

A New Look at FDR:

DID HIS POLIO DISABLE HIM
OR ENABLE HIM TO
INSPIRE THE WORLD?



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Mr. Reich served as U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs from 1970-1975, and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for East-West Trade. Prior to his government service, Mr. Reich was an executive with Polaroid Corporation.

Mr. Reich holds a B.A. from Dartmouth College, an M.A. from Middlebury College Russian School, a diploma in Slavic languages and Eastern European Studies from Oxford University and an M.B.A. from Harvard University. He speaks five languages and holds honorary Doctorate of Laws degrees from Dartmouth College and Gallaudet University.

Mr. Reich served as an officer in the U.S. Army and is a member of the U.S. Army Infantry OCS Hall of Fame. Mr. Reich uses a wheelchair as a result of an accident in 1962. He is chairman of the World Committee on Disability and has advocated on behalf of the world's half billion people with disabilities in the U.N. General Assembly. ♦

Cover photo of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in wheelchair with dog, Fala and an unidentified admirer, courtesy of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, New York.

Introduction

A New Look at FDR: DID HIS POLIO DISABLE HIM OR ENABLE HIM TO INSPIRE THE WORLD?

APRIL 1995 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the founding in San Francisco of the United Nations, which FDR regarded as his crowning achievement.

FDR was paralyzed by polio in 1921 at age 39. He never took another step without help. His struggle and triumph over adversity inspired the American people to struggle and triumph over their own adversity during the Depression and World War II.

The 50th anniversary provides the occasion to take a closer look at how FDR's disability was central to his leadership. His legacy of hope and optimism can, through the U.N., continue to inspire individuals and nations to improve the human condition worldwide.

A New Look at FDR: DID HIS POLIO DISABLE HIM OR ENABLE HIM TO INSPIRE THE WORLD?

I am extremely pleased to join you here in San Francisco, since this beautiful city is the actual scene of the high drama – with its famous but absent hero – I want to sketch out for you today. It is the story of a great American – Franklin Delano Roosevelt – and the world institution he helped create half a century ago – the United Nations. For if any institution (as Emerson wrote) is the lengthening shadow of one man, surely the UN is FDR's. And I shall describe how the United Nations can grow to still greater influence around the world out of this Rooseveltian legacy. A legacy of right-thinking optimism that shines like a nimbus around FDR's vivid profile – projected, even now, across the world: the old fedora, that lance of a cigarette holder, the jutting jaw, the jaunty lines of that famous smile.

UNITED NATIONS: HE SET THE STAGE

But may I first pay you a tribute: you have always made your fine city – as we in the disability community like to say – accessible. You have been so willing to open up your Golden Gate to all comers. It was fifty years ago, this very month of April, that you welcomed the world's mighty to meet together and take up the burden of a lasting peace. That first UN conference heralded a new spirit of unity across the world, after the bloody sacrifices of World War Two. And that spirit has lasted. Since 1945, the United Nations has spoken out, and often acted, for the survival and betterment of all the planet's people. And you set the stage for that global mission. Literally “set the stage,” since the conference took place downtown in the Civic Center, at your magnificent San Francisco Opera.

You soon will be celebrating this golden anniversary of the UN at the Opera. But that anniversary will still be absent its real hero – who himself missed the original occasion by the few weeks that fate would not spare him.

FDR was resting at The Little White House – his cottage in Warm Springs, Georgia – already preparing

to welcome the world's delegates here, when he was tragically struck down on April 12, 1945. He had been caught up in every detail of the conference, agendas littering his bedside table. Talk about "setting the stage!" FDR worked out the seating plan at the Opera for every member nation, worried that Molotov wouldn't show, planned his own travel to the coast by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in his private Pullman, The Magellan. ("Don't go through the Royal Gorge," he ordered, "already seen it twice.") He would get off at the Oakland army base on April 25, speak to the delegates that afternoon, then back on the train by six to slowly — repeat, slowly — entrain across the country to Hyde Park. "Mrs. Roosevelt will be going with me to San Francisco."

