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A Man Older Than His Years: Franklin D. Roosevelt's Last Days

Bryan Vieira

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It was just like a bolt of lightning or getting hit by a train, one minute he was alive and laughing. The next minute- wham! This was not the sort of thing you could forecast.¹

He is slipping away from us, and no earthly power can keep him here... I know you do not want to make the admission, and I have talked this way with no one else save one. To all the staff, to the family, and with the Boss himself I have maintained the bluff; but I am convinced that there is no help for him.²

In April 1945, all seemed well in the United States; the end of the war in Europe was within the grasps of the Allied forces as they drove their invasion into the heart of the European Theatre. On April 12 of that year, however, the thirty-second President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, died in Warm Springs, Georgia. The news concerning President Roosevelt sent shock waves around the world. The cause of the death of Roosevelt was in question, because no autopsy was performed;³ the surgeon general of the U.S. Navy and Roosevelt's personal physician, Vice Admiral Ross T. McIntire, stated on numerous occasions that prior to his "unexpected death," the president was as healthy as ever.⁴ In reality, though, Roosevelt had been gravely ill for the final five years of his presidency. With the cooperation of McIntire and his other advisers, Roosevelt was able to conceal from the American people the truth about his health. His many ailments weakened him mentally as well as physically and affected his ability to make decisions. Although clearly dying by 1944, he chose to run for an unprecedented fourth term and then made little effort to prepare his Vice President, Harry S. Truman, to succeed him. Roosevelt's actions put a nation already imperiled by the war in still more danger.

Ailing Presidents

The attempt to disguise presidential illnesses by presidents prior to and after Franklin

¹ Quote by Howard Bruenn following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 12, 1945.

² Quote took place in a conversation between William Hassett (quoted) and Howard Bruenn following Roosevelt's Post Yalta Address.

³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt Certificate of Death. <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/PSE/BOX20/T901AY01.HTML>

⁴ Lomazow, Steven, and Eric Fettmann. *FDR's Deadly Secret*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2009, 188

Delano Roosevelt had the same purpose- to assert permanence in their position or to preclude a halt to their political career. In 1893, President Grover Cleveland had an operation on a yacht in New York harbor to remove cancer from his upper jaw. The only details released to correspondents and the public was that Cleveland suffered from a toothache. President John F. Kennedy did not reveal that he was diagnosed with Addison's disease, an incurable deterioration of the adrenal glands. If publicized, the 1960 presidential election would likely have gone to Richard Nixon. It was later confirmed in President Kennedy's autopsy that his adrenal glands were nonexistent.⁵

During his time at the Navy Department as Assistant Secretary, Roosevelt befriended Rear Admiral Cary T. Grayson. Grayson was President Woodrow Wilson's personal physician and like McIntire later on, had a personal devotion as the president's closest friend which led him to conspire to keep the truth concerning the chief executive's precarious health from being leaked out to the public. In April 1919, Wilson became ill; Grayson diagnosed the president with influenza, which was at the time a worldwide pandemic. The physician was clever in his statement that Wilson suffered from the common ailment because it would not be questioned by anyone. He did not disclose that Wilson had suffered from a stroke that left him impaired neurologically.⁶ As a result of his stroke, in September of the same year, Wilson suffered from a cerebral embolism and another brain attack. The second stroke left the president completely paralyzed on one side. Grayson did not declare Wilson disabled and conspired with the First Lady to deceive the Cabinet. Vice-President Thomas Marshall was not well liked by those close to the president. As a result, Secretary of State Robert Lansing and Grayson deemed the disabled Wilson a better fit to lead the United States than a healthy Marshall. The two conspirators planned to keep the president hidden from public view and have First Lady Edith Wilson serve

⁵ Ferrell, Robert H. *The Dying President: Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944-1945*. (Columbia, Mo.): University of Missouri, 1998) 5

⁶ Ibid. 6

as surrogate president. As Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt made trips to the White House; he recalled his visit with President Wilson: “As we came in sight of the portico, we saw the president in a wheelchair, his left shoulder covered with a shawl which concealed his left arm which was paralyzed... Wilson looked up and in a very weak voice said ‘thank you for coming’... His utter weakness was startling.”⁷

Roosevelt witnessed firsthand the effects of serious illness on a president and with the help of Grayson, he learned how to conceal his medical history as well as finding a White House physician for himself that knew how to cover-up and keep quiet. Cleveland, Kennedy and Wilson had the same intent as Roosevelt had when he first contracted polio; to prevent a medical issue from altering American’s perception of them. In the case of Roosevelt, Kennedy and Wilson, a disclosure of their physical condition would probably have been serious enough to deny them the office of the President.

Roosevelt’s Paralysis

On August 9, 1921, Roosevelt sailed aboard the yacht *Sabalo*; the thirty-nine year old fell into the cold Bay of Fundy. After his fall Roosevelt exclaimed that he “never felt anything as cold as that water. I hardly went under, hardly wet my head because I still had hold of the tender, but the water was so cold it seemed paralyzing.”⁸ The key word in Roosevelt’s explanation of his experience was “paralyzing” because in the day that followed, Roosevelt indeed became a paraplegic. The chill that Roosevelt felt was the early symptom of poliomyelitis.⁹ Under normal circumstances, a human’s immune system can resist the onset of the polio virus; however, if the person was under stress the chance of the body withstanding the disease ebbs. Indeed, Roosevelt felt neither tranquil or unperturbed, thus the severity of the attack amplified; the likelihood of the man from Hyde Park becoming paralyzed increased. After

⁷ Ibid. 6-7.

⁸ Lomazow and Fettman, 25.

⁹ Ibid. 28.

a swim the next day, Roosevelt felt that he had a case of lumbago. He proceeded to walk unassisted to his bedroom; this was the last time he would ever saunter unaided.¹⁰

As Roosevelt awoke, he remained bedridden; “The next morning when I swung out of bed my left leg lagged...I tried to persuade myself that the trouble with my leg was muscular, that it would disappear as I used it. But presently it refused to work and then the other.”¹¹

Roosevelt’s symptoms included a 102° fever, moderate pain, and weakness in his legs. A local doctor was called to examine the feeble Roosevelt; his diagnosis was that he had a severe viral upper respiratory tract infection- the common cold. As his state degenerated, Eleanor Roosevelt called for Dr. E. H. Bennett to look at her husband; Bennett confirmed Roosevelt had a bad cold as well as spinal cord compression due to a lesion. As Roosevelt’s condition worsened, Bennett and Louis Howe, a family friend, began calling specialists. Howe had met Roosevelt in 1911 and helped him get re-elected to the New York State Senate.¹² Howe turned to William W. Keen to examine Roosevelt; Howe was aware that Keen was part of a team of surgeons that secretly removed the tumor from the mouth of President Cleveland. Keen maintained silence when a Philadelphia paper heard rumors of the secret operation. Howe, aware of Keen’s credentials, worried about the ramifications of the diagnosis and was comfortable knowing Keen had the ability to keep quiet.¹³ It was determined two weeks later by Keen and Dr. Robert Lovett that Roosevelt had polio.

