

The President and the Wheelchair

In the decades since Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, Americans have come to believe that FDR hid from the public the crippling effects of his polio. That myth about the man in the wheelchair says more about our own time than it does about his.

by Christopher Clausen

During his 12 years in the White House, Franklin D. Roosevelt was hardly ever photographed in a wheelchair. Not surprisingly, the longest-serving president in American history disliked drawing attention to his polio symptoms. He had been stricken suddenly by the disease in 1921, at age 39, seven years before he was elected governor of New York and 11 years before his first presidential campaign. Roosevelt took the stage on crutches at the 1924 Democratic National Convention to nominate New York governor Alfred E. Smith for president. Later, he learned to stand with leg braces and to walk for short distances with the assistance of crutches or—after he had recovered as completely as he would—a cane.

Once Roosevelt took the governor's office in Albany, four years later, the press corps was discouraged from photographing him being helped out of cars or otherwise exhibiting signs of physical dependence. When *Life* published a photo of him in a wheelchair in 1937, presidential press secretary Steve Early was displeased. Most stills and newsreels from Roosevelt's White House years show him seated (often in a car), gripping a lectern, or, frequently, clutching the arm of his son James. To compensate for the immobility of his legs, he developed his arms and upper body and used them effectively in his signature speaking style.

Fast-forward half a century. Although FDR had explicitly rejected the idea of a memorial, his admirers eventually succeeded in having one erected between the monuments to Lincoln

and Jefferson in Washington, D.C. It opened in 1997 to mixed reviews. While some commentators were enthusiastic, others felt that it was a bland, politically correct celebration not so much of the late president and his accomplishments as of the liberal pieties of the 1990s. Daniel Schorr, one of the few Washington journalists who could recall the New Deal, complained in *The New Leader* that "FDR is remembered for the cigarette holder he held between his teeth at a jaunty angle. You will not find that in any of the statues in the memorial. The argument is that if he had known what we know today about tobacco, he wouldn't have smoked." After noting that Eleanor Roosevelt's "trademark silver fox fur piece" is also never shown, Schorr asked, "Why does everybody with a cause seem to know that FDR and Eleanor today would be sharing that cause?"

But the biggest controversy was what Schorr dubbed "the great battle of the wheelchair." The committee that designed the memorial had acceded to Roosevelt's wish that he not be shown in one. Disability rights groups, however, demanded that the biases of his own time not be countenanced in ours. (The possibility that a proud man might have minimized his handicap as much to avoid pity as stigma did not seem to occur to them.) After President Bill Clinton announced that he felt both their pain and his late predecessor's, Congress authorized a bronze statue of FDR sitting proudly in the homemade wheelchair he had designed for himself, like a man who,



In a 1941 family snapshot, FDR holds his Scottish terrier, Fala, and chats with the daughter of his Hyde Park caretaker. Photos of the president in his wheelchair are scarce, but the public knew of his disability.

with superhuman effort, had rolled himself out of the closet of ancient prejudices and simultaneously kicked the tobacco habit.

At the dedication of the statue in early 2001, the air was thick with self-congratulation. “While Roosevelt hid his disability from the public during his lifetime, believing that the country wasn’t ready then to elect a wheelchair user as president, he nevertheless stayed in his chair when it was uplifting to particular audiences, such as when touring veterans’ hospitals,” proclaimed Michael Deland, chairman of the National Organization on Disability.

“It’s wonderful that the whole world will now know that President Roosevelt led this country to victory in World War II and through the Great Depression from his wheelchair.” Clinton echoed this view of the past, explaining, “He lived in a different time, when people thought being disabled was being unable.” The implication was that if FDR had had the good fortune to run for president today, his disability would have been no handicap at all.

