

# FDR's lasting legacy is one of triumph over polio

by [Access Press Staff](#) // November 10th, 2014

“People who are crippled take a long time to get to their feet – sometimes years,” said Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The president who got the United States back on its feet during the Great Depression and also served during World War II was in the spotlight again this fall in the PBS series *The Roosevelts*.

As the post-November election dust settles on months of political attack ads, it's worth remembering how FDR and his supporters controlled his image as a strong, vibrant leader. Roosevelt contracted polio in 1921 at age 39. He couldn't walk without leg braces or assistance from staff. Roosevelt often used a wheelchair in private, but seldom in public.

What might surprise people in today's no-holds-barred media world is that during Roosevelt's presidency, most journalists cooperated in downplaying Roosevelt's disability. Those who tried to do otherwise were shut out.

The PBS series was produced by noted documentarian Ken Burns and Roosevelt historian Geoffrey V. Ward. It is considered to be the first thorough examination of all of the efforts that FDR made to appear to walk during his initial run for president and his presidential years of 1933-1945. Roosevelt would swing his body forward while holding someone's arm, a move that took him years to perfect.

The man who used a wheelchair and couldn't get to the bathroom on his own “made everyone believe he stood up to greet them,” Ward told the New York Times. “He was an absolute magician.”

Historians also note that FDR's polio was well-known. He was an active supporter of efforts to raise fund for research and for patient care. What the public didn't know was the extent of his disability. Roosevelt was able to convey that he had overcome polio. In crucial ways that shaped the country and world, he did so.

In 2013 rare footage was released of Roosevelt being pushed in his wheelchair, while visiting the U.S.S. Baltimore at Pearl Harbor in July 1944. Eight seconds of film show Roosevelt exiting a doorway on the ship and using what appears to be a ramp. A line of sailors screens the president, but he is shown gliding past the men at a lower level. The wheelchair isn't visible but someone is seen pushing it. Ray Begovich, a journalism professor at Franklin College in Indiana, found the [clip](#) while conducting unrelated research in the National Archives in College Park, Md.

“This raw film clip may be the first motion picture images of the president in his wheelchair, and it was never meant to be shown to the world,” Begovich said. Officials at the Roosevelt library and the National Archives weren't aware of other films.

“To me, the importance of this clip as historic media imagery is that it reminds all of us that this president fought the Great Depression and World War II from a wheelchair. I think it's a tragedy

that we haven't had more candidates for national office who use a wheelchair, guide dog or sign language," Begovich said.

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*Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.*