

Q37 – The President of the United States can serve only two terms. Why?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:

The Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution limits the president of the United States to two terms of four years.

The amendment was adopted after the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt – the only president to seek more than two terms. Roosevelt was elected to his first term in 1932, during the depths of the Great Depression: the worst economic catastrophe in our history. He was overwhelmingly re-elected in 1936.

As Roosevelt neared the end of his second term, Europe had plunged into World War II. Roosevelt decided he would run for an unprecedented third term on two conditions: If the war in Europe worsened, and if his party nominated him.

In the spring of 1940, the war did worsen. In a matter of weeks, Adolf Hitler had conquered Western Europe. That summer, Democrats re-nominated FDR – and in November he won.

In 1944, with America at war in both Europe and the Pacific, Roosevelt ran a fourth time, and won again. He died in April 1945 – only a few months into his term.

FDR's tenure revived the Framers' fears of a lifetime president: a king by another name. And in 1951, the people ratified the Twenty-second Amendment – limiting presidents to two terms.