

MONUMENTS

Where's His Wheelchair?

Disabled Americans are protesting the way a commission is preparing sculptures in the long-delayed F.D.R. Memorial

By **HUGH SIDNEY** WASHINGTON

The enduring magic of Franklin Roosevelt was so strong that one day in the White House Lyndon Johnson stopped by an F.D.R. bust and cradled the bronze chin in his big palm. "Look at that strength," he said to his companion. Then he stroked the Roosevelt face in tribute. His mind reaching back to when he was a young Texas Congressman, watching in awe as F.D.R. steadied the nation in depression and commanded it in war. After nearly 30 years of trying, the U.S. at last seems ready to complete a major Roosevelt memorial in Washington. Or maybe not.

Johnson was only one of a legion who wanted their hero to be put in marble and bronze in momentous proportions, a project that has been frustrated ever since F.D.R.'s death on April 12, 1945. In 1969 L.B.J. designated 27 acres along Cherry Tree Walk in the Tidal Basin—between the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials—as a park for a Roosevelt monument. One earlier design had been ridiculed as "instant Stonehenge" and dumped in 1960. Two other attempts also faltered.

Twenty years ago, San Francisco landscape architect Lawrence Halprin took over the enterprise and began to orchestrate an open gallery depicting F.D.R.'s four terms with 10 sculptures, both free-standing and bas-relief, and 23 slabs inscribed with the President's words. Progress was steady but tortured. A proposed statue of Eleanor Roosevelt, F.D.R.'s peripatetic wife, showed her in the New Deal period wearing her famous traveling fur piece. But to head up the animal-rights people, Eleanor was moved from the mid-1930s gallery to the time after F.D.R.'s death when she was a delegate to the U.N. By then she was wearing a cloth coat.

On Wednesday afternoon, if current plans hold, the little known Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission will gather yet again on Capitol Hill and, in nervous reverence, study secret photos on a 1-ft. 6-in. model for a bas-relief sculpture. The finished artwork, by California sculptor Robert Graham, would be three times that size and grace the entrance to the memorial. It is a work showing a triumphant Roosevelt riding in an open car down Pennsylvania Avenue after his 1933 Inauguration.

It is the last of the sculptures up for approval in the \$52 million project. It is also one of only three sculptures showing F.D.R. himself. This all seems rather simple, but in truth, telling history is a difficult task these days, filled with experts, historians and special interests. Recently war veterans pressured the Smithsonian institution to change its presentation of the *Enola Gay*. The original script for that World War II exhibition, they said, implied that the use of an atomic weapon on Hiroshima was overkill for a blameless enemy.

This time disabled Americans are incensed by the fact that the three F.D.R. sculptures have no sign of a wheelchair, leg braces, cane or crutches, all part of F.D.R.'s support system. There is, however, a sentence on one of the slabs pointing out that he could not walk unaided after his 1921 polio attack.

“Not sufficient.” says Michael Deland, a board member of the National Organization on Disability, who is confined to a wheelchair. “F.D.R.’s disability was simply too central to his very being.” Hugh Gallagher, author of *F.D.R.’s Splendid Deception*, a book detailing how Roosevelt veiled his disability (only two pictures of him in a wheelchair are among the 125,000 in the Roosevelt library), calls the plans “historically inaccurate.” Alan Reich, president of the N.O.D., which claims to reflect the feelings of almost 50 million disabled Americans, says visual depiction is necessary because Roosevelt was “the personification of triumph over adversity, and that made him believable when he told the nation they had nothing to fear but fear itself.” Both Gallagher and Reich also use wheelchairs.

Senate majority leader Bob Dole, disabled from war wounds to his right shoulder and arm, has protested. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin (*No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Homefront in World War II*) says putting F.D.R. in a wheelchair “would be one of the most powerful parts of the memorial.”

Architect Halprin echoes the view held so far by the memorial commission and the Roosevelt family. “This is about Roosevelt’s being President.” he says. “He did not wish to appear before the people as disabled. This makes him out to be who he wanted to be. To do otherwise would be a historical denial of how he felt.”

The commission, co-chaired by Senators Mark Hatfield of Oregon and Daniel Inouye of Hawaii (who lost an arm in the war), and including grandson David Roosevelt, is hunkering down. But the tide seems to be against their view: that F.D.R.’s deception of the 1930s—politically incorrect now but necessary, he believed, for the politics of the time—should be perpetuated in a monument intended for the ages. “We all need to understand what it was this man conquered.” says Goodwin. “If Franklin Roosevelt were to come back, I think he would want his disability to be shown in some way.” He would be amused by the debate. After all, he once said, “There is nothing I love as much as a good fight.”