BACK TO THE FUTURE: 
FROM ROOSEVELT TO OBAMA
Gil Troy

As Barack Obama took office as the 44th president of the United States on January 20, comparisons abounded to the 32nd president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The economic context was obvious — Obama inherits the worst economic crisis since FDR took office in 1933. Roosevelt’s first inaugural address, in which he famously declared, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” was an equally obvious standard of excellence. But beyond rhetorical benchmarks, how did Roosevelt rise to the occasion in the 20th century, and what historical lessons can Obama draw from FDR in the 21st century? Contributing Writer Gil Troy, author and presidential historian at McGill University, offers some reflections about then and now.

Barack Delano Roosevelt? Since Barack Obama’s extraordinary election day win — and redemptive election night celebration — the Franklin Roosevelt and Great Depression analogies have been piling up almost as quickly as America’s national debt. We have been told that the United States faces the Greatest Economic Crisis since the Great Depression. We have been told that Barack Obama read Jonathan Alter’s The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope. And we have been told that Barack Obama is poised to become the Greatest and Most Ambitious President since Franklin D. Roosevelt. Indeed, America is languishing economically and Barack Obama is a talented visionary with tremendous potential. But all this analogizing should come with a warning label. Historical examples should be used as subtle guideposts. They become harmful if they inflate expectations or become policy straitjackets.

So far, no one can determine whether the financial meltdown of 2008 matches the Great Depression because we do not know how long today’s financial crisis will last. The great crash of October 1929 is not what made the Depression great. American economic history — in fact, the history of capitalism — is punctuated by great booms and great busts. The magnitude of the 1930s depression came from its longevity, from how many years it lasted before the economy recovered. So far, we are only months into this economic crisis. The Great Depression lasted at least 12 years — and only really ended thanks to the economic boom the Second World War triggered.

Similarly, while Barack Obama’s inauguration in may have been as inspiring and uplifting as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1933, Roosevelt’s greatness stemmed from his unprecedented — and now unconstitutional — four terms in office. Without dismissing Roosevelt’s great skill and impressive accomplishments, he also remained in office long enough to outlast critics and earn bragging rights for having transformed America, ended the Great Depression and won the Second World War. When Bill Clinton was in office in the 1990s, while feeding the illusion that America was under no threat either economically or from terrorists, he moped that he was not given the kind of greatness-inducing challenges Roosevelt and other presidents such as Abraham Lincoln faced. Only weeks into his administration, Barack Obama probably would not object if he had fewer domestic and foreign headaches challenging him simultaneously.

While historians have enjoyed the public attention and trip down memory lane toward the 1930s, we have
been swept up in the broader partisan debate. The Democratic Party's tug-of-war regarding whether Barack Obama should lead from the centre or from the left has also played out as an historical duel over whether Roosevelt was a great liberal reformer or a successful centrist. For example, the historian Allan Lichtman identified four “simple rules” Obama should learn from Roosevelt. The first was “Strike early,” which Obama is doing with his stimulus package and the buzz of activity in his first hundred days in office. The second was “Bring the people with you,” which Obama has mastered so far, based on his silky-smooth transition and his transcendent inauguration. The third was “Think big and broadly,” which links Obama’s ambitious energy plans and repudiation of Republican free-market economics with big New Deal programs, from launching the Tennessee Valley Authority to creating Social Security. The fourth, “Don’t govern from the middle,” interprets Roosevelt’s record as more radical than it was, and dismisses one of Obama’s greatest achievements so far, which is setting a new tone of unity after the divisive Bush and Clinton years.

America’s greatest presidents including Franklin Roosevelt led from the centre. Being a muscular moderate entails having core principles, thinking big but mastering the art of compromise too. Franklin Roosevelt understood that, as did that other president whom Lichtman, more and more other historians, and Barack Obama himself identify as a success: Ronald Reagan. Admirer told Roosevelt, “If it fails, you will be the worst one.” Roosevelt responded: “If it fails, I’ll be the last one.” Against that backdrop, Roosevelt’s reforms were pioneering but temperate. He preserved private property. He restored American capitalism. The American welfare state he created was a stretch considering America’s historic aversion to government aid for individuals, but a minimalist by European standards, let alone compared with the Soviet model so many American intellectuals at the time desired.