Such careful planning, and imagine if he had made it, after all, to the Opera. It would have been his crowning appearance — his great chance to succeed where the one president he'd served, Woodrow Wilson, had failed with the League of Nations. It was even wildly rumored he was going to resign the presidency to become the first Secretary General of the UN. San Francisco, and the world's delegates, would have seen him walk the short distance to the podium, with some intimate at each side. He would have tightly gripped the sides of the podium, then delivered, no doubt, hopeful, visionary words, designed to tell the world even the fear of fear was over. He would have been seen standing tall — the first American leader to speak for the free world.

Only much of that too would have been, we now know, "setting the stage." Magnificently, with great courage, but still . . . all part of an act.

POLIO STRUCK HIM IN 1921

Because FDR, after his polio attack in 1921, never walked, or stood unassisted, again. The Magellan had special hand rails, an elevator for easy lowering, lifting. And if he had truly appeared as he lived from day to day, he would have appeared as I come before you — in a wheelchair.

"You and I," he once told Orson Welles, "are two of the finest actors in America." And he proved it over a quarter of a century, carrying on what Roosevelt biographer, Hugh Gallagher has called the "splendid deception." The deception lay in rarely allowing the public to see that he had a disability, and in that, the national

press cooperated. Over 140,000 photos exist of FDR. Only two — taken privately, among family — show him in his wheelchair. But if there was deception, there was also splendor.

Because FDR never allowed himself to be daunted by his disability. He loved being president, deeply identified with the office, and therefore would never let the presidency be daunted either. In fact, he used his disability during the trying times both he and the Nation faced, I would argue, to help him succeed as president. And he was splendid at it.

"DOCTOR ROOSEVELT"

Let me explain, briefly, by telling you how he became "Doctor Roosevelt" before he ever became President Roosevelt.

"Doctor Roosevelt" is what the other patients at Warm Springs, Georgia came to call him. After the onset of polio in 1921, at age 39, he was determined — being a Roosevelt, still with hopes of a political future, like his Cousin Teddy — to regain mobility in his lifeless legs. By 1924, that lonely struggle had brought him to try the waters at Warm Springs. He was greatly buoyed up by the experience — with water wings, no less — even more, by the help he got from other "polios." They became his new friends around the ramshackle inn, and he invested \$200,000, two thirds of his fortune, to make Warm Springs a modern therapeutic center. He organized most of the fun, invented a new crutch, better braces, and started helping other polios exercise their atrophied limbs. That's how he became — to all of them — "Doctor Roosevelt."

By now, he knew there could be no cure, only rehabilitation, which was the realistic treatment at Warm Springs. But he chose to return to politics, using crutches to appear before the 1924 Democratic convention to nominate Al Smith for president. He would have to do it without crutches, because he "was scaring people half to death." His upper-body musculature had grown massive with tireless exercise, and on the strength of his own two shoulders, "Doctor Roosevelt" prescribed for himself a new way of walking.

"With my hand on a man's arm, and one cane, I'm sure. . . . Let's try it." Propping himself rigid on a cane with his left hand and clinging to his son Elliot's

arm with his right, he learned to hitch himself forward from one braced leg to the other braced leg, like a man swinging along on hidden stilts.

“YOU’RE COMING TO HOUSTON WITHOUT CRUTCHES”

