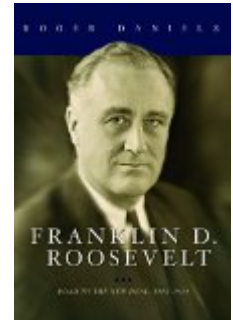


**Roger Daniels.** *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Road to the New Deal, 1882-1939.* University of Illinois Press, 2015. pp \$34.95, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-252-03951-5.



**Reviewed by** Bianca Rowlett

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**Commissioned by** Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

Daniels, a well-respected and prolific contributor to the historiography of American society and politics in the twentieth century, has successfully embarked upon an intellectual journey into the world of one of the United States' most important historical figures: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Driven by his own experience of having lived through the Roosevelt presidency, along with his years of educating students about the policies of America's longest-seated president, Daniels took on the ambitious project of writing a political biography of FDR. He relies largely on FDR's own words in speeches, public papers, and interviews, along with the writings, recollections, biographies, and autobiographies of those who worked closely with the president, while also frequently referencing other well-known biographical accounts. Accordingly, Daniels's work largely ignores the personal and family life of Roosevelt: "Despite a professional lifetime spent reading, writing, and, above all, thinking about Franklin D. Roosevelt," Daniels writes, "I have not the slightest notion of what his inner essence was like" (p.

xiv). Indeed, he points out that for a man who appeared to be quite outgoing and forthright to the public, Roosevelt remained an enigma when it came to the struggles and triumphs of his personal life. Moreover, it is important to note that Daniels's work is focused primarily on American domestic politics. Foreign affairs, though touched upon at times, are largely placed on the back burner and are somewhat relegated to one chapter of the book. However, this goes along nicely with Daniels's overall goals, which are to trace the evolution of FDR's political thought and to clarify how the president was able to achieve liberal results with his New Deal in a fairly conservative political environment (p. xiii).

Daniels begins with the ancestral roots of the Roosevelt family and provides a brief narrative of the future president's early life before quickly moving on to his tenure as assistant secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson and his nomination as vice-president on the Democratic Party's ticket in 1920. Shortly after retiring from the federal government and losing the 1920 election,

Roosevelt contracted polio. Daniels does a splendid job throughout the book of discussing the effects of the disease on the president, along with highlighting how FDR worked to bring attention to the malady, raise money for research, and provide aid to the victims of polio, many of whom, being less fortunate than Roosevelt, might not have been able to afford proper medical care and appropriate therapy. Daniels notes that the reader must bear in mind that in every circumstance “this is the story of a man who could not move freely and had to be transported almost everywhere he went” (p. 58). Despite his physical impairments, FDR remained active in Democratic Party politics throughout the 1920s, and in 1928 he was elected governor of the state of New York.

Unlike many Roosevelt scholars, Daniels does not view Governor Roosevelt as a New Dealer; rather, he maintains that FDR’s platform was progressive in nature. The governor called for an eight-hour workday, the establishment of a minimum wage board, the extension of workmen’s compensation, and state financing for the care and rehabilitation of the handicapped. Though FDR worked on public power projects, talked about relief for farmers and unemployment insurance, and advocated old age security—all programs that he would use as models for national projects as president—Daniels points out that at least throughout his first term as governor, FDR believed that such programs were the sole prerogative of the individual states and not the federal government.

Yet although Roosevelt was still far from being a “New Dealer” during his tenure as governor of New York, his actions and experiences in Albany certainly foreshadowed his presidential governing style. First, the New York House of Representatives was dominated by Republicans, thus allowing FDR to develop conciliatory political skills that would be of vital importance once he entered the White House. In addition, while governor, Roosevelt relied heavily upon a number of aca-

demics and experts to help shape and lobby for legislation. “This was the way Roosevelt preferred to get his information,” Daniels writes. “On a crucial question, such as public power, he would grill a variety of experts until he felt that he had a thorough understanding of the problem and the ramifications of this or that policy” (p. 81). Moreover, the governor began the practice of giving his subordinates a long leash when it came to formulating and implementing policies, a custom that allowed for creativity, as well as the characteristic improvisation associated with Roosevelt’s future New Deal, while also providing him with plausible deniability should resulting policies come under attack.

