



Memorials Are Made of This

Of big government, that is, even in honor of Reagan.

They're close to completing the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington. It is an exercise that has been going on for so long, inching forward since 1946 with designs and redesigns, public laws and joint resolutions of Congress, Commissions of Fine Arts and Memorial Commissions, that I have come to think of it as the capital's stealth project. Competitions were announced, plans were advanced and publicly rejected. Then they were revised, and once again the project crept forward. A stone-slab arrangement that won the 1960 competition was dubbed "instant Stonehenge."

Back to the drawing boards, and so another decade went by. Other winning entries were rejected in turn. At last you began to wonder if they had forgotten the whole thing. Perhaps the old FDR fervor was fading. But of course it was not the New Dealers who forgot, or died off. It was the conservative remnant, those who realized that the New Deal had undermined the Constitution and self-reliance. And now the 7.5-acre memorial is going up in broad daylight, on the Tidal Basin, not far from the cherry trees and the Jefferson Memorial.

I drove into West Potomac Park in order to get an early look, but it turned out to be a "hard hat" area. Everything was concealed behind picket fences. A dozen workmen's pick-up trucks lined Ohio Drive—desultory work of the Davis-Bacon variety was evidently proceeding backstage. Groundbreaking had been announced in 1991, then three more years passed before construction began. The

Interior Department donated the land, a road was rebuilt to allow two-way traffic, three parking lots were constructed near the 14th Street Bridge. Hard to believe that no more than \$42 million in taxpayers' money has been spent on all this, with another \$5 million coming from private donations. Then, in 1994, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt appeared at the Tidal Basin site and said that "the verdict of history is in." We need a place that "will capture the greatness of his deeds"; a place where "generations to come" (children included) will be able to visit. The grand opening is scheduled for May 1.

A roadside billboard, years old, proclaimed that "the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial joins the memorials to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln as major U.S. tributes to those four great American leaders." In case you weren't sure where to locate FDR's marbled neighbors, a map showed lines of sight to the Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln memorials. The place will inspire "a subtle mood of quiet contemplation to a nation's great president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the times he led us through." When FDR took office, the commission has also said, Americans found themselves "without jobs, savings or hope." So he launched the nation "on a revolutionary course that would continue beyond his four terms in office." In fact, "Americans' expectations of how we live, work and age stem from FDR's programs." Revolutionary is not too strong a word, I'm afraid.

Visitors will enter a sequence of four outdoor "rooms," one for each term in office. Quotations from the great man will be inscribed upon twelve-foot-high walls of

pink granite—think of them as secular chapels or shrines to activist government. There will be a bronze sculpture of Eleanor Roosevelt, portraying her as the first U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. But according to the *New York Times*, even she has fallen afoul of political correctness: "An earlier design, which depicted the First Lady with her trademark fur piece, was rejected after the commission anticipated protests from animal rights groups."

This news came as a shock to the disability people, who have been unable to get the FDR Commission to change its mind and show Roosevelt as the polio victim that he was, in a wheelchair with leg-irons. How come the commission was more afraid of animal-rights groups than the disability lobby? Their argument is that Roosevelt himself went to great lengths to conceal his disease and that the memorial should put historical accuracy ahead of current politics. Only two known photographs (out of more than 35,000) show Roosevelt in a wheelchair. The victim lobby took umbrage ("he is the role model for the 50 million disabled people living in this country"), but for once did not prevail.

Commission member Sen. Daniel K. Inouye did put on an emollient display of sensitivity, however. "In compliance with the spirit and the letter of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the FDR Memorial was designed, from the beginning, with the disabled in mind," he wrote in the *Washington Post*. "This is the first memorial in Washington purposely designed to be totally wheelchair accessible, with many areas for rest and contemplation. Also a major bas-relief sculpture titled 'Social Programs' includes 54 detailed images, each with braille for the sight-impaired."

No one seemed to have noticed another minefield. I phoned the commission

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in the Dirksen Senate Office Building and asked if Roosevelt would be depicted with his famous jutting jaw, cigarette holder, and, er, cigarette. The lady on the phone said she would get back to me on that. I did not expect her to, for if the answer was yes, last minute opposition from the anti-smoking brigades loomed as a possibility; if no, where was the devotion to historical accuracy? Surprisingly, she did. No cigarette or cigarette holder for FDR. "Did you see the column by Senator Inouye?" she hurriedly added. "We could fax it to you."

