

## You Felt He was Talking to You: FDR's Fireside Chats and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
  - How will embracing your own identity help you to be successful?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about Franklin D. Roosevelt and how his identity helped him to soothe the fears of Americans during the Great Depression. They will also learn how embracing their identity can help them be successful.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats and how they formed a part of his identity.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of identity to their own lives.
  - Students will understand how to embrace their own identity.
- **Background**
  - Franklin D. Roosevelt was born in 1882 to a wealthy upstate New York family and attended elite private schools and Harvard. Dedicating his life to public service, he served in the New York Assembly and then as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I. After running for vice-president in the 1920 election, Roosevelt contracted polio and endured a grueling physical therapy regimen to re-enter politics. He was elected governor of New York in 1928 and served until 1932 as the Great Depression wracked America and the world. In 1932, Roosevelt defeated incumbent President Herbert Hoover to become president. He was re-elected three times in 1936, 1940, and 1944 because of the national emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II. Roosevelt thus broke with George Washington’s precedent of serving only two terms.

Roosevelt utilized the new communication tool of radio that had become part of tens of millions of American homes during the 1920s for news and entertainment. Young and old alike in families would gather around the radio in living rooms or groups of friends and strangers would gather in public to listen to a boxing match or baseball game. While he was governor, Roosevelt had experimented with giving an informal address directly to the people rather than a formal speech. Because it was so popular, Roosevelt delivered the “Fireside Chats” thirty times throughout his presidency to assuage people’s fears during the Great Depression and World War II as well as to promote his presidential policies.

When he spoke, he developed such an intimate tie to his tens of millions of listeners that they felt as if the president were speaking directly to them or was in the room with them. As a result, Roosevelt’s identity was closely linked to his Fireside Chats, which brought a president closer to the people than ever. The American people thought they had a friend in Roosevelt who really cared about their problems and offered them consolation, answers, and encouragement.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Oratory
  - Masons
  - Bolster
  - Somberness
  - Dialogue
  - Forge
  - Inextricably
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
  - What challenges are you facing?
  - What fears or concerns might you have?
  - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - Who was Franklin D. Roosevelt?
  - Why did Roosevelt hold the Fireside Chats?
  - What did Roosevelt say or do in the Fireside Chats that helped the American people cope with the Great Depression?
  - How did Franklin D. Roosevelt help to advance freedom with his Fireside Chats?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Brands, H.W. *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
  - Burns, James MacGregor. *The Lion and the Fox: Roosevelt, 1882-1940*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1956.
  - Cohen, Adam. *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009.
  - Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt, The Home Front in World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
  - Leuchtenburg, William E. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
  - Smith, Jean Edward. *FDR*. New York: Random House, 2007.

## Handout A: You Felt He was Talking to You: FDR's Fireside Chats and Identity

### Background

Franklin D. Roosevelt was born in 1882 to a wealthy upstate New York family and attended elite private schools and Harvard. Dedicating his life to public service, he served in the New York Assembly and then as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I. After running for vice-president in the 1920 election, Roosevelt contracted polio and endured a grueling physical therapy regimen to re-enter politics. He was elected governor of New York in 1928 and served until 1932 as the Great Depression wracked America and the world. In 1932, Roosevelt defeated incumbent President Herbert Hoover to become president. He was re-elected three times in 1936, 1940, and 1944 because of the national emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II. Roosevelt thus broke with George Washington's precedent of serving only two terms.

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### Narrative

On the late evening of Sunday, March 12, after only a week in the White House as president, Franklin D. Roosevelt sat in front of several microphones at his desk in the Executive Mansion. The announcer introduced the president by stating, "The president wants to come into your house and sit beside your fireside for a little fireside chat." Roosevelt's voice and even his unseen gestures were like that of a friend. As he began his chat, he moved his hands in natural, comfortable gestures to emphasize his words gently. He did not attempt grand, sweeping oratory, but spoke in genial, intimate terms. He smiled and his face lit up as though he were actually speaking to the listeners on their front porch or living room. Roosevelt later said he tried to identify with each of the listeners as if they were a "mason at work on a new building, a girl behind a counter, a farmer in his field."

Roosevelt used this occasion to discuss the banking crisis sweeping the nation in simple terms that they could readily understand. He succeeded in soothing their fears about losing their money and assuring them that their deposits were safe. As a result, he bolstered national confidence in the nation's banks, many of which re-opened their doors. Humorist Will Rogers joked that Roosevelt explained the banking crisis in such clear terms that even the bankers could understand it.

The first of his fireside chats was a resounding success as Roosevelt addressed an estimated 60 million Americans. Adults worried about their jobs and financial condition because of the deepening Great Depression sat around the radio listening to the president in their living rooms. One reporter said, "You felt he was talking to you, not to 50 million others but to you personally." That was exactly the goal Roosevelt was trying to achieve with the addresses. Many people would stop First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and tell her, "He used to talk to me about my government." She believed that the president had created a dialogue with millions of Americans. Throughout his four terms as president, his style of presidential leadership used the Fireside Chats to reassure the American people throughout the darkest days of the Great Depression and World War II.

On December 29, 1940, people began filtering out of movie theaters and restaurants to make sure they arrived home before 9:00 p.m. The crowds were subdued as a heavy somberness hung over them. They wanted to get

home to their living rooms in order to turn on the radio and listen to President Roosevelt address the country about helping Great Britain face down Nazi Germany virtually alone. Roosevelt explained that, “We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.” Letters and telegrams to the White House supported the president’s speech by a ratio of 100:1.

On May 27, 1941, as the nation slid closer to war, Roosevelt went on the air at 10:30 p.m. in the East Room of the White House to declare that there was an “unlimited national emergency” that required greater preparations for war. The listeners heard the president’s grim determination over the airwaves, but Eleanor reported that she saw the “weight of responsibility” he bore. Sixty-five million Americans listened to the Fireside Chat, and millions more listened overseas to determine the future of American involvement in World War II. The *New York Times* reported, “For almost an hour, a whole nation here stilled itself to listen to his words.”

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and the president asked for a declaration of war, which Congress promptly granted. On Tuesday evening, December 9, Roosevelt went again to people’s living rooms through the radio during a Fireside Chat. He created a sense of shared purpose, unity, and sacrifice. “We are all in it – all the way. Every single man, woman and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking in American history. We must share together the bad news and the good news, the defeats and the victories – the changing fortunes of war.” In the coming months, Japan would conquer several islands and other territories throughout the Pacific, and Nazi Germany would continue its advance deep into Russia. But Americans confidently felt as if their president would lead them to eventual victory.

Novelist Saul Bellow remembered how closely Roosevelt was identified with the Fireside Chats and related a memory of watching the intimacy the president established with the American people. Bellow was walking on a Sunday evening in Chicago just as the summer sun was finally setting in the Midwest. He reported that the “drivers had pulled over, parking bumper to bumper, and turned on their radios to hear Roosevelt.” They rolled down their windows and opened their doors, and any pedestrian who walked by (and most Americans were at home) could hear Roosevelt’s eastern accent. “You could follow [the chat] without missing a single word as you strolled by. You felt joined to these unknown drivers, men and women smoking their cigarettes in silence, not so much considering the President’s words as affirming the rightness of his tone and taking assurance from it.”

Roosevelt had mastered the use of the new technology of radio not merely to reach Americans with a speech or campaign for office. He utilized it to forge a deep bond with the American people that endured for decades after he died in 1945. They felt that they knew him and that he actually cared about them. Roosevelt’s identity as president was inextricably linked to his Fireside Chats.