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How Great Changes Begin at the Beginning

Review by Chris Lauer

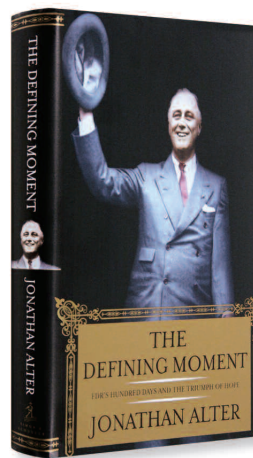
THE DEFINING MOMENT: FDR'S Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope

by Jonathan Alter

Simon & Schuster, © 2006, 415 pages, \$29.95
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As a senior editor at *Newsweek*, Jonathan Alter started writing a critically acclaimed column on politics, history, media and society back in 1991, gaining praise for his even-handed analysis and thoughtful research and commentary. Fifteen years later, Alter brought even more respect to his journalistic skills by writing *The Defining Moment*, a historical account of the moments in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life that shaped him into the man who brought the United States out of the Great Depression and kept democracy alive when hopelessness, communism and fascism threatened the country.

The Defining Moment accomplishes something no other book about FDR has done in a single volume: It describes just the factors leading up to and including the first 100 days of his administration in 1933. While most books about the 32nd president of the United States refer to Pearl Harbor and World War II and describe his performance as a wartime president, this book stops long before the bombs exploded. Instead of recounting the presidential challenges of leading the country through war, *The Defining Moment* describes the pivotal moments, critical events and historic decisions in FDR's life during the early days of his presidency, when crucial leadership was vital for the survival of democracy in the United States.



Pinnacles and Pitfalls

The story Alter describes follows the swerving path of Roosevelt's early life, revealing it as a roller-coaster ride filled with glorious pinnacles and tragic pitfalls. What emerges from the journey is a thrilling American adventure that recounts the life of one of history's most remarkable and admired leaders, and provides future leaders with much food for thought about gaining early momentum in a new leadership role. Jonathan Alter's talents as a storyteller turn FDR's perilous tale into an exciting and revealing glimpse into the life of the man often cited by experts as one of the greatest U.S. presidents of all time, alongside Abraham Lincoln.

The story begins peacefully enough with a description of the wealth into which Roosevelt was born. As fifth cousin to President Theodore Roosevelt, and his maternal family roots tied to a ship that arrived at the Plymouth colony shortly after the *Mayflower*, privilege was practically FDR's middle name. He was the only child of a doting mother, Sara, and a highly stationed father, James, who was absent for most of FDR's upbringing due to a debilitating illness. Although he was not very skilled as an athlete and not particularly impressive to those who knew him at the time, he did boldly claim that, because of his presidential name and family fortune, he would become president one day. But his lack of success as a young lawyer caused many people to view his ambitious prediction as unlikely to come true.

Without reaching into too much psychoanalysis or extrapolating too much from political conjecture, Alter provides enough guidance to the events and circumstances of FDR's life to shed light without interjecting

more than a storyteller's spark into the story. For example, while describing FDR's earliest memories, readers learn that FDR was present in the house when his aunt accidentally set herself on fire with an alcohol lamp while curling her hair. She subsequently died from her injuries. Alter connects this family event, which undoubtedly exposed young Roosevelt to horrific screams and unimaginable terror, to FDR's later admission that the only thing he truly feared was fire. Small insights from events like this build from his youngest days through his college life and into his earliest days in politics. Each turn in his history holds increasing lessons that slowly transform the well-traveled sophisticate into a more empathetic human and powerful politician.

The Power of Relationships

One of the concepts Alter revisits frequently is the power that relationships had in changing Roosevelt from the effete "feather duster" of a man to a leader whose decisions and guidance put the country at ease during some of its roughest times. One of these relationships was with his wife, Eleanor, who helped guide him in a more humane direction by showing him the suffering of the lower classes, something about which Roosevelt knew very little. Her work with poor Jewish immigrants in the slums of New York brought her husband in contact with suffering he had never seen before. Alter credits Eleanor with softening FDR's sense of self-satisfaction and opening his mind to help those less fortunate. These were significant changes that would play out on a much larger scale when he became president.