David B. Roosevelt, a grandson of the great man and a member of the commission, said in opposition to the wheelchair lobby that "the memorial should not be a vehicle for making a social statement." Well, yes and no. I agree with him about the wheelchair, and I agree with Florence King, who wrote in *National Review* that we in the U.S. worship weakness, whether physical, mental, or moral, because we want to advance "the twisted notion that the unhalt, unlame, unstupid, unvulgar, unpoor and uncriminal are somehow not playing fair."

But in response to David Roosevelt, the whole idea behind the memorial has from the first been to make a very public social statement: nothing less than setting up FDR as the co-equal of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln in the most hallowed precincts of the nation's capital. As Francis X. Clines wrote in the *New York Times*: The FDR memorial "will equate him with Lincoln, Jefferson and Washington, placing him far above other presidents in the nation's official memory." By comparison with that, the disability issue is trivial.

As I drove away from West Potomac Park I idly wondered how a Ronald Reagan Memorial would go down with the powers that be in Washington. Then I realized that we do in fact have a Reagan memorial opening here soon. Maybe on the same day as the FDR Memorial. I refer to the huge new Ronald Reagan Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. It is the largest government building in the District of Columbia—1.9 million square feet of office space—and only the Pentagon in nearby Virginia beats it for size. Go to the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 13th Street N.W. and there

you will see the new limestone-clad monument to big government. Towering above the avenue, the inscription is already carved in stone: "Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center."

Work began in the late 1980's, and cost estimates for the building have now doubled, from \$360 million to \$720 million. A "plush new Taj Mahal," said Sen. Jesse Helms. "Probably the biggest boondoggle to come down the pike in a long time," said former General Services Administrator Richard Austin. Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste, called it "one of the most notorious boondoggles ever funded by taxpayers." Among its intended tenants are the Agency for International Development, the dispenser of foreign aid, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Customs Service, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center. Faced with the prospect of a tenfold increase in its rent, the Woodrow Wilson people at first balked. Congress responded by naming the space alongside the new building Woodrow Wilson Plaza. That seems to have persuaded them to change their minds.

How did a monument to big government get to be named after its (alleged) foe? "Nancy Reagan was terribly keen on the idea," said Edmund Morris, Reagan's official biographer. "She jumped at it as soon as it was offered." He thought the whole thing "grotesque." A faxed request for further information was not answered by the office of Ronald Reagan in Century City. The prime mover behind these strange developments seems to have been Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whom I saw described in the papers the other day as a "conservative." (See what we've come to?)

The huge lot had remained vacant for decades—since the first FDR administration, in fact. Moynihan, ranking Democrat on the Senate Public Works Committee, and a great believer in grandiose government projects, saw the opportunity to carry out the urban planning of his dreams. Writing the authorization language himself, he requested a building of "monumental quality" that would provide "visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise and vigor of the Federal government" (according to an excellent account

of these developments published by the *Austin American-Statesman*).

President Reagan himself approved the project in 1987, not realizing that his name would later be on it. For a while there was talk that Moynihan's name would grace the building. Then came the cost overruns. The record gets a little murky here, but it seems that Moynihan came up with the ingenious idea of using Reagan's name as a way of encouraging reluctant Republicans to vote for the money. No problem enlisting the support of Bob Dole, of course. Can do! He and Moynihan introduced the bill naming the building after Reagan. It would be a "fitting" way to honor the 40th president, Dole said. The building was "named for a great president and a good cause," Moynihan added, and President Clinton signed the legislation in December 1995.

One is tempted to think of Dole here as playing the familiar gullible Republican. But was he? Perhaps calling the building a "fitting" tribute was closer to the truth than we like to think. Government spending expanded rapidly in the Reagan years, almost doubling (uncorrected for inflation) by the time he left office. Revenues came flooding in after the top tax rates were reduced in 1983. Even as the editorial writers and journalists howled about David Stockman's "axe," the federal government went on an unprecedented spending spree with no resistance from Reagan. Another irony is that it was Moynihan who most conspicuously complained that the Reagan deficits were crowding out other worthy social programs, even as he added to those deficits by indulging his edifice complex.

Reagan grew up in FDR's shadow, and in a way he never left it. Amazingly, he even said that Roosevelt was the president he admired the most. So, perhaps the FDR Memorial could be adjusted not by adding a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair, but by adding to one of those outdoor "rooms" a cheery little statue of Ronald Reagan. A "line of sight" could show the view of the Reagan building, the roof at least, and an inscription could be added, explaining that despite all the confusing rhetoric, here was the great president who cemented in place the New Deal, making it a bipartisan affair. ❀