After Roosevelt was admitted into the hospital, his condition worsened. Those close to Roosevelt gave a misleading announcement to the press concerning his health.¹⁴ As Roosevelt made it known that he longed to be President of the United States, and any news regarding a

¹⁰ “F.D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis.” *NYTimes*, September 16, 1921, p.1. Lumbago is a term used to describe mild to severe pain in lower (lumbar) portion of the back.

¹¹ Gallagher, Hugh Gregory. *FDR's Splendid Deception*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985. 20

¹² Brands, H. W. *Traitor to His Class: the Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. 70-71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146-148.

¹⁴ While in the hospital, Roosevelt did not have the ability to move his arms or legs.

disabled candidate running for president would spoil his likelihood of winning, those close to Roosevelt hoodwinked the media. The various means of mass communication passed on reports to the public which were deceitful. In its September 16, 1921 edition, *The New York Times* reported that Roosevelt was stricken by infantile paralysis. While the main information regarding the health of Roosevelt was factual, the readers of the newspaper were misinformed and lied to. The issue entitled “F.D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis,” was written one month after the onset. Roosevelt’s entourage hoped that he would recover from polio without showing any ill effects; however, when it became evident that he would not recover fully, a fictitious report was considered necessary. *The New York Times* stated that Roosevelt was “recovering,” and that his use of legs was affected, but doctors said that the attack was “very mild,” and Mr. Roosevelt “would not be permanently crippled.”¹⁵ Dr. George Draper, Roosevelt’s family physician stated: “I cannot say how long Mr. Roosevelt will be kept in the hospital but you can say definitely that he will not be crippled. No one need have any fear of permanent injury from this attack.”¹⁶

Polio removed Roosevelt from the political spectrum for seven years. The advent of his disease that rendered him unable to walk seemed to bring his political career to a close. Although the polio was deleterious to Roosevelt’s wellbeing, it had a positive effect on his political life. In July 1921, the Senate Naval Affairs Committee disseminated its testimony of the Navy Department’s ill-handling of the Newport Naval Training Station scandal. The report was critical of the assistant secretary, stating that Roosevelt “committed all sorts of high crimes and misdemeanors [that] are nowhere supported by the evidence.” Roosevelt responded by saying, “Throughout their report I accuse them of all deliberate falsification of evidence, of perversion of facts, of misstatements of the record, and a deliberate attempt to deceive.”¹⁷ The feeling of trepidation was upon Roosevelt that the charges against him would be renewed, but his

¹⁵ “F.D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis.” *NYTimes*, September 16, 1921.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 1

¹⁷ Lomazow and Fettmann, 38

attack and “temporary” immobility gave Congressmen the impression that he would not be considered a candidate in forthcoming elections or appointive office. Hence the investigation was not pursued further.

While Roosevelt’s doctors told him he would not recover the use of his legs, Roosevelt believed otherwise. Roosevelt went through drastic measures to attempt to regain the use of his legs, but also to convince others that he was on his way to a full recovery. In 1926, Roosevelt wrote that his legs were “greatly improved.” Roosevelt acquired an obsession for swimming; this allowed him to exercise his upper body and atrophied legs, which gave him the ability to “walk” and look physically fit- from the waist up. Roosevelt’s illness temporarily suppressed his interest in politics; that ended in 1928 when Al Smith, the Democratic party’s candidate for president, convinced him to run for the gubernatorial position in New York.

Fit for the Presidency?

By 1931, it became clear that Roosevelt was the overwhelming favorite to represent the Democratic Party in the upcoming election. While some Republicans attacked Roosevelt by asking: “Is Franklin Delano Roosevelt physically fit to be the next President of the United States?”¹⁸ Republicans such as Jesse W. Nicholson and a freelance writer named Earle Looker publicly voiced their quarrels. Nicholson and Looker expressed their sentiments in a manner that was atypical. From the primaries to the fall campaign, such concerns were not uttered openly. Referring to Roosevelt, Nicholson stated, “While mentally qualified for the presidency, [he] is utterly unfit physically.”¹⁹ Unlike a presidential candidate in this era, Roosevelt never had to or was expected to address his health in a formal speech. After being informed by his “brain trust” of the rumors concerning his health, Roosevelt did not endeavor in a campaign to invalidate the assertions made by his opponents. Whilst Roosevelt remained quiet about his

¹⁸ Ibid. 41.

¹⁹ Ibid. 43.

wellbeing, his doctors gave the public misleading assurances that the Democratic nominee was vigorous. Dr. Francis E. Fronczak asserted that Roosevelt suffered from a relatively common illness and the outcome of it was “temporary” and only led to a “partial disability of the leg muscles.” Likewise, Fronczak exclaimed that with the right therapeutic procedures, “The disabilities gradually disappear, as they have in Mr. Roosevelt’s case.”²⁰

Instead of speaking about his health, Roosevelt campaigned on the issues the nation faced. It was the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, John Farley, who responded to the Grand Old Party’s claims. Farley accused the Republicans of engaging in a “whispering campaign,” in which hateful stories were fabricated by Roosevelt’s opponents that attacked him on a personal level. Mudslinging was and remains common in presidential elections; however, in this instance, Farley deemed that the Republicans had crossed the line. Roosevelt’s challengers were justified in their accusations that he was physically weak and not recovering. In his run for the presidency, Roosevelt and his inner circle went to extreme lengths to cover-up any of his signs of weakness, indicators that if unearthed would cost him votes and perhaps the election. In 1930, a photograph was taken of the presidential candidate, which made Roosevelt appear physically competent and confident.²¹ The photograph gave viewers the impression that Roosevelt was able to stand on his own power with the help of a cane- refuting the argument made by Republicans. This photograph was not authentic; it was cropped and taken at an angle with the intent of fooling the eye of the viewer- *trompe l’oeil*. In art, *trompe l’oeil* is a technique that creates optical illusions; in this photo Roosevelt appeared to be standing on his own; however, in the untouched version, he can be seen using two canes. In the photograph, Roosevelt is balanced in an awkward position against a building. Even with the assistance of two canes, it appears that Roosevelt was still unable to stand or walk without aid.

In the time of Roosevelt, wheelchair users were considered different from other

²⁰ Ibid. 43.

²¹ FDR Library Digitized Historical Photos <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/photographs.html>

individuals. In interviews conducted with people who lived during this time period, they stated that handicapped people were considered “damaged” and treated them with “pity.”²² From a political standpoint it was wise for Roosevelt to hide his physical disability ; none of my interviewees knew that he was bound to a wheelchair. Roosevelt did everything possible to cover-up his physical handicap; when he talked with advisors and political officials from the United States and abroad he would be seated in a normal chair. If Roosevelt had to make a speech he arranged to have his Secret Service men wheel him to the podium. The photographers who were present at the address were aware that they were not to photograph Roosevelt in his wheelchair; if they proceeded to do so, their camera would be confiscated.²³ At the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidential Library and Museum there are thirty-five thousand still pictures of the President. Just two show him in a wheelchair and that there are not any newsreels that display Roosevelt being carried, lifted, or pushed. To avoid the public eye, Roosevelt arrived at his speeches and appearances hours early. In many instances Eleanor Roosevelt became her husband’s “eyes” and “ears,” as she attended speeches and meetings that the President could not reach.