In the historian Richard Hofstadter’s apt metaphor, FDR was a nimble quarterback, always scrambling but usually remaining within America’s constitutional boundaries. Perhaps Roosevelt’s greatest failure — his attempt during his second term to pack the Supreme Court — resulted from running out of bounds. The Court-packing scheme — adding up to six new justices for each justice over 70 to the original nine — failed because Roosevelt overestimated his own power and the American people’s appetite for revolution. This miscalculation set back the New Deal — but taught FDR a valuable lesson. When the Second World War broke out in Europe, Roosevelt was a model muscular moderate. Facing an overwhelmingly isolationist public, Roosevelt advanced gradually toward intervening to save England and the Allies, always staying half a step ahead of the American people, rather than outrunning them.

The centre is, of course, an elusive target (just as definitions of liberalism and conservative or left and right have shifted over the decades). But a president earns the centrist label when he acts more pragmatically than ideologically, when he compromises on key measures if not core ideals, when he uses his bully pulpit to forge as broad a coalition as possible in Congress and among the people.

To understand Roosevelt as a moderate we have to recall the historian’s favourite text — context. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March, 1933, America’s prospects looked bleak, and radicals demanded revolution. “Mr. President, if your program succeeds, you’ll be the greatest president in American history,” an admirer told Roosevelt. “If it fails, you will be the worst one.” Roosevelt responded: “If it fails, I’ll be the last one.” Against that backdrop, Roosevelt’s reforms were pioneering but temperate. He preserved private property. He restored American capitalism. The American welfare state he created was a stretch considering America’s historic aversion to government aid for individuals, but a minimalist by European standards, let alone compared with the Soviet model so many American intellectuals at the time desired.

In the historian Richard Hofstadter’s apt metaphor, FDR was a nimble quarterback, always scrambling but usually remaining within America’s constitutional boundaries. Perhaps Roosevelt’s greatest failure — his attempt during his second term to pack the Supreme Court — resulted from running out of bounds. The Court-packing scheme — adding up to six new justices for each justice over 70 to the original nine — failed because Roosevelt overestimated his own power and the American people’s appetite for revolution. This miscalculation set back the New Deal — but taught FDR a valuable lesson. When the Second World War broke out in Europe, Roosevelt was a model muscular moderate. Facing an overwhelmingly isolationist public, Roosevelt advanced gradually toward intervening to save England and the Allies, always staying half a step ahead of the American people, rather than outrunning them.

The centre is, of course, an elusive target (just as definitions of liberalism and conservative or left and right have shifted over the decades). But a president earns the centrist label when he acts more pragmatically than ideologically, when he compromises on key measures if not core ideals, when he uses his bully pulpit to forge as broad a coalition as possible in Congress and among the people.

Roosevelt’s discipline — usually — was impressive. He avoided overstepping during an era when cries for radical solutions were mainstreamed. He also respected America’s divided government, with its fragmented power sources, at a time when Germany and Italy succumbed to the demagogic oversimplifications of fascism. The Great Depression seemed to prove that democracy and free-market capitalism did not work. By crafting coalitions, and improvising his way toward gradual, not radical, reform, Franklin Roosevelt offered a New Deal to the American people while rejuvenating the liberal and democratic creed worldwide.

Roosevelt’s careful, painstaking, often manipulative and frequently inconsistent triangulation process reflected a broader American leadership tradition. This consensus-building, improvisational centrist was rooted in George Washington’s enlightened approach to mobilizing Americans behind a “common cause,” Abraham Lincoln’s pragmatic focus on first keeping the country united and alive, then freeing it from the sin of slavery, and Theodore Roosevelt’s bully-bully romantic nationalism seeking to make things happen.

While Barack Obama’s inaugural speech may have been as eloquent and uplifting as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1933 address, Roosevelt’s greatness stemmed from his unprecedented — and now unconstitutional – four terms in office. Without dismissing Roosevelt’s great skill and impressive accomplishments, he also remained in office long enough to outlast critics and earn bragging rights for having transformed America, ended the Great Depression and won the Second World War.
America more progressive without alienating big business too much. The result in the 1930s was America’s unique welfare state that stretched constitutional limits without breaking them.

