says, can't move without stepping on a "sacred cow."

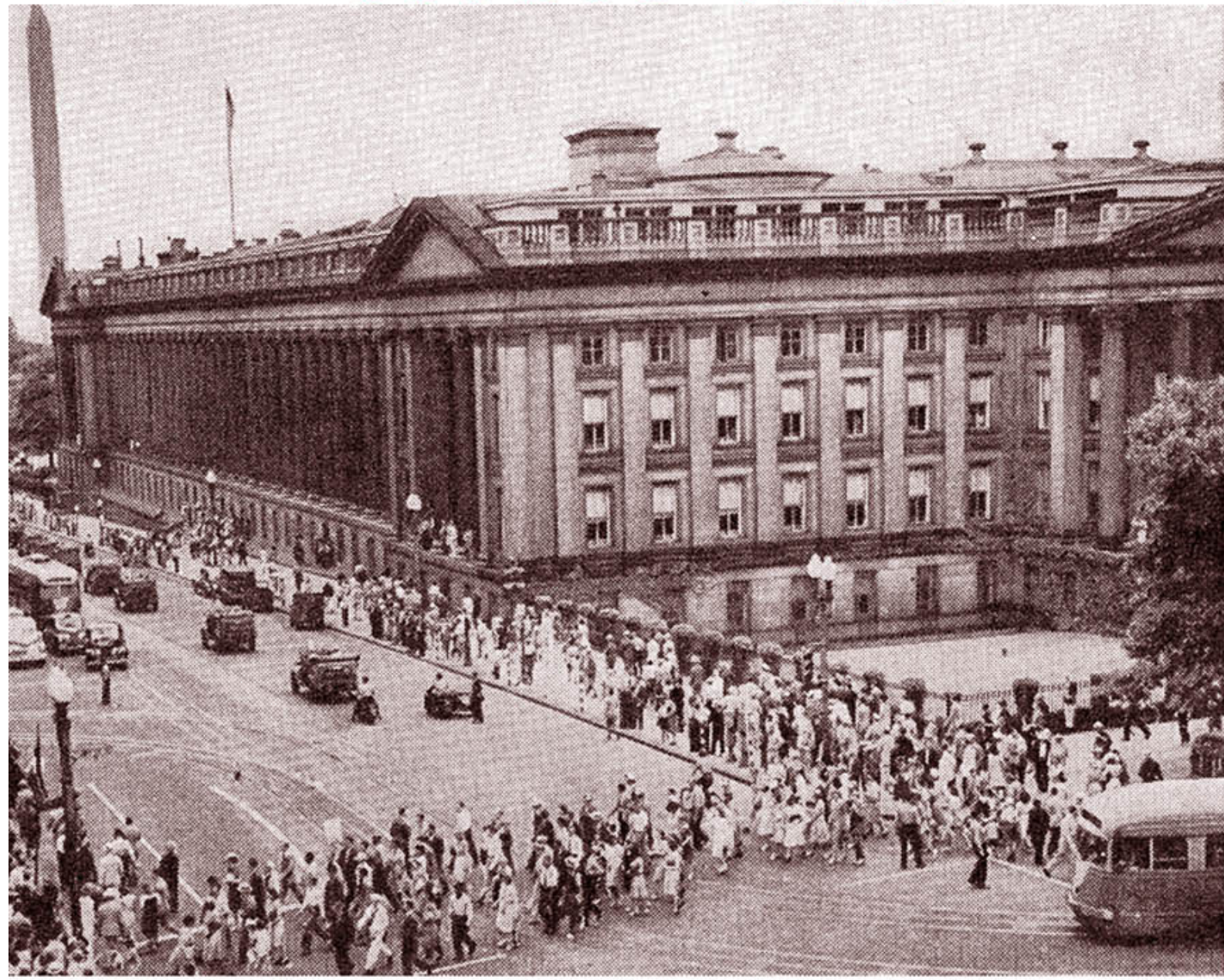
his flame of the spirit, unfit him for the sober and drudging tasks of execution. It is his tragedy—and the tragedy of America, for that matter—that he is either unwilling or unable to sit in cold judgment on his own temperament, recognizing his limitations.

