

## History of Red Cross Month

*"I request that during that month (March) our people rededicate themselves to the splendid aims and activities of the Red Cross."*

--President Franklin D. Roosevelt, first Presidential Proclamation of March as Red Cross Month, 1943

Each year the president of the United States proclaims March "Red Cross Month." The American Red Cross uses this opportunity to promote its services to the American public and for fund raising. How did this tradition come about?

For the first quarter century of its existence, the Red Cross held no regular fund-raising drives. Since Clara Barton created the organization in 1881, it was largely dependent for publicity and funds on the spontaneous support of people who learned of catastrophic events and the Red Cross response to them. News of an event broke, the American Red Cross rushed to the scene with help, and people around the country came forth with outpourings of volunteer assistance and with donations of funds and supplies.

This rather haphazard manner of operating changed abruptly in 1917, when the United States entered World War I. After declaring war, President Wilson ordered the American Red Cross to raise funds to support its aid to the military and civilians affected by war, as Congress had mandated. In response, the Red Cross held its first national War Fund drive in June 1917 and set as its goal \$100 million, an astoundingly large sum at the time. Under the circumstances, however, the public response was immediate and overwhelming. Within a few days, more than \$115 million was raised. Then in December 1917, the Red Cross held its first "Christmas Roll Call." People were asked to give a minimum of \$1 to join the organization's membership rolls. This drive also proved highly successful, as did an additional War Fund drive and another Roll Call in 1918, the last year of the war.

After the war, the Red Cross decided to make the Roll Call an annual membership and fund-raising drive. In addition, it conducted special appeals from time to time in response to major disasters, such as the Dust Bowl drought of the early 1930s and periodic flooding on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

In November 1941, with war in Europe, the Red Cross conducted a highly successful 25th Annual Roll Call. A few days later the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II. As it had done in the previous World War, the Red Cross responded immediately by declaring a War Fund campaign. By June 1942, it had raised more than \$66 million.

Rather than go back to the public with a third appeal in one year, the Red Cross decided to cancel its 1942 Roll Call. Instead, after discussions with President Roosevelt, the honorary chairman of the Red Cross, the whole month of March 1943 was declared "Red Cross Month." The Red Cross set a goal of \$125 million, the largest amount ever requested in one campaign by any American organization. Again, the response was overwhelming. It took less than six weeks to reach the target, and by June 1943 donations totaled nearly \$146 million. Roosevelt called it "The greatest single crusade of mercy in all of history."

This success caused the Red Cross to repeat the March drive during the remaining years of the war and then to make it the occasion of its annual membership and fund-raising efforts ever since. (As a historical footnote, the last radio speech President Roosevelt gave, a few days before his death, was in support of the 1945 Red Cross campaign.) As part of the tradition, the president customarily issues a proclamation each year declaring March as Red Cross Month.

### Useful quotes:

"I summon the men, women and young people of our country, in every city and town and village, in every county and state throughout the land, to enlist in the *army of mercy* mobilized under the banner of the Red Cross and to contribute generously to the Red Cross War Fund."

From first Proclamation by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1943

"No one can predict when the next river will flood or the next storm will hit. No one can foresee the next threat to the Nation's health. What is predictable is that we will face such threats and emergencies, and that *the American Red Cross will be there* to offer help and hope."

From 1987 Proclamation by President Ronald Reagan

"I request, as my predecessor Franklin Roosevelt did 58 years ago, that each American enlist in the Red Cross "army of mercy" — and give part of themselves to advance this organization's *noble humanitarian mission*."

From 2001 Proclamation by President George W. Bush