

The FDR Wheelchair Controversy

Publication info: The Washington Post (pre-1997 Full text): Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C]
25 June 1996

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

I entered government service in the early New Deal and saw Mr. Roosevelt on various occasions during his four terms. Two of them come to mind in connection with the subject of a memorial statue. One was on Nov. 17, 1938, when reciprocal trade agreements with the United Kingdom and Canada were signed at the White House. I was invited to attend as one of the State Department negotiators. I sat facing the corridor through which the president came to the room. I caught sight of him before he entered the room and was shocked by how gray his face was. It lighted up to his characteristic ebullience when he entered the room, but the experience made me realize the pain he must have felt in walking.

The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission should change the design of a massive, historically inaccurate memorial to the former president. The American Rehabilitation Association, representing medical, vocational and community supports rehabilitation providers nationwide, agrees with George Will, who wrote that FDR "probably would not become president . . . without passing through the furnace of polio" {op-ed, May 9}. The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial is due to open in the spring of 1997, compete with 12-foot-high waterfalls and an amphitheater on the Tidal Basin near the Jefferson Memorial. Plans call for three statues of FDR and one of Eleanor, his wife, on the 7 1/2-acre site. The commission, claiming that FDR would wish to play down his struggle with paralysis, refuses to depict his disability on any of the statues it will erect.

FULL TEXT

I agree with Charles Krauthammer {op-ed, June 14} that Franklin D. Roosevelt should not be memorialized in a wheelchair.

I entered government service in the early New Deal and saw Mr. Roosevelt on various occasions during his four terms. Two of them come to mind in connection with the subject of a memorial statue. One was on Nov. 17, 1938, when reciprocal trade agreements with the United Kingdom and Canada were signed at the White House. I was invited to attend as one of the State Department negotiators. I sat facing the corridor through which the president came to the room. I caught sight of him before he entered the room and was shocked by how gray his face was. It lighted up to his characteristic ebullience when he entered the room, but the experience made me realize the pain he must have felt in walking.

The second occasion was on May 10, 1940, the day the Nazis invaded the Low Countries. The president attended a concert by the National Symphony Orchestra that evening in Continental Hall. My wife and I also were there. During the intermission, the president decided to address us. It was presumably an unplanned event, because his remarks were not reported in the press the next day. He apparently wanted to tell his fellow Americans who happened to be there how serious a threat to our country the day's events had demonstrated. The audience sat with bated breath while the president, with the help of his son Jimmy, dragged himself up a short flight of stairs to the stage to address us. No one whoever

witnessed the effort that Franklin Roosevelt made to get around would think he should be portrayed in a wheelchair.

JACQUES J. REINSTEIN, Washington

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But by doing so, the commission denies the historical reality that during the last 24 years of Mr. Roosevelt's life, he never took a step without his braces. In fact, during the 12 years of his presidency, he spent most of his waking hours in his wheelchair. Without depicting his disability, the memorial denies the fact that FDR led the nation out of the depths of the Depression and led the Allies to victory in World War II -- from a wheelchair. Eight of Roosevelt's grandchildren have stated their support. Former president George Bush, who signed the historic Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, stated, "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. It is my opinion FDR should be shown for what he was -- a courageous man who had infantile paralysis and still led our nation." A Harris Poll found 73 percent of Americans agreed that Mr. Roosevelt's disability should be clearly depicted.

SY SCHLOSSMAN

President and CEO American Rehabilitation Association

Reston

Charles Krauthammer contends that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's disability should not be represented in the pending memorial because the former president would not wish to be so remembered. What has any of this to do with us? The memorial's sponsors already have ignored Roosevelt's wish to have no monument other than the small block of stone that now sits near the National Archives.

The most compelling reasons for acknowledging the former president's disability have nothing to do with guessing the honoree's preferences. First, there is the matter of historical accuracy. At a time when the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit and other controversies have drawn fire at so-called revisionist history, here we have a case with no room to dispute fact or interpretation: As president, Roosevelt could neither stand nor walk unaided. But the larger point is that Roosevelt's commemorative preferences are simply irrelevant. Monuments are for the living, not the dead. We must remember this inspiring man in a way that extends his leadership into the present and the future without being constrained (as he sometimes was) by the shames and prejudices of the past. SCOTT A. SANDAGE
Pittsburgh The writer is an assistant professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University. I am researching what I hope will be a complete history of the FDR Memorial and a balanced assessment of the

"wheelchair or no wheelchair" issue. As Mr. Krauthammer says, it is well documented that FDR did everything he could to minimize his disability and present an image of power and leadership to the public. Mr. Krauthammer says only two out of 35,000 pictures of FDR show him in a wheelchair. The number is actually only two out of 125,000 pictures.

The bas relief Mr. Krauthammer mentions showing FDR standing (taken from a photograph in which he was leaning on the arm of his son) was rejected quite a while ago.

The memorial's major sculpture of FDR by Neil Estern shows him seated on a chair with small wheels, an exact replica of the chair he used at Hyde Park. His cape -- made famous in photos of the Yalta conference -- covers one leg but reveals floppy trousers covering the other leg, which, on observation, is an honest image of an emaciated, withered limb, done subtly, as befits a memorial statue.

Mr. Estern says: "My sharpest, clearest memory of FDR is a man in a cape, toward the end of his life, at once vulnerable and yet strong, in failing health and at the same time, the hero. I remember his strength. It is an anathema to me that people are clamoring to change this image."

As Mr. Krauthammer writes: "You do not memorialize a man by imposing on him an identity that he himself rejected." Perhaps when people see the FDR statue -- enveloped in its cape, seated on a chair with small wheels, as he truly was -- the debate will end and history will prevail.

LOIS HARMON ALCOSSER Weston, Conn.

Illustration

PHOTO

DETAILS

Publication title: The Washington Post (pre-1997 Full text); Washington, D.C. Pages: A.16

Number of pages: 0

Publication year: 1996

Publication date: Jun 25, 1996

column: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Section: OP/ED

Publisher: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post

Place of publication: Washington, D.C.

Country of publication: United States, Washington, D.C.

Publication subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 01908286

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: LETTER

ProQuest document ID: 307899396

Document URL: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/307899396?accountid=46320> Copyright: The Washington Post Company Jun 25, 1996

Last updated: 2010-08-04

Database: The Washington Post

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