Although Eleanor Roosevelt appeared as First Lady at social functions, she and her husband had a strained marriage. In 1918, Eleanor Roosevelt discovered her husband was having an affair with Lucy Mercer, her social secretary. Mrs. Roosevelt asked for a divorce but was manipulated by her husband and his family into not going through with the separation; she was threatened with the burden of having to raise five children on just her own resources. An agreement was made in which the Roosevelt’s remained married; however, Mrs. Roosevelt was given separate living arrangements and was given financial compensation to fund her humanitarian work.²⁴

²² Oral Interview of John and Lorraine Strauss, by author, October 1 2010.

²³ Gallagher, 94.

²⁴ Brands, 36-41.

White House physician Ross T. McIntire recalled in his book *White House Physician* how the president successfully hid his inability to walk:

I remember particularly an occasion at the White House during the time that Mme Chiang Kai-shek was a guest, having come from China to beg larger aid for her invaded homeland. On leaving the room at the end of the evening, she turned to the President with a flutter of her graceful hands and told him not to go to the bother of getting up. Only when he pointed to his braces did Mme Chiang realize what she had said, and while a wave of color flushed her face, the President laughed and thanked her for the compliment.²⁵

The reaction of Mme Chiang was not an isolated occurrence. The president's physician during the Atlantic Charter meeting, Casablanca, Teheran, Cairo, Malta, and Yalta, analyzed the reactions of the Allied leaders. From Stalin to Chiang Kai-shek, all of them "had a moment of natural curiosity about the President's physical condition."²⁶

The person most interested in the health and protection of Roosevelt was his close friend and eventual secretary Louis Howe. Since the onset of polio, Howe monitored all anti-Roosevelt news articles that in his opinion falsified the facts. In response to those who questioned Roosevelt's well-being, Howe wrote passionate letters refuting those claims. Throughout the presidential election, Howe did not ease up on his assault to prove to all skeptics that Roosevelt was physically capable of being President of the United States. Howe used the results of two medical examinations as evidence. The doctors declared that Roosevelt's ability to walk was improving and that it "had no more effect on his general condition than if he had a glass eye or was prematurely bald."²⁷ The conclusion made by the examiners was that Mr. Roosevelt could "walk all necessary distances and can maintain a standing position without fatigue." The evaluation made by the medical practitioners was a mere publicity stunt and the conclusions made by the "distinguished doctors" were misleading and an unequivocal act of deception. This

²⁵ McIntire, Ross T., and George Creel. *White House Physician*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1946, 236.

²⁶ Lomazow and Fettmann, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 42.

unchallenged feat was a deliberate attempt to conceal Roosevelt's physical limitations. Moreover, these doctors made a serious ailment seem trivial. One person who seemed to be not hoodwinked was Earle Looker. Looker challenged Roosevelt to have independent medical examiners assess his health.²⁸

Looker assembled three renowned physicians to look at Roosevelt and their conclusion upon completion was that Roosevelt was physically fit to be president. It would appear that this challenge would end all defamation; however, the results and specific findings of the tests performed by the doctors were not released. Were the doctors maintaining the Hippocratic Oath by not revealing their knowledge of their patient's health? Or was the medical appraisal biased towards Roosevelt? The results of these tests were not revealed until after Roosevelt's death. At the time of his examination, Roosevelt's blood pressure reading was 140/100 (a normal reading was 120/80) and far worse his electrocardiogram (EKG) tracking was atypical. The abnormal EKG suggests an enlargement on the left side of the heart and hypertension- the source of numerous medical conditions that haunted Roosevelt after he became president. One can only conclude that there was at least some favoritism towards Roosevelt by the doctors; however, was this just another act of trickery on the part of Roosevelt to further substantiate that he was physically able to be commander-in-chief?²⁹

Like the other medical examinations, this one was also a hoax. Private communication between Looker and Roosevelt was discovered by historians David W. Houch and Amos Kiewe. Houch and Kiewe's findings revealed that the medical appraisal was yet another act of deluding on the part of Roosevelt. A letter from Looker to the presidential candidate reads, "Well sir we got away with the *Liberty* article, despite all obstacles at least seven and a half million readers are sure you are physically fit." In a separate letter following a *Springfield Republican* article that questioned if financial compensation was exchanged between Roosevelt, the Democratic

²⁸ Ibid., 45.

²⁹ Ibid., 46.

Party and Looker, Looker wrote, “The question of who paid for the physical examination was and still is between us, frightfully embarrassing, it had to be answered as I answered it.”³⁰

The aforementioned *Liberty* article grew in length and became a campaign biography entitled *This Man Roosevelt*; in the book, Looker discussed the health of Roosevelt. It was avowed that Roosevelt was as healthy as ever and that he was capable of walking unobstructed. The written account concerning the wellbeing of the presidential candidate was inaccurate. The reckoning of the Roosevelt camp was that the memoir could silence murmurs about the Democratic nominee’s health by giving the citizens of the United States a fallacious anecdote that led them to believe that Roosevelt was able to lead the country out of privation. Yearning to accentuate his liveliness and discredit his critics, Roosevelt conducted a campaign in which he travelled 25,000 miles.

The Stock Market slide during the 1930s and the downfall of the larger economy made the 1932 election the most pivotal presidential race since 1860. President Herbert Hoover and fellow Republicans became unpopular due to their mismanagement of the economy following the crash on Wall Street and the public’s disenchantment with Prohibition. While Hoover deemed the worst to be over, the economy however made further downturns. To combat the Depression, Roosevelt called for “a new deal for the American people;” he was a candidate of change in the election, whereas Hoover was adamant that his policies were sufficient to get the United States out of the economic decline.³¹ The Democrat did more than enough to convince electors; Roosevelt defeated President Hoover, winning 472 electoral votes.³² Following the election, Roosevelt determined he no longer needed the freelance writer. By letter, the president shunned Looker. “Things have moved fast in the week since November eighth,” said Roosevelt, “and it has become perfectly clear to me that future articles- at least for a long time- are taboo.”

³⁰ Ibid. 47.

³¹ Brands, 234.

³² Ibid., 238.

Looker lobbied for Roosevelt to reconsider, but the president responded: “Dear Earle: Hah! Hah! and again Hah!”³³

Following his successful campaign, the president-elect embarked on a cruise to the Caribbean aboard the yacht of philanthropist Vincent Astor. Upon arriving in Miami, on February 15, Roosevelt was greeted by thousands of supporters. Following his speech, Roosevelt was brought to his car with Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak. At that moment, an Italian bricklayer named Giuseppe Zangara opened fire. None of the shots hit Roosevelt; however, one bullet struck the Mayor. In the moments following the assassination attempt, Roosevelt remained calm and acted like the leader he was. The target of Zangara in the shooting was unclear; however, Cermak’s aim to clean up Chicago and eliminate Al Capone and organized crime was thought to be the impetus in the murder. The demeanor of Roosevelt after the shooting bolstered his political stature. In Washington, some feared that Roosevelt could not seize the reins of government and guide our nation out of the Depression. However, Roosevelt’s calmness and quick thinking elevated the public’s perception of him as a leader. Also the questions concerning his physical capabilities were put on hold.

