Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Effect of his Disability on his Presidency

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)
By

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Abstract

The presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the most unprecedented in American history partially because he was elected four times and partially because he did it all from a wheelchair. He was afflicted with polio at the age of thirty-nine in the middle of what was becoming an illustrious political career. Most of the American public never fully understood how physically disabled he was because he constantly appeared in front of Americans sitting down or standing with the use of hidden leg braces. During the 1920s and 1930s, physical disabilities were not well understood and many people looked down on someone in a wheelchair. Thus, President Roosevelt went to great lengths to hide his paralyzed legs from the world. He did this successfully, with the help of the media, and managed to lead an emerging first world country during two of its most trying times in its short history: The Great Depression and World War II. This essay analyzes his life before contracting polio, during his fight to "heal" himself, and his life after polio through biographies, audio clips, and histories of the time period. These sources give me the insight into what life was like for the thirty-second president of the United States and how he managed to lead one of the biggest countries in the world through its greatest trials with the confidence and support of the American people.
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"No political leader of modern times had managed to reach the top rung without standing alone and giving the appearance of being in good health and in physical command."

None had accomplished this daunting task by the 1920s except Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Famously known today by many middle school students in their American history classes, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was indeed a physically disabled international leader. He suffered from polio throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s behind closed doors. The media left him alone, and only two pictures are known to exist of the former president in a wheelchair. Mr. Roosevelt was well-liked by the American people, most of whom had no idea how severe his disability actually was. This secret was well kept for decades in order to protect his credibility. It was believed at the time that if one had a physical disability, he would never be taken seriously or manage to make it to the top of any political ladder, let alone the most important government job in America. Roosevelt did just that; he took the office of the presidency by storm, and it did not matter that he could not walk unassisted. His disability did not affect his leadership skills during the Depression or even World War II. What his disability did was make him more aware of the plight of the common man, appeal to the average American citizen, and prove his leadership abilities were second to none in a time of crisis. Through his experiences before polio, during polio, and after polio, President Franklin D. Roosevelt managed to effectively pull America out of Depression and lead them through the Second World War.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in to a world of privilege and power on January 30, 1882, to his parents, James Roosevelt and Sarah Delano Roosevelt. He was sheltered and very sickly throughout his entire childhood, acquiring various illnesses off and on. His
mother, Sarah Delano, recorded that he had typhoid on August 1, 1889, but his illness was hardly ever mentioned over the next few months in her diary. The Roosevelts preferred to ignore problems, and try to work through them quietly. Richard Thayer Goldberg, author of *The Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, says, "Franklin learned from such childhood experiences that illness was something to be endured." From the beginning of his life, Franklin Roosevelt knew what it was like to be sick and was taught to always fight it. I think this is the reason why he fought his battle with polio for so long and tried so hard to beat it.

Before Roosevelt contracted polio in 1921, he led a very standard upper-class lifestyle. He attended a preparatory school in Massachusetts called Groton at age fourteen for boys of his class. It focused on a Christian education, a strict honor code, and self-discipline. After Groton, Franklin attended Harvard University in 1900 where he concentrated in political science and history. He finished his requirements for his degree in three years, but stayed a fourth year to assume the editor position of the *Harvard Crimson*. Most of his classmates do not remember him as especially sociable, athletic, or noteworthy during his Harvard years. He kept to himself and his Groton friends, but most remember him as agreeable and friendly. It was during his Harvard years that he began to grow into himself and become the man we knew during the pre-polio years. He was not in touch with his "humanitarian" side yet, nor was he especially outgoing. Goldberg says, "Academically, he was not outstanding and he gave no indication of having formed a political philosophy." At this point in his life, he was still going with the flow and skating by the best he could.

During his last year at Harvard, Franklin Roosevelt told his mother he wanted to marry his cousin, Eleanor. On March 17, 1905, the pair was married, and within five
months, their first child was conceived. They had six children over the next ten years, with one of them dying in infancy. Roosevelt was never overly concerned with raising his children during his early years of marriage.

In 1907, Franklin entered a law firm on 54 Wall Street called Carter, Ledyard, and Milburn. He was not much interested in the law firm job because he actually wanted to enter into politics. In 1910, he ran as a Democrat for a State Senate position, and surprisingly won in a district that had traditionally been Republican due to intense and fierce campaigning tactics. Roosevelt was also a strong supporter of President Wilson, and after Wilson's inauguration, Roosevelt was appointed as Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Josephus Daniels. For the next several years, Roosevelt learned a lot about public opinion, political leadership, and limitation of power from Daniels. By 1920, Roosevelt believed he was ready to run for Vice President of the United States.

