

## REVISED FDR MEMORIAL SHOWS DISABILITY

**Michael Kilian, Washington Bureau** CHICAGO TRIBUNE January 10, 2001  
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Former President Franklin D. Roosevelt will be revealed in sculpture Wednesday as he was seldom seen in public: in a wheelchair.

President Clinton is to dedicate the sculpture by Robert Graham as the new frontpiece of the 7-acre Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial alongside Washington's Tidal Basin.

"This dedication represents a great victory for people with disabilities," said Alan Reich, president of the National Organization on Disability. "FDR's memorial finally will acknowledge his significant disability experience, which forged his leadership qualities--courage, determination and compassion--that enabled him to successfully lead the nation through the worst crises of the 20th Century."

Roosevelt was stricken with polio in 1921, at age 39, losing the use of his legs. He already had served as assistant secretary of the Navy and was a Democratic candidate for vice president, and he overcame his disability later to become governor of New York and then win election to the presidency four times.

The original FDR Memorial was completed in 1997, more than a half-century after Roosevelt's death. But Reich's organization and similar groups objected that the elaborate monument failed to show that the man who led America through the Great Depression and World War II was paralyzed and dependent on a wheelchair.

They argued that the capabilities and character traits Roosevelt developed in coping with his disability were what made it possible for him to succeed in public life.

In response to the groups' protest and with the backing of 19 Roosevelt grandchildren and former Presidents George Bush, Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, the Clinton administration authorized adding a wheelchair sculpture. It is located just inside the entrance to the memorial directly opposite its visitors center.

For largely political reasons, Roosevelt kept his handicap a secret, using braces to stand while delivering speeches and making many of his personal appearances riding in a car.

The only times he willingly appeared in public in a wheelchair was when he visited military hospitals during the war and talked with wounded service personnel.

He refused to be photographed in a wheelchair, though, and only a few, rare images exist of him in one. His staff and members of the Washington press corps went along with the pretense through his presidency.

The only reference to his handicap in the original memorial was the inclusion of small caster wheels on the legs of his straight-backed chair depicted in one of the initial sculptures.

"I was doubtful at first," said Peter Kovler, whose Chicago-based Kovler Family Foundation contributed \$1 million of the \$5.1 million cost of the new sculpture. "The memorial was complete, and I just loved it. But I think the addition is great too, and I can't imagine the memorial now without it."

Unlike the other FDR depictions in the complex, and the gigantic, heroic Lincoln, Jefferson and Grant statues elsewhere on the Mall, Graham's new piece presents Roosevelt in his actual size. "Including the base of the sculpture, it is only 60 inches tall," said Graham, a Mexico City-born Los Angeles artist who also did the Duke Ellington Memorial in New York City and monuments to Joe Louis in Detroit and [Charlie Parker](#) in Kansas City. "People will look upon him as those who worked with him in the White House did. Visitors in wheelchairs will be able to view him face to face."

Graham used Roosevelt's own home-made wheelchair as a model for the sculpture and otherwise had to rely on one or two rare photographs. But he said the piece is intended as more of an expression of Roosevelt's spirit and leadership than as an exact representation of a man in a wheelchair.

The wall behind the new sculpture is inscribed with Eleanor Roosevelt's words about her husband's disability: "Franklin's illness gave him strength and courage he had not had before. He had to think out the fundamentals of living and learn the greatest of all lessons--infinite patience and never-ending persistence."

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