

George F. Will

# Don't Hide His Source Of Strength

Controversies concerning the memorial to Franklin Roosevelt are today's evidence that this is an age in which one cannot find common sense without a search warrant.

Because of trepidation about possible protests by the animal rights lobby, the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt will not depict her wearing her familiar fur wrap. And FDR's cigarette holder, seen in so many photographs, will not be in evidence. That holder, often clenched in a toothy smile illuminating FDR's large upturned head, was emblematic of the infectious jauntiness that was his greatest gift to a shaken country and a precis of his political philosophy. But the cigarette holder must be banished, lest sin flourish.

More seriously wrong is the decision that none of the three statues of FDR in the 7.5-acre memorial will depict him in a wheelchair. We wallow waist deep in a confessional culture, in which any lunatic can get on television to confess unnatural acts with llamas, yet we will not truthfully depict this century's most important president in a way that is, to say no more, pertinent to understanding him.

The decision has been made to continue in stone a reticence about FDR's disability, a reticence that in his lifetime was required by public sensibilities that now have been happily surmounted. The decision reveals confusion about the proper point of the memorial.

Defenders of that decision say it would be wrong to "revise the record"—that it would be unhistorical to display what FDR successfully concealed from the American people, most of whom did not understand the reality of his affliction. (Thanks to a cooperative press corps, only one of the more than 125,000 photographs in the FDR library at Hyde Park shows him in a wheelchair.) But fidelity to FDR's wishes is not guiding the design of the memorial: FDR told Felix Frankfurter he wanted only a starkly simple memorial no larger than his desk, the sort of memorial to him that already exists at the National Archives.

A statement by the FDR Memorial Commission almost implies that the project is a celebration of the New Deal. If that is so, the heck with it. The statement says the memorial "is designed to serve not as a monument to the man, but as a place of remembrance, contemplation and tribute to his work."

But that is a distinction without a difference.



FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT LIBRARY

The work of the last 13 years of FDR's life cannot properly be contemplated without reference to the affliction that left him a paraplegic for the last 24 years of his life. He probably would not have become president, and certainly would not have become the long-headed and tough president he was, without passing through the furnace of polio.

One can believe that many of his works were mistakes and still believe he should be celebrated for the gallantry that the disease demanded from him but need not have elicited. No serious person doubts that FDR played a large role in the making of modern America, and it is passing strange to suppose that the disease did not catalyze the transformation of the debonair young swell, skating along on charm and connections, into the brilliant and broadly empathetic politician.

"Too often," FDR once said, "is the biographer tempted to confine himself to that comparatively brief period after the trumpet of fame has directed the eyes of the world upon him whose life story he writes." From that statement Geoffrey Ward derived the title of

the first volume of his unsurpassed biography of FDR, "Before the Trumpet."

Ward's second volume, which recounts FDR's rise from a bed of pain to the seat of power, is titled "A First-Class Temperament." That comes from Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous assessment of FDR: "A second-class intellect. But a first-class temperament!" No reader of Ward can doubt that the temperament FDR exhibited in the 1930s and 1940s was forged in the 1920s. The iron entered into his soul when he performed, with heroic ebullience, the excruciating exercises necessary to make his legs ready for steel braces.

So, let's see FDR portrayed at the memorial in a wheelchair. Perhaps we should resist the temptation to have him holding something that would accurately depict one of his most noble talents and his unquenchable capacity for pleasure—a martini shaker. But let's see that cigarette holder—which, he once breezily explained to an inquiring boy, he used "because my doctor told me to stay as far away from cigarettes as possible."