**T**HE late Louis McHenry Howe, asked about his relations with Mr. Roosevelt, is said to have made this remark: "Franklin has to have a new interest every day, and I supply it." Had the President's familiar gone on to the extent of volumes, he could not have been more revealing; for it is in a persistent, irrepressible youthfulness—in the amazing manner in which F. D. R. has carried over the enthusiasms of his teens into adult life—that one finds the answer to the Roosevelt riddle.

Youngness is at once his strength and his weakness. For example, it furnishes the bravery to blaze new trails, the gay disregard of outworn traditions, the never-failing optimism that refuses to admit either depression or defeat, and the idealism that has no immoderate reverence for obstacles. On the other hand, it precludes contemplation, reflection, and detachment, puts emphasis on daring and dash rather than on steadfastness, leads to a love of short cuts, and all too often confuses activity with action.

Looking back over the record of the last nine years, it will be seen that the President's concern has usually been with the *end* and seldom with the *means*. Always it is the idea itself that stirs his interest, and rarely the method of making it work. Ask any of his intimates, and they will confess that it irks him to burden his soaring enthusiasm with the details of execution, a temperamental flaw that explains his failure to make larger use of men like Baruch. Not only does he do his leaping before looking, but it is not often that he stops for a look after the leap. Why bother with the wreck of a plan when a brand-new one is at hand?

All of which might be stripped of hurtful consequences did he go in for the delegation of power, turning the idea or the plan over to plain, practical men skilled in the somewhat exact



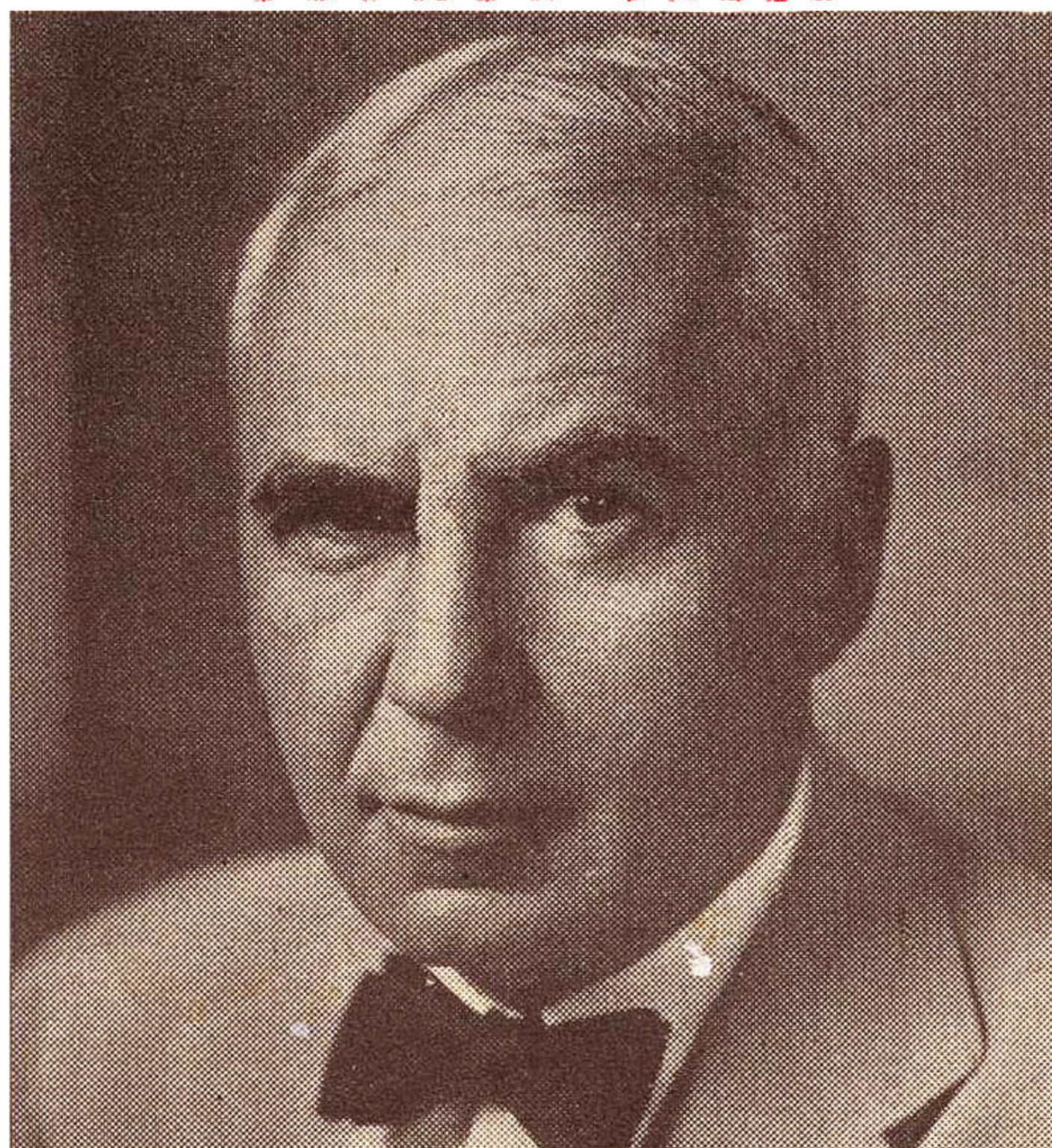
A glimpse of wartime Washington streets thronged with workers for what Mr. Creel calls that "litter of boards and commissions" in which the duplications and conflicting authorities "combine to hamper the war effort."