Similarly, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan proceeded more cautiously than conservatives hoped and liberals feared. Although he eventually became a Republican, Reagan was a New Deal Democrat in his 20s and never lost faith in Franklin Roosevelt, whose New Deal employed Reagan’s father in the depths of the Depression. Reagan always demonstrated that he, too, was not the president of the Republican Party or its conservative wing but president of the United States. The Reagan Library has many files filled with letters from conservatives blasting Reagan for being too accommodating. Reagan’s cabinet, filled as it was with moderates like Alexander Haig and Malcolm Baldridge, not to mention Rockefeller Republicans like Richard Schweiker, infuriated conservatives. One of the few ideologues Reagan appointed to a high position, his Office of Management and Budget director David Stockman, would write a kiss-and-tell book, The Triumph of Politics, complaining that the so-called Reagan Revolution was headed by an amiable former actor more interested in being popular than in storming the big-government Bastille. Ultimately, the Reagan Revolution slowed the rate of growth of government but it preserved the New Deal status quo. Stockman’s glum conclusion was that American government was more “Madisonian,” fragmented, temperate, incrementalist, than he had hoped.

Similarly, James Patterson, Alonzo Hamby and other historians have started appreciating Ronald Reagan as more of an incrementalist than an ideologue. This centrism of Reagan’s, this understanding of the need to compromise and sell his program broadly, accounted for his success. At the same time, Bill Clinton’s tenure is a cautionary tale for moderates. Simply being a finger-to-the-wind spineless centrist, lacking big ideas and core principles that you can at least compromise on, leaves you with little more than the policy Band-Aids of the Clinton years and the impression he created of tremendous potential unfulfilled.

This moderation provides essential ballast in a democratic system. America remains a centre-right nation — and a country of pragmatists wary of revolution. Even the American Revolution itself was a relatively mild, reasonable affair — compared with the French, Russian and Chinese revolutionary bloodbaths. In his victory speech, Barack Obama acknowledged the tens of millions who did not vote for him, whose support he will need to succeed. George W. Bush’s presidency should be remembered as a cautionary tale warning against the Karl Rove strategy of mobilizing the base and neglecting the centre.

When President Bush struck early in his administration, in the spring of 2001, thinking big and broadly, one Democratic senator proposed minor changes to Bush’s controversial tax cuts. The senator promised that with those compromises, “I guarantee you’ll get 70 votes out of the Senate.” Bush’s political guru, Karl Rove, replied, “We don’t want 70 votes. We want 51.” This polarizing take-no-prisoners attitude alienated many and derailed Bush’s presidency. The writer who recounted that anecdote was Barack Obama in The Audacity of Hope. Obama then wrote: “Genuine bipartisanship...assumes an honest process of give-and-take, and that the quality of the compromise is measured by how well it serves some agreed-upon goal, whether better schools or lower deficit.” This is a great description of muscular moderation, and what President Obama must remember as he reads about FDR’s presidency — and plans to lead from the centre.

In leading from the centre, Barack Obama should appeal to what he has called the “pragmatic, nonideological attitude of the majority of Americans.” The search for moderation is really about reinvigorating a new broad vision of American nationalism — and advancing policies that reinforce a broad, big-tent approach. It starts with repudiating the George W. Bush-Karl Rove 50-percent-plus-one strategy of simply mobilizing enough partisans to ensure re-election. But it entails picking moderate, non-ideological advisers — as Obama has done so far, preferring a Lawrence Summers, a Timothy Geithner, a Hillary Clinton to the economic radicals and naive pacifists of the Moveon.org crowd. It entails reaching out symbolically and substantively to Republicans and more conservative Democrats — as Obama has done so far, even retaining Bush’s secretary of defence, Robert M. Gates. And it entails singing a song of centrism while advancing constructive, bridge-building policies America’s greatest presidents including Franklin Roosevelt led from the centre. Being a muscular moderate entails having core principles, thinking big but mastering the art of compromise too. Franklin Roosevelt understood that, as did that other president whom Lichtman, more and more other historians, and Barack Obama himself identify as a success: Ronald Reagan.
domestic wish list, is constructing a health care reform that avoids triggering the big-government fears Republicans exploited so effectively in killing the Clintons’ program. It means using government stimulus to find alternative energy sources but not to do it in such a heavy-handed way as to crush individual or corporate initiatives. And it means protecting civil liberties and working together with allies without being afraid to treat terrorism as a military problem, not simply a crime, and without forgetting how in the Middle East cooperation and diplomacy can be perceived as weakness.

Barack Obama demonstrated the kind of muscular moderation America needs during the summer of 2008, when he endorsed a different domestic surveillance bill from the one he initially opposed. At issue were a series of amendments to the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. In February 2008, during the Democratic primaries, Obama had opposed granting immunity to telecommunications companies that cooperated with government attempts to wiretap suspects. The compromise bill Obama supported in July created a secret court and an inspector that would help decide rather than leaving all the discretion to the president. Obama felt that the compromise preserved a vital tool against terrorism without further expanding presidential power.