Courage, judgment, concern and command were all attributes of Roosevelt- all of which made him a natural leader. Roosevelt also had traits that were less appealing. Some of the president’s peers considered Roosevelt to be “a manipulative man, devious and upon occasion, even sadistic.” The duplicitous nature of Roosevelt was not known by many people, but his wife Eleanor remarked that he “used people and then he discarded them.”³⁴ These qualities and practices by Roosevelt became more pronounced as a response to his physical incompetence.³⁵

Growing Older than His Years

³³ Lomazow and Fettmann, 48.

³⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt. *My Day: Acclaimed Columns 1936-1945*. (Washington: Library of Congress Cataloging, 1949.)77.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 45.

During the first seven years of his presidency, there was not much about his health (other than his paralysis) that required to be concealed. Throughout the final five years of his presidency, however, Roosevelt and his entourage had to cover up more than his physical handicap, as numerous serious concerns about his health emerged. In the spring of 1923, when Roosevelt was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine*, the photograph on the cover revealed a dark spot that had formed above his left eyebrow.³⁶³⁷ At the time, the spot could just be seen from a distance; by the time Roosevelt took office it had become more noticeable. Throughout the decade, the lesion expanded and grew darker; it presented signs which would prompt physicians to test for melanoma- considered one of the most feared cancers. The main concern with the cancer was the likelihood of it metastasizing to the brain and gastrointestinal tract.³⁸

The public and media took little notice of the blemish above the president's eye; those who did brushed it off as just another aspect to the uniqueness of Roosevelt. The main rationale for the little attention paid to the melanoma was that the public was unaware of the cancer and the media outlets did not have an expert in fields such as oncology. Instead, there was a reporter and a teleprompter or sheets of paper. The dangerous skin cancer, in the case of the president, was referred to as "the brown blob" or "the mole," which showed how little Americans knew about the malignant tumor.³⁹

While it was reported that the blob was harmless, one prominent clinician was concerned. Reuben Peterson, a veteran medical educator from Harvard University, became wary when he saw photographs of the supposed mole that grew on the skin of the commander-in-chief. Peterson contacted Ross McIntire and he expressed his apprehension about the cancerous looking splotch. On January 20, 1940, McIntire replied to the doctor: "I will say to you, in confidence, that the pigmented area above the President's eye is very superficial

³⁶ *Time*, May 28, 1923

³⁷ See Appendix A

³⁸ Lomazow and Fettmann, 64.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 65.

and has never shown any sign of an inflammatory nature. You can rest assured that it is under observation at all times.”⁴⁰

However, was McIntire telling the truth? Or was this just an additional attempt to camouflage another infirmity? During the 1930s and 1940s, patients that had melanoma were diagnosed with having a sun spot rather than the malignant cancer. There were only two advised ways to treat melanoma, neither of which were acceptable for Roosevelt, because the outcomes were too immediate and visible. In one scenario, radiation would have caused Roosevelt to lose his eyebrow and hair as well as suffering eye damage. In its place, while the debate grew to what was the cause of the dark spot above the president’s eyebrow, McIntire was reducing the size of the lesion in a progressive manner by cauterizing the cancer with electricity or scraping the tissue with a curette. The moment at which a biopsy revealed that the blemish was malignant is unknown, attributed to the cleverness of both Roosevelt and McIntire. Any records which indicated a treatment of the spot are nonexistent, due to a lack of documentation or the destroying of evidence. After August 1940, the lesion underwent a gradual change; by October of that year, it had faded a great deal, and by 1942, the skin cancer had disappeared altogether- externally.⁴¹ For the time being, Roosevelt yet again fooled the press and the American people; in a letter to his fifth cousin and closest confidant Margaret “Daisy” Suckley, the president wrote that he and his advisers “have all been laughing at the complete ignorance & gullibility of the Press.”⁴²

The timing of the cancer required the suppressing of intelligence; the illness was also a complicated political component because Roosevelt was about to run for an unprecedented third term as president. During the heat of the election, the incumbent was not guaranteed to be reelected; a Gallup poll revealed that Roosevelt had a four percentage point lead over Wendell

⁴⁰ Ibid. 66.

⁴¹ See Appendix B

⁴² Roosevelt, Franklin D., Margaret Suckley, and Geoffrey C. Ward. *Closest Companion: the Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship between Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.) 167

Willkie.⁴³ The slightest indication that Roosevelt had a malignant skin cancer would have spelled disaster. At the time, Americans had a terrible fear of cancer- “cancerphobia.”

According to author of the book *The Dread Disease: Cancer and Modern American Culture*, James T. Patterson, this nation considered cancer as “a stigmatizing illness to be kept quiet at all costs.” It was not uncommon for doctors to withhold a cancer diagnosis from their patients or falsify death certificates. Despite the reality that physicians refrained from giving a cancer diagnosis, there is no reason to believe that in this instance Roosevelt was not aware of his condition.

As indicated by Farley, it was during this period that the Democrats became concerned that the American people were electing a dying president. In a conversation with Farley, Roosevelt exclaimed: “The man running with me must be in good health because there is no telling how long I can hold out.” In a private memo, Farley expressed his doubts about the health of the president: “I am really fearful that if the President is elected for a third term, he may not be able to stand up physically under the strain and he will let those around him get into a situation that will be bad for the country and himself.” Farley later told Vice-President John Nance Garner that he doubted Roosevelt could “stand the strain of another four years, particularly war years.”⁴⁴ However, Garner would not have to be concerned, because Roosevelt chose Henry Wallace to be his new vice-president. Garner was not liked by some liberals due to his conservatism.

Unforeseen tribulations for Roosevelt were in the future. Following his inauguration for the third time, the president would be drawn against a perilous medical risk to his life that almost made Henry Wallace chief executive. On May 4, 1941, Roosevelt delivered a speech in Staunton, Virginia that criticized isolationism. Following the address, *Time* declared that

⁴³ Katz, Daniel. *The Public Opinion Quarterly: Public Opinion Polls and the 1940 Election*. 1941.

⁴⁴ Lomazow and Fettmann, 70.

Roosevelt “moved the crowd as few recent Presidential speeches have.”⁴⁵ *The New York Times* stated that the President “was sharp,”⁴⁶ but privately, correspondents admitted Roosevelt looked awful and “as bad as a man can look.” Following his return to Washington, Roosevelt griped to McIntire that he had a horrible stomach ache and felt fatigued. The physician sent a full blood exam to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Knowing that the result of the examination could be severe, McIntire sent the blood work using a pseudonym - “F. David Rolph.” Roosevelt had over two dozen aliases, all used to conceal his medical tests at the Naval Hospital and National Naval Medical Center. The outcome of the complete assessment revealed that Roosevelt had a hemoglobin level that was well below average. In addition, the President had lost eight pints of blood in a fourteen month period. The commander in chief was on the brink of a medical cataclysm, yet McIntire and Press Secretary Steve Early announced that the president had a temperature and a “slight gastro-intestinal upset;” they underplayed the grave situation adding that “it was nothing serious.” With intent, McIntire deceived the press and the nation yet again. It would not be the last time he would mislead the media.

