I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

3. Polio and Paralysis: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Disability

On the summer day in 1921 when Franklin D. Roosevelt first experienced the weakness of polio, this viral disease had Americans in the grip of fear. No one knew what caused it. No doctor could cure it. All people knew was that polio could paralyze a person overnight, that it struck children disproportionately, and that epidemics swept the country at intervals, usually during the summertime. Afraid they would catch it, Americans shunned “polios” just as they had isolated the victims of smallpox and other contagious diseases.

Moreover, when FDR lost the use of his legs at age thirty-nine, the disability rights movement lay long in the future, along with its central tenet that a decent society doesn’t just care for people with disabilities, but lowers barriers to their full participation in public life with high-tech assistive devices, accessible public spaces, and accommodations at school and work. In the 1920s and ‘30s, “cripples” were the objects of pity, often institutionalized or kept at home mostly hidden from view.
For FDR, the athletic, charming, and increasingly successful scion of a wealthy family, being struck with such a dread condition was a transformative experience. “I think probably the thing that took the most courage in his life,” Eleanor Roosevelt would say, “was his mastery and meeting of polio.” According to his longtime colleague Frances Perkins, FDR emerged from his confrontation with death and his struggle with disability a gentler, more compassionate person—a deeper man. Also, in his response to polio, FDR’s extraordinary mettle came forth. Winston Churchill famously remarked that “not one in a generation” could have done what FDR did, taking on, despite his bodily constraints, the arduous job of leading the country through the Great Depression and World War II.

Though in his public life FDR tried to conceal his disability and project physical strength—he was a man of his time—he did not permit his condition or the stigma attached to it to force his withdrawal from the spotlight, as his mother, Sara, counseled. He likewise kept his own counsel in medical matters, insisting against doctors’ prognoses (and some would say in a particularly stalwart form of denial) that he would walk again. But he didn’t wait for that to happen before plunging back into politics in 1928.

During his seven-year hiatus from government, and then as he rose from state to national to international leadership, FDR tackled the problems that come with disability, and the scourge of polio itself.

With few models to follow, he essentially designed his own accommodations, building wheelchair-accessible, one-story cottages for himself, first near the spa he frequented at Warm Springs, Georgia, and, later, on his family estate (Top Cottage) in Hyde Park, New York. During his early rehabilitation, he had the first of a series of cars, a Model T, modified with hand controls so he could drive around the countryside of rural Georgia.

Also in Warm Springs, FDR invested the bulk of his personal wealth (a larger part than ER thought wise) in an old inn, turning it into a world-renowned polio treatment center, the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation. In 1938 a fund-raiser for FDR’s newly created Institute for the Study of Infantile Paralysis led to the March of Dimes and the first private initiative to fund a major scientific program to eradicate a particular disease. The research it sponsored eventually produced the polio vaccine that consigned this terrifying illness to the American past.

FDR’s polio was not a secret. It was, to many Americans, something that he had overcome, and whether by recovery or adaptation hardly mattered—it showed his fitness to sail, steady as she goes, through calamity. And in the dreadful 1930s and ’40s, that was an asset the country could ill afford to squander.
Illness Strikes at Campobello, August 1921

On vacation, the Roosevelts spent their days in vigorous physical activity in the outdoors. Their family compound on Campobello Island off the coast of Maine, with its rocky coves, forest trails, and glittering lawns, offered the ideal setting for swimming, sailing, deep-sea fishing, hiking, golfing, and jogging. Franklin D. Roosevelt reveled in dashing from one activity to the next and expected his guests to follow his lead.

When FDR awakened at Campobello the morning of August 10, 1921, he felt somewhat achy, but the weather was glorious and he was anxious to take his family sailing aboard his 24-foot sailboat, Vireo. After a long day’s excursion that included battling a small forest fire, FDR and his children sailed back to Campobello, took a short swim in the warm lake water, and raced one another on foot to their cottage. Reading the paper that evening, FDR suddenly felt chilled. He told Eleanor Roosevelt not to set a place for him at dinner and went upstairs to bed. He would never climb a staircase again.