His running mate, James M. Cox, was not to become President of the United States. The pair was beat out by Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge in 1920, which solidified Franklin Roosevelt's first major political defeat. This prompted him to take a short break from the political world and get back into business. Coincidentally, Roosevelt contracted polio shortly after this, in 1921 while swimming in Maine. Because of this, he would stay out of the limelight for the next seven years until he was eventually elected as Governor of New York state in 1928.

At the time, the concept of "disabilities" was quite different than it is in the twenty-first century. People did not understand that people with a physical or mental disability were not all that different from themselves usually. Buildings did not include disability ramps, automatic opening doors, or easy access to second floors. It was not a high priority
in the 1920s to accommodate people who could not get around as easily as the “normal, able-bodied” person. Many people thought that the handicapped were evil or dangerous to an extent. They were viewed as flawed in moral character as well as in the body. This was simply untrue and based on a lack of knowledge and education about disabilities. The handicapped were treated as scum and placed in dark, dank treatment centers or hospitals.

When Franklin Roosevelt contracted polio, it was arguably one of the first times someone prominent in the public arena was considered a little different than everyone else. His disease was quite common at the time because there was yet a vaccine for polio. The full name for polio, poliomyelitis, comes from the Greek terms meaning grey and marrow where the suffix -itis means inflammation. It spreads through contact between infected persons, through nasal or oral secretions, and when in contact with contaminated feces. In most cases, polio is just a mild illness, and only about one or two percent of those infected will actually become paralyzed like President Roosevelt did. His exposure to polio was simply an unfortunate fluke. According to “The History of Vaccines” website, polio could have been more widespread and rampant in areas with higher living standards because of their concern for personal hygiene. Often, polio contaminated people through poor water sources, which is most likely what happened to President Roosevelt who contracted the disease in 1921 while swimming at his summer home on Campobello Island off the coast of Maine and New Brunswick.

Roosevelt struggled for several years to grapple with the effects of polio. He stayed out of the limelight purposely so that Americans would not realize that he was sick. Between 1921 and 1924, Roosevelt tried every method possible to rehabilitate himself. He consulted with every doctor in America who had experience with polio patients. Roosevelt
was determined to fight this disease and come out victorious. He was told to try saltwater baths, massages, ultraviolet light, horseback riding, exercises, osteopathy, and walking practice. During his first winter of rehabilitation in 1921-22, he did make significant strides. He regained control over his automatic nervous system, and his arms, lower back, and stomach strengthened. Yet, the one thing that remained stagnant was his legs. Roosevelt's goal was to walk again, but that would never actually happen.

During this time, he became increasingly depressed and hated being alone. Roosevelt preferred to be surrounded by people as much as possible. Even despite the feelings of depression, he was always determined to fight the paralysis and regain the use of his legs. Hugh Gallagher's biography on Roosevelt states that, "His [President Roosevelt] entire effort was dedicated to what was not clearly an impossible task: the recovery of his muscles. After the first two years, his single-minded concentration had begun to take on the characteristics of an unhealthy obsession." As part of his obsession, Franklin Roosevelt sought out treatment at Warm Springs, Georgia, an area known for its healing springs. He had heard from a friend, George Foster Peabody, that a friend who had polio had benefited from swimming in the springs waters. He suggested to Roosevelt that perhaps hydrotherapy in Warm Springs would help rehabilitate his legs.

While on his visit there in October 1924, an Atlanta Journal reporter, Cleburne Gregory, wrote an article entitled "F.D.R. Will Swim to Health" published on October 26, 1924. This article was widely read throughout the entire nation, and it gave polio sufferers everywhere hope for rehabilitation in Warm Springs. After this article went viral, several polio patients flocked to the hotel, the Meriwether Inn, where Roosevelt was staying and hoped for a cure. The problem was that the hotel was not equipped to
accommodate disabled patrons. However, the owners, Tom Loyless and George Peabody, realized the potential for business growth and welcomed the polio patients into their hotel. By 1925, Loyless had died and Roosevelt took over operations at the hotel. He installed ramps, upgraded the cottages, and installed a treatment table in the pool. Franklin Roosevelt became invested in his patients' lives and in their treatment. He felt at home at Warm Springs and would return yearly during his eventual presidency. Roosevelt was so involved with the treatment center that by the spring of 1926, he purchased Warm Springs for $200,000, one of the biggest financial undertakings of his life.

