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## Book Review: FDR Fireside Chats — Perspectives on American History from Presidents Washington to Biden

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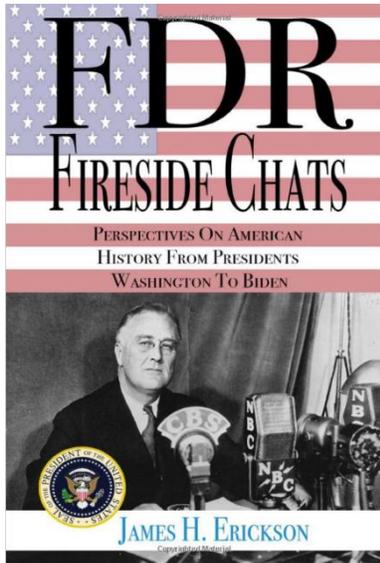
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**Title:** *FDR Fireside Chats – Perspectives on American History from Presidents Washington to Biden*

**Author:** James H. Erickson, Emeritus Vice Chancellor of the University of California

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**Reviewer:** Elizabeth F. R. Gingerich

### History ... with a Twist

With the growing political and social polarization in the United States (and frankly throughout certain regions in the world), predominantly between members of the Democratic and the Republican parties, there appears to be little encouraging news of compromise and a return to much yearned-for civility – seemingly of yesteryear. The author of *FDR Fireside Chats, Perspectives on American History from Presidents Washington to Biden*, James H. Erickson, provides a unique approach in attempting to bridge the schism in American politics and within American communities. He examines salient historical events demarcating presidential administrations, from George Washington to Joe Biden, covering times of peace as well as eras marked by great turbulence and turmoil. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (FDR’s) presidency began with early years of The Great Depression and ended with the concluding months of World War II, radio addresses were given on a semi-regular basis to the American public (a total of 31 addresses within a 4422-day presidential period). These “Fireside Chats” were FDR’s main tool to connect to the country’s citizenry to present the relevant issues of the day and attempt to explain the context and primary purposes of his policies. By examining the multiple banking crises and New Deal initiatives, FDR’s broadcasts were designed to help the country restore the strength and integrity of its workforce and economy. The author applies this FDR technique to what FDR might say to both previous and future presidents. Unlike the original “chats,” these exchanges involve discussion, engaging the addressee in a question-and-answer format and noting what might be their replies. These “chats” are premised upon imagined dialog with his peers.

The author’s approach to conveying history is to highlight the best of how our presidents have served, but largely downplay and even exempt much of the incompetence, debauchery, and inhumanity of many of these same men. Perhaps this approach was adopted to combat the

misinformation and disinformation of our current time which has sadly comprised traditional tenets of human civility and mutual respect. Unlike the 24-news cycle of today, FDR's radio chats at that time in history had the advantage of not showing the person but rather relied upon the spoken word. There was no marketing or gimmickry. With the peer chats used in this book, the author attempts to amalgamate the best policies in presidential history and delineate lessons learned. By examining the collective wisdom of America's leaders and noting many of the multi-faceted traits of each elected leader, both past and present, we are given insight as to the best way forward

These individual vignettes not only reveal the history of the development of our nation, they show the personal prowess of each president. For example, the conversation with Harry Truman reveals that Truman was not just the person in charge at the time of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima to end WWII, but was an obstinate figure who refused to take any gifts as acknowledgment of his leadership position. These discussions also convey messages to corporate CEOs as well as to our youngest generation about possibilities and well-rationed behavior. Truman wanted to emphasize that the seat was sacred and not for sale, that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and that some acts should be avoided at all costs.

While it was Truman who dropped the atomic bombs that was the catalyst for ending World War II, it was Dwight Eisenhower who was appointed by FDR as Supreme Allied Commander during World War II. World peace and national security were always put above party politics under the Eisenhower administration. He revealed the depth and the extreme horror of Hitler's concentration camps. These ethereal conversations attempt to rise above party differences.

As pleasant as these conversations appear to be, there seems to be an intentional redaction of historical failures. The often-maligned Herbert Hoover, usually blamed for the Great Depression, is somewhat relieved of this burden by FDR who emphasizes that it was Truman who invited Hoover to serve as coordinator of the food supply drive to combat world famine, thereby providing a bridge between those two administrations.