Over the next two weeks, an inexorably progressive paralysis would take hold of FDR’s tall frame, leaving him unable to so much as lift a fork to his mouth, much less swim or jog. As doctors struggled to diagnose his condition, and ER and close Roosevelt confidante Louis Howe closed ranks to comfort and care for him, FDR sank, as author Kenneth Davis wrote, into a “loneliness that [could not] be alleviated by wife or friend, an utter solitude shot through with moments of pure naked terror.”

The first morning after his symptoms appeared, FDR’s left leg nearly buckled beneath him as he tried to rise from bed. By that night, his right leg also was losing strength, and he could hardly stand. The day after that, a Friday, he couldn’t stand, nor move his legs or even sit up, and terrible pain wracked his neck and back. By Sunday FDR was unable to feed or wash himself, and he had to be catheterized in order to urinate.

Nobody knew what was wrong with him. ER and Howe not only took on FDR’s intimate physical care, but also desperately sought a diagnosis and, they hoped, effective treatment for his condition. The Roosevelts’ regular physician on Campobello Island, summoned soon after FDR fell ill, opined that he might have a severe cold. A specialist from Philadelphia who had been vacationing in Maine’s Bar Harbor believed the problem could be due to a blood clot in FDR’s lower spine; he prescribed deep massage, which ER and Howe took turns administering in an exhausting round that caused FDR agonizing pain.

Finally, on the 25th of August, Dr. Robert Lovett, a Harvard expert in infantile paralysis and chief surgeon at Boston’s Crippled Children’s Hospital, arrived on the island to see the patient. FDR’s paralysis had completely stilled his hands and moved to his face. His pain was so excruciating that the doctor spared him a thorough examination, declaring that it was “perfectly clear” FDR had polio.
When Franklin D. Roosevelt got his diagnosis of polio, he was relieved to at last know just what he was facing, especially since the news came with the prognosis that in time he might regain some or all of his functioning. After several weeks at Campobello Island off the coast of Maine, under Eleanor Roosevelt and political ally Louis Howe’s round-the-clock care, in mid-September 1921 he made the journey home to New York City, where he would enter New York Presbyterian Hospital.

Howe orchestrated a plan for the trip that prevented the press from seeing how disabled FDR was, instead projecting the image of a man already on the road to recovery, upbeat about his return to New York, and eager to resume his political and legal work. ER hired the crew that would build his stretcher for the journey by boat, truck, and rail to Grand Central Station. It was a torturous trip for FDR, who was in such pain that he couldn’t bear to have even linen sheets touch his tender legs.

FDR expected to leave New York Presbyterian after three weeks, walking on crutches. Instead, he lay flat on his back for six weeks, with little change in his condition, though he became able to pull himself to a sitting position with gymnast’s rings hung above his bed. When he left the hospital for his home on East Sixty-fifth Street in late October, FDR’s medical chart read, “Not Improving.”

Life on East Sixty-fifth Street was hectic, crowded, and tense. FDR was put to bed in a corner bedroom on the third floor. Howe took another bedroom, and relays of nurses and physical therapists occupied a third. ER slept on a cot in one of her sons’ rooms. Old friends and political well-wishers climbed the stairs at all hours to see the famous patient.

FDR overdid his regimen of exercises despite Dr. Robert Lovett’s warning that “the over-use of a muscle is . . . worse than its disuse.” At one point FDR’s hamstrings contracted so acutely that his knees drew up toward his chest, and his doctors encased his legs temporarily in plaster casts. FDR turned forty on January 30, 1922.

In the spring of that year, his mother, Sara, urged him to come with her to Springwood, the family estate in Hyde Park, New York, to rest and recuperate away from all the clamor of the New York City household. FDR eagerly agreed. At Springwood, he took up a quiet life, but one centered on intense and largely unavailing efforts to regain his mobility. He rode an adult-size tricycle, swam in pool and pond, ordered exercise equipment recommended by friends, and faithfully tried to walk while grasping the parallel bars he had installed behind the family home. Finally, placing his full weight on crutches, his legs stiffened by new braces, he strained to drag himself from the top of the driveway to the main road, a quarter mile away. Despite months of effort, he completed the arduous trek only once.

