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Senator Bob Dole Remarks-Franklin Delano Roosevelt, A Disability Hero

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PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT:
A DISABILITY HERO

WASHINGTON -- Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole today made the following remarks on the floor of the U.S. Senate in honor of the 50th anniversary of FDR's death on April 12, 1995:

As many members of the Senate know, it is my custom to speak each year about a disability subject on April 14th. It is the date I was wounded in World War II and joined the disability community myself. This year we will be in recess on April 14th, so I will give my annual message today.

I will talk about another member of the disability community--certainly one of its most prominent members. But throughout his life, his disability was not only unknown to most people, it was denied and hidden.

I am speaking about President Franklin Roosevelt. Next week, the nation will commemorate the 50th anniversary of his death on April 12th, 1945. He will surely be recalled by many as a master politician; an energetic and inspiring leader during the dark days of the depression; a tough, single-minded Commander-in-Chief during World War II; and a statesman.

No doubt about it, he was all these things. But he was also the first elected leader in history with a disability, and he was a disability hero.

FDR's Splendid Deception

In 1921, at age 39, Franklin Roosevelt was a young man in a hurry. He was following the same political path that took his cousin Theodore Roosevelt to the White House. In 1910 he was elected to the New York State Senate, and later was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1920, he was the Democratic candidate for Vice President.

Then, on the evening of August 10th, while on vacation, he felt ill and went to bed early. Within three days he was paralyzed from the chest down. Although the muscles of his upper body soon recovered, he remained paralyzed below the waist.

His political career screeched to a halt. He spent the next seven years in rehabilitation, determined to walk again. He never did. He mostly used a wheelchair. Sometimes he was carried by his sons or aides. Other times he crawled on the floor.

But he did perfect the illusion of walking--believing that otherwise his political ambitions were dead. He could stand upright only with his lower body painfully wrapped in steel

braces. He moved forward by swinging his hips, leaning on the arm of a family member or aide. It worked for only a few feet at a time. It was dangerous. But it was enough to convince people that FDR was not a "cripple." FDR biographer Hugh Gallagher has called this effort, and other tricks used to hide his disability, "FDR's splendid deception."

This deception was aided and abetted by many others. The press were co-conspirators. No reporter wrote that FDR could not walk, and no photographer took a picture of him in his wheelchair. For that matter, thousands saw him struggle when he "walked." Maybe they didn't believe or understand what they saw.

In 1928, FDR ended his political exile, and was elected Governor of New York. Four years later, he was President. On March 4th, 1933, standing at the East Front of this Capitol, he said, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He was 35 feet from his wheelchair. Few people knew from what deep personal experiences he spoke.

(more)

Perhaps the only occasion where FDR fully acknowledged the extent of his disability in public was a visit to a military hospital in Hawaii. He toured the amputee wards in his wheelchair. He went by each bed, letting the men see him exactly as he was. He didn't need to give any pep talks--his example said it all.

FDR: A Disability Hero

Earlier I called FDR a "disability hero." But it was not for the reasons some might think. It would be easy to cite his courage and grit. But FDR would not want that. "No sob stuff," he told the press in 1928 when he started his comeback. Even within his own family, he did not discuss his disability. It was simply a fact of life.

In my view, FDR is a hero for his efforts on behalf of others with a disability. In 1926, he purchased a run-down resort in Warm Springs, Georgia, and over the next 20 years turned it into a unique, first class rehabilitation center. It was based on a new philosophy of treatment--one where psychological recovery was as important as medical treatment.

FDR believed in an independent life for people with disabilities--at a time when society thought they belonged at home or in institutions.

Warm Springs was run by people with polio, for people with polio. In that spirit, FDR is the father of the modern independent living movement--which puts people with disabilities in control of their own lives.

He also founded the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis--today known as the "March of Dimes"--and raised millions of dollars to help others with polio and find a cure. On April 12th, 1955, on the 10th anniversary of his death, the March of Dimes announced the first successful polio vaccine, engineered by Dr. Jonas Salk. Today, polio is virtually extinct in the United States. Next week, the March of Dimes will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the vaccine in Ann Arbor.

In public policy, FDR understood that government help in

rehabilitating people with disabilities is "good business"--often returning more in taxes and savings than it costs. It is unfortunately a philosophy that even today we often pay more lip service than practice.

Disability Today and Tomorrow

Our nation has come a long way in its understanding of disability since the days of President Roosevelt. For example, we recognize that disability is a natural part of life. We have begun to build a world that is accessible. No longer do we accept that buildings--either through design or indifference--are not accessible, which is a "keep out" sign for the disabled.

We have come a long way in another respect--in attitudes. Fifty years ago, we had a President, Franklin Roosevelt, who could not walk and believed it was necessary to disguise that fact from the American people. Today I trust that Americans would have no problem in electing as President a man or woman with a disability.

Let's not fool ourselves--this work is not done. Not by a long shot. And I think this is something that we can all agree on, Republican or Democrat.

So, next week, as we honor President Roosevelt, let us remember him as a disability hero and dedicate ourselves to this unfinished business.

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