In 1937, the story goes, an eminent psychiatrist died. He went to heaven and appeared at the pearly gates.

"We've been waiting for you," said Saint Peter. "We're worried about God. He seems to be suffering from delusions of grandeur. He thinks He's Franklin D. Roosevelt."

The nation's only four-term president, Roosevelt was a popular -- and polarizing -- politician. Tens of millions of Americans hailed him as the savior of democracy and capitalism during the Great Depression and World War II.

A not inconsequential minority, however, spat at "Franklin J. Rosenfeld and the Jew Deal." They insisted that the president was a would-be dictator who had betrayed American traditions of individualism, free enterprise, private property and laissez-faire small government.

H.W. Brands, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, provides a graceful account of this complex, controversial, political genius who, everyone agrees, changed the course of history.

Well-researched and exquisitely detailed, Brands' effort does not ignore Roosevelt's foibles and failures, personal and public. He was a lousy husband, a philanderer, and devious and deceptive even in dealings with members of his own administration.

As president, he was willing to eviscerate judicial checks and balances in his plan to add additional friendly justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, and acquiescent in the detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

But Brands is a fan. He endorses the view of most professional historians that Roosevelt was the greatest president of the 20th century.

The Depression, he claims, was "too large and complex for any elected official to conquer," but Brands celebrates what Roosevelt wrought.

The president's refusal to bow to the mythic "invisible hand" of the marketplace inspired federal government initiatives from banking reform to public works to Social Security "that had a tremendous positive effect on millions of marginal farmers,
furloughed workers and struggling merchants."

Perhaps most important, Brands writes, as have so many before him, Roosevelt "banished the despair the Depression had engendered."

He reminds us that most Americans approved of the New Deal enough to retain substantial components of it when prosperity returned.

As the economy boomed in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, he adds, with some exaggeration, the more "objective and honest" cohort of wealthy Americans, who had denounced Roosevelt for betraying his class, recognized that "he was the best thing that could have happened to them."

On foreign policy, Brands gives Roosevelt even higher marks. While many of his fellow citizens remained isolationists, the president concluded that the United States must assume responsibility for the defeat of Germany and Japan.

As a democrat with a small 'd,' he guided public opinion, patiently, if at times deceptively, "until the leader became the led and the country demanded what he had wanted -- what he knew the country needed -- all along."

Without Roosevelt to mediate between Churchill and Stalin, "the alliance might have splintered before the Axis did."

A doer rather than a thinker, Roosevelt was not much given to self-reflection. He rarely confided in anyone. And so, Brands speculates, not always persuasively, about his motives.

He guesses, for example, that Roosevelt observed the German invasion of Poland with a "feeling of helpless irresponsibility," even though such a feeling seems alien to the president's temperament.

And he posits, without evidence, that the president, "an egalitarian at heart," might have desegregated the armed forces "had politics and war not constrained him."

With the current meltdown on Wall Street, many of us have grown interested in the Great Depression and the New Deal. We're wondering, perhaps, if by looking backward, we can peer into the future.

"Traitor to His Class" provides a timely reminder that even after the Reagan Revolution, we live in the shadow of Franklin D. Roosevelt -- and might thank our lucky stars if we see his like again.

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