The 1928 convention was in Houston. “I’m telling everybody you’re coming to Houston without crutches,” Eleanor wrote him, “so mind you stick to it.” He did, and “walked” to the podium on Elliot’s arm to renominate Smith, and “walked” again, breaking all precedent, to appear before the delegates to accept their 1932 nomination in person. It was always a dangerous balancing act, but he “walked” again at his first inaugural. This time hanging onto his son Jimmy, whose arm screamed with pain from his father’s vice-like grip — as they took those thirty-seven steps, all the time smiling, to the rostrum, where FDR told the Nation, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Physician — “Doctor Roosevelt” must have said — heal thyself. That is how you can help succor others. And the role of doctor stuck. He was soon calling himself “Doctor New Deal,” this time on emergency call to help the Nation recover from the ravages of the Depression. “Doctor New Deal” kept up the people’s spirits, just as “Doctor Roosevelt” had the polios’ morale. There was only one slip. At the 1936 convention, he reached around from the rostrum to shake hands with the poet Edwin Markham, famous for “The Man with a Hoe,” a popular salute to the common man. One brace buckled, and FDR crumpled to the floor. But the convention never saw him fall. The Secret Service instantly surrounded him, and quick drill, had him upright and smiling again. After his speech, he drove around the entire stadium in the well-known touring car, waving to his cheering people, as if no mishap had occurred.

Next he was more grimly calling himself “Doctor Win the War.” Again, as Commander-in-Chief, he rose to the tremendous challenge of fighting in two hemispheres, and set unheard-of production goals: 75,000 tanks, 125,000 planes in 1943. Not possible, he was told. “Oh, the production people can do it if they try.” If he could stand on his own two feet, so could the rest

of America. Gus Gennerich, his Secret Service agent, lifted him, carried him, even piggy-backed him, but the public never knew. Nor did his many guests at the White House. Upstairs, seated at a drinks tray, he would mix the cocktails. Then Eleanor would lead their guests downstairs to dinner, pausing to point out this portrait on the wall, that heirloom. By the time they reached the dining room, FDR — using an elevator — was already there to greet them, seated at the head of the table.

Only as the war deepened into tragedy along with victory did he appear at last in his wheelchair. On a visit to a veterans hospital, he rolled slowly through the amputees’ ward, so that they could see how well he understood their loss. He paused at many bedsides that day, including that of a man who had amputated his own legs to save his life. “I understand you are something of a surgeon,” FDR said. Then ever the doctor, he added, “I’m not a bad orthopedist myself.”

He could not be beaten, except by death, and when death came, the nation went into shock as much as mourning. He had been our whole support, this man whom we were never told needed any kind of support even to stand.

His great companion-at-arms Winston Churchill knew only too well. “Not one man in ten million, stricken and crippled as he was, would have attempted to plunge into a life of physical and mental exertion and of hard, ceaseless political controversy,” Churchill told the House of Commons. “Not one in ten million would have tried, not one in a generation would have succeeded, not only in entering this sphere, not only in acting vehemently in it, but in becoming indisputable master of the scene.”

WE ALL KNEW

Churchill knew, having watched FDR hoisted aboard HMS Prince of Wales, having seen him carried up six flights of steps to the top of a tower in Marrakesh, to admire a view of the Atlas mountains Churchill recommended. But I also strongly suspect — deep within us, over those terrible but finally triumphant years — we, all Americans, also knew.

We knew, even if we did not have these sometimes painful details. And we did not need to have all these

details — in order to understand and admire how he was dealing with his disability. We witnessed from afar what Churchill saw up close, an “extraordinary effort of spirit over the flesh, of will power over physical infirmity.” And we accepted his acting the part — yes, his splendid deception — because we realized that FDR had found or developed within himself two extraordinary strengths.

First, as a person with a disability — ever mindful that others might shy from him as a cripple — he had learned how to cajole, seduce, inspire, compel, even shame others to do his bidding. He was indeed indisputably master of every scene, whether calling for timely legislation within the One Hundred Days or setting the European strategy for a Second Front. As one germane example, think what FDR accomplished for his fellow polios.