But embracing this view of a tolerant present contrasted with a darker past requires negotiating a major obstacle: Americans of our

FDR's Handicap

grandparents' generation elected FDR to the presidency four times—twice during the worst depression in history and twice more during a world war. How could such unenlightened people have done a thing like this? The answer is simple: They must not have known what they were doing. His affliction must have been kept secret, hidden through two decades of public life from all but his intimates. As Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe put it in *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (2003), "Roosevelt's disability was carefully concealed not only from the media, and thus the public, but also from some members of his own family."

This assertion has been widely circulated in recent years. Since the 1985 publication of Hugh Gallagher's book, *FDR's Splendid Deception*, it has become conventional wisdom—even though Gallagher himself makes the more modest claim that the impact of polio on FDR's personality and motivation has been underestimated. This April, in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Roosevelt's death, both a History Channel documentary and an HBO drama offered accounts of how the complicated cover-up was supposedly carried off.

Press discussion of the films asserted even more positively that Roosevelt's ailment was kept under wraps. "FDR is being reimagined for television audiences in the very way he went to extraordinary lengths to hide," declared *The Los Angeles Times*, "as a polio survivor whose paralysis formed the core of his adult experience." The paper quoted the scriptwriter of the HBO movie, *Warm Springs*, as saying, "I wanted to out him as a disabled man." *The Columbus Dispatch* insisted, "Most Americans never knew of his disability. During his presidential years his polio wasn't even disclosed by the press." *The Washington Post* went further, attributing the New Deal itself to polio: "Because voters were unaware of Roosevelt's paralysis, he set out to project a can-do approach calculated to restore national self-confidence."

How much truth is there to these claims that most Americans knew little or nothing about their president's paralyzed legs until after his death? Such major historians as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and

Frank Freidel, writing in the 1950s when the Roosevelt administration was a comparatively recent memory, made no mention of such a secret. Their accounts treat his polio and its physical manifestations matter-of-factly, as if every well-informed person knew at least the essentials of his condition and had known at the time. As members of a generation less obsessed with health and youthful appearance than we are, perhaps they did not find it remarkable that a demonstrated ability to perform presidential duties was sufficient physical qualification in voters' eyes. The rite of exhibiting fitness for high office through frenetic athleticism didn't emerge until the administration of John F. Kennedy, whose general health, ironically, was much worse than FDR's.

Freidel discusses at length the ways in which the future president dealt with the disease and indicates that he was fortunate in his friends and supporters. Reacting early in the 1928 gubernatorial campaign to the Republican charge that paralysis made Roosevelt unfit for office, Al Smith, who had drafted the younger man to succeed him in Albany while he himself ran for president, snorted, "But the answer to that is that a governor does not have to be an acrobat. We do not elect him for his ability to do a double back-flip or a hand-spring." Indeed, Republicans soon stopped talking about Roosevelt's physical condition for fear of creating a sympathy vote for him.

Questions and rumors about Roosevelt's health naturally proliferated as his plans to run for president became evident. In July 1931, *Liberty* magazine, a weekly that claimed a circulation of 2.5 million, published an article headlined "Is Franklin D. Roosevelt Physically Fit to Be President?" The opening paragraph bluntly stated, "It is an amazing possibility that the next President of the United States may be a cripple. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Governor of the State of New York, was crippled by infantile paralysis in the epidemic of 1921 and still walks with the help of a crutch and a walking stick. Yet by all the political signs he will emerge as the Democratic nominee." Though the article made no mention of a wheelchair, it detailed Roosevelt's use of leg braces and fea-

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tured a photograph of him displaying them. Another photo showed him barelegged on the edge of the pool at Warm Springs, Georgia, where, he explained, “swimming in tepid water” gave him buoyancy and somewhat improved the feeling in his legs. As for his limited mobility, he portrayed it as an advantage on the job; it forced him to concentrate. “I don’t move about my office,” he was quoted as saying. “But I can and do move about the state.”

