

FDR AS HE WAS

By Daniel K. Inouye

July 2, 1996

It is time to identify, then set aside the misinformation swirling about the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, so the truth of the matter can be told. The FDR Memorial Commission has never sought to hide, ignore, bury or conceal the facts of President Roosevelt's disability.

The FDR Memorial forthrightly recognizes FDR's triumph over polio in many ways: Following a directive from the commission's cochairmen, an active investigation is underway to find means by which one of FDR's wheelchairs could be obtained for display in the memorial's entry building. Also in the entry building will be photographs of FDR, including one of the two known photographs of him in a wheelchair. These photographs will be available on postcards at the memorial shop along with a variety of historical materials about the life and times of FDR.

In the memorial a time line of the major events of FDR's life, carved in granite, will state, "1921 stricken with poliomyelitis -- he never again walked unaided." In addition, free National Park Service handout literature for visitors will include a discussion of the president's disability.

In compliance with the spirit and the letter of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the FDR Memorial was designed, from the beginning, with the disabled in mind. This is the first memorial in Washington purposely designed to be totally wheelchair accessible, with many areas for rest and contemplation. Also, a major bas-relief sculpture titled "Social Programs" includes 54 detailed images, each with braille for the sight-impaired.

The commission was established by Congress in 1955 to plan, design and construct a national memorial to President Roosevelt. After much deliberation, the commission chose a theme that would celebrate the man and embody his times. The memorial will be a historical narrative of President Roosevelt's service to the people of the United States by depicting the issues and events during the stark days of the Great Depression and the powerful drama of World War II.

There is no sculpture of FDR standing unaided, as reported in Charles Krauthammer's piece {"FDR in a Wheelchair? No." op-ed, June 14}. Any such presentation would be historically inaccurate, therefore, unacceptable.

Of the 10 sculptures in the memorial, three depict the public persons of FDR as president, commander in chief and world leader. These FDR sculptures were inspired by real-life situations, and they show the president as he actually appeared at the time, seated, without a wheelchair or crutches present. This is, of course, the way FDR deliberately and painstakingly presented himself to the public.

We know from FDR's two eldest grandchildren, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves and Curtis Roosevelt, both of whom lived for several years in the Roosevelt White House, that FDR was an intensely private person who considered his disability a very private matter. They both confirm the historical accuracy of the memorial's portrayal of their grandfather. Another grandson of Franklin and Eleanor, David B. Roosevelt, has been an active member of the commission since 1992.

In regard to the idea of including a sculpture of President Roosevelt in a wheelchair in the memorial, Curtis Roosevelt wrote to the commission: "Let me say quite emphatically that FDR would have been very disturbed. He was a very private person and went to great lengths to avoid any discussion or comment on any illness that might be plaguing him."

I have served on the FDR Memorial Commission for 25 years. I now have the distinct privilege of co-chairing the commission with my friend and colleague, Mark Hatfield. This memorial to one of America's greatest presidents should have been built long ago. The delay is truly an embarrassment to those of us who continue to build upon President Roosevelt's policies for a more abundant life for all Americans.

At a press conference on Nov. 18, 1938, President Roosevelt was asked about a controversy concerning the construction of the Jefferson Memorial. He said there was a lot of "flim-flamming that this dear old capital of ours has been subjected to," but "the facts are very simple." He went on to say that after years of discussion about all aspects of the Jefferson Memorial, "the constituted legal authorities decided on a design and that design is being built." So it is with the FDR Memorial.

Construction of the FDR Memorial is on schedule, and completion is expected in the spring of 1997. The writer is a Democratic senator from Hawaii.