

A Monumental Mistake

The F.D.R. memorial misses the essence of the man

By Hugh Sidey 1997

TIME, April 28 -- They came humbly and quietly last week in wheelchairs and with leader dogs and a sign-language interpreter, hopeful paraplegic old men, and vigorous middle-age people except for their weakened limbs and dimmed eyes, and glowing youngsters with silence in their ears.

They were a coterie representing 50 million disabled Americans who were invited by the U.S. Park Service to preview the sprawling monument for Franklin Roosevelt to be

dedicated May 2. The monument spreads out grandly on 7.5 acres along Washington's Tidal Basin, great blocks of ocher South Dakota granite carved with the soaring phrases of F.D.R.'s that brought this nation through economic collapse and war.

But in the \$48 million monument there is no depiction of Roosevelt in the wheelchair he used for 24 years, nothing in the gardens and along the pathways to show his disability at a glance for those who remember and for children who never knew the personal struggle that shaped him.

The small vanguard of disabled people left the site saddened, believing to a person that the monument seemed lifeless, lacking the heroic vibrancy of F.D.R. with his radiant smile, head back, steering himself into that destiny he saw beyond all adversity. "The essence of the man is missing," said wheelchair user Mike Deland, chairman of the National Organization on Disability.

And a handful of Gallaudet College students in sign language declared it incomplete history as they had learned it and said they would join a demonstration planned for the dedication day.

Mick Countee sensed the emptiness because after he broke his neck in a diving accident, while he was a Harvard student, his mother told him, "Son, if Franklin Roosevelt could be President, you can finish your education." Countee, a black, not only finished but also went on to get a law degree from Georgetown and an M.B.A. from Harvard. "Not a day went by," he said last week, "that I did not think of Roosevelt and Roy Campanella." Campanella was the Brooklyn Dodgers catcher who was paralyzed in a car accident but never despaired in public.

Jim Dickson, the man organizing the demonstration, stood nearly sightless along the huge monument walls, and imagined how a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair at the entrance would bring the stone to life. When Dickson was seven, he was told by his doctor that he had juvenile macular degeneration and would soon be blind. As he walked with his parents out of the doctor's office, his mother told him, "If Franklin Roosevelt, who had polio and was in a wheelchair, could be President, then you can do what you want." He never forgot.

This cry for understanding from the disabled community is being heard. At least 16 Roosevelt family members now seek a design alteration. A demonstration at a New York foundry casting some of the sculptures halted a press conference. Another protest is planned around the office of monument designer Lawrence Halprin in San Francisco.

Former Presidents Bush, Ford and Carter have urged an additional sculpture to show Roosevelt in a wheelchair, and Bush has sent off a "Dear Bill" note to Clinton in hopes he can encourage a peace before Clinton gives the dedication address. Meanwhile every historian of consequence who has considered the issue has concluded that the monument is a tragic misreading of the spirit of F.D.R. and a grave misstatement of history for the generations to come.

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