

The Campaign To Undo FDR

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"Pearl Harbor," the movie, is an engagingly ramshackle mess of comical improbabilities, '40s cliches and dialogue so corny it must have been (was it?) deliberate. It is entertaining enough but would hardly merit serious attention were it not for one scene too egregious to go unremarked.

It is the scene of FDR convening his military advisers after the attack. Finding them depressed and defeatist, FDR makes a melodramatic "when I had the use of my legs" speech and then, to illustrate the point, rises from his chair -- theatrically, clumsily, angrily struggling to stand using leg braces and cane -- with the ringing admonition: "Don't tell me it can't be done."

I've been in a wheelchair about as long as was FDR and I cannot think of a more grotesque abuse of his disability. FDR would never have said or done anything remotely like this. He never talked about his disability with anyone -- his family, his wife, even his mother -- let alone did stunts for war counselors and generals. If anyone dared broach the subject with him, FDR would freeze him out.

The modern politician thinks nothing of playing on pity or exploiting weakness. Think of Al Gore's 1996 convention speech detailing his sister's tobacco-related death or Rudy Giuliani's gratuitous revelation of his post-prostate cancer impotence.

FDR would have been mortified at the mere suggestion of making a public show of misfortune. He was so careful about disguising his disability that he would receive his White House dinner guests in one room, fixing drinks while sitting at a table, then have Eleanor take the guests on a long and winding trip downstairs to give him enough time for his unseen conjuring trick -- his Filipino stewards rushing in, wheeling and carrying him downstairs, then quickly transferring him into a regular chair. His guests would enter the dining room to find the smiling president awaiting them at the head of the table.

The "Pearl Harbor" scene would hardly matter except for the fact that it perfectly captures the contemporary penchant for sentimentalizing and, perversely, celebrating disability. Celebrating the paralytic's "courage" is the psychological equivalent of calling an accomplished black person "a credit to his race" -- it is a patronizing act of distancing wrapped in the appearance of adulation. It would have appalled FDR. Most appalling, it now finds its most enduring expression -- literally engraved in bronze -- at FDR's own memorial in Washington.

The memorial is a sprawling ensemble of four large outdoor "rooms" (each dedicated to one of Roosevelt's presidential terms) to which a fifth was added this year. It consists of nothing but a single statue. There, at the beginning, one might say, the very center of the memorial -- there, utterly alone, without furniture or friends, without disguises or devices, without context or cover -- sits Franklin Roosevelt in a wheelchair.

Thus is portrayed a man who had more than 40,000 photographs taken of him, exactly two of which show him in a wheelchair. He trained for months to give the appearance of walking -- holding a cane in one hand and the arm of a confederate (usually a son) in the other. He gave speeches in great stadiums from the seat of an open car, having dramatically driven into the infield and onto a platform in a marvel

of misdirection any stage hypnotist would have envied. It took an entire book -- Hugh Gregory Gallagher's "FDR's Splendid Deception" -- to chronicle the extraordinary lengths Roosevelt went to disguise his disability. And here, a half-century later, in what is supposed to be homage, he is undone.

The statue is not just a travesty. It is unnecessary. In the memorial's third "room," there is a larger-than-life sculpture of FDR sitting covered in a great cape. If you look carefully at the back, you can see -- at the bottom of a chair leg and almost hidden beneath the cape -- the tiny wheel that FDR had added to a kitchen chair for moving short distances in the White House.

This sculpture subtly represents both FDR's disability and his lifelong effort to cloak it. For our generation, though, subtlety is no virtue. We wish FDR exposed. And that we have done.

Each "room" of the memorial has an identifying stone inscription: first term, second term, etc. The wheelchair statue, sitting as it does at the very entrance of the memorial, has an inscription too: Prologue.

Prologue? From 1882 until 1933 -- assistant Navy secretary, vice presidential candidate, governor of New York, father, lawyer, author -- the wheelchair defines who and what FDR was?

This is not prologue. This is epilogue, the statement of a generation far removed from FDR's, appropriating the past to make a show of its own preening sensitivity.