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TWO PRESIDENTS

“You realized an era was over.”

James Denney

To those of us in that age group, Roosevelt was kind of a god. He never went away, he was always going to be there, and he was going to make the world safe for us, and that's what held us together, because we truly felt that way. Not very many generations in the history of mankind, in my opinion, have had the privilege of knowing and loving a leader like the American people did Franklin Roosevelt.

Marialyse Hager Knobel

Well, my mother was not a Democrat. She didn't think very much of Franklin Roosevelt. In fact, she referred to him — and that's the only time she ever swore — as a bastard. And that's how I grew up.

Geraldine George Sorensen

My grandfather had been a member of Congress from Tennessee in the twenties, from 1903 until about 1928, so he was very much a part of the government structure They were southern Democrats. From my childish stance, President Roosevelt was kind of part of our family, or something [akin to it]. I felt sort of as if I knew him. We didn't have television, but there were newsreel features at the movies, especially on Sunday, and you got the news of the week in review. So we constantly were exposed to moving pictures of the president and all events. It was just as today with television. You have a visual image of the person up close, so it's not surprising that you might feel rather close to someone that you had just seen in the movies.

It happened that — though of course, Nebraska, even then, was much more strongly Republican than Democrat — my family, the Koehlers, were Democrats. So we admired him extravagantly. He was a marvelous orator. We certainly listened to every speech that he made. For a child, there was something absolutely sure and certain about the world if a man could talk with the assurance that he had. Why, I just knew everything was going to be okay.

We were going to win the war, and President Roosevelt would make everything just fine. My family regarded him as a great president and a great leader. I think I may have had him a little mixed up with God.

Virginia Koehler Knoll

He never should have been at Yalta. He was senile. He was close to death. He couldn't deal with Stalin even if he did have the egotistical idea that he could.

Elmer Dasenbrock, Leigh

U.S. Army Air Forces C-47
navigator, European Theater

As a teenager, I felt comfortable and secure knowing Roosevelt would bring us through victorious. For me, he was one of my mentors during those years. We always listened to his fireside chats on radio. I, like so many youth of those days, believed President Roosevelt had a magic wand and would make all situations work for the betterment of the nation.

Mary Ann Dreesen Voss, Norfolk

High school student

I think he was very controversial. His actions were. There were a lot of people who did not favor what he was doing Then [there was] the feeling that he knew that there was the possibility of an attack on Pearl Harbor and nothing was said [and] the laxness of the military there at the bases in Hawaii and in the Philippines Of course, he'd said for a long time that America would never send its boys to war, and of course, we did.

Helen Green, Fairbury

Secretary, reporter,
Fairbury Journal

What Did You Do in the War?

President Roosevelt. When he was elected president, I thought he was a pretty good man . . . but I still think he was a warmonger. At that time, I think Winny Churchill, Adolph Hitler, Mussolini — all were real aggressive people When you look at it, the leaders of the world at the time . . . were all very aggressive people.

Mitchell Kumagai

I think Roosevelt did a lot of wonderful things. I was disappointed that he stayed on as long as he did. I think as far as writing the peace, he was not capable of dealing with any of the other world leaders I think that's part of the problem that we've had with the Soviet Union I think if he'd have known when to quit, he'd have been a much greater man.

Willard Waldo, Weeping Water

Cass County extension agent

I was in the hospital in England when President Roosevelt died, and this may sound kind of corny but really it isn't, grown men, including myself, cried.

Bill Gilgren

I was pretty critical of him most of the time. I just didn't approve of his way of conducting our government. I was shocked, of course, and sorry when he died, and died the way he did, because I think it was just unfortunate that he continued in that office as long as he did. I don't think he was capable of doing the job at all for quite a long period of time. On the other hand, I can understand that it might have been a morale shock to our own forces and probably a morale booster to some of our adversaries if he'd dropped out. So maybe in balance it was best, but I guess I still don't have to like what he did.

Earl Luff

I was there [in Washington, D.C.] the day that Franklin Roosevelt died. I remember that very much because I had a three-day pass and was able to stay there clear up until the time they brought his casket back from Warm Springs, Georgia, and have it go up Pennsylvania Avenue. Here's what happened. I was there on a three-day pass, and they had a place called International House where soldiers from all branches of the service could go . . . and clean up and take a shower. It was hard to get rooms in Washington at that time or even a place to clean up. I felt grimy and dirty. I had ridden a train down from Fort Dix, New Jersey, and I was in the International House taking a shower, and another guy came in and said, "Did you hear the news?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Roosevelt died." I said, "Died!" This was totally unexpected. With his voice, you know, he was kind of like the Rock of Gibraltar to Americans. You heard him, and you had confidence that he was directing the war, this sort of thing. So after I got cleaned up and got my clothes on, I went down to the White House and rather dramatically, I thought, watched history unfold in front of my eyes.

This was the most historic moment of my total war experience. All the cabinet officers arrived. We watched Truman arrive in a limousine, and then we stayed there. People were crying. There were huge crowds, and then we watched them [the cabinet] all leave. Then we found out that Truman had been sworn in as the new president. Then the following Monday — this was the last day of my pass — I went up to Capitol Hill . . . and then stood outside of the Senate Office Building and watched the casket being drawn by the horses . . . [T]hey have this one horse that follows the casket — there's nobody riding on it — but the boots are facing backwards, and this is an army tradition. Again, I would say there were millions of people on Pennsylvania Avenue then, watching Roosevelt's casket come from Union Station up to Capitol Hill, [and] move down to the White House where he lay in state . . .

I would say you felt a sense of shock . . . Others would say that fighting in the Battle of the Bulge or fighting in North Africa or this or that was far more demanding, but there was something about the fact that when I saw Truman in his limousine coming out of the White House and then having someone whisper to me, "Mr. Truman's been sworn in as president," you realized an era was over because Roosevelt had been president longer than anyone else in the history of our country.

James Denney

What Did You Do in the War?

We thought Truman was just totally inept, just a bumbler, that he was just a Pendergast machine flunky. Missouri's right down the road here. People here had even been as far as Kansas City sometimes, and they knew about that place. Truman was nothing, just a nothing.

Barc Bayley

[H]e was really a non-entity. Everyone was just scared to death. We'd scarcely ever heard of him. He was this little man with these glasses from Kansas City. I think everyone was sort of scared. How could this little bespectacled man step into being president?

Virginia Koehler Knoll

Here was kind of a very ordinary little man who had failed at almost all of his endeavors, except being a politician, who moved into the presidency, had to learn fast and make big decisions, and he did it.

Mildred Pogue Gardner

They didn't push Harry around, like with some of the others. You know the old saying, "Give 'em hell Harry." That was his motto and if he didn't want something, why he didn't do it. He had his own way of doing things. It might have been a little cruder than some, but he got the job done.

Grant Hazlett

U.S. Army infantryman, came to Nebraska in 1943 as a guard at the Atlanta POW camp