

Bob Dole



NEWS

U.S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS

FROM:

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER

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PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT: A DISABILITY HERO

WASHINGTON -- Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole late yesterday 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.

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received it. And many thousands with severe or multiple disabilities had little or no education.

In 1975, Congress passed a national law, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, based on pioneering state laws, to make sure children with disabilities had the same opportunity as others for a "free and appropriate education."

Today, almost 5 million young people, 10 percent of all students, have a disability. Their education poses many challenges. As Senators Dodd and Jeffords recently pointed out, Congress has never kept its promise to pay 40% of the extra costs of special ed. Inclusive education works when supports are available, and that costs money. And I am also deeply concerned about the high percentage of African Americans and other minorities assigned to special education.

I hope when we reauthorize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act next year we can help fix these and other problems.

Health Care

Then as now, health care is an important and understandably emotional issue for many people with disabilities. We have done much, if not enough, through Medicare and Medicaid, to provide medical insurance. In fact, coverage of people with severe disabilities is about the same as for the general population -- 85% -- though they more often depend on these Federal programs.

There is perhaps no other group for whom health care reform offers such opportunity and such peril. For those who have stayed out of the job market in order to keep their Medicare or Medicaid, health care reform will hopefully mean they can look for work with the confidence they can obtain other -- and perhaps better -- medical insurance.

Like all Americans, people with disabilities want security, simplicity, and portability. I also know they are looking for services which today are not covered or only partly covered by many insurance plans -- including personal assistance, assistive technology and durable medical equipment, and rehabilitation services. I can make no promises, but I hope we can do better.

But we must also be sobered by the very real limits of medical care. Medical science has never been more successful at keeping people alive, but sometimes at the price of severe, lifelong disability.

I recently received a letter from the parents of a child in a small town in south central Kansas, near the Oklahoma border. They wrote:

"We desperately love our [1 year old] son and want to do everything we possibly can for him. His health problems were so severe that specialists in Wichita told us we probably would never take him home from birth. ... [H]e does not have the part of the brain needed for intellect, reasoning, etc.

"We live in a rural area where there are not many resources for a family such as ours. Where do we turn for special help?"

Yes, there is help for this family, but we are still humbled by what medical science cannot do.

International Human Rights

Disability is a matter of human rights. In July I introduced a bill to require the Secretary of State to examine discrimination against people with disabilities in the annual report on human rights. My bill received broad bipartisan support -- 26 co-sponsors across the political spectrum.

The Secretary of State was listening. In this year's report, each of the 190 countries covered, from Angola to Zimbabwe, includes a short section on people with disabilities. Some of the accounts are disturbing. In one country, for example, infants born with birth defects are considered sorcerers, and sometimes killed at birth. But other reports are encouraging. Even in some low-income countries, there are real efforts at advocacy and opportunity.

This report sends the message around the world that America respects the rights of all people, including those with disabilities.

Change in Attitudes: Dignity and Respect

We have also made important contributions in other areas -- including housing, transportation, assistive technology, and help to families of people with disabilities. I have been proud to be part of many of these initiatives. In 1983, I created the Dole Foundation, which I am pleased to say has awarded over \$5 million in grants.

But perhaps the greatest success has been in how people with disabilities are viewed -- no longer with pity, but with respect for their dignity and recognition that disability is a natural part of the human condition. Where institutional care and dependency were

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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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