Franklin Delano Roosevelt
(Lexile: 870)

Within a span of less than fifteen years, the Great Depression and World War II hit the United States hard. These were the toughest times the United States had experienced since the Civil War. Throughout it all, one man was President. He was elected four times in a row and almost singlehandedly led the nation through a number of tribulations. However, there was something interesting about this “man of the people” that walked the country through these troubling times: he could not walk himself. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was an only child from a very wealthy family. He attended Harvard University and, although he was a C student, he somehow finished in just three years. In his last year at Harvard, Franklin met and fell in love with Eleanor Roosevelt. They married in 1905 and later had six children together. In 1907, Roosevelt finished classes at Columbia Law, passed the bar exam, and became a lawyer. Franklin’s fifth cousin Theodore Roosevelt was the twenty-sixth President of the United States at that time. Teddy inspired Franklin to leave his boring law practice behind and venture into politics. Franklin quickly found his way into the political world. He was elected to New York State Senate in 1910. While vacationing in Canada eleven years later, Franklin’s life was forever changed. He contracted poliomyelitis. This disease is also called “polio,” and it leads to paralysis. Franklin tried everything he possibly could to reverse the paralysis of his legs, but he eventually realized it could not be changed. He would never walk without assistance again. Roosevelt was disheartened and wanted to leave politics altogether. But, his wife and friends encouraged him to keep going and not give up! Encouraged and motivated by those who loved him, Franklin spent many hours swimming to strengthen his legs. His hard work was not for nothing! He was eventually able to regain enough strength to walk short distances while wearing leg braces. In Franklin’s mind, this short walk was critical to his political career because he never wanted the public to see him in a wheelchair. He thought it would make people think he was weak. Franklin later established a polio foundation and the March of Dimes charity, which ultimately raised enough money to fund the creation of a polio vaccine. Although his body was physically weakened, Franklin’s political career was stronger than ever. In 1928, Franklin was elected as Governor of New York. He found himself dealing with the Stock Market Crash of 1929 less than a year after his election. Americans blamed New York for the Great Depression that followed the Crash. Roosevelt used this spotlight on New York to increase his popularity. He eventually earned a Presidential nomination in 1932. Amazingly, Roosevelt beat the incumbent (or the current President) Herbert Hoover in the election. However, Franklin inherited a very broken nation with this victory. The new President was
welcomed into office by 13 million jobless Americans, a nation with just about every bank closed, and the worldwide Great Depression. During his first 100 days in office, Franklin proposed the idea of the New Deal. The New Deal was a plan to help Americans find jobs for relief, recovery, and reform. He called for big changes to be made. President Roosevelt’s plan brought success and 41 lifted the economy out of the depths of the Depression. The nation had recovered by 1936, the year of the next Presidential election. Because of his success, the American people confidently re-elected Roosevelt. A large number of American lives were lost during World War I. So, the United States adopted an isolationist policy for world relations. This meant that the country was committed to not getting involved in conflicts around the world. This strategy worked until 1940. In 1940, World War II was brewing, and Germany and Japan began attacking parts of Europe and Asia. During all of this, the American people reelected Franklin for a third term. Americans hoped he could handle the mess. Handle it he did! In 1941, the Japanese bombed the U.S. at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This officially ended the United States’ plan for neutrality. As the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army, Franklin Roosevelt was a key leader of the Allied Powers (U.S., Great Britain, France, and Russia). He was also the mastermind behind the invasions that ultimately led to Germany’s defeat. By 1944, the stress of the war was wearing Franklin down. His heart began having trouble. However, Roosevelt felt he could not leave his country when it needed him most. Thirty-six out of forty-eight states voted in favor of his re-election. Less than two months after he was sworn in for the fourth time, Franklin met with German and British leaders at the Yalta Conference. The group of world leaders planned for the end of the war. The end of the Second World War was in sight! April 12, 1945 brought a shock to the American people. Their beloved President of twelve years died due to sudden bleeding in his brain. His death was unexpected to the nation that had not known about his weak physical condition. He had hidden his paralysis so well from the public that his death was unexpected. His death left the Presidency to Harry Truman, the Vice President at the time of Roosevelt’s death. When Eleanor informed Harry of Franklin’s death, Harry replied, “Is there anything I can do for you?” Eleanor replied, “Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now.” Prior to his death, Franklin had planned to share this thought on April 13, “The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.” Twelve days later on April 24, Truman was informed of a secret atomic bomb project that Franklin had kept entirely hidden from him. Truman was left with the decision of whether or not to drop the deadly device on Japan. Truman walked in Roosevelt’s legacy, moving forward with strong and active faith to drop the bombs and officially end World War II in September of 1945.