Hugh Gallagher

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was thirty-nine years old when he contracted a severe case of poliomyelitis in 1921. Despite seven long years of rehabilitation, using every technique thought to be helpful, his hips and legs remained paralyzed for the rest of his life.

To move about, FDR was forced to use a wheelchair. In order to stand, he had to don long leg braces and steady himself on the arm of a strong man and use a cane as a load-bearing crutch. To "walk," he shifted his weight from one side to another, using the strong man's arm as a parallel bar as he swung first one leg, then the other, in a forward arc. It was a slow and dangerous process—for if he lost his balance, his hips would buckle and he would fall. FDR had to be pulled to a standing position and lifted in and out of cars and up and down stairs. He also needed assistance in dressing.

Hard Times for Disabled Persons

The era of Roosevelt's presidency was a hard time for disabled people, who were subject to age-old prejudices based on fear and shame. Many viewed the disabled as helpless invalids, and expected them to stay at home in their bedrooms with the shades drawn. In "polite" society, it was considered bad taste to discuss subjects such as cancer and disability. The disabled were spoken of only in whispers; for all intents and purposes, they were nonpeople.

Disabled people were seldom seen on the street. They certainly did not participate in politics. Yet the paraplegic Franklin Roosevelt was elected Governor of New York State in 1928, returned by a landslide in 1930, and voted President of the United States in 1932. He was to be reelected three more times: in 1936, 1940, and 1944.

For twelve years, FDR was certainly the most loved (and probably the most hated) man in the nation. To his followers, he seemed to be almost a member of the family. Millions of Americans stopped to listen to his "fireside chats" on the radio. FDR appeared in the newscasts virtually every week, and he traveled across the nation many times. Millions of people saw the President. Even so, Americans simply did not think of their president as being handicapped.

How did this happen? How could the public not know that Roosevelt was a polio paraplegic who used a wheelchair for mobility? It was no accident. Rather, it was the result of a complex set of deceptions that were designed to make the President appear to be able-bodied whenever he appeared in public. This is how it worked.

The Splendid Deception

The President's every appearance was carefully planned by the Secret Service. They searched out back entrances to public arenas. They installed ramps as needed, made bathrooms accessible, and always kept the distance the President had to "walk" to an absolute minimum. According to Secret Service records, FDR walked a total of thirty-seven paces at his First Inaugural. Moreover, the podium had to be firmly bolted to the floor so that he could grip it as he spoke; otherwise, the podium and the President would crash to the floor.

When it was necessary to lift the President in and out of his car, to push him in his wheelchair, or to carry him up and down flights of stairs, this was always done out of public view. If there was no private way of carrying FDR up steps, he would approach the staircase closely surrounded by what looked like a "welcoming committee" but was in reality a group of Secret Service men who carried the President in a standing position up the stairs by gripping his elbows. In at least one case, when there were many steps to be surmounted, the Secret Service actually raised the level of an entire city street so that the President could make his entrance on a level surface.

The President always wore dark pants with black socks and shoes. His leg braces

FDR by the pool in Warm Springs, Georgia, 1924. (Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library)
were painted black so that they would be less obtrusive. He used a cane rather than crutches to avoid looking crippled, even though crutches were indicated and would have been much safer.

FDR carried out inspections of factories, Navy yards, CCC camps, and public works projects from the back seat of an open touring car. Occasionally, the car would actually drive right through a factory building. Over the years, the President gave hundreds of speeches from the back seat of his touring car. If the crowd was a large one, a ramp would be built for his car so that the President could be visible to all as he spoke.

"It is Not a Story"

All of official Washington knew of FDR's disability. Cabinet members and Congressional leaders often saw him in his wheelchair. The Executive office staff and employees of the War, Navy, and State Departments (then housed in what is now the Executive Office Building next to the White House) often saw the President in his wheelchair being pushed at a fast clip from the family residence to the Oval Office or the EOB. He would wave cheerfully to them in passing, while they worried that he was going so fast that he might actually fall out.

People knew about the President's disability, but it was never discussed. As Dorothy Dix noted, one of the White House workers, said many years later, "We never thought of the President as handicapped. We never thought of it at all."