science of thinking things through and getting them done. Because it seems impossible for him to make any such delegations, his enemies argue selfishness, jealousy, and a vainglorious egotism. Here again, in my humble opinion, it is the essential *youngness* of the President that is to blame.

When Woodrow Wilson appointed a man, not only did the appointment carry authority but duties were explained down to the last minute detail. After that the appointee was on his own. If the job went badly you heard from him, but as long as things went well he did not want to hear from you. Nothing irritated him more or forfeited his confidence more quickly than to have an official popping back to the White House with his "problems."

Franklin Roosevelt is absolutely incapable of pursuing any such course of conduct—not out of pettiness or egotism, but purely out of a youthful eagerness to know everything that is going on and to have a finger in every pie, whether that "pie" is the Far Eastern conflict, a second front in Europe, or a plan for putting cafeterias and dormitories in public parks. Instead of being vexed by appointees returning for advice and consultation, he loves it. Huddles are the delight of his soul, and he is at pains to compel them. Examine his executive orders, and in almost every instance it will be found that nothing can be done without the approval of the President. Usually the sole function of a supposedly executive board or commission is to *advise* him. As a consequence, his desk is a bottleneck and high officials twiddle thumbs for days before they get a green light.

**B**Y way of illustration, take the higgledy-piggledy manner in which America's war machine was put together—the headless, footless bodies that followed one another in an endless stream between May 28, 1940, when we set out to be "the great arsenal of democracy," and December 7, 1941, the date of Pearl Harbor. There was no excuse for blundering, for Woodrow Wilson had left behind a great volume of experience tested by trial and error. What more natural for one sailing the same course than to have hailed it as a master chart handed down by a master mariner? Yet no more attention was paid to it than would have been to a chart prepared by the Phoenicians or Leif the Unlucky. Why? Because any following of the Wilson chart entailed the dele-



Elmer Davis too according to Mr. Creel finds himself press "boss" in name only.

gation of authority, thus robbing the President of the excitements that come from having a large forefinger, and sometimes the whole hand, in every pie. The Office of Emergency Management, a catch-all containing more than a score of important agencies, was actually set up as part of the Executive Office under the President's personal direction.

No human being could possibly do well the thousand and one things that he has piled upon himself, and as a result there is none of that careful definition of function that marked the Wilson way. Excited by a suggestion, he makes appointments and creates new agencies without ever stopping to learn if the job has already been done or is being done. More often than not, a zealous soul rushes out of the White House, on fire with enthusiasm, to find that a half dozen others are in the field that he thought had been assigned to him. This, in some measure, explains Washington's litter of boards and commissions, the incessant fights over jurisdiction, and the duplication, conflict, and name-calling that combine to hamper the war effort.