The “minor” ailment was in reality a “profound” case of anemia caused by exposure to radiation. The most palpable means for Roosevelt to be subject to radiation was for treatment of his melanoma; however, that was not an option because the result of the treatment was too noticeable. With the elimination of the primary decision, this raises the question, since he was not given radiation for his lesion, how was our president exposed to a radioactive substance?

In the summer of 1941, it became apparent that the press was no longer publishing any rumors concerning the health of the President. In other parts of the world, however, there was a great interest in the status of the ailing leader. On June 19, 1941, a secret service spy of Hitler’s

⁴⁵ Ibid. 72

⁴⁶ Frank L. Kluckhohn, “President Sharp.” *NY Times*. May 5, 1941.

regime disclosed that the president's doctors relayed information concerning his health. The "reliable source" that informed the Abwehr (German Intelligence) reported that previous announcements that indicated Roosevelt had just throat and stomach aches were "merely to camouflage his true condition."⁴⁷ While the American people and the majority of the president's staff and American people were misinformed and not cognizant of Roosevelt's true health, the Axis powers knew more about our leader than Americans did. On the home front President Roosevelt and McIntire all but controlled what was said by the press as they hand fed the media false reports of good health. Moreover, they manipulated what was and was not put to ink, as if they were the true authors of the news stories. The president did not have influence over what was circulated abroad, at least not in allied countries, as the Germans revealed that they were aware that Roosevelt was not the fit and healthy person portrayed in press releases. During this time Roosevelt required more trips to the naval hospital; no records of what tests were run remain as officials wanted to conceal this information to suppress any ailment(s) our president had.

Shortly after the death of Margaret "Daisy" Lynch Suckley in 1991, her diary was unearthed. While McIntire insisted that Roosevelt was "in excellent condition for a man of his age," the president's cousin thought differently.⁴⁸ In 1942, according to Suckley, the president had no serious medical concerns other than his ongoing sinus problems. But following the conference at Casablanca, in January 1943, in which Roosevelt, Churchill and Charles de Gaulle plotted the Allied forces' military approach, the president was unable to recuperate like he had beforehand. The Casablanca trip marked the beginning of the end for Roosevelt. During the meeting in Morocco, Roosevelt felt lethargic and had a temperature; Churchill wrote that he thought that the president caught an African bug that made him ill. The diary of Suckley contained detailed commentary between her and the president, all of which enclosed accurate

⁴⁷ Lomazow and Fettmann, 88.

⁴⁸ Roosevelt, Suckley and Ward, 260.

details of her cousin's deteriorating health. Throughout the year, Suckley stated that the president was in poor health due to toxic poisoning and that the cause was unknown. In the weeks that followed, the president began suffering from tremors and had a high temperature.⁴⁹ The languid president could not muster the energy to write a message to Congress. On the 18th of October 1943, Suckley wrote that the President told her that he fell asleep twice while trying to write a message to Congress. Roosevelt's cousin stated, "He just is too tired, too often. I cannot help worrying about him." By the end of 1943, the president had swelling of the ankles—the most common sign of congestive heart failure. Prior to Roosevelt taking off to Casablanca, McIntire instructed the pilot to refrain from flying higher than 9,500 feet. The doctor, according to Roosevelt's advisor Harry Hopkins, was apprehensive about the President's "bad heart." Flying at a high altitude requires the body to send more oxygen to the brain, which increases a person's heart rate; the immediate threat to the President was pulmonary or cerebral edema.⁵⁰

Subsequent to the distended ankles, Roosevelt had a "pain in his side." While Roosevelt had minimal concerns about his health, all of his symptoms pointed to something lethal.⁵¹ The president's abdominal pain, nausea, weight loss, weakness, fatigue and anemia were all signs of stomach cancer in addition to heart failure; the "brown blob" had metastasized to his abdomen. The president was dying before our eyes, yet the public was uninformed and naïve about the crisis.⁵²

During a time when it was apparent amongst his peers that the president was nearing the end, a journalist named Drew Pearson reassured the country via his popular syndicated article "Washington Merry-Go-Round" that Roosevelt started 1944 "with one of the greatest gifts given to any President or any person—miraculous good health." The incorrect publication

⁴⁹ Roosevelt had a temperature of 104.5°

⁵⁰ Cerebral edema is the accumulation of water in the inner and outer spaces of the brain. Pulmonary edema is the buildup of water in the lungs.

⁵¹ Gallagher, Hugh Gregory. *FDR's Splendid Deception: the Moving Story of Roosevelt's Massive Disability : and the Intense Efforts for Conceal It from the Public*. Arlington, VA: Vandamere, 1999. 156.

⁵² *Ibid.* 156.

is an example of the public's unawareness of their leader's condition. The January 11th State of the Union address was unlike any other in history; Roosevelt did not speak in front of Congress. The required speech was made by means of Fireside Chat; within his message, the president contradicted Pearson, stating that his doctor "simply would not permit me to leave the White House" due to the flu. In fact, he suffered from the effects of the melanoma that had metastasized to his stomach.⁵³

A Fourth Term?

The current vice-president, Henry Wallace, was not liked within his own party; leading Democrats felt that he was not a fit man to be president of the United States. While Roosevelt was fond of Wallace, he did not want to divide the party like he had in the previous election. Roosevelt forced Senator Harry Truman of Missouri, a man uninterested in the position to fill the void; "Tell the senator that if he wants to break up the Democratic Party by staying out, he can." Unlike his previous elections, President Roosevelt stated that he would not go on the campaign trail. Roosevelt declared that he did not need to cite his responsibilities as president to the public, because he felt that he was needed elsewhere- first and foremost as commander in chief in the ongoing days of global warfare. To Roosevelt, this particular election was a choice between the "inexperienced" and "immature" Thomas Dewey or the group "who saw the danger from abroad, who met it head-on and who now have seized the offensive and carried the war to its present stages of success."⁵⁴ While it appeared the president made the war in Europe priority number one, it was only a cover-up. In the political sphere, focusing on the war instead of the campaign made sense, but that was not the intent. In lieu of concentrating on the war, Roosevelt was concealing his failing health. Roosevelt suffered from chronic bouts of unbearable pain as a result of the cancer that had metastasized to his bowel. On a train ride to Camp Pendleton,

⁵³ Lomazow and Fettmann, 93-94.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 113-114.

