

Family Deplores Furor Over FDR Memorial

FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 1997

The Washington Post

Photo Caption: This 1941 photo of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was taken by a cousin, Margaret Sucklay. Shown with the president are a girl identified as Ruthie Bie and Roosevelt's dog, Fala.

16 Descendants Endorse Including a Statue with a Wheelchair

By Alona Wartofsky, Washington Post, Staff Writer

Sixteen of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's descendants this week endorsed depicting the former president in a wheelchair in the new FDR Memorial slated to open early next month.

"It would be a disservice to history and the public's interest if the impact of polio on the man were to be hidden," read a statement released by the family.

Roosevelt's grandson Christopher Roosevelt, one of the statement's signatories, said yesterday that while the statement supports an accurate depiction of the former president, it also makes a more important point.

"The purpose of this statement is to say there is no family position on the subject," Christopher Roosevelt said. "The family position...should not in any way be a determining factor on an issue of this kind of public and national importance."

The statement expressed concern that the growing issue of whether or not to portray FDR's disability in the soon to be opened FDR Memorial in Washington...will seriously detract from and disrupt the dedication ceremonies."

The FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign, a coalition that includes some groups that advocate the rights of disabled people, is planning to demonstrate at the May 2 dedication. "We expect somewhere between 500 and 650 protesters, mostly people with disabilities," said organizer Jim Dickson.

Some prominent figures have weighed in on the controversy. Former presidents George Bush, Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter have written letters in support of a sculpture depicting Franklin Roosevelt in the wheelchair he used after being disabled by poliomyelitis at age 39.

Dick Thornburgh, an attorney for the National Organization on Disability, spoke this week with former senator Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) and Sen. Daniel K Inouye (D-Hawaii), co-chairmen of the FDR Memorial Commission, in an attempt to persuade them to consider changes at the \$48 million installation along the Tidal Basin.

"No breakthroughs yet," said Thornburgh, a former U.S. attorney general. "I think Senator Hatfield and Senator Inouye both would like to see something accomplished but are skeptical about whether at this late date something meaningful can be done."

The memorial's displays will include a reproduction of one of FDR's wheelchairs and one of the two known photographs of Roosevelt in a wheelchair.

Dickson dismissed the two exhibits as tokenism. "The photograph will be 10 by 14 inches in a monument the size of 742 acres. How many people are going to notice that? The photograph is tucked in this little itchy-bitsy building in the corner by the bathroom."

An entry for 1921 in the memorial's timeline reads: "Stricken with poliomyelitis, he never again walked unaided." Dickson said that many people with disabilities will have difficulty seeing the inscription. The imbeciles carved it into the riser of a staircase," he said. "It's hard to imagine how they could have been so insensitive."

The FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign has offered to raise the money for an additional statue depicting Roosevelt in a wheelchair.

The debate over how to portray Roosevelt has been going on for years. Although he started the March of Dimes and occasionally appeared in public in a wheelchair, Roosevelt adamantly discouraged photographs showing him in his wheelchair.

Two years ago, the National Organization on Disability asked the Memorial Commission, which includes Roosevelt's grandson David B. Roosevelt, to reconsider its design.

"The full commission heard that request and voted unanimously to move ahead with things that were already in place and approved...so that there would be no delay in this memorial, which has been a long time coming." said Dorann H. Gunderson, the commission's executive director.

Gunderson said the commission is "very confident that their choices have been the right ones." Dickson disagrees. "If I sat down and said, 'How could I design a memorial to Roosevelt that would tick off people with disabilities?' it would be hard to top the monstrosity they've designed," he said. "We're going to win this whether we win this before May 2 or in two years."

Although there are Roosevelt family members who approve of the current design, Christopher Roosevelt said it doesn't truly represent his grandfather's life. "That's kind of like talking about Joan of Arc without talking about her being burned at the stake. FDR would not have been the person he was without the incredible disability that he lived with and overcame," he said.

"Anybody who is interested in honoring FDR should be committed to making every effort to achieve a resolution of these issues before the dedication ceremonies," he added.

"I will personally feel embarrassed that a resolution has not been achieved, and I will personally feel embarrassed if there are demonstrations by representatives of the disability community at this dedication."