After his purchase of the estate, he basically turned the place into a full-blown treatment center for polio, something that had really never been done before to this point. The hotel, Meriwether Inn, was slowly taken over by all the polio patients, and the original rich clients stopped coming to Warm Springs because of all the “crippled” folks who were cramping their style. This did not bother Roosevelt, and he was finally able to make Warm Springs into a physical treatment center by 1927. He raised money for it and completed several important upgrades. At one point, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, was worried that Warm Springs would consume his life entirely and he would never reenter into politics. However, once he accepted the nomination for governor of New York in 1928, it was clear that Franklin Roosevelt was destined to do greater things.

During this same year, he attempted to run on the vice presidential ticket under Al Smith, but stories circulated throughout the media about FDR's disability. He was strongly determined to prove to Americans that he was in great condition, so he campaigned hard, making several speeches, traveling to many cities, and always making sure there was a back door for him to enter in through so people did not publicly see how difficult it was for
him to maneuver. Overall, he was able to hide his disability from the public and even made an agreement with the media during his gubernatorial campaign to not be photographed in his wheelchair and not to circulate any pictures of him falling. This agreement was an unspoken one and would be honored for the rest of his life.

It remains a mystery as to why the media left Franklin Roosevelt alone and barely ever portrayed him as a disabled man. In the early part of the twentieth century, this would have been fairly easy to keep secret because television did not come around until mid-century. The media was also a lot different then than it is now. With forms of mass communication like the Internet, the media flourishes a lot more than it ever has. When Roosevelt became president during the Depression, the media respected his wishes because he was very popular. Most Americans viewed him as their savior that brought them out of the economic slump and returned them to prosperity. He was highly regarded, loved, and respected in every sense of those words. FDR had charm and passion, which most likely added to the reason why the media left his disability out of the public spotlight. Since the media never talked about Roosevelt’s battle with polio, it never really became an issue when he was elected governor of New York. Roosevelt proved to New Yorkers that yes, he had battled polio, but it would not affect his leadership and decision-making skills.

Many historians who have studied Franklin Roosevelt suggest that his plight with polio changed him from his early days of politics to when he became governor of New York and President of the United States. Because he was plagued with a physical disability in the middle of his life, he quickly began to understand what it felt like to be an outcast. All of his early life, Franklin Roosevelt had come from money and power; the man had never been treated like an invalid until he appeared to be one on the outside. Through his experiences
with polio at Warm Springs, Georgia, Roosevelt was able to talk to many other polio sufferers. These people were afflicted with a disease they could not help and could not fight. They seemed hopeless and dejected until they came to Warm Springs. Most of them were poor or lower-class and had no other alternative. Many of the polio patients became very good friends of FDR’s and he understood them and connected with them on a level he had never really been on with people before polio. His wife believed that polio was a “blessing in disguise.” Eleanor believed his experiences with polio gave him more patience and a better “understanding of the suffering of others.” Learning what it is like to be on the other side, where the grass is not always greener, Roosevelt may have set himself up to be one of the most well-loved presidents in American history simply because he connected with others who were not as well off as he was.

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected as the thirty-second president of the United States of America. He would be the first and the last president to ever serve more than two terms, which was mainly due to his immense popularity. FDR became president during one of America’s most tumultuous periods in history. At first, he was met with figuring out how to combat the Depression where banks closed, the Stock Exchange crashed, and people were desperately poor. As the Depression ended, World War II began and enveloped the United States into its vast scope with the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, “A date that will live in infamy,” according to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. President Roosevelt was faced with several major decisions and took on the role of leader quickly and decidedly.

The First Hundred Days of his presidency were some of the most productive a president has ever had. Roosevelt enacted several major public works projects that would
benefit out-of-work Americans and put trust back into the banking system. Congress passed all fifteen proposed pieces of legislation within one hundred days. Some of these included ending prohibition, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, among many other important programs. What Roosevelt demonstrated here was that he could command a country the size of America no matter if he was physically disabled or not. He put the country back together, gave citizens hope, and proved that he was up to the task.

Roosevelt gave Depression era Americans more hope and allowed them to feel much more connected to the government through his famous, “Fireside Chats.” In these radio chats, Roosevelt was able to accomplish another important thing – the ability to connect with those he would never meet, see, or hear. After listening to several of his Fireside Chats, one can tell that he speaks to Americans like equals. He is clear, concise, warm, and informative when he speaks. He has a friendly voice that Americans trust and understand. Most likely, he started these to prove to Americans that he wanted to be their friend, not their enemy. At the beginning of his first Fireside Chat, President Roosevelt says, “I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be.” By saying this, he is making it clear to Americans that he wants them to understand and feel confident in his work as president. He is proving his worth to them, and hoping that they accept what he is doing. For example, in his first Fireside Chat, Barbara Bennett Peterson says, “The president soothed the public’s crisis of confidence over the stability of the banking structure in the first of his Fireside Chats as he explained ‘that it is safer to keep your money in a re-opened bank than it is under the mattress.’” The
Glass-Stegall Banking Act, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Securities and Exchange Act all aided the public’s confidence in the banking system and in their president. Because of what he was doing in office, the public was able to trust their president.

