

A Radical In the White House
By BOB HERBERT
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Last week—April 12, to be exact—was the 60th anniversary of the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “I have a terrific headache,” he said, before collapsing at the Little White House in Warm Springs, Ga. He died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage on the 83rd day of his fourth term as president. His hold on the nation was such that most Americans, stunned by the announcement of his death that spring afternoon, reacted as though they had lost a close relative.

That more wasn’t made of this anniversary is not just a matter of time; it’s a measure of the distance the U.S. has traveled from the egalitarian ideals championed by F.D.R. His goal was “to make a country in which no one is left out.” That kind of thinking has long since been consigned to the political dumpster. We’re now in the age of Bush, Cheney and DeLay, small men committed to the concentration of big bucks in the hands of the fortunate few.

To get a sense of just how radical Roosevelt was (compared with the politics of today), consider the State of the Union address he delivered from the White House on Jan. 11, 1944. He was already in declining health and, suffering from a cold, he gave the speech over the radio in the form of a fireside chat.

After talking about the war, which was still being fought on two fronts, the president offered what should have been recognized immediately for what it was, nothing less than a blueprint for the future of the United States. It was the clearest statement I’ve ever seen of the kind of nation the U.S. could have become in the years between the end of World War II and now. Roosevelt referred to his proposals in that speech as “a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all regardless of station, race or creed.”

Among these rights, he said, are:

“The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation.

“The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation.

“The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living.

“The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad.

“The right of every family to a decent home.

“The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health.

“The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident and unemployment.

“The right to a good education.”

I mentioned this a few days ago to an acquaintance who is 30 years old. She said, “Wow, I can’t believe a president would say that.”

Roosevelt’s vision gave conservatives in both parties apoplexy in 1944 and it would still drive them crazy today. But the truth is that during the 1950’s and 60’s the nation made substantial progress toward his wonderfully admirable goals, before the momentum of liberal politics slowed with the war in Vietnam and the election in 1968 of Richard Nixon.

It wouldn't be long before Ronald Reagan was, as the historian Robert Dallek put it, attacking Medicare as "the advance wave of socialism" and Dick Cheney, from a seat in Congress, was giving the thumbs down to Head Start. Mr. Cheney says he has since seen the light on Head Start. But his real idea of a head start is to throw government money at people who already have more cash than they know what to do with. He's one of the leaders of the G.O.P. gang (the members should all wear masks) that has executed a wholesale transfer of wealth via tax cuts from working people to the very rich.

Roosevelt was far from a perfect president, but he gave hope and a sense of the possible to a nation in dire need. And he famously warned against giving in to fear.

The nation is now in the hands of leaders who are experts at exploiting fear, and indifferent to the needs and hopes, even the suffering, of ordinary people.

"The test of our progress," said Roosevelt, "is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Sixty years after his death we should be raising a toast to F.D.R. and his progressive ideas. And we should take that opportunity to ask: How in the world did we allow ourselves to get from there to here?

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