This nuanced approach angered many core supporters at a delicate time in the campaign, when the Democratic Party was still reeling from the clash between Obama and Hillary Clinton. In a remarkable on-line exchange with thousands of his field workers, Obama explained why the new legislation did not cross his red lines — while affirming his commitment to defend civil liberties as president. As one volunteer who participated told me, he demonstrated that he was willing to listen to the complaints, he understood the disagreement, but he was comfortable with his decision. George W. Bush rarely showed he was willing to listen. Bill Clinton too frequently caved in on core issues.

President Barack Obama delivers his inaugural address on January 20. Presidential historian Gil Troy writes that the speech “reflected his centrist and pragmatic vision.”

Obama’s inaugural address also reflected his centrist and pragmatic vision. Trying to resolve the debate
Similarly, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan proceeded more cautiously than conservatives hoped and liberals feared. Although he eventually became a Republican, Reagan was a New Deal Democrat in his 20s and never lost faith in Franklin Roosevelt, whose New Deal employed Reagan’s father in the depths of the Depression. Reagan always demonstrated that he, too, was not the president of the Republican Party or its conservative wing but president of the United States.

Both Reagan and George W. Bush (as if Bill Clinton, Obama insisted: “The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works — whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified.” Obama also tried to remember some of the Reagan-era lessons about the importance of the free market, while continuing to try pinning the market meltdown on the excessive, renegade, cowboy capitalism of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (as if Bill Clinton and the Democrats did not take a similar approach in the 1990s). Thus, Obama preached, “the question before us” is not “whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched, but this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control — and that a nation cannot prosper long when it favours only the prosperous.”

Similarly, regarding foreign policy, Obama tried to resolve the fight between realists and idealists in American foreign policy. Realists emphasize America’s needs; idealists focus on spreading democracy and other American ideals worldwide. Americans’ historic isolationism. But minutes into the job, Obama already acknowledged that the world looks very different when viewed from the Oval Office’s big, bullet proof picture window. Moreover, the surge’s success in Iraq stabilized the situation, precluding a quick withdrawal. And while Obama relies on some realist advisers, he is somewhat imprisoned by his own soaring rhetoric and aspirations. Obama does not just want his administration focusing on what is right for his country; he wants what is right for his country to be right for the world. Just as true isolationism is impossible for the world’s only superpower, no American, let alone Obama the hope-generator, can avoid the idealistic impulses in the country that Obama’s hero Abraham Lincoln deemed “the last best hope of earth.” For all those reasons, Obama declared when inaugurated: “As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.”

At these critical moments, Obama has demonstrated that he just might walk the walk as well as talk the talk — governing as he speechifies, creating a “yes we can” muscular moderation that advances a substantive agenda in ways millions of Americans in the big, broad, pragmatic centre can applaud. He has also continued the project he began with his lyrical, extraordinary 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, namely, trying to articulate a vision of liberal American nationalism that works for the 21st century. Obama’s repudiation in 2004 of the “red America” versus “blue America” paradigm, and his celebration in 2009 of “our patchwork heritage” as a “strength not a weakness,” sought to forge a new nationalist centre that heals America’s wounds and revives a sense of community. Obama understands that the growing cult of personality surrounding him is a great asset, giving him a mandate to succeed. But he also knows that hope is like a balloon: if properly inflated it soars into the sky, dazzling, delighting and elevating; but if overblown, it pops. Obama recognizes that the near-messianic hopes his election has triggered could sour. Shrewdly, pragmatically, constructively, he is trying to manage those expectations while channelling them into a badly needed sense of communal and national renewal. Obama’s campaign slogan was “Yes we can,” not “Yes I can.” His campaign, his transition, his inaugural address and now his first hundred days in office, all have invited Americans to join in forging a new centre rooted in this sense of American renewal. President Obama has clearly and warmly set out the welcome mat — now the challenge is for Americans to accept the invitation, just as they did in the 1940s, when American creativity, energy and patriotism finally ended the Depression and launched a half-century of the greatest and most broadly distributed mass middle-class prosperity in history.

Contributing Writer Gil Troy is a professor of history at McGill University and visiting scholar at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington. A presidential scholar, he is the author of Leading from the Center: Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents (Basic Books, 2008) gil.troy@mcgill.ca
IT'S HARD TO FIND A CORNER OF THE WORLD WHERE YOU WON'T FIND A BOMBAIRDIER.

Now that the Global Express has joined the ranks of our business jets flying in the region, India is one more country in the world we’re proud to call home.