

CONTROVERSY OVER A SITTING PRESIDENT

By Benjamin Forgey

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It's deja vu all over again for the bedeviled Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, now under construction in West Potomac Park.

Fifty years after Roosevelt's death and 49 years after the first congressional resolution to create his memorial, yet another controversy concerning its design and content is upon us.

This time, the issue is how to memorialize the president's infirmity. Stricken with polio at age 39 in 1921, Roosevelt remained paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. But, aware of the prejudices of his time, he went to great lengths to keep the public from realizing the extent of his disability.

Recently, a group associated with the Washington-based National Organization on Disability (NOD) has been pressing to include an "appropriate and accurate depiction" of the president's affliction in the memorial.

It is but the latest and most poignant of the FDR Memorial debates. First, there were questions about whether it was necessary at all -- less than four years before his death from a cerebral hemorrhage, Roosevelt himself said that he wanted nothing more than the modest block of stone that is now in place near the National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Then came the disastrous designs of the 1960s. A modernist, competition-winning entry, deemed "instant Stonehenge" by its critics, was abandoned after a couple of years of fiery exchanges. Several years later, architect Marcel Breuer's equally abstract design fared no better.

The current design, for a park within a park by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, dates from the mid-'70s. It gained plenty of support back then but was left on the shelf by Congress and the Republican administrations during the '80s. At the end of the decade it was rescued by the passionate advocacy of Florida congressman Claude Pepper in one of his last public acts.

Even then, sailing was not altogether smooth: Halprin's design was greatly reduced in length (to about 700 feet), and there was much wrangling over materials, plantings, sculptures and other details. In a sense the latest flap is but a continuation of the arguments about details.

But it arises very late in the day. Congress has already appropriated \$42 million for the memorial, a private group is busy trying to raise an additional \$10 million, immense quantities of stone have been quarried and cut, the roads of West Potomac Park have been altered, and the 7.5-acre site near the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial is being readied. Completion is anticipated early in 1997.

Unfortunately, the new effort to change the memorial also echoes the divisive contest over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Powerful opponents of Maya Lin's eloquent design for a memorial wall forced the addition of Frederick Hart's statue of three soldiers. This created an opening for the addition of Glenna Goodacre's bronze grouping of servicewomen assisting a wounded GI.

Halprin's FDR design from the beginning created places for realistic sculptures -- including three images of the president, one of Eleanor Roosevelt, and depictions of the New Deal's alphabet soup of social agencies, bread lines and other realities of the Depression. In all, there will be 10 sculptures.

As we saw all too clearly in the Vietnam memorial brawl, the problem with realistic as opposed to allegorical or symbolic representation is that once you begin it is difficult to draw a line saying, "Stop, no more." Those who are not depicted feel excluded -- and every group begins to feel entitled to a place on the hallowed ground of the Mall.

In the current FDR Memorial case, it is also clear that there is a generational divide over attitudes toward disability -- two divides, actually. One is between today and the time that FDR felt compelled to hide his handicap in order to get elected. The other is between today's rightfully vocal wheelchair users - - including chief NOD activists Alan Reich and Michael Deland -- and the people who designed the memorial in the '70s.

It comes down to an elusive debate about history and reality. "We talked about this a lot, right at the beginning," says Halprin, recalling the early discussions about the memorial with the sculptors and members of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission. "We talked about showing him in a wheelchair, with crutches, doing this, that and the other thing, and we decided that the way to go was the historical way."

Thus, just as Roosevelt "veiled his disability from the public," says commission member and FDR grandson David Roosevelt, there are no overt depictions of a disabled president. There is, as part of a chronology carved in granite, a verbal acknowledgment: "1921, Stricken With Poliomyelitis -- He Never Again Walked Unaided." This inscription doesn't satisfy Reich, Deland and others. Along with Hugh Gallagher, author of a revealing book, "FDR's Splendid Deception," they argue that Roosevelt's disability was central to his character and achievements, and therefore should somehow be shown in the memorial.

"There is apple pie and motherhood on both sides," Halprin observes. But he is not alone in feeling that advocates for the disabled underestimate the difficulties involved in adding to or changing a carefully conceived work of art.

Comprising four "outdoor rooms" defined by granite walls, waterfalls and plantings -- and much more accessible to the disabled than memorials of old -- Halprin's design is a narrative sequence that traces the Roosevelt presidency through its four terms. It doesn't idealize its subject quite so thoroughly as do traditional presidential memorials, but it is a wholly sympathetic portrait of the public -- and not the private -- life.

Though the design may have its faults -- the space-eating precedent it sets is particularly worrisome -- it is without question an aesthetic whole in which every element has been given a particular, meaningful setting. To plop a portrait of the president in a wheelchair down in it would be a disservice to its aesthetic unity and its subject. And to bring partisan politics into the fray, as was done with the Vietnam memorial, would simply be mean-spirited.

One facet of the memorial that advocates for the disabled may have overlooked is that, unlike traditional memorials, this one by design is not static. Rather, it is a flow of spaces that encourage visitors to respond on many levels. Here, there will be more than enough room for all kinds of tours and

interpretations. Obviously, one such tour could and should focus on the importance of the president's disability.

An aspect both sides seem to have ignored so far is the character of one of the portraits of the president. For the third "room," sculptor Neil Estern has created a free-standing bronze of a seated Roosevelt. This usually is referred to as the "Fala" statue, because a representation of the president's little dog is poised nearby.

More important, the Estern portrait "is extremely somber," says Charles Atherton, secretary of the Commission of Fine Arts, who examined the final maquette in the sculptor's Brooklyn studio on Friday. Roosevelt's feet and legs "do not look natural," Atherton continues. "The legs are troubled. You can see the very thin bone structure underneath the trousers. The eyes are haunting. There's a sense of gauntness, a sense of pain, to the whole piece." Though the seat is not a wheelchair, this portrait could be just the image advocates for the disabled are looking for.

Whatever the case, this is not the time to delay the Roosevelt Memorial yet again. Roosevelt himself was familiar with memorial exasperations. He admired the Jefferson Memorial design and fought for it against strong opposition. And after many delays were overcome, a group of conservationists -- led, as it happened, by women -- threatened to block construction by chaining themselves to endangered cherry trees.

"If the tree is in the way," the president said, "we will move the tree and the lady and the chains, and transplant them to some other place."