But FDR did regain his health and vitality, while developing the considerable upper body strength that would help him compensate, in function as well as appearance, for his weakened legs.
Eleanor Roosevelt and the unkempt, canny political operative Louis Howe had developed a strong rapport during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice presidential campaign in 1920. But the time they spent together caring for an ailing FDR on Campobello Island and later in New York City was something altogether different, their hands and hearts turned to the same urgent and intimate task.

They shared FDR’s physical care. They also waged a fierce campaign to lift his spirits, having been warned by the Harvard specialist who diagnosed FDR that the patient might succumb to a “mental depression” and “irritability” that would compromise his recovery. ER and Howe shared the same basic instincts about what was best for FDR—unflagging optimism and engagement in the world. They assiduously maintained a cheerful atmosphere around him, welcoming friends and associates. In the notoriously stressful role of caregivers, ER and Howe became very close.

The pair’s roles in relation to FDR also expanded during this time. Howe moved into the Roosevelt household (he would also live with the Roosevelts in the White House), seeing his own wife and children on weekends. He made himself essential to FDR by becoming a handler of sorts—protecting his privacy, looking to his reputation, and taking elaborate measures to keep him in the political game, while the would-be candidate devoted his time to restoring his body and spirit from the trauma of polio.

From the earliest days at Campobello in 1921 until FDR yielded to pressure to run for governor of New York in August 1928, Howe manipulated press coverage to depict FDR as a happy, energetic patient working his way to a full recovery. While a seriously ill FDR grappled with the onset of polio, Howe sent letters out under his signature. Later, as FDR cruised Florida on his houseboat and bathed in buoyant waters at Warm Springs, Georgia, Howe acted as FDR’s eyes and ears in New York City, keeping close tabs on state and national party rivalries and internal debates over party platforms and party structure. He conveyed all this to FDR and arranged for elected officials, civic leaders, and party stalwarts to meet with FDR in Warm Springs. In short, Howe made sure that Democrats continued to see FDR as a major force in the party.

ER also became an important link between the convalescing man and the larger world. Her discovery nearly three years earlier that FDR had been having an extramarital affair had been the crisis that encouraged her to blaze a trail to independence and become a political activist in her own right; now, coping with the ordeal of her husband’s polio deepened ER’s confidence and secured her place as FDR’s indispensable partner and rightful public representative. More and more, she would speak out about issues. She also took charge of her own household, resisting her mother-in-law’s well-intentioned plans for the family.

When finally FDR did fully emerge from his rehabilitation to hit the campaign trail and win the governorship in the autumn of 1928, the threesome—FDR, ER, and Howe—would be a formidable force, indeed. Howe, who had urged FDR not to run until 1932, would nonetheless devote himself quite single-mindedly to FDR’s rise. ER, on the other hand, would take care to spend a few days in New York City each week, away from the governor’s mansion in Albany, working on her own issues and teaching at the Todhunter School for Girls.
Sara Roosevelt

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was struck with polio on August 10, 1921, his mother, Sara, was away on a European holiday. No one told her until she returned to the States at the end of the month. Anticipating her visit to Campobello Island, FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, and political ally Louis Howe knew Sara would be distraught by her son's condition. ER and Howe in particular feared her response would exacerbate FDR's depression and interfere with his treatment.

When Sara reached the island cottage and entered FDR's bedroom, the patient set the tone: "Well, I'm glad you are back, Mummy," he said, "and I've got up this little party for you!" As Sara later confided to her brother Fred, FDR and ER had decided "to be cheerful" and create an atmosphere that was "all happiness."

"So I have fallen in and follow their glorious example," she wrote. "I can hear them all laughing, Eleanor in the lead."

Over the following fall and winter, however, the atmosphere around FDR grew contentious, to the point that his New York City physician observed in his beleaguered patient "the intense and devastating influence of these high-voltage personalities." A power struggle over FDR's lifestyle—and over his future—pitted his wife, his medical team, and Howe against his mother and children.