Roosevelt showed why his health prevented him from campaigning. According to Jimmy Roosevelt, during the journey on the rails, his father “suddenly began to groan...his face took on an expression of pain and suffering, and all the color seemed to drain from it.” After minutes of agony, Roosevelt began to return to form, and asked his son to not mention the incident to a soul—not even his doctors.⁵⁵

Following his trip to San Diego, the president met with General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz at Pearl Harbor and discussed the war plan against the Japanese. Following the meeting, MacArthur wrote that Roosevelt’s deteriorating health was observable: “I had not seen him for a number of years, and physically he was just a shell of the man I had known. It was clearly evident that his days were numbered.” MacArthur was also recorded as stating that he believed that Roosevelt would be dead within a year. While MacArthur noticed the decline in health, Roosevelt was excellent in making his diminished health inconspicuous.⁵⁶ In the midst of a nationally broadcasted address, Roosevelt suffered from an angina attack which lasted for “about fifteen minutes.” The transient episode was caused by a lack of blood flow to the heart and caused the president to have “a helluva pain” in his chest.⁵⁷ As historians looked at the unedited film, they could not determine at what instance the attack commenced.⁵⁸

From 1944-1945, Ross T. McIntire manufactured fictitious accounts of what affected the health of President Roosevelt. McIntire insisted that the president was “as good as one could expect for a man in his early sixties;” the physician only publicized that the president had suffered from bronchitis and influenza. During the 1944 campaign, most Americans believed that their president suffered a “paralytic stroke, that he was being treated for cancer of the

⁵⁵ Ibid. 130.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 133.

⁵⁷ A transient episode is described as a mini-stroke; however, the symptoms can disappear in a few minutes.

⁵⁸ Lomazow and Fettmann, 137.

prostate, that he was the victim of a mental breakdown, and, favorite whisper of all, that his heart had played out.” In a successful attempt to make certain that President Roosevelt was re-elected for a fourth term, McIntire refuted all claims that the president was not well: “In not one of these rumors were there a grain of truth. The president never had a stroke, never had any serious heart condition, and never underwent other operations than the removal of a cyst and the extraction of an infected tooth.”⁵⁹

In March of 1944, it became evident to those close to the president that something was gravely wrong with him. In addition to Suckley, the president’s daughter, Anna, had a sense of trepidation about the health of her father. In the months that followed, the president’s condition only worsened. By May the president lost a significant amount of weight, and in the months that followed, Roosevelt described himself as feeling “low” and “logy.” The president said that he had not a clue what was the matter with him. On Wednesday September 6th, the president called from Washington D.C. and said that “he felt like a boiled owl;” Suckley described his voice as being heavy. While the president’s physician told the nation that Roosevelt was “as healthy as ever,” Suckley’s diary entries told a different story.⁶⁰ In November 1944, Roosevelt carried thirty-six states and was once again reelected; however, if the truth had been revealed to our citizens that Roosevelt felt and looked ghastly, the president said that he felt at that point any Republican candidate could have defeated him. The Republicans did not focus on the health of Roosevelt in the election, diminishing any hope of defeating the incumbent.

While the president’s physician was adamant that Roosevelt was underweight but otherwise healthy, he began to question himself. In his book, McIntire stated, “Quite frankly, I had dreaded that campaign; but the manner in which the president came through it made me doubt my accuracy as a diagnostician.” McIntire claimed that the chances of the president completing his fourth term were “good.” The campaign was the least of the doctor’s worries; the

⁵⁹ McIntire, Ross T., and George Creel. *White House Physician*,. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1946,) 241.

⁶⁰ Roosevelt, Suckley and Ward, 280.

period of time between election day and the inauguration was a more stressful time for McIntire. During those months, Roosevelt could not “rid himself of a sense of terrible urgency...physical and mental strain, plus loss of appetite, reduced his weight to 170 pounds.”⁶¹ According to McIntire, the president’s inaugural address marked a return of his old self. Roosevelt rose to the occasion to show the American people that he was as advertised, a man with great physical and mental strength and energy. Only the president’s White House entourage and close family members knew of his torpor.

In January 1945, Roosevelt celebrated his sixty-third birthday. During a social gathering that included the well-known actress Veronica Lake, first-lady Eleanor Roosevelt revealed to the silver screen artist that the President “was ill.” As the conversation between the two women continued, Mrs. Roosevelt informed Lake that her husband had cancer of the prostate gland. It so happens that the treatment for prostate cancer at the time was the surgical insertion of radium into the perineum or rectum, which produced bleeding from the colon.⁶²

Planning for Postwar Europe

In February 1945, Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin met in Crimea, Ukraine.⁶³ The Yalta Conference was intended for “the Big Three” to address several issues that pertained to the war and its aftermath, such as: the unconditional surrender by Germany, the status of Poland, Soviet participation in the United Nations, and the entering of the war in the Pacific by Stalin following the fall of Nazi Germany. From the conclusion of the eight day summit, Roosevelt was dubbed “the sick old man of Yalta.”⁶⁴ Through the examination of personal accounts of officials present at the Crimea Conference and photographs, it is incontestable that Roosevelt was ill and older than his years. Sir Alexander Cadogan of the

⁶¹ McIntire, 248.

⁶² Ferrell, 92. This answers the question proposed on page 16: “How was our president exposed to a radioactive substance?”

⁶³ See Appendix C

⁶⁴ Brands, 795.

British Foreign Office concluded that Roosevelt was unaware of what was going on “most of the time.” Jimmy Byrnes, the unofficial Assistant to the President, took “copious notes” during the meetings; Byrnes condemned the President, declaring that Roosevelt “had made little preparation...I am sure that the failure to study them [notes] while en route was due to the President’s illness.” William Rigdon, Roosevelt’s deputy naval aide, noted that the lower jaw of the President “often hung down-” a sign of renal failure.⁶⁵ The symptom was noticed by those around Roosevelt; however, it did not concern them. Rigdon divulged after the death of Roosevelt that it was “incredible” that those who accompanied the President on a daily basis “did not see that he was declining.”

Anna Roosevelt accompanied her father to Yalta. The summit began on February 4, and in the days that followed she wrote to her husband John:

Just between you and me, we are having to watch O[ld] M[an] very carefully from the physical standpoints. He gets all wound up, seems to thoroughly enjoy it all, but wants too many people around, and then won’t go to bed early enough. The result is that he doesn’t sleep well. Ross and Bruenn are both worried because of the old ‘ticker’ trouble- which, of course, no one knows about but those two and me...I found out through Bruenn (who won’t let me tell Ross that I know) that this ‘ticker’ situation is far more serious than I ever knew...It’s truly worrisome- and there’s not a helluva lot anyone can do about it. Better tear off and destroy this paragraph.⁶⁶

What the worried Roosevelt did not know was that she and the doctors were not the only ones that knew of Roosevelt’s heart issues. Charles McMoran Wilson, Churchill’s personal physician, wrote in his diary that he had received a letter from a “close friend,” Dr. Roger I. Lee of Boston. Lee was a prominent physician and founder of the Harvard School of Public Health. The confidential note from Lee stated that Roosevelt had heart failure eight months prior to the Yalta Conference and Roosevelt had an “enlargement of his liver and was puffy.” Lee obtained his information through Frank Lahey and James Paulinn, his two predecessors as president of the

⁶⁵ Lomazow and Fettmann, 164.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

American Medical Association. Lahey and Paulinn were Bruenn's consultants that McIntire beckoned to confirm his diagnosis. In Moran's opinion, Roosevelt appeared to be a "sick man" and had "all of the symptoms of hardening of the arteries of the brain in an advanced stage;" he gave Roosevelt only a few months to live. At Yalta, Roosevelt could not cover-up his failing health; Moran stated, "Everyone was shocked by his appearance and gabbled about it afterwards."⁶⁷