Roosevelt was President before the television era, the Watergate scandal, and the rise of modern investigative reporting. The private lives of public figures were still private. The Washington press corps was well aware of the extent of the President's paralysis. Reporter John Gunther wrote, after FDR's death, of how unsettling it was to see the President being transported in someone else's arms: "The shock was greatest of all when he was carried: he seemed, for one thing, very small." They knew it, but they never reported it.

The President had an unspoken agreement with the press: He would take care of them and they would take care of him. He would see that they got their stories by holding two press conferences a week and offering numerous photo opportunities. And, for their part, they would not report on his paralysis.

During the twelve years of FDR's presidency, the press never once wrote a story or printed a photo depicting Roosevelt's disability. When asked about the President's handicap, the White House Press Assistant would reply, "It is not a story." And it wasn't.

Although FDR used a wheelchair throughout his political life, there are only two known photographs of him in it—both thought to have been taken by a family member.

There was, in a real sense, a subconscious understanding between FDR and the country. The American people wanted FDR as their president, and he wanted to be their president. Americans did not want to think of their president as crippled—certainly not when the country itself was crippled by the Great Depression. Roosevelt, with careful and complex strategies, was able to gratify their desire: Americans never saw their president as a disabled person. It was denial on a massive scale.

The Best Actor in America?

Roosevelt once met the great Orson Welles. "Orson, you and I are the two best actors in America!" he boomed. And this was true. As President, FDR was always on stage. He was acting all the time. He had to calculate his every move, estimate how it would appear to an onlooker, and make sure his visitors were not made uncomfortable by his handicap. Roosevelt could not stand up to make a point, clap a man on his shoulder and whisper confidentially in his ear, or move around a reception "working the room and pressing the flesh," as Lyndon Johnson called it.

Instead, FDR learned how to project his personality so that he could dominate a room, a press conference, or even a stadium with one hundred thousand listeners. His cigarette holder always cocked at an optimistic angle, his pince-nez reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson's, his admiral's cape, his battered old felt fedora became his famous trademarks. His great head thrown back in a hearty laugh, his ebullience and bonhomie, his splendid tenor voice with its distinctive accent—all of this and more were used by the President to make people feel at ease, to make his personality the center of att-
tention, and to help him achieve his ends.

Before contracting polio, FDR was seen by many as a cocky, well-bred, good-looking lightweight. The Teddy Roosevelt side of the family used to call him "the feather duster." Old Senator Henry Cabot Lodge remarked, "He is a well-meaning, nice young man, but light..." Polio changed this. For the first time, FDR learned what it meant to fail: he worked seven years to recover the use of his legs and still failed. Whereas FDR's air of arrogant superiority had once put people off, they now sensed a knowledge of suffering and a new strength of character. Frances Perkins, who knew him both before and after his bout with polio, concluded, "It made it possible for the common people to trust him to understand what it is to be handicapped by poverty and ignorance as well as by physical misfortunes."

During his rehabilitation years in rural Georgia, FDR met people he would never have met in New York's old family society. Driving the back roads, he made friends with poor farmers, failing small businessmen, and African American sharecroppers who were barely eking out a living. He developed a genuine understanding of the problems confronting these people. This was amply reflected in his New Deal programs, which did so much to bring not only food, jobs, and housing, but—perhaps most importantly—hope to the millions thrown out of work by the Great Depression.

President Roosevelt brought to the White House the management techniques he learned at the therapeutic center he founded for polio victims in Warm Springs, Georgia. In his rehabilitation efforts, he had tried each and every therapy available. If it was effective, he kept it. If it was not, out it went. FDR handled his New Deal campaign to end the Great Depression in the same way. All sorts of economic theories, work programs, and social experiments were tried. If they worked, he kept them. If they did not, out they went. But the President's cheerful optimism and his determination that a cure would be found always remained.

Roosevelt's daily, lifelong struggle with polio required tremendous energy and dogged determination. The fact that for twelve years he was able to manage his disability, at the same time steering the nation through the Great Depression and World War II, was an amazing personal accomplishment. ■

Hugh Gallagher is an independent writer and scholar who lives in Cabin John, Maryland. He is the author of FDR's Splendid Deception, the story of Roosevelt's disability and the intense efforts to conceal it from the public.