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FDR – Man of the Century, Disability and All

Alan A. Reich

President, National Organization on Disability

Franklin Delano Roosevelt is far more than the Person of the Century. He is the only world leader in history to have reached the pinnacle of global power as someone who had to overcome a major disability.

Those of us in the disability community -- 54 million of us in the United States, among half a billion people with disabilities around the world -- have long understood FDR's unique triumph. But only lately has the larger public learned of FDR's "splendid deception": from age 39, paralyzed from the waist down by polio, he never again stood or took a step unassisted.

Throughout his 12 years as president, only his intimates -- and a cooperating press corps -- knew. Winston Churchill saw him hoisted aboard HMS Prince of Wales, like so much cargo. "Not one man in ten million, stricken and crippled as he was," Churchill later said in the House of Commons, would have plunged into "hard, ceaseless political controversy." But FDR succeeded "not only in acting vehemently in it," according to Churchill, "but in becoming indisputable master of the scene."

His wife Eleanor soon realized, "Franklin's illness gave him strength and courage he had not had before." At a far greater distance, the American people sensed something of this in FDR's character, and came to rely deeply on their indomitable leader who had discovered within himself two extraordinary strengths.

First, by mastering his disability in public -- ever mindful that others might shy from him, in those less tolerant days -- FDR learned how to cajole, inspire, compel, seduce, even shame others into doing his bidding, whether to take timely action against the ravages of the Great Depression or to open a Second Front during World War Two.

Second, in dealing daily with his disability, FDR never diminished his life, but boldly enlarged his life to embrace all the risks the greater world had to offer. He used his paralysis, literally, to get himself moving again -- and the nation right along with him. The American people would never have accepted the visionary goals that FDR always set -- from military victory in two hemispheres to the founding of the United Nations -- if they hadn't somehow known, in their hearts, what he was up against. If FDR could ask that much of himself, with all his burdens, surely he had the right to ask something of them.

Half a century later, he still does. If only by his eternal example, the real-life details of which are now more openly discussed. Nobody need hide the traumatic facts since they so clearly underlie the development of his inner strengths. The Person of the Century can at last be recognized as a person with a disability.

And so depicted. Right now, the disability community, led by the National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.), is raising funds to place a statue of President Roosevelt in his wheelchair at the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C., showing how he actually worked day by day at the White House. Already the Roosevelt Institute, in cooperation with N.O.D.'s World Committee on Disability, annually presents the \$50,000 FDR International Disability Award at the UN to honor and underwrite progress by nations on behalf of 500,000,000 persons with disabilities, the majority of whom live below the poverty line in the developing countries.

In so many other ways, both symbolic and proactive, Franklin Roosevelt is gaining ever greater stature as the avatar of right-thinking optimism. Offering hope and courage, demanding the impossible, jutting his jaw, set in the jaunty lines of that famous smile. At the Millennium, the man who could not walk one lone step, still bestrides the world.