Sara believed strongly that he needed a life of repose, privacy, and support, not to reenter the tumult of politics. Nor, at this frightening time, were the five Roosevelt children—the youngest was six—eager for their parents to embrace more activities that would take up their attention. But ER felt just as strongly that a retiring existence would snuff out FDR's spirit. In the summer of 1922, having joined FDR and Sara in Hyde Park, New York, she defended Howe's presence there despite Sara's dislike for him, and both she and Howe encouraged visits by friends and associates who engaged and entertained FDR. Sara pushed back with all the emotional force she could muster.

The tension became so palpable that FDR's doctors urged him to go to Boston to be refitted for braces so that he might have some respite.

Over the next several years, FDR would pursue both the agendas advocated by his nearest relations, devoting time to rest and relaxation, while also maintaining a presence in politics and public life. But to a large extent he would pursue these activities far from his home and family—while drifting on a houseboat off the Florida Keys or living in a modest cottage in rural Georgia.
A New Home, a Replenished Spirit

In February and March of 1923, Franklin D. Roosevelt spent his first extended time away from New York since contracting polio, cruising off the Florida Keys on a rented houseboat. The next year, he purchased a used houseboat he rechristened the Larooco, and he made the first of three more winter trips around the keys, spending his days swimming, fishing, exercising, sitting in the sun, and, aided by his personal secretary, Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, continuing a stream of correspondence with civic leaders and political activists across the nation.

FDR was working to regain his emotional equilibrium. LeHand would recall that there were days aboard the houseboat "when it was noon before he could pull himself out of depression and greet his guests wearing his light-hearted façade."

In the same year he bought his houseboat, FDR found another home away from home that would renew his sense of purpose and occupy an important and long-lasting place in his life, becoming the site of FDR's "Little White House" during his years as president.

FDR first learned of Warm Springs, Georgia, in August 1924, when the philanthropist George Foster Peabody sent him a letter from a polio patient describing the dramatic progress the young man had made after swimming in its warm mineral waters at a local resort. FDR decided to see if the waters could be as healing for him.

Two months later, he, Eleanor Roosevelt, and LeHand boarded a southbound train. Tom Loyless, a former journalist who managed the crumbling resort, met them at the station. As they drove the rutted back roads, they passed parched, gutted farmland dotted with unpainted tar-paper shacks. When they reached the resort, they settled into a cottage so flimsy that the floors creaked under their weight and light streamed through cracks in the walls.

FDR was eager to try the mineral springs. Loyless and Leroy Jones, the first of several African American valets who assisted FDR, wheeled him to the 150-foot T-shaped pool and helped ease him into the water. The verdict: "heavenly." FDR shouted to his companions that he felt so "marvelous," he didn't think he would ever get out. He could stand in shoulder-deep water and, holding tightly to the edge and concentrating intensely, lift his right foot slightly off the pool floor. Later he told a friend that once in the water, "I walk around without braces or crutches almost as if I had nothing the matter with my legs."

ER, after touring the grounds and helping FDR settle in, returned to New York to fulfill her political and family responsibilities. FDR stayed three weeks, with LeHand in the cottage next door, acting as secretary and well as hostess and companion.

FDR loved Warm Springs, whose buoyant water and welcoming community helped him recover the optimism so central to his character. "I feel a great 'cure' for infantile paralysis and kindred diseases could well be established here," he wrote his mother. His three weeks exercising at the springs, he confided to Peabody, had been more productive than...
all of the exercises and therapies he had undertaken in the previous three years. He told the Atlanta Journal that he planned to build a cottage there, returning for two to three months each year until he was "completely cured." FDR, the October 1924 article said, was "literally swimming himself back to health and strength" at Warm Springs. He even allowed the paper to publish a photograph of him sitting by the pool, a newspaper carefully hiding the thinness of his legs.

Although he had dreamed of transforming the decaying resort into a profitable spa where polio patients and wealthy patrons could vacation side by side, his plans took on a sudden urgency when he returned to Warm Springs in April 1925. The Atlanta Journal article had inspired polio patients and their families, and hundreds had reached out to FDR for guidance and support; their letters flooded Loyless’s office. FDR was stunned. He was even more surprised to learn that eighteen polio patients had already descended upon Warm Springs unannounced and had no place to stay nor medical staff to advise them.