The bulk of Daniels’s work focuses on the first two terms of the Roosevelt presidency, specifically his liberal accomplishments through New Deal legislation. Daniels maintains that Roosevelt presided over the reversal of the great economic decline ushered in by the Depression and transformed the nature of American government to the extent that once the economy recovered in the 1940s “nothing even resembling a depression, as opposed to a recession, took place for some six decades” (p. 131). Though many associate the bank holidays, the end of prohibition, and the Economy Act with FDR, such changes were either proposed or brought about under the Hoover Administration. Thus, Daniels asserts that the New Deal was born with the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Following his discussion of the AAA, Daniels examines the multitude of policies initiated by FDR and passed by Congress during the first hundred days of his administration, including the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Securities Act, the Glass-Steagall Act, the National Industrial Recovery Act, and various smaller pieces of legislation such as the Home Owners’ Loan Cooperation. In his assessment of the first hundred days, Daniels claims that FDR won the hearts and minds of many Americans, demonstrated his ability to dominate Congress

with relative ease, and drafted a great deal of important legislation with great efficiency. He also argues that the bulk of these laws aided the middle classes and not the working poor.

After providing an analysis of the president, his staff, and congressional debates concerning the legislation of the first hundred days, Daniels continues to focus on New Deal legislation while highlighting FDR's appointment of women, minorities, and non-Protestants to government positions. He offers a thorough examination of the Public Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the creation of the Natural Resources Board, the Rural Electrification Program, the Social Security Act, and the government's efforts to deal with the Dust Bowl, along with less controversial legislation such as the creation of the Federal Communications Commission, limited gun control measures, and the Reciprocal Tariff Act. In the realm of foreign affairs, Daniels devotes one chapter to diplomacy between 1933 and 1936. Here he highlights the Good Neighbor Policy, including the end of the Platt Amendment in Cuba and troop withdrawals from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union, the Tydings-McDuffie Act which promised Philippine independence in the next decade, the Neutrality Acts, and FDR's relations with other American states.

Historiographical debates concerning FDR's presidency are numerous and Daniels does not shy away from engaging in several of these debates. For instance, Daniels maintains that FDR did not fully embrace Keynesian economics, writing that "before 1938-1939 Roosevelt spent when he had to but remained committed to the ideal of a balanced budget" (p. 186). Whereas many historians maintain that the New Deal was implemented in two distinct phases, Daniels disagrees. Throughout his work, Daniels relies heavily upon the speeches, interviews with, and written records left by Roosevelt, and, according to Daniels "Roosevelt himself never suggested that

there was more than one New Deal" (p. 219). Historians also argue over Roosevelt's position on race along with the New Deal's impact on African Americans. Daniels praises the president for appointing African Americans to government jobs and starting a dialogue with the black community, but asserts that as governor, Roosevelt ignored black New Yorkers and that it was not until his third term that one can see "transforming presidential action in race relations" (p. 338). Like most historians, Daniels remains highly critical of FDR's fight with the courts; however, unlike many of his peers, Daniels does not believe that the court debacle put the brakes on New Deal legislation. Nor does Daniels agree with some historians' assertions that FDR's failed attempt to purge recalcitrant Democratic senators in 1938 put an end to the New Deal.

Overall, Daniels achieved his goal of providing a thorough political biography of FDR from his birth up to 1939. The book is well organized, well researched, and well written, and Daniels does a wonderful job of engaging with the ongoing historiography of the time period. That said, the work feels unfinished. Perhaps this has to do with his decision to cut off the biography in 1939. On the one hand, ending the work in 1939 makes sense given the domestic and international changes that occurred thanks to the outbreak of World War II. However, FDR remained president of the United States until 1945 and his leadership, both at home and abroad, throughout the course of World War II merits attention. It is this reviewer's hope that Professor Daniels is working on a second volume on FDR. Should he publish another installment, I would certainly purchase it.

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