

THE FIRESIDE CHATS

During the 1930s, well before the advent of television, some 90 percent of American households owned a radio. Seeing the potential of mass media to communicate directly and intimately with the public, Roosevelt would give around 30 total radio addresses from March 1933 to June 1944. The topics he spoke about ranged from domestic issues such as the economic policies of the New Deal, drought and unemployment, to Europe's battle with fascism and American military progress in Europe and in the Pacific during World War II.

Roosevelt was not actually sitting beside a fireplace when he delivered the speeches, but behind a microphone-covered desk in the White House. Reporter Harry Butcher of CBS coined the term "fireside chat" in a press release before one of Roosevelt's speeches on May 7, 1933. The name stuck, as it perfectly evoked the comforting intent behind Roosevelt's words, as well as their informal, conversational tone. Roosevelt took care to use the simplest possible language, concrete examples and analogies in the fireside chats, to be clearly understood by the largest number of Americans. He began many of the nighttime chats with the greeting "My friends," and referred to himself as "I" and the American people as "you" as if addressing his listeners directly and personally.

In many of the speeches, Roosevelt invoked memories of the Founding Fathers, Abraham Lincoln or other inspirational figures from America's past. "The Star Spangled Banner" was played after each chat ended, underlining that patriotic message. Finally, the president appealed to God or Providence at the end of almost every speech, urging the American people to face the difficult tasks ahead with patience, understanding and faith. Through depression and war, the reassuring nature of the fireside chats boosted the public's confidence (and Roosevelt's approval rates) and undoubtedly contributed to his unprecedented number of election wins.