FDR quickly took control. He arranged for housing and medical examinations, helped the patients with exercises, coached them when they struggled, and horsed around in the pool with them. His fellow visitors affectionately nicknamed FDR "Doctor Roosevelt."

Finding himself in the role of leader and encourager, FDR was now determined to restore the resort. Over ER’s understandable misgivings—the couple had five children to raise and educate—he invested two-thirds of his personal fortune, about $200,000, in the project, purchasing the resort and other property in 1926 and establishing the nonprofit Georgia Warm Springs Foundation the following year. All his previous investments had lost money, and this was his largest investment to date.

But he threw himself into the work with gusto, and clearly it was doing him good. "You would howl with glee if you could see the clinic in operation at the side of the pool, and the patients doing various exercises under my leadership," he wrote a former Harvard classmate. "In addition to all this, I am consulting architect and landscape engineer for Warm Springs Co.—am giving free advice on the moving of buildings, the building of roads, getting out of trees and remodeling the hotel. We, i.e., the Company plus F.D.R., are working out a new water system, new sewage plan, fishing pond, and tomorrow we will run the dance hall, tea rooms, picnic grounds and other forms of outdoor and indoor sports."

One of FDR’s dreams for his rehabilitation center was quickly dashed: that of making a profit. Healthy, wealthy vacationers had no intention of bobbing in mineral waters alongside people fighting polio, a dreaded contagious disease. But this disappointment did little to dampen FDR’s spirits or diminish his enthusiasm for the place. Warm Springs quickly became a second home that gave FDR what his New York homes could not—independence, mobility, and complete relaxation.

A lasting tie
In 1927 FDR built a simple, one-story, wheelchair-accessible cottage for himself at Warm Springs (he would build the Little White House on a somewhat more secluded spot in 1932). By this time he was spending months at a stretch there, usually, as on his sojourns aboard the Larooco, accompanied by LeHand. He worked on his stamp collection, swam, exercised, entertained neighbors and fellow patients, and crisscrossed the back roads, driving himself in a Model T Ford he had equipped with hand controls he designed himself. FDR took particular joy in parking the Ford in front of the drugstore, honking, and ordering a Coke, or driving up next to a field to discuss crops with the men farming it. He got to know his neighbors and they got to know him. "He was a man that could talk to you," one of them recalled. "He had sense enough to talk to a man who didn’t have any education, and he had enough sense to talk to the best educated man in the world; and he was easy to talk to."

A patrician New Yorker by heritage and experience, FDR developed a bond to the environs and people of Warm Springs that grew so strong that, through all the busy times to come, he would return there every year of his life except 1942. Not long before assuming the presidency in 1933, he completed construction of a second Warm Springs cottage somewhat more substantial than the first but similarly accessible. It would soon be dubbed the "Little White House."
In 1924 Franklin D. Roosevelt returned from Warm Springs, Georgia, to New York City to chair Governor Al Smith’s campaign for the presidency. His speech placing Smith in nomination before the Democratic National Convention that summer was his first since contracting polio three years earlier. It was an effective address, in which FDR famously labeled Smith a “Happy Warrior of the political battlefield” (a reference to Wordsworth). “He has a power to strike at error and wrongdoing that makes his adversaries quail before him,” FDR said of the candidate.

The power of FDR’s speech, however, only underscored his physical frailty. Delegates watched in silence as he approached the podium, leaning on his son, James, and clutching a crutch. Once there, he gripped the rostrum with both hands to keep from falling. He could not wave to thank the boisterously cheering delegates who celebrated his political rebirth, nor could he wipe away the sweat that poured down his face in a sweltering Madison Square Garden.

Smith failed to win the nomination. And FDR, though urged by state party leaders to consider running for governor or U.S. senator, insisted he needed more time to recoup his strength. By 1926, though, Warm Springs had become as much FDR’s political office as a place for him to relax and grow stronger. Party leaders boarded Georgia-bound trains to confer with him. Those who did not visit received letters FDR dictated to LeHand or read articles FDR wrote and political operative Louis Howe placed in major newspapers and magazines. Voters and local officials listened to him address farmlands and other policy issues over the radio.

