

AFD Ep 393 Links and Notes - August 1921 Centennial FDR becomes disabled for life

[Bill/Kelley/Rachel] - Recording Aug 22

- [Bill] *Who was FDR before August 1921?* Franklin D. Roosevelt was briefly a New York State Senator elected in 1910, where he earned a reputation of being against the Tammany Hall Democratic machine and focused on farm legislation, which would come back up during the New Deal. He then left for Washington in 1913 to join the Woodrow Wilson Administration as Assistant Secretary for the US Navy, which had previously been Teddy Roosevelt's political launchpad. He briefly tried to run for the Democratic nomination for US Senate from New York in 1914 but was unsuccessful and remained at the Navy position. After World War I, he survived the 1918 flu pandemic and began the Navy's unexpected pivot to sea-based aviation, which became crucial years later in winning WW2. In 1920, the Democratic Party was in chaos as Woodrow Wilson's inner circle concealed his debilitating stroke and refused to allow any major candidates to step up to run for president, in delusional hopes of electing him to a 3rd term. Wilson's team actually continued this active sabotage of strong candidates from his own cabinet up to the convention. With the first-string candidates seemingly out of the picture, Roosevelt put himself forward and tried to assemble a junior Dream Team to run for President with Herbert Hoover as his running mate. Hoover had recently come to prominence globally for organizing emergency food distribution to European civilians during and after World War I. Unfortunately Hoover, who himself had presidential aspirations, was politically inexperienced and openly declared himself a Republican, which not only ended FDR's plan but also actually ended Hoover's plans by allowing more experienced Republicans like Ohio Senator Warren Harding to outmaneuver Hoover without risking him running as a Democrat. (Hoover would instead end up as Commerce Secretary in the next administration and then be elected president in time to face the 1929 market crash.) So in 1920, then aged 38, FDR abandoned his first presidential plans and instead began lobbying to put himself in contention as the Vice Presidential running mate. The Democratic convention struggled through 44 ballots to pick progressive Ohio Governor James Cox as their presidential candidate. Cox quickly endorsed Roosevelt as his running mate pick, party leaders concurred, and convention delegates were happy to pick a Roosevelt for name value and he was selected for VP unopposed after a half dozen others withdrew to save time and effort. (Fun fact: One of the other would-be VP candidates ended up being implicated as one of the bribers in the Teapot Dome scandal of the next administration.) Cox and Roosevelt went on to be obliterated in the November 1920 election, by a 26-point margin with no Northern or Western states carried – the worst defeat to present day in the history of contested US presidential elections. This loss came despite an unusually vigorous campaign schedule and reasonable efforts to distance themselves from the mounting public backlash to the late-period Wilson Administration's foreign policy (especially on Ireland and League of Nations commitments) and US economic or labor instability and ensuing crackdowns, and despite attempts to re-focus domestically like the Harding Campaign was. Irish-American and German-American voters overwhelmingly boycotted or crossed over to vote Republican in reaction to Wilson's domestic persecutions and reversals abroad on Irish independence policy, ensuring a massive Democratic defeat. Republicans also out-spent Dems about 4:1. Of course, as we know Roosevelt would make a political comeback in the 1928 New York Governor election by a 1% margin and then would be elected 4 times to the Presidency, and some historians as well as Roosevelt's circle itself at the time would argue that the 1920 campaign built up his national profile even if it was a failure. (And Cox's legacy lives on through the media conglomerate bearing his name, to say nothing of his enthusiastic support for Roosevelt's future campaigns.) But Roosevelt's career very nearly ended in the early 1920s, not only because of his

crushing political defeat in late 1920, but also because of the defining life event of August 1921, less than a year later: His paralysis and permanent disability. As Kelley will explain, it's hard for us to imagine the Roosevelt of 1920, running for Vice President and able to walk around – given his later public image – but his situation shifted dramatically 100 years ago this month...