The article’s author was a self-described Republican journalist, Earle Looker, who (probably with the Roosevelt campaign’s encouragement) had challenged the prospective candidate to submit to a lengthy interview and to an examination by an orthopedist, a neurologist, and a general practitioner, to be chosen by the director of the New York Academy of Medicine. “A sound mind in a sound body,” Looker declared, “has more and more come to be a requirement for the Presidency. This is outside the legal requirements, but two recent breakdowns in office, those of Woodrow Wilson and Warren G. Harding . . . very pertinently raise the question whether or not Franklin Roosevelt is fit to be President.” Roosevelt eagerly accepted the challenge. In a moment of unintentional humor, when Looker asked whether he would be willing to sacrifice his “personal desires” to assume the burdens of the presidency, the candidate snapped, “The opportunity for service that the Presidency affords has not honestly been considered a personal sacrifice by anyone I have ever known or heard of who has had that opportunity.” The article also contained a now-famous quip from Eleanor Roosevelt: “If the paralysis couldn’t kill him, the presidency won’t.”

After following the governor through several exhausting workdays, Looker delivered a chirpy but essentially accurate judgment: “Insofar as I have observed him, I have come to the conclusion that he seemed able to take more punishment than many men ten years younger. Merely his legs were not much good to him.” The three doctors concurred: “We believe that his health and powers of endurance are such as to allow him to meet any demands of private and public life.” The Roosevelt campaign sent copies of the published article to every influential Democrat and county chairman in the country, as well as to others who expressed concern about the candidate’s

health. Looker soon expanded his piece into a popular campaign biography, *This Man Roosevelt* (1932), that painted an even more favorable picture of the candidate’s abilities and, like nearly all later biographies, attributed some of his most impressive qualities to his struggle with a crippling disease.

Liberty was by no means the only publication to scrutinize FDR’s polio as it related to his fitness for office. After he formally declared his candidacy, *Time* ran a sympathetic cover story on February 1, 1932, that described the onset of the disease in 1921. “Months later,” the magazine reported, “he arose to find his legs quite dead. This calamity he met with supreme courage and cheer.” In 1924, FDR discovered Warm Springs, then a down-at-heel spa resort. “After churning about in the pool, he found that his leg muscles felt a little stronger. Thereafter Warm Springs became his great hobby. He spent a large part of his personal fortune on developing the place into a sanatorium.” As for his present condition, *Time* summarized it judiciously:

Swimming at Warm Springs several months each year and special exercises at Albany have made it possible for the Governor to walk 100 feet or so with braces and canes. When standing at crowded public functions, he still clings precariously to a friend’s arm. Constitutionally he is sound as a nut and always has been. His affliction makes people come to him to transact business, saves him useless motion, enables him to get prodigious amounts of work done at a sitting. Governor Roosevelt is confident of ultimate total recovery. . . . Never have his crippled legs deterred him from going where he would.

Some secret. There you have all the essential information laid out with admirable succinctness and precision—the history of the disease, how it affected him after more than 10 years (with a clear distinction between the effects of polio and general health), complete with a slightly skeptical reference to the ingrained optimism that helped make FDR such an appealing leader—in time for voters to factor it in, if they wanted. It’s hard to imagine fuller disclosure.

References to FDR’s paralyzed legs did not end with his election. Faced with a manifestly



At a ceremony in 2001, President Bill Clinton, flanked by FDR's grandchildren Anna Eleanor Roosevelt and James Roosevelt, regards the controversial statue of the late president in his wheelchair.

energetic president in a time of national crisis, however, the press had more important things to cover. After the public rendered its verdict in 1932, his health was never a significant political issue again until the 1944 campaign, when he was visibly deteriorating. Then, the White House was indeed less than informative, but at issue were heart disease and exhaustion rather than polio. (One alarming sign, however, as *Time* noted, was that for a while he “virtually abandoned the uncomfortable braces which make walking possible for him and hold him up while standing.” A week later his chief physician reassured the press that the president was swimming again, adding that “the buoyancy of

the water enables him to walk and he gets exercise that he can't get any other way.”) In the countless attacks on a controversy-riddled administration, FDR's polio was rarely a target—not because it was taboo, but because it had ceased to be relevant. “It's not a story,” Early would answer when asked about the president's handicap, and he was largely right.