In June 1928, a rejuvenated FDR once again left his beloved Warm Springs to support Smith’s second campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. To the Democratic delegates assembled in Houston, FDR—who now used a cane instead of crutches and leaned less heavily on his son, Elliott, as he made his way to the rostrum—seemed tireless, charismatic, and almost recovered. He managed the convention floor for Smith, ensuring that delegates pledged to Smith came through and voted for him.

FDR and Howe believed they had another four years to prepare for FDR’s own return to the campaign trail. But Smith and other party leaders persuaded FDR to take the leap right away and help Smith build support for the Democrats in New York. In the autumn of 1928, FDR mounted an energetic run for New York governor—and won.
The goal of the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation, which Franklin D. Roosevelt established in 1927, was to treat polio patients using the most up-to-date methods, in an atmosphere of “cheer, optimism, and good fellowship,” as a 1940 annual report put it. But FDR also hoped the institution would pass along its observations and innovations to medical people treating polio all over the country and the world.

Both goals required money, and FDR worked to raise it from his first days at Warm Springs, Georgia, continuing to support this cause during his years in state and national government. Not long after FDR became president, a political supporter launched an ingenious fund drive for polio treatment and research: “Birthday Balls” to take place on FDR’s January 30 birthday in communities across the nation, with part of the proceeds going to the Warm Springs Foundation and, after FDR created it in 1938, to the foundation’s offshoot, the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP), soon to be dubbed the March of Dimes.

Actor, comedian, and radio star Eddie Cantor coordinated a radio campaign for the NFIP’s first drive commemorating the president’s birthday in 1938. Cantor coined the term “March of Dimes”—a play on the popular radio and newsreel series *The March of Time*—to encourage people to send their change to the White House to “show our President that they are with him in this battle against this disease.” Dimes flooded the president’s mansion, and a successful fundraising campaign was born.

The next year, FDR took to the radio to thank Americans for giving to the March of Dimes birthday campaign, comparing the drive to a military campaign and pointing out that while Americans believed people with disabilities should be “cared for and guided to full and useful lives,” their enemies in Germany and Japan viewed “those who are handicapped in body or mind . . . as unnecessary burdens to the state.” In the fight against polio as in the war overseas, FDR said, one weapon was paramount: “That weapon is morale.”

FDR had founded and lent his name and image to an initiative that would do enormous good, sponsoring Jonas Salk’s work to develop and test the world’s first polio vaccine. In the late 1950s, the threat of polio virtually banished, the March of Dimes changed its focus to preventing birth defects.
I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

3. Polio and Paralysis: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Disability

Above: Eleanor Roosevelt hosts an FDR Birthday Ball to benefit polio research and treatment on her husband’s birthday, January 30, 1944, at the Statler Hotel in Washington, DC. The annual publicity event garnered support from the stars—here are pictured, from left to right, Red Skelton, Lucille Ball, John Garfield, and Maria Montez—and became the first major private philanthropic initiative aimed at defeating a disease. FDRL

Far Left: Letters containing dimes to mark the president’s birthday and benefit polio research pour into the White House, to be inspected by presidential secretary Marguerite “Missy” LeHand, January 28, 1938. LOC

Left: Dimes pour into the White House mailroom during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1939 “Birthday Ball” fundraiser for polio research. FDR used his January 30 birthday each year to publicize the effort that became known as the March of Dimes. It would fund the research responsible for eradicating polio. LOC

Above: A rare image of a relaxed Franklin D. Roosevelt sitting in his wheelchair with his beloved Scottish terrier, Fala, in his lap and little Ruthie Bie, granddaughter of his property caretaker, at his side. The photo was taken by FDR’s sixth cousin Margaret “Daisy” Suckley at FDR’s fully accessible personal retreat, Top Cottage, near the Roosevelt estate at Hyde Park, New York, in February 1941. FDRL