“CALL IT THE ... ‘MARCH OF DIMES’”

He wanted to win the fight against paralysis by replicating Warm Springs all across the country. But that couldn't be done by limited private charity, an endless series of presidential balls. A larger response had to come, and come voluntarily, from the entire country. He set up the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, and Eddie Cantor, a radio comedian, suggested he, Cantor, try asking people over radio to send money to FDR at the White House. “Call it the March of Dimes,” said Cantor. FDR promptly agreed, putting his popularity on the line. Cantor broadcast an appeal, so did the Lone Ranger, then most of Hollywood. At first, the March stumbled badly. Only \$1,700.05 came in. Some officials wanted quickly to deflect contributions — and the blame — to local chapters, but FDR hung tight. And then millions of dimes and dollars came pouring in, an avalanche of mail, such as the White House had never seen, and couldn't handle. From then on, it was only a matter of time before the Salk vaccine. He didn't live to see it happen, but “Doctor Roosevelt” actually rid the world of the dread disease that had struck him down in his prime.

Second, FDR overcame his disability not by diminishing his life to what was readily manageable, but by enlarging his life to embrace all the risks the greater world had to offer. As a young man, he had been pampered, favored, cosseted — even in politics, an

energetic lightweight — until he was hit by polio. Then, over seven harsh years, he learned to use his paralysis, literally, to get himself moving again. And all of us right along with him. As a people, we never would have come to accept the visionary goals that FDR set the nation, if we hadn't somehow known, in our hearts, what he himself was up against. If he can ask this much of himself, with all that wile and charm and optimism, surely — we inwardly had to admit — he has the right to ask something of us.

At the last, what he asked of us was the same commitment he was prepared to make himself, before cut down by his stroke, to the United Nations. He never became Secretary General (if that was truly what he wished), but in a sense, his wife took his place at the UN. Eleanor Roosevelt's crucial support for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was, in so many ways, the continuation of FDR's quest for international peace, the spread of democracy, and the rise of human equality, attended by great hopes for social development among the newly emerging nations of the world. Over fifty years, the United Nations has steadily increased its moral suasion, if not its carriage of force, and mounted and stimulated many programs dedicated to these worthy, credible, and someday attainable goals . . . including, I hasten to add, the UN World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons.

I happen to know something about that UN effort to improve the lives of people with disabilities worldwide because I served as United States representative advocating before the United Nations General Assembly on behalf of the UN Decade of Disabled Persons. It was an honor, and yes, often a frustration, since so much still needs to be done in creating a wider awareness of disability over this earth. Most importantly, in this country we passed the Americans with Disabilities Act during that decade, in July of 1990, so that the law now mandates public access, protection against discrimination, and other civil rights for almost fifty million Americans with disabilities. And, I am proud to note that my organization, the National Organization on Disability, is a direct outgrowth of the United Nations' disability initiative in the early 1980s.

HALF A BILLION PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

But the world figure is 500 million, half a billion people with disabilities. Fully 85% of them live in the developing world and struggle to bear up under a double burden—not only their disabilities, but the terrible weight that always falls too heavily upon the poor of this earth. When we count in their family members, we can fairly say that more than a billion human souls are both mired in poverty and affected by disability.

If I may say so, a truly Rooseveltian challenge! One that FDR would recognize from his own bodily knowledge, in numbers he would insist we could handle if we tried. And I want to put it to you exactly that way. With some trepidation, but without hesitation. I believe there is a great opportunity here to pull together several strands out of this high drama about FDR and the UN, and tie them into a new and significant undertaking for the world's disability community. What's more, I believe this is the ideal moment to do so, precisely because of rising sensitivity and public response to those with disabilities — a new forthrightness as clear as the simple fact that, nowadays, I come before you as I am, in a wheelchair.

FDR MEMORIAL: NO SIGN OF HIS DISABILITY

Consider, first, that those of us with disabilities do not now — as FDR worried he would then — scare people half to death. Public life, street life, daily life have changed for us, and the media — scrupulously portraying us for real. For those of us with disabilities, FDR's deception, however splendid in his day, is no longer right for our day. We strive to be open and undisguised about the truth of our lives, and only ask that others acknowledge that truth about us as well. That is why some of us have expressed deep concern that statuary planned for the FDR Memorial in Washington will reveal no sign of his disability. The famous Admiral's Navy cape is to be sculpted over his shoulder, but will then reach down to cover up any possible metallic glint of a leg brace or other support.