Making light of an affliction is not the same as denying it. Roosevelt aggressively identified himself with the cause of curing polio. As president-elect, according to *Time*, “At Worcester, Mass., Governor Roosevelt picked Catherine Murphy, 9, also a crip-

ple from infantile paralysis, to send at his own expense to Warm Springs, Ga., for treatment.” Starting with his 52nd birthday, in 1934, he promoted an annual series of nationwide “birthday balls” to raise money for polio treatment and research.

In 1938, his advocacy efforts culminated in a national radio address and media extravaganza to announce the creation of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, soon to become known as the March of Dimes. Press coverage was profuse and laudatory. *The New York Times* carried a story on page 1 and several more on page 3. *Life* featured pictures of the Hollywood stars who had participated. *Time* began its story with the lead, “Franklin Roosevelt is not only the nation’s No. 1 citizen but its No. 1 victim of infantile paralysis. He is not only President of the U.S. but president of the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation.” *Newsweek* ran a cover that showed polio sufferers in wheelchairs and a benevolent FDR sitting in his car lighting a cigarette, with the headline, “Paralysis war: Roosevelt’s gift becomes a national institution.” Like other publications, *Newsweek* recounted the by-then-familiar story of the president’s crippling infantile paralysis, his early experiences at Warm Springs, and the creation of the Warm Springs Foundation in 1927. Courting this kind of publicity was hardly the act of a man trying to distance himself from a stigma, let alone practice a deception.

Although he never abandoned the unrealistic hope of a complete recovery, as a candidate and as president Roosevelt was more candid about his health than Kennedy was in 1960 or former senator Paul Tsongas (who downplayed the lymphoma that later killed him) was in his 1992 run for the Democratic nomination. But even if he had been less forthright, how *could* such a secret have been kept? It would have required the collusion not only of the president’s associates and a supine press, but of thousands of people who met him in situations in which his paralysis was obvious or who had known about it before he became president. His worst political enemies would have had to conspire to keep quiet. The whole theory is wildly implausible.

Yet the myth will not die. Myths are immune to evidence, and the 21st centu-

ry has already enshrined this one in film and bronze. Like other myths, it reveals more about its believers than about its ostensible subject. At the dedication of FDR’s statue in 2001, his granddaughter, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, made the shrewd comment, “Memorials are for us. They aren’t necessarily for the people they memorialize.”

The new millennium’s nicotine-free FDR sits placidly in his wheelchair next to the Tidal Basin, as if contemplating the changes wrought by time. Americans who elected and re-elected him in the second quarter of the 20th century held some attitudes, particularly on race, that we rightly repudiate. But they were not fools, and they were not on the whole deceived about their president’s abilities or disability. Rather, they shared with him a notion of dignity and reserve that entailed suffering in silence, emphasizing what one *could* do instead of what one couldn’t. “Don’t stare” was the first rule of etiquette. At a time when everybody knew victims of polio and was at least somewhat familiar with its effects, discreet sympathy seemed the most appropriate and humane posture toward those with an affliction that remained all too common until the Salk vaccine (whose development had been largely funded by the March of Dimes) came into use a decade after FDR’s death.

This stoic observance of privacy has gradually come to seem obsolete over the past half-century. Subsequent political history and present-day attitudes make it amply clear that a man handicapped as Roosevelt was would stand no chance of reaching the White House today. In an age when pictures trump words, television would mercilessly fix in every viewer’s mind the very images of physical helplessness that FDR largely managed to avoid. Polio would drown out every other issue. The insistence that the voters who chose the greatest president of the 20th century must not have known the inspiring truth about him is simply one more example of the present misrepresenting the past to serve its own ends—in this case, a powerful need for assurance that, whatever our faults, we immeasurably surpass our forebears in the supreme contemporary virtue of tolerance. □