Right: Franklin D. Roosevelt receives a birthday cake festooned with checks for his National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (also known as the March of Dimes), in the Oval Office, January 1942. FDR used his birthday as a fundraising occasion to benefit polio research and treatment. Presenting the cake is William Green of the American Federation of Labor. FDRL
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Basil O’Connor

On October 9, 1922, a little over a year after his paralysis began, Franklin D. Roosevelt entered the crowded lobby of 120 Broadway in New York City’s financial district, home to the offices of the Fidelity and Deposit Company. FDR had taken an executive job at the insurance and bonding firm in 1921 upon moving back to New York after his stint in Washington, DC, as secretary of the navy. Now, after months of recuperation, he hoped his return to work would go smoothly. A crutch under each arm, steel leg braces snapped into place to support his frail legs, FDR dragged his lower body toward the elevator. He had asked his chauffeur to walk beside him and prop his foot against FDR’s left crutch to steady it. But as FDR propelled himself across the slick floor, both he and his chauffeur slipped. FDR fell, his crutches and braces clattering on the tile. When his chauffeur could not pull FDR to his feet, FDR jauntily asked two young men for help. Basil O’Connor walked over, helped FDR stand, and accompanied him to the elevator. They liked each other at once.

They would become law partners and trusted friends. FDR asked O’Connor to serve as counsel for the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation, an experience that transformed O’Connor into a tireless crusader against polio. As president of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and later the March of Dimes Foundation, O’Connor raised millions to support polio patients and the research that developed the Salk vaccine.

In 1955, thanks to the work FDR began and O’Connor continued, the United States began widespread vaccinations against polio, and by 1979 the disease that paralyzed FDR in 1921 was eliminated in America. Today polio is exceedingly rare. The World Health Organization reported 223 polio cases in 2012, most of which were found in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, where security concerns and economic barriers have hindered immunization campaigns.
Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to believe that he would never walk again and tackled rehabilitation with the same “bold, persistent experimentation” he would apply to the Great Depression. But despite constant, strenuous exercise, his legs remained frail and fragile.

In 1926 at Warm Springs, Georgia, he perfected the motion that would allow him to appear to walk. He would strap on steel leg braces, hold a cane in one hand, clutch the arm of a trusted aide with the other, and use his hips to swing his legs out in front on him—cheerfully chatting to all around him to distract his companions and put them at ease. This was not something FDR did to get around when unobserved. It was a strenuous display.

America knew FDR could not walk. The public understood he had battled polio. It had been an issue during his first campaign for president in 1932—people whispered about whether he was physically fit for the office. And FDR associated himself prominently with calls for public donations to polio rehabilitation and research clinics.

But Americans did not understand just how frail his legs were or realize that he could not stand without help.

FDR’s team encouraged this misperception. Press agents took care not to let FDR be photographed in his wheelchair or being carried up and down stairs or on and off railroad cars. Staged White House photos emphasized his muscular shoulders and arms as much as his intellect. And FDR’s joyful banter as he “walked” drew eyes away from his atrophied legs and toward his captivating face. It was, FDR biographer and people with disabilities advocate Hugh Gallagher has noted, “a splendid deception.”
In his eulogy before the House of Commons after Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death in 1945, British prime minister Winston Churchill spoke candidly about the president’s disability, having pushed his wheelchair during Churchill’s first visit to the White House at Christmas 1941 and on numerous occasions afterward. It was now time not to conceal FDR’s paralysis, but to credit him for the strength he displayed in living with it.

“President Roosevelt’s physical affliction lay heavily upon him,” Churchill said. “It was a marvel that he bore up against it through all the many years of tumult and storm. Not one man in ten millions, stricken and crippled as he was, would have attempted to plunge into a life of physical and mental exertion and of hard, ceaseless political controversy. Not one in ten millions would have tried, not one in a generation would have succeeded, not only in entering this sphere, not only in acting vehemently in it, but in becoming indisputable master of the scene. In this extraordinary effort of the spirit over the flesh, the will-power over physical infirmity, he was inspired and sustained by that noble woman his devoted wife, whose high ideals marched with his own, and to whom the deep and respectful sympathy of the House of Commons flows out today in all its fullness.”