Another reason they trusted and loved him was because he was able to help give jobs to those who lost theirs because of the Depression. However, just because many people benefitted from his policies and employment programs, did not mean that everyone was one hundred percent satisfied with the president. Initially, he had “overwhelming support from all classes of people in the task which lay ahead of him. It was this support—tacit or active—that enabled him to achieve a great legislative programme.” 26 Despite the support, there were plenty of people who were against what the President was doing, particularly because he followed Keynesian economic models, which believed in “creating jobs to regenerate purchasing power.” 27 Basically, President Roosevelt did not believe in laissez-faire, which in French literally means “let it be.” He wanted to actively create programs, jobs, and make investments in the banks to force the economy to turn around quickly instead of leaving it alone, to further absorb the Stock Market Crash’s serious and devastating effects. This theory of economic recovery was the opposite of many Republicans, like those that followed President Hoover. They believed what President Roosevelt was doing was the beginning of the “dole” or welfare. In fact, it kind of was the start of welfare. Roosevelt did not believe in simply handing out money to people without making them work hard for it, which is why he started so many work-for-money programs. However, Roosevelt did care about the physically disabled and older generation Americans and how they would be able to survive in the world. So he also passed the Social Security
Act to help older Americans when they retired. Because he passed so many pieces of legislation in the First Hundred Days and in the Second New Deal, he was going to encounter plenty of opposition. Since he helped so many people at once and in big ways, it never truly affected his reelection.

As the 1940s approached, World War II was slowly becoming inevitable. With that, President Roosevelt was forced to take on another important role: being the leader of a country at war. Foreign policy decisions made the biggest impact on Americans economically and President Roosevelt proved through several laws and decisions he made that he was the man for the job. In his first year in office, President Roosevelt worried mainly about domestic issues and stabilizing the country economically. These policies would allow for Americans to eventually be more involved in an international community. Roosevelt was in favor of regulating industry and economic involvement overseas more than the 1920s presidents ever were. He believed it was necessary to solve the domestic crisis. However, at first, Roosevelt believed in independent internationalism where the United States would do what was best for them disregarding what Europe needed. According to Rosenberg, the United States favored trying to reestablish an open liberalized international order through a liberal tariff policy and an increase of discretionary power through the Executive branch instead of the Congress.\textsuperscript{28} Mainly, the Trade Agreements Act of 1934 gave the President the power to raise or lower tariffs within a 50 percent range. Nations who were favorable to the U.S. experienced a lower tariff and those who were not received higher tariff rates.

Slowly, FDR was able to control more of foreign policy than any president before him. He wanted to move the country from the privately controlled business stance to a
regulatory one through trade and tariffs. By 1935, he had the Neutrality Act passed, which imposed an arms embargo and prohibited shipment of munitions on American ships. In 1936, he passed another Neutrality Act, which added the prohibition against commercial loans to nations at war. By 1937, the President had been given the authority to place all trade on a cash and carry basis. This meant that nations in a state of war could buy non-war goods from the United States in cash and carry them away in their own ships. Basically, it allowed for the nations with better navies to profit and benefit from this, which was Britain. According to Adams, the cash and carry policy was a crucial step in aiding Britain and France against Nazi Germany. However, according to Leuchtenberg, Roosevelt did not like the cash and carry policy, something enacted by Congress, because it allowed for Japan to benefit as well. In 1939, the Neutrality Act repealed the arms embargo, which allowed warring nations to buy arms. At the same time, the U.S. threatened to outlaw trade with Japan to try to hurt them if they continued aggression.

