

FDR and the Hidden Work of Disability
By Mark Willis
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1. A Splendid Deception

During World War II President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled safely and securely throughout the nation in a private railroad car built and owned by the Pullman Company. Its original name was the *Ferdinand Magellan*, and with the President aboard, its official designation was *U.S. Car 1*. At the war's outset the rail car was retrofitted to the specifications of the Secret Service responsible for protecting the President. The *Magellan* was equipped with bullet-proof windows, armor plating, escape hatches, and an elevator at one end to accommodate the President's wheelchair. The lift eliminated the need to build temporary wooden ramps wherever FDR travelled, which had become a widely-recognized clue to the President's whereabouts.

The *Magellan's* wheelchair lift is perhaps the earliest example of an accessibility accommodation built for mass transportation. The innovation had more than one practical justification: it afforded the President a measure of privacy as he boarded the train; it saved public funds by reducing the need to build temporary ramps; and it fit Secret Service plans for national security on the home front. That final point suggests that by the early 1940s many Americans knew that F.D.R. used a wheelchair to move through the world.

Indeed, the American people had known about FDR's infantile paralysis (poliomyelitis) for twenty years. They read about its onset in *The New York Times* in 1921, and they followed nationally-syndicated feature stories about Roosevelt's arduous rehabilitation efforts in Warm Springs, Georgia. They donated money in his name to charities seeking a cure for polio. They applauded FDR's heroic first steps as he returned to politics in 1924. They admired the cheerful confidence of his struggle. Some said his affliction made him more human; his struggle made him more empathetic; and his confidence buoyed them through their own struggles in the Great Depression. After voting in a landslide to elect him President in 1932, the American people were prepared to believe Roosevelt when he reassured them, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Nonetheless, FDR was extraordinarily successful in stage-managing public perceptions of his paralysis. When he stood at a podium to make a speech, his trousers covered the locked steel leg braces that enabled him to stand upright. Using the braces, a cane, and the supportive arm of a trusted aide, he mastered the ability to "walk" short distances from a chair to the podium. His aides and bodyguards shielded him from the public's gaze when he transferred from chair to wheelchair, or was lifted and carried by others. FDR was determined to be seen as a strong leader, not a helpless cripple who was wheelchair-bound. He staked his political career on that difference in perceptions.

According to biographer Hugh Gregory Gallagher, this political calculation was "FDR's Splendid Deception." In a groundbreaking book with that phrase as its title, Gallagher explained how FDR used great charm, personal loyalties, and occasional strong-arm tactics to persuade journalists to keep the details of his paralysis "off-the-record." Roosevelt set the rules in his 1928 campaign for governor of New York: no photographs depicting him to be helpless or crippled. In a newsreel made that year, he is heard to say as he was helped out of a car, "No movies of me getting out of the machine, boys." According to Gallagher:

It was an unspoken code, honored by the White House photography corps. If, as happened once or twice, one of its members sought to violate it and try to sneak a

picture of the President in his chair, one or another of the older photographers would "accidentally" knock the camera to the ground or otherwise block the picture. Should the President himself notice someone in the crowd violating the interdiction, he would point out the offender and the Secret Service would move in, seize the camera, and expose the film. [1]

As a result, only two archival photographs are known to depict FDR in a wheelchair. Neither document the President executing the public duties of his office. Both were taken in the relatively private setting of his Hyde Park home. By comparison, there are many written accounts by FDR's contemporaries that acknowledge his use of a wheelchair in everyday life.

It is this scarcity of visual evidence, not the written record, that fuels today's widespread perception that FDR concealed his paralysis and deceived the American public. The perception resonates in the MiT8 Call for Papers in the assertion "that the media were complicit in keeping from the public FDR's disability and the foibles of the ruling elite." [2] I'll take that bait (though I won't have time for the ruling elite). If the media were complicit, so were the American people. They wanted a leader who could stand tall on his own two feet. If Roosevelt deceived them, he deceived himself as well. He believed the public persona he projected. He never gave up the hope that he would overcome paralysis and someday walk again. Call it deception or self-denial, what was concealed from public view was the prodigious work required to pull it off.

2. Models of Disease and Disability

In speaking of Roosevelt's paralysis, I have carefully avoided the term *disability* until now. It was not a concept FDR applied to his own experience. When the Social Security program was launched during his Presidency, "disability" referred to an inability to work. [3] The term did not convey the range of social and political contexts in which it is understood today. In FDR's time, "handicapped" was an acceptable label in public discourse, but "cripple" was the likeliest epithet encountered in everyday speech. When FDR referred to his paralysis, he spoke euphemistically about "my illness" or "my condition." He typically spoke of it in the past tense, implying that he had recovered and was moving on.