Perhaps that is how FDR would have wanted it, great thespian that he was. But such an evasion does not speak up for his personal triumph over disability, nor in any way depict how he overcame — and even used it — to become the greatest statesman with a disability of all time.

Surely more than one way exists to memorialize the FDR I have tried to portray here. During our lifetime attitudes have evolved so radically, contrasting the conditions that FDR daily lived with and those facing people with disabilities today. Why not create a living memorial as an annual award, that both acknowledges his disability and inspires progressive action to alleviate and ameliorate disability around the world?

Just as FDR has become a symbol of personal courage in challenging adversity, so would such an award memorializing his triumph be a symbol of the enduring world struggle to expand the participation of people with disabilities. Much has changed in 50 years, but what remains — and I hope will never change — is the lasting commitment FDR bequeathed to overcoming barriers of mind and body to maximum self-fulfillment. That is his legacy. People with disabilities — special heirs of FDR—see it as a living force, driving the global fight against discrimination as much in the 21st Century as it has since those fateful days in April 1945 when FDR died and the UN was born.

And how better to do that than through the world institution that he worked so hard to found? The United Nations was his last cherished dream, epitomizing his great hopes, shared by so many, for One World. But the UN also embodied his human sympathy, his abiding attendance upon those who suffer misfortune — his fellow polios or that one third of a Nation “unhoused, unclothed, unfed” or those rising peoples round the world. He did not live to see the UN brought to reality, even that first small step taken here at San Francisco in April of 1945. So why not remember FDR — for his triumph over his disability — through the United Nations? The vehicle already exists in the U.N. World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons. Each year—from among its 185 member nations, the U.N. Secretary General, in FDR's name, would honor that member state in which significant national progress has been achieved toward enlarging participation of its citizens with disabilities.

THE FDR UNITED NATIONS AWARD

I have proposed such an Award to the United Nations and to the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute which oversees the Roosevelt Memorial at Hyde Park. Happily, both the UN and the Institute have welcomed the idea, and I am pleased to announce here today – at the birthplace of the United Nations on its golden anniversary – the first contribution, in the amount of \$50,000, to the FDR United Nations Disability Award Program.

We believe this to be a fitting memorial to the living FDR because it honors him for what he inspired and achieved around the world, even as he lived under his own physical burdens. He tried to keep them from us, but we saw through him. We saw through to the real, coping human being. FDR's disability was not only part of his grand persona, but became central to his leadership. It made him believable to people the world over, when they desperately needed to believe. His struggle and triumph over adversity inspired many millions to struggle and triumph over their adversity in the Great Depression and World War II.

What better way than this award to pay FDR tribute than to ensure that his memory will inspire other nations and peoples to triumph over disability? And even though he tried to deceive us, always the charmer, what more splendid way, fifty years later, to catch him out and recognize his true greatness? ♦

National Organization on Disability

The National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.) promotes the acceptance and full participation of America's 49 million men, women and children with disabilities in all aspects of life.

Founded in 1982, N.O.D. is the only nationwide network organization concerned with all disabilities, all age groups and all disability issues... and is supported entirely by private contributions from individuals, companies and foundations.

N.O.D.'s "Calling on America" Campaign, spearheaded by Jim Brady, Vice Chairman, improves public attitudes and inspires citizens to become involved in local disability initiatives.

N.O.D. works through a Community Partnership Program, a network of over 4,100 cities, towns and counties nationwide. It assists them in promoting, through voluntary action, opportunities for people with disabilities.

N.O.D. promotes expanded employment of people with disabilities through its Disability 2000-CEO Council, which involves over 250 business leaders and their companies.

N.O.D.'s Religion and Disability program assists congregations of all faiths to become more accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities.

Through its national survey program, N.O.D. provides timely disability data on attitudes and stereotypes so that public acceptance and full participation can be more readily achieved.