To those who met with Roosevelt, his physical deterioration was not the only thing that caught their attention. Moran stated Roosevelt "looked old and thin and drawn...he sat looking straight ahead with his mouth open, as if he were not taking things in."⁶⁸ Churchill was also concerned by Roosevelt's indifference; he felt that his counterpart seemed to "no longer take an intelligent interest in the war." "At Yalta," according to Churchill, Roosevelt's "captivating smile, his gay and charming manner, had not deserted him, but his face had a transparency, an air of purification, and often there was a faraway look in his eyes."⁶⁹ Cadogan, in reference to Roosevelt, noted: "Whenever he was called on to preside over any meeting, he failed to make any attempt to grip it or guide it, and sat generally speechless, or, if he made any intervention, it was generally completely irrelevant."⁷⁰

On February 8, after a debate over Poland, at which Roosevelt and Churchill called for free elections and Stalin insisted on having more control, Roosevelt suffered from a *pulsus alternans* attack- an altering of strong and weak rhythms indicative of heart failure. Roosevelt's activity was cut back; according to Bruenn the attack was "a very bad sign...It indicated he didn't have much reserve." At the end of the meetings, Stalin promised free elections, although

⁶⁷ Ibid. 166

⁶⁸ Ibid. 167

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

he had no intention of following through on the accord made with Churchill and Roosevelt. An agreement about the Soviet Union entering war against Japan was made; however, it was contingent on the recognition of Manchurian independence from China. The arrangements made ensured that Stalin would have control over Eastern Europe- making the Cold War inevitable. Roosevelt's poor health caused him to lack the mental focus and stamina to be a forceful negotiator; this enabled Stalin to mislead him. Following the summit, Roosevelt stated that it was the best he could do and that the United States "can't do business with Stalin."⁷¹ In the end, Yalta was an unsuccessful and dangerous journey for Roosevelt.

Dying Before Our Eyes

Following the Yalta Conference, Jonathan Daniels, Roosevelt's staff assistant looked through photographs taken at the summit and determined which ones would be distributed to the news agencies. "Some of them," Daniels recalled, "were appalling. I must admit that as part of the protective mechanism, I picked only those pictures which seemed to me to be the best ones of Franklin Roosevelt."⁷² While it is unknown if Roosevelt directed Daniels to remove all of the worrisome photographs, it is evident that he selected his staff in an astute manner- all of them knew when to take the initiative.

A week after Roosevelt arrived, he met with Truman; his appearance, according to the vice-president was shocking. "His eyes were sunken," wrote Truman, "His magnificent smile was missing from his careworn face. He seemed a spent man. I had a hollow feeling within me, for I saw that the journey to Yalta must have been a terrible ordeal." During their meeting, Truman suggested to Roosevelt that he spare himself any "unnecessary pain" and to "conserve his strength" by addressing Congress seated. The speech was arranged to take place on March 1, 1945, a day Truman said he "shall never forget."⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ferrell, 108.

During his twelve year presidency, Roosevelt engrossed his listeners with his messages to Congress, political rallies or Fireside Chats. On the first of March 1945, when the president addressed Congress and the nation concerning the summit with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at Yalta, something went radically wrong. Instead of standing in front of a podium, Roosevelt was sitting down, an act that never occurred before while he delivered a major speech before Congress. Prior to his address, the president did not walk with his steel braces; instead, he was wheeled into the chamber.⁷⁴ Earlier in his presidency, Roosevelt was not to be seen in his wheelchair, a part of his act of deception, but in his last hundred days it was apparent that the chief executive looked older than his years. For more than two decades, the president had kept his paralysis as much a secret as possible. However, in his opening statement, Roosevelt referred to the paralysis that had immobilized him since the age of thirty-nine. To his thunderstruck audience, the president stated:

I hope that you will pardon me for this unusual posture of sitting down during the presentation of what I want to say, but I know that you will realize that it makes it a lot easier for me not to have to carry about ten pounds of steel around on the bottom of my legs; and also because of the fact that I have just completed a fourteen-thousand-mile trip.⁷⁵

For twenty-four years Roosevelt had been determined and successful in keeping the citizens of the United States and the world from having complete insight into his paralytic illness and his need for braces to walk or stand.

The address on Yalta was the president's first appearance in front of the United States Congress since his State of the Union Address on January 11, 1944. In the intervening fourteen months, Roosevelt had grown physically and emotionally lethargic and languid. During this

⁷³ Truman, 2.

⁷⁴ "President Put Many Interpolations in Text; Started With Apology for Remaining Seated." NY Times, March 2, 1945. 12.

⁷⁵ <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3338>

time, the president was no longer the commanding figure that led the country out of the Great Depression. In that last year of his third term, the president's health diminished further and by the 1944 election against Dewey, Roosevelt had lost forty pounds.⁷⁶

The cadaverous Roosevelt was reelected for a fourth term; however, his entourage deemed that the Roosevelt was dying before their eyes.⁷⁷ On August 18, 1944, after having lunch with FDR, Vice President Truman stated, "The President seemed feeble, and when he tried to pour cream into his tea, more went into his saucer than into the cup. He is just going to pieces"⁷⁸ With time, the president faced another predicament; he had lost the capacity to see clearly out of his left eye. It became evident to the members of Congress and the president's staff that the president had become enervated. Aware that he had a problem, Roosevelt compensated for his loss of sight in his left eye by using his pen to mark his position and maintain his place on the page. The president was suffering from unilateral hemianopia; the causes of the president's loss of vision was malignant hypertension and a metastatic brain tumor. The lesion over the president's left eye was disclosed to be melanoma; the skin cancer metastasized to the president's brain causing the tumor. The high blood pressure also reduced the president's ability to see the prepared message in the left side of his visual field because it swelled his optic nerve.

Media outlets across the country headlined the front pages of their newspapers with scrutinies of the president's weak performance. The March 2, 1945 edition of *The New York Times* captioned their article "President Put Many Interpolations in Text; Started With Apology for Remaining Seated."⁷⁹ The paper noted that the Chief Executive "bounced in and out of his prepared text." An example of the president's spur of the moment utterances occurred when he

⁷⁶ See Appendix D.

⁷⁷ Lomazow and Fettmann, 127.

⁷⁸ Truman, 2.