Another relationship Alter describes that would prove pivotal to Roosevelt's rise to the presidency was that between FDR and Louis McHenry Howe, a cranky reporter from *The New York Herald* who would become an important ally and adviser in his efforts to gain prominence in local and then national politics. This "medieval gnome" would play a key role in Roosevelt's development as a man who could play the game of politics. Alter describes Howe's skills as a manipulator and confidante, and how this tiny, unattractive man helped Roosevelt grow as a campaigner and master of the press who was able to firm up support from the country's population and win elections.

Polio

One aspect of Roosevelt's life that Alter connects to his effectiveness as president was the onset of the debili-

tating disease that would test his character and then help him demonstrate his latent yet impressive strengths. While making an appearance at a Boy Scout camp at Bear Mountain, N.Y., Roosevelt apparently caught polio after sailing with his wife and running a couple of miles with the scouts. At 39 years old, polio-related paralysis left him unable to walk for the rest of his life. Alter interprets this tragic event in the life of a physically active man — who had become an avid golfer, swimmer and outdoorsman since his graduation from college — as the source of life lessons that would eventually benefit Roosevelt and the rest of the country.

One aspect of Roosevelt's personality that changed due to his experience with polio was his belief in expert opinions. Shortly after the onset of the disease, Alter relates, one doctor prescribed deep massage to help the paralysis in his legs. This turned out to be a terribly painful and mistaken combination. Alter quotes columnist and FDR acquaintance Max Lerner regarding the shift that took place inside Roosevelt's psyche:

"[It] cured him permanently of any belief in the conventional wisdom of experts, whether in medicine, politics, economics, warfare or diplomacy."

Alter explains that Roosevelt's distrust of experts helped him succeed as president. Unsatisfied with having only a few perspectives, FDR became famous for gathering a multitude of different opinions and sorting through them first before rendering his own judgment on a matter, whether it was about fighting his own polio, handling the Depression or entering the country into World War II. His success at staying optimistic through such an agonizing and debilitating affliction also characterized the optimism with which he would lead the country through its darkest days.

Saving Democracy

The Defining Moment provides a compelling glimpse into FDR's rise to power as well as the people and events that shaped his personal character, but the history lessons it contains offer more than a simple guide to presidential politics. By focusing specifically on the years of 1932 and 1933, Alter's book provides deep insight into the first time FDR "saved democracy" from the rise of communist and fascist trends taking place in other countries at the same time "by convincing the American people that they should not give up on their system of government." This deep look into FDR's first months in office also gives readers a glimpse into the formative

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personal factors that led to his success. One was the self-confidence he injected into the collective American consciousness, replacing the “fatalistic terror” that had frozen the public in a pernicious malaise. In *The Defining Moment*, Alter reveals the sources of Roosevelt’s confidence and how he was able to rise above adversity and offer the country hope.

Alter explains that he wrote this book “to better understand a few timeless questions about the nature of crisis leadership and the meaning of the American experiment in self-government.” These questions probe the sources of inspiration and hope that a country needs to pull itself out of insecurity and suffering. By examining the defining moment “when the character or perception of a political figure is crystallized,” in this case FDR’s first months in office, Alter offers future presidents and politicians a role model who can provide guidance on ways to grow and shape their own effective leadership strategies.

Alter transforms the cold winter of 1933 into an example of how a lone individual can face desperate adversity — including an assassination attempt at the hands of an unemployed bricklayer from New Jersey and a deepening national economic crisis — and rise above it with enough self-assurance and strength to restore confidence to a nation.

In those first difficult days as president, Alter reminds readers, Roosevelt gave the country his famous first inaugural address, in which he stated, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and started his hugely popular “Fireside Chats.” He points out that FDR also created “the thrilling legislative experimentation of what came to be known as the Hundred Days.” Alter explains that this is the story of how one man was able to transform his formidable communication and political skills, honed during a life filled with staggering fortune and tragedy, into a rejuvenated outlook for an entire country facing tremendous difficulties.

Roosevelt’s ‘Tree Army’

One of the 15 major pieces of legislation in FDR’s first 100 days in office was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a New Deal program that combined Roosevelt’s deep beliefs in hard work and environmental conservation. Alter explains that this program alone, which began when 275,000 young men were mobilized in 1,300 camps across the country, was the best example of how the new president’s leadership style changed the United States during those 100 days. Not only did this unique program substitute work and jobs for government-funded relief, but it also kept thousands of people fed, sheltered and working when they might have been tempted to create the civil unrest that many feared

would take place at the height of the Depression. In addition, the work of the CCC helped the country improve its infrastructure of resources by employing more than 3 million men to plant 3 billion trees, develop 800 state parks, protect 20 million acres from erosion and create 125,000 miles of trails across the United States. Alter points out that the program would also eventually inspire the creation of the Job Corps, the Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps and thousands of community projects.

