



New Book Asserts FDR Became President *Because* of Polio

In his new book, *The Man He Became*, James Tobin, an associate professor of journalism at Miami University of Ohio, goes much further than recounting the obvious physical limitation imposed upon Roosevelt according to the *Booklist* reviewer. Rather, Tobin convincingly asserts that the struggle to overcome the disease and to resume an active life transformed Roosevelt's character. It added steel to his personality, led to his appreciation for human suffering, and even added additional fire to his already burning political ambition. Tobin offers very useful context by describing the nature of the poliovirus, especially for those too young to recall what a terrifying and devastating malady it was before a vaccine was developed.

An Amazon reviewer notes: "Within the recounting of Roosevelt's contraction, illness, recovering and physical rehabilitation from polio, Tobin enlightens readers on a number of issues. The first is the mechanics of the poliovirus and how it became a major epidemic disease in the early 20th-century. The second is the societal attitudes towards the disabled in the 1920s and early 1930s that many faced and were amplified when Roosevelt returned to politics. The third was political dynamics that the nation and the Democratic party were facing throughout the mid-1920s. ... The fourth is Roosevelt's dealings with the press about his physical condition and how much he actually used a wheelchair."

Publisher Simon & Schuster provided this interview with the author:

Q: *You've called FDR's presidency the greatest comeback in American political history – what do you mean by that?*

Tobin: His presidency now looms so large in our memory that people don't realize that when he came down with polio, he was absolutely ruined as a politician. I mean, nobody – with the possible exception of his aide Louis Howe – thought he had a political future. By any odds, and especially in that era, he should have

spent the rest of his life sorting his stamp collection by the fireplace.

The greatest obstacle was the social stigma. In that time, it was simply unthinkable that a man who couldn't walk might be fit for an important public position, let alone the presidency. And the practical obstacles were, in fact, very great. But he did it. He had a lot of help and some good luck. But his ambition and his will were gigantic.

Q: *The conventional wisdom is that FDR deceived the public about his disability, but you say that's incorrect. What really happened?*

Tobin: FDR never pretended to be anything but a man with a significant disability. But he was allergic to pity; he didn't want to make people uncomfortable; and he was worried about falling in public, especially having a fall photographed. So, although he was perfectly frank about being disabled, his appearances in public and with company were rather carefully managed. He asked photographers not to take pictures of him walking or getting in or out of cars. And he didn't use a wheelchair in public; that was too potent a symbol of disability. But this was a very far cry from deceiving the nation about his condition.

Q: *You've said that FDR became president less in spite of polio than because of polio – how so?*

Tobin: Before polio, FDR was held back in politics by the perception that he was an aristocratic smoothie who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. That was especially troublesome in the New York Democratic Party, which was dominated by tough types like Governor Al Smith. But polio gave him a great story to tell. Now he could present himself as the guy who had come back from a knockout punch. And by a lucky turn of fate, the years when he was rebuilding his strength were the same years when the Democratic Party was tearing itself apart over Prohibition. Polio kept him on the sidelines at the perfect time.

Q: *What did you find out about Roosevelt's initial diagnosis?*

Tobin: The key doctor who examined FDR at first – a famous surgeon – didn't even diagnose an infectious disease, which should have been obvious from his high fever. This delayed a correct diagnosis by more than a week. There's at least a slim possibility that a correct diagnosis at the outset could have led to a quick treatment and a better recovery – but since polio was probably a net plus for FDR's later career, a better recovery might also have cost him the presidency.

Q: *In researching the book, what did you learn about FDR's treatment and exercise regimen?*

Tobin: I learned that one of the hardest things anyone can face is a prolonged course of physical rehabilitation with no guarantee of recovery. It's often a matter of subjecting yourself to indefinite pain – severe pain – and failure. So it's both a physical and a psychological ordeal. FDR was not the perfect patient he has sometimes been made out to be. He slacked off sometimes. But he worked at it hard

enough to make significant progress. The most important thing he did – after several years of frustration – was to follow the advice of smart physical therapists. They showed him that learning a new way to walk was more important than sheer muscular recovery.

Q: *Your research draws on many primary sources – what was the most difficult part of the research?*

Tobin: Robert Caro said an editor once told him: “Turn every page.” Maybe Caro turned every page at the Lyndon Johnson Library; I know I didn't turn every page at the FDR Library at Hyde Park. But in the papers that cover these years in FDR's life, I turned an awful lot of pages. I had to, because FDR revealed very little about his private thoughts and emotions about his condition. It was a process of looking for a hundred needles in a thousand haystacks. But after a while, patterns started to emerge, and I realized that his silences about the disease – and his happy pronouncements about getting better, even when he wasn't – were essential parts of the story. ■

Celia Yoder continued from page 1

Land Rush of 1889 where 50,000 people lined up for a race to lay claim to unoccupied public land.)

“In Olathe, I have made many friends. I am a member of the Olathe Visual Artists, and I became a member of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution at age 90.”

Celia has written four family histories and two books – *Memories of a Farmer's Daughter* and *Memories of a Carpenter's Wife*.

“I now help people write their memories and teach a landscape painting class in the senior apartment building where I am in independent living. I still paint landscapes, although I am struggling with macular degeneration. My hearing is failing even with expensive aids.”

Post-polio problems in her left leg caused a fall that has left her with stasis ulcers exacerbated by poor circulation and antibiotic allergies.

“But I feel I am still blessed and I am proud to be a polio survivor,” Celia says. “It has made me aware of and empathetic to people with any handicap or disability. I always felt blessed to enjoy a good life even with problems. Now I realize it was with an ‘attitude of gratitude,’ I enjoyed understanding and helpful parents, sisters and brother, a loving husband, two sons, valued nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.” ■

