CHAPTER 2

THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC OFFICE, 1910–1917

The years 1910–1917 were a time of great change for FDR, as he left the private world of a Hudson Valley patrician and businessman for the public life of a politician. Initial success as a Democrat in New York led to service in the Wilson administration and relocation to Washington. Although his wife Eleanor brooded about the amount she and the children saw of FDR, the excitement of a political career and ambitions of public power increasingly drew him away from family contentment and responsibilities. FDR’s move into the public and political sphere also brought new experiences and challenges that had the potential to transform his views on international relations.

The old families of the Hudson Valley did not traditionally engage in politics, viewing it with a mixture of revulsion, fear, and contempt. Competing for votes was deemed unseemly, unprincipled, and vulgar—unworthy of a gentleman and against every ideal they held dear. The distaste for the grubby world of electoral politics was still strong when FDR entered public life and he experienced the first slurs of a lifelong accusation that he was a “traitor to his class.” His mother recalled that she was one of the few in her milieu who encouraged and supported her son’s political ambitions. Social mores were changing, however, and entering the struggle of politics and leadership was increasingly accepted, provided the right posture was adopted. TR, in his presidential career, was an important model of form for FDR in this respect.

FDR’s upbringing and background was hardly an appealing “log cabin” heritage guaranteed to attract the electorate. The Republican Poughkeepsie Eagle noted his patrician origins on his nomination as state senate candidate in...
1910, commenting: “Presumably his contribution to the campaign funds goes well above four figures—hence the value of his discovery.” Josephus Daniels viewed FDR’s schooling at Groton as “one of the worst things that could happen to a man who wants to be a Democratic candidate” and graduation from Harvard, “that bastion of conservative and Republican ideas,” as the second worst. The difficulties arising from FDR’s later contraction of polio was rated a poor fourth in Daniels’ analysis of his assistant’s prospects. FDR was well aware of the political handicap arising from his background; it proved a sore point and a source of constant worry to him. In a letter to Daniels about a proposed naval training cruise for members of the public in 1916 he wrote:

I fear you have some kind of an idea that the cruise will be taken advantage of only by college boys, rich young men, well-to-do yachtsmen [sic], etc. I want to remind you of the fact that I have twice been elected to office in a fairly large and cosmopolitan kind of district and that I can rightly claim to be in touch with every element in the community.

Both Daniels and FDR were heavily involved in programs to eliminate class prejudice against enlisted men in the navy and the improvement of living standards, education, and promotion prospects for them. Yet even after serving in the administration for three years, FDR still felt it necessary to restate his democratic credentials to his boss.

A desire to counteract the handicap of his background may have influenced FDR’s choice of political party at a time when the Republicans were commonly perceived as the party of special privilege. FDR’s partisan sympathies are often portrayed as somewhat amorphous and unprincipled in his youth. His allegiances did seem to flit from side to side as if trying to find a safe home at this time and TR, it is argued, proved an irresistible draw for his fifth cousin. In October 1900, FDR joined the Harvard Republican Club and supported the McKinley-Roosevelt ticket in a torchlight parade. He even placed his first vote in a presidential election for TR and attended his inaugural in March 1905.

Yet FDR’s very first vote was as a Democrat in the off-year election of 1903. Historian Frank Freidel has argued that FDR chose, like many of his generation, to follow the politics of his father and there is probably much truth in this, though FDR erroneously claimed that his father had always been a Democrat and the family had long been that way. It is unlikely that FDR’s father James, a Democrat, could have supported William Jennings Bryan, considered a dangerous radical by many, in 1896, and he even campaigned for TR as governor of New York in 1898. TR was more likely an acceptable temporary alternative to Bryan for FDR and his father until a more suitable candidate was chosen by the Democrats.