All of these trade embargos, the cash and carry program, and the Neutrality Acts were part of American foreign policy attempts to stay out of the war when these policies were indeed getting them into another war. Slowly, FDR began to denounce the policy of neutrality with his Quarantine Speech by asking peace-loving nations to make efforts to avoid treaty violations and inhumane actions that would lead to international instability. He compared the war to a contagious disease and implied that a community was needed to protect others from the disease. In effect, he was asking for a collective security agreement. As Japan was getting more aggressive, FDR realized the war was slowly rolling up at his front door. Despite his promise that he would not get the United States into another world war, he knew that war was imminent.
FDR had acquired much more control than ever before and he used it effectively to get America into war. He was helping Britain and France survive and fight the war against the Axis powers, which was in turn helping Americans economically at home. The war brought the United States into an economic prosperity never before seen. Helping out European countries kept industry flourishing and kept domestic problems at home from getting bad. Because Americans stood to gain from the war, they were not too upset with getting involved. They had claimed they wanted to stay isolated from Europeans, but in reality, they were better off economically. The downside to war was of course, the loss of American soldiers' lives, but it was a risk the Federal government was willing to take.

As Britain was being air bombed by Germany during the spring and summer of 1940, Americans' moods changed about the war, according to Leuchtenberg. It was clear that something needed to be done, and Gallup polls taken about the war effort proved that Americans supported the Allied powers. The national mood changed quickly and drastically. Roosevelt's foreign policy worked in aiding Britain and France while America stayed "neutral" but by 1940, it was obvious we had to do something even more. The destroyers-for-bases deal in 1940 was negotiated to give the U.S. 99 year leases on British controlled bases along the Eastern coast of North America in return for fifty out-of-use destroyers. Both the U.S. and Britain gained from this agreement because Roosevelt felt better insulated by having control of military bases along our Eastern coast, and Britain badly needed more destroyers. However, this was a clear violation of American neutrality because, in effect, we became a non-belligerent ally of Britain. The Lend Lease Act passed in 1941 placed no restriction on the amount of aid or to whom aid was given. There was no expectation for the money to be returned, but it was another clear violation of
neutrality. By April 1941, it was obvious that the U.S. would go to war eventually for the Allied side. The attack on Pearl Harbor only reinforced the idea that America needed to help out the Allied powers and protect them from the Axis. Thus, we entered World War II shortly thereafter.

Through it all, foreign policy made the difference to American involvement in the Second World War. We preached a policy of “neutrality” but we were not being neutral at all. The shift from a cooperative state to a regulatory one gave President Roosevelt the power to make executive decisions regarding international affairs, particularly the United States’ involvement in war. By acting neutral while not being neutral, the United States foreign policy between 1933 and 1941 put America on track to entering World War II.

Through all of his decisions about foreign policy, he was affecting Americans at home domestically. This period of time between 1940 and 1945 was one of the most economically prosperous times in American history, which was quite the opposite of the decade before. Adams suggests that, “The nation not only rallied, the war inaugurated the greatest era of prosperity in human history. The U.S. gross national product increased 60 percent during the war.” Industry was flourishing because of war contracts, and the living standards were rising significantly. Women took on more roles than just simply being housewives, and jobs were not scarce. Roosevelt was leader during one of the worst times and one of the best times economically. He proved to be effective, popular, and trustworthy – just the kind of president America needed.

Based on all of his major accomplishments domestically and internationally, it is easy to see that President Roosevelt made for a very effective, popular, and compassionate president – and he did all of it in a wheelchair. His disability, though something he never
really talked about with anyone except his wife and political advisor, Louis Howe, never played a huge role in his ability to do his job. President Roosevelt's experience with polio made him into the man he was as the President. Without that experience, of knowing what it was like to be different from others and learning to connect with the "common man" gave him the insight and compassion he was missing from his early, privileged life. It is not that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was not an adequate politician before 1921, but his priorities appeared to change as he dealt with his disability. He was more open to what others needed and what they felt. He cared less about himself (or mistresses) and worried more about what the public needed from its government. Roosevelt's goal as president was to put America at the top, and be a good model for how governments should treat and provide for its citizens. Nothing could stop him from accomplishing this, especially not his disability.

On April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died from a massive cerebral hemorrhage. The day of his death is one of those days that everyone who was alive at the time remembers exactly where he or she was and what he or she was doing. As the days of his death approached, it was obvious the stress of his job was wearing down on him. The last sixteen months of his life, he made few public appearances and spent very little time at the White House. He probably only ran for his fourth term because he refused to look like he was quitting in the middle of an important war. According to Gallagher, he looked gaunt, gray, and tired on inauguration day, January 20, 1945. His physical health had so depressed him by the time he ran for his last term, that he could not carry on much longer. The last time he would ever stand erect, with his braces on, in front of the American people would be inauguration day. The fight with polio would finally end a few months later, and
he would be at peace, knowing that he had the American people's respect and trust. With all of his experiences before, during, and after polio, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was able to lead a country through several ups and downs, while not being able to physically get up or down unassisted.

Notes


2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 6.

4 Ibid., 8.

5 Ibid., 12.

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