One executive order, signed in the usual rush, actually took certain control over foreign policy from the State Department and transferred them to the Board of Economic Welfare. Of course, the order was called back and made over, but the blunder aroused ugly feelings that still persist.

**T**HE President's capacity for sudden and unquestioning friendships also contributes to confusion. This is another manifestation of his *youngness*. Rarely indeed does he pick the best man for the job rather than the man that he likes best. Places are made for friends regardless of need or fitness. Having made a choice, he sticks in spite of hell and high water.

Let us, for a moment, consider the case of Donald Nelson. At the time of his appointment it was confidently assumed that the President had come to realize the necessity for one single and authoritative board in full control of everything pertaining to industrial mobilization, and that board with a full-powered boss. It soon developed, however, that while names had been changed and certain officials shuffled around, the old organizations were still on the the job, cluttering up the landscape to a point where poor Nelson could not put down a foot without stepping on some sacred cow. Instead of his hav-

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ing absolute authority, he found that the award of contracts was still the right of the Army, the Navy, and the Maritime Commission. Also other agencies, such as the Office of Price Administration, McNutt's Manpower Commission, and the Office of Defense Transportation, ringed him about, limiting his powers and jurisdiction.

A case even more in point is that of Elmer Davis. In the beginning, it may be remembered, Lowell Mellett, as head of the Office of Government Reports, was assumed to have charge of war information. Before he was warm in his chair, however, the Army and the Navy each set up its own Public Relations Bureau, as did the State Department and the Office of Emergency Management. Then Nelson Rockefeller, out of a clear sky, was thrown into the propaganda field with all of Latin America as his territory.

Inevitably enough, this division of authority made for confusion and inefficiency, and suddenly Colonel William J. Donovan was catapulted into prominence as the Co-ordinator of Information. Soon realizing it was a hopeless job, the wily colonel announced that he would confine his activities to foreign propaganda; but as Mr. Rockefeller refused to hand over Latin America, the large and expanding Donovan organization found itself broadcasting mostly to Europe.

Next came the Office of Facts and Figures, headed by Archibald McLeish, Librarian of Congress and one of the President's closest friends. Unlike Colonel Donovan, Mr. McLeish did make a manful attempt at coordination; but, due to the lack of any real authority, he turned cheerfully to the making of speeches that were distinguished for their literary quality rather than their tact.

Now came the turn of Elmer Davis as head of the brand-new Office of War Information. No better selection could have been made, and a loud cheer went up from the country as a whole. But when Mr. Davis, supposedly the generalissimo, reached Washington and took office, what did he find? First, that the press bureaus of the Army, the Navy, and the State Department were to retain their independent status, although these three constituted the principal source of all war information. Second, that Mr. Rockefeller was still the propaganda boss as far as the whole of Latin America was concerned.

As it stands today the "information racket" is a scandal. The cost has already mounted to something like \$27,000,000 a year, and this does not include \$20,000,000 spent on press bureaus by the various departments of government. Nor, due to the franking privilege, does it take in post-office expense or the hospitalization of mail carriers swaybacked and spavined under the daily load of pamphlets, clip sheets, and bales of mimeographed material. What Elmer Davis will do about it remains to be seen.

The chances are, however, that he will find himself in much the same position as unhappy, harassed Donald Nelson. Due to the President's habit of headlong appointments, and the hustle and bustle that precludes careful and accurate definition of powers and duties, it is well-nigh impossible to uproot a New Deal agency after it has "dug in." Almost overnight

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an organization grows from one office to a whole floor or even an apartment house, and from five or six employees up into the hundreds, thus presenting an impressive front by its very size.

**T**HE Office of Civilian Defense furnishes an apt illustration of the practice. The Executive order creating OCD was so vaguely drawn that it gave room for almost everything, and full advantage was taken of the opening. Instead of concentrating on advice and assistance to the states and municipalities with respect to programs for the protection of life and property in emergencies, the office proceeded to go so far afield that its outposts could not be reached by radio.