Another feat Roosevelt accomplished during his first four months in office was to establish of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which extended the U.S. government into the private economy more than any program before or since. While it abolished child labor in the country and setting the first federal minimum wage, Alter points out that the NRA also boosted national confidence when it was most needed. Although its many strict codes and micro-regulations would prove to be too much of a burden for businesses and the country in the long run, Alter explains that experts credit the NRA program with giving a new and needed sense of corporate accountability to the community.

Social Security

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Roosevelt’s first 100 days in office was his creation and support of the Social Security system. When he signed the bill to protect older Americans from destitution in their later years, he called it “the cornerstone” of his administration. Although he believed it was less than perfect in its original form, Roosevelt, Alter explains, told his people that he believed it was his “greatest domestic achievement.”

An accomplishment such as Social Security became not only a crucial part of Roosevelt’s early impact on the country’s economic system, but also an example of the type of giant action that can make or break a president when he or she first takes office. Alter writes that since 1933, making a great impact in the first four months in office has been the goal of presidents, with some more effective than others at reaching that goal. The author points out that Lyndon B. Johnson claimed

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he did more with the 15 bills he pushed through the U.S. legislature during his first 100 days than Roosevelt did in his initial period of time in office. Ronald Reagan also took the idea of early wins to heart and worked hard at accomplishing historic budget and tax law changes in his first months in office. On the other hand, Alter points out, the idea to prove yourself as president in 100 days was not something that John F. Kennedy would let distract him from the longer-term efforts that he knew were required to lead the country through lasting changes.

Barack Obama

According to the *New York Daily News*, Barack Obama was seen reading a copy of *The Defining Moment* in the days before he was elected as the 44th president. While only history will tell whether the stories Alter describes in his book had a significant impact on Obama and the country during his own first 100 days in office, the fact that one of his final advertisements during the presidential campaign was titled “Defining Moment” might indicate that he took some of the lessons in Alter’s book to heart. When Obama won the Iowa caucus, he exclaimed, “They said this country was too divided, too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose. But on this January night, at this defining moment in history, you have done what the cynics said we couldn’t do.” Obama would later talk about “defining moments” in his victory speech in Chicago.

In a recent interview with author Mark Green, the president of Air America Radio, Jonathan Alter was asked whether there is a valid comparison between the transitions of FDR and Obama, and he said Obama’s process seems to be more orderly, while FDR’s transi-

tion was often characterized as “seat of the pants.” He added: “Indeed, Roosevelt was described to have a second-class intellect and a first-class temperament. Obama has a first-class intellect, he’s smarter than Roosevelt, and a first-class temperament.”

Alter’s Next Book

According to Dermot McEvoy of *Publisher’s Weekly*, Simon & Schuster has already acquired Alter’s next book project: a book about President Obama’s first 100 days in office, which will be published in 2010. In McEvoy’s article, Alter explained that his next book will cover Obama’s campaign as well as how he performs when he reaches the White House.

With his rich perspective on Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s rise to prominence and his historic presidency, Alter is uniquely suited to provide a comparative view of yet another Democratic president facing difficult national and global struggles during an unprecedented economic downturn. Sure to answer similar questions about who influenced Obama and how he became an inspirational figure to

many, Alter’s next book, thanks to his ability to dig deeply into the details that make historical figures who they are, will undoubtedly offer readers another fascinating look at the powers that shaped the leader and his date with destiny. Judging by Alter’s ability to portray FDR’s leadership as a powerful force grown out of personal experiences and numerous difficulties and accomplishments, the Obama book will be a welcome addition to the historical record. It promises to advance the collective understanding of those eager to learn how yet another president faced great odds while leading the United States through tough times. ●

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The author: Jonathan Alter is a senior editor at *Newsweek*, where since 1991 he has written an acclaimed column on politics, history, media, and society at large. He is also an analyst and contributing correspondent for NBC News.

His next major project will be a book detailing the first 100 days of Barack Obama’s presidency. The book is scheduled to be published by Simon & Schuster in 2010.



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