

Clinton Enters Fray Over Memorial; Statue of FDR in a Wheelchair Would Be Added After Opening

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Clinton, in a statement released by the White House, responded to a potent campaign by advocacy groups that have made the memorial's design the focus of a poignant debate over the change in the last half-century in national attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Those groups had threatened to disrupt the May 2 dedication ceremonies for the memorial -- at which Clinton is scheduled to deliver the dedication address -- to protest the decision by the FDR Memorial Commission and its artists not to portray Roosevelt's paralysis from polio. They argued that the failure to show him in a wheelchair treated his disability, and other disabilities, as something shameful to be hidden.

FULL TEXT

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But others argued that Roosevelt did not want to be seen as a disabled person and that to present him that way would impose his disability on the public image of vigor he worked so hard to create.

Although many Americans knew of his paralysis, few thought of him as a disabled person.

"Future generations need to know Roosevelt as he was: He was a president who served 12 years in a wheelchair," said Alan A. Reich, president of the National Organization on Disability, after meeting with White House aides yesterday.

Reich stopped short of saying the coalition of groups representing the disabled will call off the protest, during which they had promised to disrupt Clinton's speech. But he said that if the White House follows

through quickly on a promise to introduce legislation to add another statue, "we are hopeful we can turn the demonstration into a celebration."

Reich's group has offered to pay for the additional statue, which would have to be commissioned, sculpted, and placed at the 7.5-acre Tidal Basin memorial after its dedication.

"I'm pleased to offer this legislation so that generations of Americans will know that this great president was great with his disability," Clinton said in his prepared statement.

The announcement apparently surprised both the designer of the monument and the FDR Memorial Commission, which had shepherded the project through four decades of controversy over its design and had resisted the latest demands for change by advocacy groups for the disabled.

Dorann H. Gunderson, executive director of the commission, said yesterday that she was unaware of the president's plans. No member of the commission attended the White House meeting yesterday between members of the president's staff and representatives of the advocacy groups.

The commission had rejected earlier requests by these groups to change the design or add a statue.

Clinton's move supports the position of the majority -- though not all -- of Roosevelt's surviving grandchildren. Most of them favor recognition of the paralysis that made their grandfather's legs largely useless after he contracted polio at age 39.

Clinton earlier had indicated his general support for including a statue of FDR in a wheelchair, and his staff had been seeking a resolution of the controversy. But Clinton said publicly that his recent knee injury had made him more sensitive to the problems of the disabled.

San Francisco landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, who worked on the FDR Memorial design on and off for 20 years, did not return a telephone call yesterday.

"I did not know this was going to happen," Gunderson said yesterday. She would not say whether she felt the addition would disrupt the design.

"The authority for the commission was to plan, design and commission a memorial. The commission's mission will be completed when it hands over the memorial to the nation May 2," she said. "What happens after that is not our concern."

But the commission had resisted any design changes since 1978, when Halprin's model of sprawling granite walls, waterfalls and bronze sculptures was adopted. That design followed several that had been adopted but then fell into disfavor with the commission, the public, or the Commission of Fine Arts.

Clinton's intervention adds to the history of political redesigns of the capital's statuary. Additions were made to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the behest of veterans' groups. And memorials to black patriots and female soldiers were approved after complaints from representatives of those groups.

The announcement from the White House came just minutes after an unveiling of the memorial for the news media during which Gunderson defended the design and insisted that no changes were planned.

The media tour was attended by a handful of disabled protesters.

"For those of us with disabilities, Roosevelt has been our hero. They are trying to steal him from us," Jim Dickson, who organized the coalition of advocacy groups to oppose the current design, told reporters before the tour.

Although there are nine bronze sculptures -- including bas-reliefs and statues -- along the meandering route of the memorial, only two show Roosevelt. One, a wall bas-relief by Robert Graham, depicts him riding in a car and waving to crowds in his first inauguration in 1933.

The second, a larger-than-life bronze statue by artist Neil Estern, shows Roosevelt seated in a dining room chair, with a cape over his shoulders and lap. His dog, Fala, is by his side. Visitors who peer between the statue and the granite wall will see small castors on the chair, the only sculpted acknowledgment of his disability.

An engraving on the memorial steps does acknowledge Roosevelt's paralysis, and the National Park Service is building a reproduction of his wheelchair to be displayed in the visitors' center at the entrance.

Roosevelt went to extraordinary lengths not to be seen often in a wheelchair. He campaigned from the seat of a car or the back of a train, often propped there and standing with his leg-braces locked. He was supported when he "walked" and was able to move -- with great physical effort -- only by heaving his body forward and swinging his leg braces from side to side. He often arrived at events long before anyone else to avoid having the public see him in a wheelchair or see him being carried.

Staff writer Peter Baker contributed to this report.

Illustration

PHOTO: Dayna Smith; Map: Dave Cook; CAPTION: David Capozzi, of the U.S. Access Board, checks the FDR Memorial for compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act. At right is one of the memorial's two sculptures of Franklin Roosevelt. Neither shows a wheelchair.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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