Although Roosevelt was arguably the most effective American politician in the 20th century, he did not and could not make the political affirmation that I myself must disclose to you. I am a person with a disability. I've made that disclosure and claimed that political identity for 40 years. When I began to lose eyesight at age 18, the result of a genetic retina disease, I was fortunate to come of age (and acquire the right to vote) along with an emerging disability rights movement. It coalesced when disabled Vietnam War veterans lobbied Congress to pass the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 of that law required universities receiving federal funds to become fully accessible. Students with disabilities like me joined the ranks of this political movement that claimed equal access and opportunity to be a civil right for all Americans with disabilities. As an academic discipline called disability studies emerged over time, social thinkers joined political activists in theorizing models of disease and disability that FDR might have imagined but never articulated. [4]

Scholars in this field draw distinctions between medical and social models of disability. The medical model explains disability in terms of an individual's impairments, which result from a disease or injury process. It emphasizes "fixing" the individual through medical interventions, rehabilitation, and the inevitable search for a cure. The social model explains disability as a process involving individuals and the societies in which they live. It emphasizes changing society – making it more flexible and tolerant – as well as

rehabilitating the individual's impaired body. The social model gained traction in the 1980s when the World Health Organization adopted terminology that differentiated *impairment* (the effect of disease or injury), *handicap* (an individual's functional limitation resulting from impairment), and *disability* (limitations resulting from an individual's handicap as well as society's barriers). In its latest iteration of these concepts, the WHO states:

Disability is... not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers. [5]

We are people, of course not models. Theorizing disability in this way should not obscure realities of experience that embrace both medical and social domains.

Franklin Roosevelt was deeply imbued in the medical model. After he contracted poliomyelitis, he set about to heal himself with an almost superhuman effort [6]. He consulted leading authorities on the disease, and he read everything he could find in the medical literature. After visiting the ramshackle resort with water cure in Warm Springs, he bought it. In the pioneering rehabilitation center built there, he called himself "Dr. Roosevelt" with obvious mischief and pride. The sobriquet foreshadowed subsequent job titles like "Dr. New Deal" and "Dr. Win-the-War." According to his wife Eleanor, FDR would have been happy to run the rehab center had he not returned to politics. When he was President, charitable gala balls were held every year on his birthday to raise money for Warm Springs and polio research. The Salk and Sabin polio vaccines developed in the decades after his death are a direct legacy of the investment "Dr. Roosevelt" made in the medical model.

The American people were comfortable with the medical model, too, and they tacitly accepted Roosevelt's handicap when it was framed in familiar tropes: tragic affliction, indomitable hope, courageous struggle, triumph over adversity. Beneath the surface of this heroic narrative, however, there is ample evidence that FDR also grasped the social basis of disability. His vision of rehabilitation emphasized an active, barrier-free social life as well as vigorous physical therapy for the residents of Warm Springs. Those residents shared their own experiences and strategies for living with paralysis in peer counseling sessions, and they formed an intentional community of people with polio in which FDR thrived. Whether at Warm Springs or the White House, Roosevelt drew around him an ever-changing network of informed and engaging people (the "Brain Trust" was only a fraction of them) who forestalled the possibility of his social isolation. This trusted inner circle, if not the American public as a whole, witnessed dimensions of disability woven throughout the President's daily life.

3. The Work of Disability

It should be clear from the scope and tone of what I say that even though I teach at a medical school, I am deeply imbued in the social model of disability. My goal in examining FDR's historical example is uncovering what I will call his *work of disability*. That work is a daily process of solving problems, making adaptations and negotiating accommodations to gain equal access and full participation in social life. I believe it is creative work, a significant if unheralded form of cultural production.

After paralysis interrupted his political career, FDR necessarily engaged in the work of disability every day for the rest of his life. One example of his work is the way he adapted the wheelchair to meet the needs of a busy man on the go. "The standard wheelchair of the

day was a cumbersome thing made of wood and wicker," according to Hugh Gallagher; "it was the old-fashioned Bath chair used for pushing invalids about in Jane Austen's time." [7] FDR designed a simpler, nimbler device using a straight-backed kitchen chair affixed with two pairs of wheels. The front driver wheels were smaller than those on traditional wheelchairs, enabling a tighter turning radius and greater efficiency of arm movement when the chair was self-propelled. Without arms or side-rails, the chair allowed ease of transfer to other seating. Lightweight and portable, it was easily stowed for travel in the trunk of a car. It was narrow enough to fit through most doorways, and when the situation required, Roosevelt could be carried in it up flights of stairs.