- [My links for the above:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_United_States_presidential_election#General_election https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_M._Cox
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_Democratic_National_Convention]
- [Kelley] Overview:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paralytic_illness_of_Franklin_D._Roosevelt#:~:text=Roosevelt%20was%20left%20permanently%20paralyzed,center%20at%20Warm%20Springs%2C%20Georgia.
 - At the age of 39, FDR contracted polio and lost the use of his legs while on vacation on a Canadian Island off the coast of Maine.
 - He began getting sick on August 10, 1921 and remained in the hospital until October 25.
 - The initial onset of the disease made him very sick and could have killed him, but most symptoms eventually resolved themselves, besides his paralyzed legs.
 - Roosevelt continued to believe that warm water and exercise would help him regain use of his legs and set lofty physical goals for himself.
 - *"Between 1925 and 1928, Franklin would spend more than half his time—116 of 208 weeks—away from home, struggling to find a way to regain his feet," wrote biographer Geoffrey Ward. "Eleanor was with him just 4 of those 116 weeks, and his mother was with him for only 2. His children hardly saw him."*
 - Interestingly, there is current debate in the medical community about whether it was truly polio or actually Guillain - Barre Syndrome. The truth is that it really could have been either and there was no cure for either in 1921. {Important to note however that because he and the public believed he had contracted polio, that influenced policy on polio, rather than whatever he might actually have had.}
- [Kelley] Hiding the disability:
<https://www.wbur.org/npr/247155522/roosevelts-polio-wasn-t-a-secret-he-used-it-to-his-advantage>
 - Unlike some folklore leads us to believe, FDR was open about his disability and did not hide it; it was well known to the American people. He did go to great lengths to avoid being photographed in a wheelchair, but his condition was well known.
 - A book by Hugh Gregory Gallagher published in the 1980s, *FDR's Splendid Deception*, overstated the extent to which FDR tried to cover up his disability, and that falsehood spread. However, the hundreds of letters from people with disabilities, newspaper mentions of it, and even FDR's own speeches show that this was not a secret.
 - *[In a speech in Rochester, N. Y.,] he was talking about the needs of disabled children in the state of New York and he mentions himself. He says, "I myself have been through this ordeal, and I am a symbol of what can happen when people with disabilities are strongly supported."*
- [Kelley] Legacy:
 - March of Dimes:
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/franklin-roosevelt-founds-march-of-dimes>

- On January 3, 1938 Roosevelt founded the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (polio) in order to support young children with polio and fund research against the disease.
- Roosevelt originally relied on President's Birthday Balls in order to fund the organization, but demand outpaced his fundraising so he appealed to the general public for donations.
- *At one fundraiser, celebrity singer Eddie Cantor jokingly urged the public to send dimes to the president, coining the term March of Dimes. The public took his appeal seriously, flooding the White House with 2,680,000 dimes and thousands of dollars in donations.*
- In 1941, the organization funded the development of an improved iron lung for polio patients.
- In 1945, the March of Dimes appointed Jonas Salk as lead researcher for a polio vaccine, which was eventually developed in 1949, four years after the president's death.
- The March of Dimes continues to fight prenatal and early childhood diseases through support programs and research.
- FDR is on the dime today.
- Warm Springs:
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warm_Springs_Historic_District#:~:text=Franklin%20Delano%20Roosevelt%20first%20visited,farm%20surrounding%20it%20in%201927.
 - Roosevelt became interested in Warm Springs when he heard about a boy regaining use of his legs through hydrotherapy in the mineral-rich water.
 - Roosevelt first visited Warm Springs in 1924 and bought the property in 1927 and made it into a polio rehabilitation hub.
 - He spent 16 weeks there during his presidency and was there in his Little White House when he died in 1945.
 - The site is still a rehab center for amputees, people with spinal cord injuries, stroke patients and those with brain damage. It is currently operated by the state of Georgia.
- Thinking about Social Security in terms of disability:
 - <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fdr-signs-social-security-act>
 - The Social Security that Roosevelt signed into law in 1935 did not include a provision specifically for people with disabilities, but it laid the groundwork for a platform on which this addition could be built.
 - *"We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age."-- President Roosevelt upon signing Social Security Act*
- [Rachel] Role of Louis Howe in Roosevelt's return from illness and political defeat (especially notable given Howe's own lifelong health problems):
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Howe
 - Howe was sickly and fragile as a child, suffered from asthma, and was generally kept home by his parents;^[5] he never grew to more than five feet tall.
 - Louis Howe, a longtime friend and advisor to FDR, actually helped him through two major illnesses, both his bout with polio, and a previous case of typhoid fever in 1912, during FDR's re-election campaign for NY state senator. Howe,

controlling the campaign in the final 6 weeks, swept FDR to a victory even greater than his initial election.

- During FDR's attack of polio, Howe took on a caretaker role, keeping Roosevelt's spirits up, and taking on more of his political concerns. He also encouraged secrecy surrounding Roosevelt's paralysis. This is probably the origin of the mythology of "concealment" because Howe did initially lie to the public about whether the disability would be permanent.
- 1924 convention nominating speech was key – but also showed the public that he was definitely permanently disabled, even if they were obscuring how severe it was. Both Howe and Eleanor encouraged Roosevelt to make the speech, and Roosevelt's walk across the stage, aided with crutches and in the company of his son, revitalized his political career.