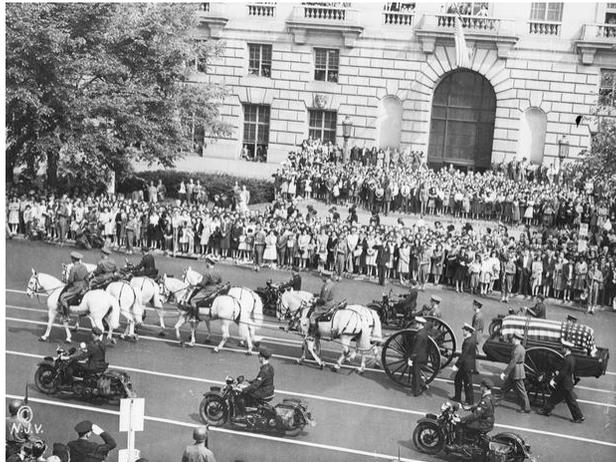


# Radio Coverage of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Funeral (April 14, 1945)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

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*President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Funeral*

After years of wartime news events providing interruptions to scheduled programs, Americans were almost used to the repeated occurrence. But few expected the shocking news reporting the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945.

***FDR's Death:*** On Thursday evening, March 29, 1945, FDR had escaped the pressures of Washington, DC, heading south by train to the slower and calmer tempo of his “Little White House” in Warm Springs, Georgia. There, surrounded by a small group of family members and long-term friends, he sought to rebuild his energy for a planned appearance at the San Francisco conference that would found the United Nations.

It was not to be. After about a week of relaxing, including short motor trips nearby, FDR sat for sessions with a portrait painter. Then, just before lunch on Thursday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, he suffered a fatal stroke, dying a few hours later, at age 63. The first radio news flashes went out that afternoon. The next day, a slow procession by train bore the president’s body back north, first to Washington and then to his funeral at home in Hyde Park, NY. Radio reported its sad way.

***Godfrey's Role:*** FDR would be in Washington only briefly--about five hours laying in state in the White House’s East Room. What is remembered as his “funeral” was the brief procession from Washington’s Union Station to the White House and his brief laying in state.

Arthur Godfrey (1903-1983) was already a 15-year local radio veteran when, based on his role as the network’s morning man in the nation’s capital, he was added to CBS Radio's team of journalists covering the FDR procession taking place on Saturday, April 14<sup>th</sup>. Positioned near the White House, overlooking the procession’s route, Godfrey gave a detailed and emotionally-wrought description, including of the caisson carrying the President's body. He was providing

what in sports events today is often termed “color,” describing for those unable to see them, the people in the procession as well as those watching it go by, the overall scene, and some of the events of FDR’s brief, final stopover in Washington.

But the strain of appearing comfortable in his role was evident. “God give me strength to do this,” he was overheard to say off air. As President Truman’s car drove into sight toward the end of the procession, Godfrey finally choked and then broke down on the air, quickly returning listeners to the studio. His reaction was surely an emotional evocation of what many radio listeners shared.

**Impact:** Although Godfrey was embarrassed by his emotional incident covering the procession, it clearly did not impede his later success. If anything, the opposite took place. CBS recognized how audiences identified with him and the network offered him a slot as host of a national morning program based in New York City. From there, he built a national following on radio, and then television, over the next decade. Indeed, just as he had shown on air that day in 1945, Godfrey developed a career building on an image of a broadcasting “everyman,” able to communicate easily with all types. He’s honored with no less than three stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles: one for radio, one for television, and one for recording.

As with such more recent events as the 9/11 attacks in 2001, everyone who lived through FDR’s death long after remembered exactly where they were when they first heard the news. Many also thought they could recall the funeral, and Godfrey’s narration, though that was not the case—there was no state funeral for FDR in DC, only a private funeral at the White House and this brief public procession on Roosevelt’s final journey to Hyde Park. But, in the days before television, the human voice often shined in people’s memories.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

## **Sources**

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