Franklin Delano Roosevelt
By Alan Brinkley

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In Alan Brinkley’s book, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, he describes the personal and political life of Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt was born on January 30, 1882 to a family of wealthy aristocrats in New York. After going to some of the finest schools in America, including Harvard, he married a distant cousin Eleanor, “desultorily [practiced] law,” began his political career and first fell ill with polio disease (p. 8). He then served on the New York State Senate and two terms as governor. In 1932, Roosevelt won the presidential election against Herbert Hoover and proceeded to serve as president for four terms until his death. He led America through the years of the Great Depression, established a New Deal era that reshaped America’s domestic policies and ideas of government, and pulled us through World War II. In early April 1945, President Roosevelt died of a stroke in Warm Springs, Georgia.

The author of this book, Alan Brinkley, is a well-known Allan Nevins Professor of History at Columbia University. As a historian, he has studied and written a great deal of biographies of important people, including Roosevelt’s opponents, and books about the New Deal Era and the Great Depression.

The main idea behind Brinkley’s book of this “enigmatic man,” Roosevelt, is to discuss the impact and legacy of F. D. Roosevelt, yet also, to de-myth this iconic president (p. xi). As stated by the author, Roosevelt “has become a figure of myth: a man for all seasons, all parties, and all ideologies” (p. 2). Brinkley established that, although he was seen as one of the most powerful public figures in America, his personal life was in turmoil and lonely. Roosevelt was a “complicated, elusive, and at times even devious figure…a friend of the common people and a creature of American aristocracy…a great statesman and defender of his own political self interest…he had millions of admirers and almost no intimates.” (p.2) Brinkley’s thesis is a constant juxtaposition of beliefs about President Roosevelt, used to express his impressive
impact and also to humanize him. While he was a man of great achievement in American reform policies and a leading believer of democracy and equality, he also sometimes made poor decisions causing injustices within America and its allies, and leading to an unstable society after his exit from office.

In the telling of Roosevelt’s life, Brinkley’s book had a refreshingly unbiased feel to it. Much of the book, especially Roosevelt’s years in the White House during the Great Depression and World War II, described many facts of domestic policy, new programs and the overall economic and political climate of America and the world. Most of the middle sections of Brinkley’s biography read like a history textbook with some mentioning of Roosevelt personally. Also, Roosevelt is presented in lights of good and bad. In the preface, Brinkley describes how FDR was still a well-known person when he was a child and how his mother instilled her respect for the president within her son. He grew up visiting the Roosevelt Library and did his senior thesis, as a historian, on the man. Although this might lead one to believe he has unfaltering love for Roosevelt, this is certainly not true. On one hand, he says how “no president since the nation’s founding has done more to shape the character of American government” and how “Roosevelt thrived in crisis,” pulling the nation through difficult and dark times (p.xii). Yet, then he turns around to tell of the symbolic, yet sometimes, ineffective policies of the New Deal, Roosevelt’s start of the use of atomic weapons, and injustices of relocation camps against Japanese citizens.

Alan Brinkley’s extensive bibliography gives him quite a bit of credibility. From his years as a historian he has done extensive research of America in Roosevelt’s time period. In this biography he used over ninety sources including the Roosevelt papers in the Roosevelt library in New York, dozens of FDR biographies, memoirs and diaries of the president’s closest
colleagues and acquaintances, studies of the New Deal and information from the State Department. His extensive resources show the positive and negative attributes of Roosevelt and his term in office.

The main argument of the book was to humanize and show the more personal problems of this man, yet also the positive affects of his presidency on America. This book does a somewhat good job of proving this thesis, but had a minor weakness. The middle part of the book delves into a general overview of American history and policy in the years of the New Deal and the Depression. It tells of all the policies of the first and second “Hundred Days” and Roosevelt’s many alphabet soup programs. It only briefly touches on Roosevelt’s own beliefs and opinions over a span of sixty or so pages. It seemed as though the book needed a little more specific comprehensive information about Roosevelt, the man. On the whole, the author did a good job of supporting his thesis of demystifying the president. As Brinkley describes, Roosevelt was portrayed in many political cartoons as a pillar of strength and compared to Hoover was “beaming, insouciant, and inscrutable, his head thrust high, riding toward his rendezvous with destiny” (p.29) Yet, since early on in his political career, he had battled with polio. The public only saw the side of him that he wanted them to see. He always made sure wherever he was speaking was easily accessible and wore large black steel braces on his legs to allow him to stand for long times. He never used a wheel chair in front of the public, mostly using a cane or the arm of a fellow companion. Behind closed doors he suffered from the disease greatly and was very weak, even though only “few Americans knew he could not walk” (p.19).

Though “economic royalists” and populists disliked him, the majority of America, including the nation’s poorer and unemployed, supported him, allowing for his re-election as
president for four terms (p. 53). Even during the Democratic National Convention, he was nominated for a third term while crowds of supporters chanted, ‘We want Roosevelt’” (p. 71). Although in his personal life, he was quite lonely. In 1918, his wife Eleanor learned of an affair between him and his secretary, Lucy Mercer. They stayed together for the sake of FDR’s career, but their relationship was never the same, becoming cold and distant as they both pursued their own political interests. Late in his third term of presidency he proposed to Eleanor that they try to fix their marriage. She declined and he spent his end years in the dilapidated White House eating poorly, with his few companions made up of staff and advisors, flamboyant women and writing to his friend Winston Churchill, who described him as “a very great man and a warm-hearted friend” (p.80).

The book described how Roosevelt did a good job of reshaping America through his push for reform and the creation of many social programs to help the economy and the poor. Some of those programs created, especially the GI Bill of Rights, were great pieces of legislation, truly exemplifying ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Although, Roosevelt made advancements, he also had mistakes while serving. For example, many New Deal programs failed, a push for isolationism lead to neglect of helping the Jews in WWII, the unjust treatment of Japanese citizens through relocation camps, and leaving the presidency with an unstable economy. In addition, Roosevelt’s life and legacy ended with a still prejudiced society against minorities. He did contribute to the front of equality through the G.I. Bill of Rights, the Fair Employment Practices Commission, increased political influence of women, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the later desegregation of the military in 1945 (which unfortunately was a little too late). Although, “Roosevelt did not, however, respond to many other demands for (racial) equality, despite his personal opposition to segregation” (p. 89) The
world he left in 1945, was still saturated with discrimination against minorities, including African Americans, women, Japanese Americans, Native Americans and Mexican Americans.

All of this evidence shows how Brinkley did a good job of supporting his thesis and showing both sides to Roosevelt, the strong and the weak, the powerful and the man of the commons, the human and the myth. Roosevelt was a president, who left behind an imperfect postwar world, but also a legacy of great reform, democracy and reconstruction in America.