Early in his rehabilitation, FDR developed the upper body strength needed to wheel his own chair wherever he went. He claimed his biceps were as big as Jack Dempsey's. He mastered techniques to transfer his body from bed to wheelchair to office chair or car seat, and he did so throughout the day without the assistance of others. As the Presidency placed increasing demands on his time and energy, Roosevelt allowed others to push the chair for him. Winston Churchill provided a friendly push on occasion, but most of the time the job was done by Secret Service agents or military aides who could roll as fast as FDR wanted to go. Whether he wheeled or others pushed it, FDR's work with a wheelchair involved strength, skill, and training. After a 1937 visit to the White House Ernest Hemingway noted in a letter, with grudging respect, that the President was "completely paralyzed from the waist down and there is much skillful maneuvering of him into the chair and from room to room." [8] During the war the Secret Service conducted routine wheelchair evacuation drills to prepare for the possibility of a White House attack. The President declined to participate in the drills, so an agent of comparable size and weight was deployed as his surrogate. The Secret Service determined that it could race the President's wheelchair from the Oval Office through an underground tunnel to a secret bomb shelter in the basement of the Treasury Building in less than two minutes.

It would be inaccurate, if not demeaning, to describe Franklin Roosevelt with the commonplace epithet "wheelchair-bound." His chair had no belts, straps, or other such accoutrements of bondage. It was a mobility tool. He worked with it. He would not allow others to confine him to it as a symbol or stigma of sedentary helplessness. Once when a newspaper editor insisted that his illness left him wheelchair-bound, FDR replied disingenuously, "As a matter of fact, I don't use a wheelchair at all except a little kitchen chair on wheels to get about my room while dressing . . . and solely for the purpose of saving time." [9] The exchange provides a glimpse into the caginess of the Splendid Deception. FDR could sail close to the wind of full and complete disclosure, and he surely could tack wide of the mark. Faced with acknowledging my own disability in such unacceptable terms, I'm sure I would have done the same.

Long before the development of motorized wheelchairs, FDR used automobiles in just that way. He may have been one of the first paraplegics to drive a car outfitted with hand controls instead of foot pedals. With few worries about money, he owned hand-control vehicles in Hyde Park as well as Warm Springs. He loved to drive his own car. Slipping away sometimes from Secret Service escorts, he stole a rare moment of solitude as he drove through the countryside. During election campaigns Roosevelt waved to voters from the back seat of an open Pierce-Arrow touring car. It was custom-fitted to serve double-duty as mobility tool and speaker's platform. He could hold onto a hand rail mounted behind the driver's seat when he wanted to stand in braces to make a speech, or he could sit before a portable tray mounted with microphones. When he travelled by railroad on Presidential junkets, the Pierce-Arrow went with him in its own freight car. In 1933, Roosevelt survived an assassination attempt while seated in the back of an open car. The bullets barely missed the President-elect but mortally wounded his friend Anton Cermak, mayor of Chicago.

Whether a wheelchair or limousine, Roosevelt's mobility tools required architectural modifications to work effectively. During his Presidency elevators and wooden ramps were installed in public buildings across Washington. Some were sturdy enough to accommodate his car. On public occasions when FDR would be seen walking a short distance from car to building, the street level of entire city blocks was raised by means of temporary scaffolding with trestle supports. During hard times the construction work must have been a boon to unemployed carpenters.

Planning, implementing, and enforcing FDR's accessibility was the job of the U.S. Secret Service, which underscores an important point. The work of disability is not limited to the efforts of a disabled individual. It also involves social organization and the productive labor of nondisabled workers, and thus it represents both an expense and an investment. Most disabled Americans today must negotiate for the kinds of accommodations made for FDR, and the caveat "reasonable accommodation" is built into the law. President Franklin Roosevelt did not have to negotiate. He could summon vast resources of the federal government – money as well as brains – to accomplish the work of disability. And it was accomplished with such thoroughness and efficiency that its scale could be called the *Accessibility-Industrial Complex* had it been directed toward public accommodations and not solely the needs of a single man.

4. Deception's Half-Life

Franklin Roosevelt once told Orson Welles, "You and I are the two best actors in America." [10] While he stopped short of claiming the title "Dr. Hollywood," his boast to Welles revealed another kind of work that not only sustained the Splendid Deception, but also redefined the job duties of the modern American Presidency. No one credits FDR's immediate predecessors – Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover – with the dramatic flair needed to project Presidential power through savvy exploitation of the news media. But every president since Roosevelt has succeeded or failed according to his own dramaturgic ability to convince the American people that he could play the part.

