



# FDR

Questions I wish  
you could answer

BY AVA ROOSEVELT

Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in the arms of his longtime companion Lucy Mercer Rutherford on April 12, 1945, leaving an immeasurable nationwide void that hasn't been fulfilled to this day. Eleanor Roosevelt, his wife, was absent. His legacy can be summed up with *The New York Times'* poll taken during his first term, which placed God as his distant second.



**Q. I wonder what it felt like to be the epicenter of the universe for millions worldwide, the only beacon of hope amidst the despair of the U.S. Depression. What did it take to carry on all the expectations placed upon you, especially while braving your own health challenges? How did you manage to conceal doubt and keep your**

**laughing-poker face? Did you give the credit for appearing perpetually invincible to your mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, who idolized you?**

At the time of his death I wasn't born, yet FDR's heritage had a profound impact on my country of origin, Poland, a geographically controversial battleground of omnipotent neighbors who shifted borders to satisfy their religious and political expansions for centuries. A Treaty of Yalta was signed by FDR, Churchill and Stalin two months before his death.

A casualty of FDR's misguided trust in Stalin and abandoned by the Allies, post-Yalta Poland suffered immeasurable consequences, but as a nation it has given its all to defeat the Nazis. At Stalin's insistence, not one dollar of the Marshall Plan's millions was spent on its reconstruction.

With three signature strokes, Poland was transformed into a Soviet-controlled satellite state. Sadly, history repeated itself.

I never cease to wonder if there was another way. Would the outcome be different if you were well? You didn't live to see the consequences of Stalin's betrayal. And for that I am glad as I am certain it would have crushed your spirit and bruised your heart.



My future husband Bill Roosevelt was 7 years old at the time of his grandfather's death. His mother Elizabeth Donner Roosevelt and his father Elliott Roosevelt, FDR's son, divorced when Bill was 18 months old. Subsequently, each of his parents married four more times. I marvel

how such a disjointed childhood could have resulted in Bill becoming goodhearted, unpretentious and humble. Simply, a good person.

Citing various anecdotes from their times together at Val Kil and Hyde Park, I learned that Bill credited Eleanor, his beloved Grandmere, for being both his surrogate mother and father. Her influence had far-reaching consequences on Bill's upbringing, he told me. His work ethics, punctuality and deep sense of responsibility that stemmed from being a Roosevelt were apparent from the moment our fates collided on a rainy November 1980 in New York.

When a friend called and suggested that I take her place at a luncheon with Bill Roosevelt, I was reluctant. "Please, you must go," she pleaded. "I am still in Southampton and Bill already left his office." This was clearly a pre-cell-phone moment.

I must admit curiosity took the better of me. I put aside my feelings, shared with almost all Poles, as they had little to do with FDR's grandson, I reasoned, and braved the freezing wind. I entered Arcadia, a fashionable bistro on East 63rd Street, my feet were soaked.

Bill Roosevelt, sporting a three-piece suit, rose to greet me. His kind, passionate eyes spelled trust with a hint of mischief. When I shook his hand, FDR became real. Bill's resemblance to Eleanor was uncanny.

"I bet something happened to Barbara, again!" Bill laughed. "Who might you be? What a nice surprise."

"I am here to tell you Barbara isn't coming," I said, preparing to leave the restaurant.

"Please stay."

I did stay, utterly charmed by Bill's unassuming manner.

Later, on the way back to my office, Bill invited me for dinner.

"I am not sure."

"Why not?"

"I am Polish. Given what your grandfather did at Yalta...I don't think I can."

Bill gently took my hand. "My grandfather had brain cancer which affected his thinking. He was out maneuvered by Stalin. Forgive him. I'll make it up to you." He did so for 20 happily married years until his untimely death in 2003.

During the course of our marriage, we often visited Hyde Park. The proximity of Sara's room to Franklin and Eleanor's bedroom defied any level of privacy and mystified me beyond measure.





*Standing left to right:  
James Roosevelt,  
Elliott Roosevelt, Eleanor  
Roosevelt, Curtis B. Dall  
(Anna's Husband), John  
Aspinwall Roosevelt,  
Elizabeth Donner  
Roosevelt and Franklin  
D. Roosevelt, Jr.*

*Seated left to right:  
James Roosevelt's wife  
Betsy Cushing Roosevelt  
and her daughter Sara  
Delano Roosevelt, FDR's  
mother Sara Delano  
Roosevelt, President  
Franklin D. Roosevelt.  
Woman seated on floor,  
Anna Roosevelt.*

**Q. You must have been keenly aware that your mother's constant presence would eventually carve a canyon-deep division in your marriage? Did you notice Eleanor's despair and isolation, when in the early years, she had little to say in matters other than childbearing?**

To me as a woman, the absence of Eleanor at the time of FDR's death speaks volumes about a man who changed the landscape of the nation, and that of the world we know, who evoked love and admiration everywhere he appeared, yet who seemed unable to remain intimate with the one person who loved him most, his wife.

FDR's indiscretion with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor's social secretary, satisfied Eleanor's greatest fears and broke her heart. She was never able to forgive him.

**Q. Why did you carry Lucy's letters, did you desire to be found out?**

FDR's omnipotence, his great looks and personality made him easy prey. All a woman had to do was to admire him. Eleanor knew it to be true.

**Q. Did you ever wonder what it felt like to be living, waiting for your affairs to actually materialize?**

To her credit and in the face of FDR's prominence, Eleanor realized that sharing him was a matter of personal and political survival and catapulted her to becoming the most influential woman of the twentieth century.

Recently, millions of Americans watched Ken Burn's brilliant portrayal of The Roosevelts, a chronical of America's greatest political family of which I am proudly a part. Sadly, I never met Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, but knew well Bill's father Elliott Roosevelt. Today, I am close to his children, David Roosevelt and his wife Manuela, Chandler Roosevelt Lindsley, Tony Roosevelt and his wife Joan and their families.

Over 70 years ago, FDR, Churchill and Stalin led the world into a war to obliterate the Nazis, one clearly defined enemy, and they prevailed.

Today, Obama, Cameron and Putin are waging a battle with faceless terrorists, geopolitically dispersed and mushrooming in a reign of extremism, unified by increasing loathing of everything we hold dear. No clear solution or end-result are in sight and it might not be found for decades to come.

**Q. What advice would you give our leaders today?**

On October 9th, 1941, FDR approved development of an atomic bomb. At the dawn of the nuclear age, the United States hoped to maintain a monopoly on its new weapon. Today, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, India, Israel, and Pakistan possess nuclear arsenals.

**Q. As a father of the atomic age, would you repeat today President Truman's decision which effectively ended World War II?**

I pray the unthinkable doesn't ever occur, but it keeps me awake. I know I am not alone wishing you were here to guide us in the face of multi-regional conflicts which conceivably could become World War III. ●