

A controversy has arisen over a planned monument in honor of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. whose construction is now well underway. President Roosevelt, a victim of Polio for much of his life, was unable to walk unaided throughout his entire presidency of fourteen years. None of the sculptures or bas reliefs planned for the monument, however, (there are to be three of each) will show him in a wheelchair, with crutches, or with a cane. Mike Deland, a board member of the National Organization on Disability has tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission to depict Roosevelt's disability. "Without question he is the role model for the fifty million disabled persons living in this country. He lived his life in a wheel chair and history should record it," said Deland. The Memorial Commission argues, however, that to portray Roosevelt as disabled would betray his memory. The Commission, whose co-chairs are Senators Mark Hatfield of Oregon, and Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, notes that throughout his presidency Roosevelt insisted upon keeping his disability from public view. David B. Roosevelt, a grandson of FDR, and a member of the Commission, said that the memorial should not be a vehicle for making a social statement.

Should the memorial to President Franklin D. Roosevelt contain at least one sculpture or bas relief that portrays his disability? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The memorial should have at least one sculpture or bas relief depicting Roosevelt's disability. It is true that Roosevelt chose to keep his disability from public view throughout his long presidency. Nonetheless, one cannot say, for this reason alone, that he would not have wanted it depicted in a memorial to him fifty years after his death, in light of all the attitudinal changes that have occurred during that time. More important, even if one could say what President Roosevelt would have wanted – which one cannot - this would be only one factor in deciding the issue, and not necessarily the decisive one. The monument is a public memorial, paid for with taxpayers' money, to commemorate Roosevelt as President, not as a private individual. For this reason, concern that the memorial be consistent with Roosevelt's personal attitudes does not outweigh the deep significance of his life as a role model for disabled individuals.

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