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The man who overcame
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Conrad Black defends a champion in the White House

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom

By Conrad Black

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1280pp.

AT the end of his fine biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Conrad Black relates a famous anecdote in which the president, flying over Egypt in late 1943, looked down and said in recognition: "Ah, my friend the Sphinx." Roosevelt's inscrutability was a source of strength during his political career, but arguably has not served him well as a historical figure. Many historians, disoriented by what one writer called FDR's "heavily forested interior", have dismissed him as facile and lacking fixedness of purpose.

More than a few have mistaken his love of improvisation, and the flexibility of means he employed, for an absence of sure and certain ends.

Of course, his detractors are correct. Roosevelt achieved very little in his life, apart from saving US democracy from the Depression; bringing the US into World War II and, through his defeat of isolationism, into the world; leading the Allies to victory over the dictators; winning an unprecedented four consecutive national elections; and doing all this with a broken body, in an era that was far less enlightened about disabilities than our own.

Black reveals Roosevelt in the raiment of a great politician, statesman and war leader. For the Canadian-born businessman, FDR's "place in American history is with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln". The book is not hagiographical: Black admits the petty vindictiveness that marred FDR's character and is critical of Roosevelt's stumbles: for example, the discreditable internment of 100,000 Japanese-Americans during the war. But, for the most part, the author writes with a partisan's passion, defending his subject from all comers and most charges, including the suggestions that Roosevelt had a second-class intellect and that he was outwitted by Joseph Stalin at the Yalta conference. This is a full-throated defence, and it makes for bracing reading.

Black plainly enjoys Roosevelt; in this he is in good company. Even FDR's opponents found him a seductive figure, and his friends tended to agree with Winston Churchill, who said that "meeting Franklin Roosevelt was like opening your first bottle of champagne". Roosevelt was a patrician but never a snob; he had a love of rogues that is obviously shared by his biographer, who describes the colourful menagerie of cronies and advisers FDR attracted during his career.

"That man in the White House", as Roosevelt's enemies called him, had style and panache. More important, he had courage and nerve. He prevailed over his paralysis through sheer force of personality, never regaining the use of his legs but refusing to live on his knees. Black reveals FDR's imperturbability at times of crisis such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In the aftermath of an assassination attempt in 1933 that nearly claimed his life, for example, Roosevelt made sure that those who were injured received treatment, slept soundly that night and never mentioned the incident again.

Black's book is not flawless. There is the occasional factual error and indexing mistake, along with some unnecessarily baroque adjectives. More significantly, the conservative Black exaggerates his case that FDR was a non-ideological man of the centre: by any measure, he was a radical president.

These are not serious shortcomings, however -- taken as a whole, this biography is a substantial achievement. Black is receiving some poor reviews for his business dealings but he deserves first-class reviews for *Champion of Freedom*.

In reading this excellent life, it is hard to avoid comparisons with the present state of US leadership. Roosevelt and his colleagues and immediate successors -- including Harry Hopkins, Henry Stimson, Wendell Willkie, George Marshall, Harry Truman and Dean Acheson -- bequeathed a postwar settlement that brought untold benefits to the world. Through their genius they defeated fascism, built the institutions of global order, not least the UN, rescued Europe from financial ruin and set the conditions for victory in the Cold War. These deeds earned the appreciation of much of the world.

Today, many of the US's friends are discomfited by Washington's unilateralist temper in the face of new dangers, and that appreciation is visibly waning.

Hence the timeliness of Black's *Roosevelt*, as an illustration of the best of the US and a reminder of what a superpower can achieve when its leader is able to marshal the opinion of the world.

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