

Hugh Sidey

Truth in Memory

Omission of F.D.R.'s handicap is a crime against his spirit

THERE WAS A FUND RAISER FOR THE CONTROVERSIAL F.D.R. MEMORIAL THE other day that traveled all over Washington and included real Roosevelt martinis (3 to 1) at the Tidal Basin construction site. It ended with a private White House dinner of lamb and artichokes at \$10,000 a plate and grossed about half a million. Bill and Hillary Clinton were eloquent in praise of their heroes Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt to their black-tie audience of 200. Actors Jane Alexander and Edward Herrmann, who had played the Roosevelts on television, gave readings, and there was a scratchy old recording of the real Eleanor singing (sort of) *High Hopes*, which brought both gales of laughter and misty eyes.

The problem was that the crucial and defining fact that Roosevelt conducted his presidency from a wheelchair became a forgotten footnote to the White House proceedings and, indeed, to the whole memorial idea. In the warm glow of the White House it was easy to ignore the growing clamor at the gates about a memorial that is taking \$42 million in tax money and has no depiction of Franklin Roosevelt in a wheelchair. (Or, for that matter, of Eleanor's fur stole, now considered too controversial.)

In a Harris poll a while back, 73% of those asked said the memorial should include "visible recognition of F.D.R.'s disabilities." The National Organization on Disability, which claims to represent the interests of 50 million disabled Americans, thinks that to ignore F.D.R.'s disability in the monument is a major cultural blunder. "It would be unconscionable to have schoolchildren visit the memorial five years from now, or 500 years from now, and have no sense of the challenge F.D.R. faced," says Mike Deland, the organization's chairman.

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has become the spokeswoman for a loose confederation of scholars who likewise are appalled at the idea of going ahead with the memorial as designed. "Roosevelt's polio made his special relationship with the American people possible," she said last week. "Not to allow that to be shown would be a fundamental distortion of history, a real loss." The Roosevelt heirs, who at first seemed supportive of a historically cleansed memorial, seem to have tipped the other way, with many favoring a change. The National Organization on Disability has agreed to pick up any extra cost if a new sculpture is needed, since the three F.D.R. pieces are already at the foundry.

Oddly, the C.O.P.'s soon-to-be presidential nominee, Bob Dole, himself partly disabled, while privately supporting a change in the F.D.R. Memorial has so far not gone public. Nor has his rival of next fall, Bill Clinton. There is a singular silence about the issue at the White House, even though Clinton is honorary chairman of the memorial.

One guy spoke up. Former President George Bush took two seconds to think about the issue and whipped off a letter declaring, "I think it would be a shame if at least one of the figures in the memorial did not show him as a man who had a disability ... a courageous man who had infantile paralysis and still led our nation." Last week, on one of his furtive visits to Washington, Bush summoned Deland and Alan Reich, president of the disability organization, to his guest quarters on Jackson Place, across the street from the White House. In those shadowy old chambers where so much of our early history played out, Bush sat down with his two friends in wheelchairs and said, "We've got to keep this one going." ■



Neil Estern with scale models of his statues for the F.D.R. Memorial