Roosevelt's political career flourished with the new medium of radio. Live broadcasts of his Fireside chats brought his familiar voice into millions of American homes. On the radio, of course, no one knew he used a wheelchair. The same was true for his public speeches. He applied an actor's discipline to the task of walking to the speaker's podium with apparent independence. Many who saw him walk, no matter how briefly, remembered courage rather than skill. Hugh Gallagher captured both qualities in a vivid account of Roosevelt's speech to Congress following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

After he had polio, FDR never took an easy step. Each step was an effort, painful, requiring concentration and balance. A false or hasty move would cause him to lose his balance and fall. Slowly, carefully, steadily, Roosevelt moved down the aisle and, with the constant steadiness of son James, to the podium just below the Speaker's chair... Roosevelt had many things to think about that morning: present defeat and ultimate victory; mobilization; alliances; the organization of an all-out effort unequalled in history. But his uppermost thought at the moment was that he get one braced foot after the other in the right position; that he hold his balance over his hips and pelvis just so; that he shift his great shoulders forward, left, and right just so; that he not fall down. This concentration caused him to break out into a sweat... Once at the podium, the President grasped the sides of that firm platform, held himself at his tallest, most direct stature; then with firm voice and steady gaze, he began, "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a day which will live in infamy..." [11]

As World War II proceeded and his own health began to falter, Roosevelt had less and less energy to expend on deception. On the home front he inspected bomber factories from the back seat of his open limo. In North Africa and Sicily he reviewed the troops from a bone-rattling perch atop an Army jeep. Countless sailors and soldiers saw the President as he was transferred from ship to ship and airplane to airplane en route to international summits with Churchill and Stalin. In Hawaii in 1944, Roosevelt chose to be pushed in his wheelchair through the wards of a naval hospital. One of the wounded sailors had amputated his own leg to save his life. Roosevelt rolled up to him and said, "I understand you are something of a surgeon... I'm not a bad orthopedist myself." [12] Later a Presidential aide would recall that FDR wanted "to display himself and his useless legs to these boys who would have to face the same bitterness." [13] I have to believe that Roosevelt's example that day conveyed not bitterness, but the dignity to be found in the work of disability. Had there ever been an iconic photograph of the President in a wheelchair, it should have been taken then.

After Roosevelt returned from the Yalta conference in 1945, he made one more trip to Capitol Hill to deliver a report to Congress. For the first time in his long political career, he was rolled into the House chamber in a wheelchair that all could see. He transferred to an armchair placed before a table in the well of the House. "Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Congress," Roosevelt intoned, "I hope you will pardon me for the unusual posture of sitting down during the presentation of what I wish to say, but I know you will realize it makes it a lot easier for me in not having to carry about ten pounds of steel around the bottom of my legs." With characteristic aplomb, FDR's disclosure coaxed laughter, then applause, as he added quickly, "and also because of the fact I have just completed a fourteen-thousand-mile trip." [14] It was Roosevelt's most public acknowledgement of his disability. He died of heart failure two months later in Warm Springs.

Not long after the President's death all evidence of the Accessibility-Industrial Complex was erased from official Washington. Down came the wheelchair ramps built for his use at the Capitol, the State and War Department buildings, and the church he attended on Lafayette Square. The Secret Service ceased its wheelchair evacuation drills and filed away the accessibility checklists used to plan the President's travel. The wheelchair lift on the Presidential railroad car was dismantled, too. Even the ramps at Hyde Park were torn down when FDR's estate was donated to the public as a national park. Surely, the erasure of all that work was the ultimate deception and denial. But the work of disability is an unstoppable process of problem-solving. In time Franklin Roosevelt's adaptations and accommodations would be built all over again. Not for one man. For everyone.

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Mark Willis is an assistant clinical professor of community health at Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. Email: mark.willis@wright.edu. Read more: fairuselab.net/fdr.

Notes

1. Gallagher, Hugh Gregory; FDR's Splendid Deception; Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press, 1994, p. 93-94.
2. <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit8/subs/call.html> retrieved 4/30/2013.
3. <http://www.ssa.gov/history/edberkdib.html> retrieved 4/30/2013.
4. See for example the papers published in a 1988 special issue of the Journal of Social Issues, "Moving Disability Beyond 'Stigma'";
<http://www.spssi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=805> retrieved 4/30/2013
5. <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/> retrieved 4/30/2013.
6. The story is portrayed with surprising veracity in the 1960 film *Sunrise at Campobello*. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunrise_at_Campobello retrieved 4/30/2013.
7. Gallagher p. 91.
8. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-lettersexcerpts.html> retrieved 4/30/2013.
9. Gallagher p. 92.
10. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/presidents-lying-fdr2/?flavour=mobile> retrieved 4/30/2013.
11. Gallagher pp. 166-7.
12. Gallagher p. 173.
13. Samuel Rosenman quoted in Burns, James MacGregor, Roosevelt: the Lion and the Fox; New York : Harcourt, Brace, 1956; p. 458.
14. Gallagher p. 207.

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