First nine inspector generals, and then a Volunteer Participation Committee "for the utilization of human energy." Then a Know Your Government Division, with two hundred clerks and stenographers "to handle the inquiries generated by the radio programs." After that, a Press Division that even included men employed to go about the country digging up "human-interest" stories, to send them back to Washington to be handled by a Head Information Specialist and some Junior Analysts.

On top of all this, a Survey Section to "collect all available information relating to the social and economic life of the community, and collate such material so as to present an overall picture of problems associated with war activities which are arising; to note the steps being taken to meet them, and to appraise the social and economic gaps that such a picture presents in terms of norms established by the staff of the Civilian Participation Division in consultation with other interested government and private agencies."

After this came the creation of a Physical Fitness Section, justified on the ground that people could not possibly hope to escape bombs unless they had the spring of a roebuck. One activity of the section was the employment of a Director of Industrial Recreation to go about the country teaching workers to play, making talks in praise of deep breathing, and particularly urging picnics on Sunday so as to avoid the usual heavy noonday meal that makes for torpor, etc., etc.

Nutritional studies also came in for heavy emphasis; likewise a Racial Relations Division for study of the problems of the Negro, and a Group Activities Division that sponsored such activities as Grow Vegetables in Your Flower Garden. Finally, and as a cap-sheaf to the crazy pyramid, teaching of eurhythmic dancing to children in air-raid shelters, and the appointment of co-ordinators for sixty-one sports that included archery, badminton, and horseshoe pitching.

That is what Mr. Nelson and Mr. Davis and a score of other "new brooms" are up against. There is so much to sweep out that they do not know where to begin, and, for another thing, care must be taken not to touch the President's personal appointments or personal interests. Oftentimes activities specifically forbidden by Congress are financed out of the President's purse. This was what happened when Congress refused to make an appropriation for Lowell Mellett's "information center," or, as the Senate called it, "Mellett's Madhouse."

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An invincible optimism is another result of the President's *youngness*. He believes what he wants to believe and sees only what he wants to see. If the country is only "ankle-deep" in war, it is because the White House has minimized bad news and overemphasized the good. Out of a defeat he can pick the heroic exploit of a sailor or a soldier or an airman and turn it into victory. Who does not remember how we were going to lick hell out of the Japanese in a month or even a week? And how the capture of two important Aleutian islands was dismissed as being of "no importance" and a Jap "face-saving device"?

Another aspect of the President's youthfulness is a love of the dramatic and spectacular. Since these effects depend largely on the element of surprise, he inclines to secretiveness. As a consequence, pronouncements of policy or decisions of moment fall on ears that have not been prepared, and, in order not to spoil the bombshell value, are rarely accompanied by any painstaking presentation of facts on which the policy or decision is based.

Aside from *youngness*, from the way he has carried over the ardors, enthusiasms, and impatiences of adolescence into age, there is another thing—and a very delicate thing—to be discussed before Franklin D. Roosevelt can be made completely understandable. It is his own supreme belief in himself and his destiny. And why wouldn't he have it? Here is one who was struck down in the very prime of his life, seemingly doomed to invalidism for the rest of his days, yet who rose from his bed of pain to go on and become Governor of New York and President of the United States. Not merely for one term or two, but for a third term, overturning what had been regarded as an inviolable precedent. What more natural than for him to have faith in his own judgments and complete confidence in the wisdom of his actions?

What is the answer? There is no answer. Only a hope—the hope that Franklin D. Roosevelt, out of his very real greatness, will come to realization and correction of certain temperamental traits that are his weaknesses; weaknesses that make him unwilling to delegate power so that responsible officials can go ahead without constant reference of every triviality back to the White House, and can have the authority to fire without regard for sacred cows; weaknesses that make him shrink from unpleasant decisions; weaknesses that make him ask the people for halves instead of the whole, fearful that the extent of the whole may dismay or terrify; weaknesses that make him feel that optimism and cajoleries are proper substitutes for candor.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is a great man and a great President. He can, if he chooses, become even greater.