The author – through FDR – extols the virtues of each presidential “servant.” For instance, he praises Calvin Coolidge as the silent, quiet, dignified type who fought for less government and more insurance accountability. And whereas Warren G. Harding had been traditionally tied to the Teapot Dome Scandal marked by taking bribes, he is partially exonerated as several of his cabinet members are marked as particularly blameworthy. Harding is praised for advancing women's right to vote as well as supporting the rights of Blacks. With John F. Kennedy (JFK), the emphasis was on the repercussions of his famous quote, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” as well as the importance of working with new programs to restore the economy. With Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), the accolades concerned overcoming differences to deal with the advancement of civil rights and the importance of a tireless work ethic. Much less attention is given, however, to his strained relationships with Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK). LBJ's involvement with the Vietnam War was missing from this dialogue and noticeably absent from the chat with Richard Nixon.

Other notable mentions include the following:

- Gerald Ford was praised for being a uniter but somewhat chastised for his absolute pardon of President Nixon.

- Carter was praised more for his post-presidency efforts concerning his work with Habitat for Humanity. The failed Iranian hostage rescue was noted.
- More pointed fault was directed to Ronald Reagan in terms of his handling of the Iran Contra Affair; he was lauded, however, with respect to his challenge of former Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall.
- George H. W. Bush was listed as UN ambassador - chief liaison to China and former CIA director.
- Woodrow Wilson was applauded for his intelligence and rightly admonished for his failure to tackle race relations (Wilson is given credit for his handling of WWII – this must have been a reference to WWI as he died in 1924 or should have been a statement credited to FDR).
- Bill Clinton was described as a pragmatic progressive. While chastised for womanizing, he was praised for his civil rights initiatives in the advancement of race relations.
- George W. Bush was commended for his handling of the events on September 11, 2001 as well as for his appointments of General Colin Powell and Dr. Condoleezza Rice, however, no mention is made for the underassessed events leading up to 9/11 nor the millions of people killed or displaced in Iraq after the perpetuation of false information leading to that invasion.
- Barack Obama's discussion seemed to praise FDR more than highlight his own achievements. Nothing was said during this chat referencing the passage of the Affordable Care Act which brought critical coverage to millions of American citizens and sustained orchestrated and repeated challenges from the GOP. Also, nothing is mentioned during the talk about his evolution in promoting rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and his support of the *Obergefell* (same-sex rights) case in 2015 (which now is under threat).
- With current President Joe Biden, it was simply too early to assess strengths and weaknesses. His personal tragedies and his appointment of Kamala Harris were noted, and he was praised for restoring America's international standing as well as his pandemic response.
- Jumping ahead to Andrew Jackson – while his poor record with the American Indian population was mentioned, the full-blown tragedy of the Trail of Tears was downplayed. The author incorrectly states that this president was not impeached. He was – just not convicted in the Senate ... by just one vote.

Where any praise could not be tolerated by this reviewer stemmed from the contrived discourse with Donald Trump. His tenacity in pursuing the highest office in the world was lauded, but was nothing more than sick braggadocio. His attraction to the American electorate was nothing more than an affinity with misogynists and white supremacists. He used his position to produce tax cuts for the richest while subjecting the poor to further hardship. And any strength shown in the world was nothing more than one man's pursuit of financial gain – primarily in Russia. His advocacy of splitting families at the border will leave a legacy of heartlessness and cruelty throughout the world. And while he did push for a COVID vaccine, he put hundreds of thousands of lives in jeopardy with talk of taking bleach and other unconventional treatments and of ignoring simple preventative measures. And of course, there is the coup against America's democratic system... .

While usually an advocate of the “glass half-full” outlook, any positive references invoked during the particular discussion with Trump produced a sense of incredulity. During his tenure, two Supreme Court Justices were essentially stolen with the help of the GOP majority. We are now witnessing the consequences of this with reproductive rights being stripped from women; with gun rights being expanded at a time when mass shootings have reached a horrific crescendo; where affirmative action is predicted to die within the coming year; and where EPA powers in tackling climate change have been eviscerated. One wonders what might be happening in this country if there were more credentialed female leaders at the helm. Thankfully, some of the positive influences of former First Ladies Michelle Obama and Eleanor Roosevelt were highlighted in an extended discussion towards the end of the book, which focused on topics such as race relations, civil rights, the economy, and America’s standing in the world.

For this writer, compliments are important and appropriate when warranted. Civility and respect are imperative, but a true test of moral leadership is typically guided by truth and accountability.

— Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor-in-Chief