⁷⁹ "President Put Many Interpolations in Text; Started With Apology for Remaining Seated." *NY Times*, March 2, 1945. 12

offered superfluous remarks following his discussion of Yugoslavia and France. In the speech, Roosevelt added: “There are a great many prima donnas in the world who want to be heard. We may have a little delay if we listen to all the prima donnas.”⁸⁰ In an attempt to expunge the ad-lib speech from becoming part of the Congressional record and history, the White House ordered stenographers to avoid transcribing the speech right away; their instructions were to use Roosevelt’s prepared wording. While the oration by the president was fresh in the minds of the public, the White House was triumphant to a degree in amending history. If the stenotype reporter recorded Roosevelt’s speech word for word, the public, with no trouble, could identify the president and his address as disjointed, disorganized and inarticulate.⁸¹ In the weeks that followed, the president’s secretary, William D. Hassett, met with Bruenn and discussed the President’s health:

“He is slipping away from us,” said Hassett, “and no earthly power can keep him here...I know you do not want to make the admission, and I have talked this way with no one else save one. To all the staff, to the family, and with the Boss himself I have maintained the bluff; but I am convinced that there is no help for him.”⁸²

Bruenn’s response to Hassett’s statement was simply “Why do you think so?”⁸³

The Death of President Roosevelt

At 9:20 am on April 12, Bruenn saw Roosevelt; he complained of “a slight headache and some stiffness of the neck.” According to Bruenn, Roosevelt had “a very good morning” and his visitors commented on how well he looked compared to the days prior.⁸⁴ Roosevelt spent the morning going over State Papers when he suddenly complained of a horrendous headache and passed out. From 1:30 to 2:30, Bruenn observed Roosevelt; he described him as being “pale, cold and sweating profusely. He was totally unconscious...pupils of the eyes were at first equal,

⁸⁰ Truman, 2.

⁸¹ Lomazow and Fettmann, 171.

⁸² Ibid. 174-175.

⁸³ Ibid. 175.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 176.

but in a few minutes the right pupil became dilated.”⁸⁵ The breathing of the comatose Roosevelt became harsh and loud (stertorous respiration.) It was apparent to Bruenn that Roosevelt had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and so he proceeded to call McIntire. At 2:45, Roosevelt’s color improved and his blood pressure dropped sharply. A half-hour later, Roosevelt’s blood pressure decreased further; however he was now cyanotic.⁸⁶ The fading Roosevelt suddenly stopped breathing at 3:31; he had no audible heart sounds. Bruenn began artificial respiration and administered adrenalin into the heart muscle, but attempts to revive Roosevelt were unsuccessful. At 3:35 Bruenn pronounced Roosevelt dead; Harry S. Truman was now President of the United States.⁸⁷ While the death of Roosevelt was shocking to everyone unaware of his condition, Americans should have been able to see that their president looked ghastly and thin.⁸⁸

Following the death, Bruenn called James Paullin, who along with Lahey had examined Roosevelt the previous year. Paullin, Bruenn and McIntire agreed that no autopsy would be performed; when they were asked about their reasoning for not having an examination, they all had differing arguments. Paullin stated: “There were no facilities whatever for performing an autopsy.” Bruenn maintained that Eleanor Roosevelt opposed the notion, though there is no documentation of her having felt this way. McIntire argued that “there was no useful purpose to be served by it.” In the hours following the death of Roosevelt, Bruenn gave a medical briefing to reporters, but maintaining the deception, he did not hint that the deceased president had been ill prior to his passing. “It was just like a bolt of lightning or getting hit by a train,” stated

⁸⁵ Bishop, 643.

⁸⁶ Cyanotic is a medical term used to describe the bluish discoloration of the skin and mucous membranes resulting from inadequate oxygenation of the blood.

⁸⁷ Krock, Arthur. “End Comes Suddenly At Warm Springs” *NY Times*, April 13, 1945.

⁸⁸ See Appendix E for the last photograph taken of Roosevelt, April 11, 1945, Warm Springs, Georgia.

Bruenn, “One minute he was alive and laughing. The next minute- wham!” The deliberately unclear doctor later said: “This was not the sort of thing you could forecast. Doctors cannot just say ‘this man is going to have a cerebral.’ It does not happen that way. He had been feeling fine. He was awfully tired when we first came down here. You saw him the other day- was not he in fine spirits?” Years later, however, Bruenn refuted his assertions. In letters written after Roosevelt’s death, Bruenn divulged that the president had been suffering from hypertension and that his death was “a cataclysmic event” that could have happened at any time.⁸⁹

Once Roosevelt died, the White House press corps began to lift the censorship levied on them. The *Washington Post* noted that “The President had been in ill health. But rumors about this condition had so often been proven false that most of us had put aside the fear that he might not live to see the peace established.”⁹⁰ An unsigned edition of the *New York Times* stated:

The condition of the health of President Roosevelt raised doubts in the minds of those in the capital who have had regular contact with him over the last two years, largely because official statements regarding it appeared to be in conflict with visible evidence of his physical condition.⁹¹

The article later asserted that Roosevelt “appear[ed] to decline more in the last year than might be attributed to his advancing age.”⁹² Walter Lippman, one of the nation’s most recognized political columnists, wrote that “Truman was nominated at Chicago last July by a convention which was fully aware that it was almost certainly choosing a President of the United States. There was no secret about this during the campaign.” Lippman’s statement, while true, was criticized by Garet Garrett, chief editorial writer of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Garrett wrote: “Actually, the state of Mr. Roosevelt’s health was a secret from millions of Americans who voted for the President on the theory that he could reasonably be expected to live out his

⁸⁹ Bruenn, 8.

⁹⁰ “Looking Ahead,” *Washington Press*, April 14, 1945.

⁹¹ “Roosevelt Health Long Under Doubt,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1945.

⁹² *Ibid.*

term of office.”⁹³ When the press called for the release of Roosevelt’s medical records, McIntire destroyed the files; he feared that Eleanor would agree to the request and reveal the secrets he had maintained. However, Walter Trohan of the *Chicago Tribune* published what the doctors did not want the American people to know: “I have learned that Mr. Roosevelt died of cancer...malignant cancer somewhere in the uro-genital system.” In the article, Trohan wrote that an “unnamed” urologist close to Roosevelt “confirmed the prognosis.” When Roosevelt learned that he had “no more than six months to live,” “he lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, blew out smoke and smiled.”⁹⁴

An Unprepared Vice-President

As Truman became president, he began to learn that Roosevelt did not prepare his succession. During Roosevelt’s last year, he made no attempt to prepare his successor. After the 1944 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Truman was not briefed on military, diplomatic, or administrative affairs. In addition to those failures, the president neglected to inform his vice-president and the State Department about his post war nuclear sharing agreement with Churchill. Information concerning the meeting at Yalta was also not divulged. As the president’s physical condition worsened, his decision making abilities deteriorated. In his final year in office, an argument can be made that Roosevelt was in no condition to govern the United States. Furthermore, his failure to keep Truman enlightened put our country in grave danger.

While he served as vice-president, Truman wrote about his concern that Roosevelt was dying: “The very thought that something was happening to him left me troubled and worried...Knowing something of the great responsibility he was forced to carry, I did not want to think about the possibility of his death as President.”⁹⁵ The ailing president did not prepare

⁹³ *Saturday Evening Post*, May 8, 1945.

⁹⁴ *News Story*, June-August 1945; Lomazow and Fettmann, 194.

Truman to take over foreign policies concerning the atomic bomb and Japan as well as the continued relationship with the Soviet Union. Truman was a politician and a legislator, but he had no familiarity with foreign policy or dealing with the likes of Stalin and Churchill. In 1942, the Manhattan Project began. The purpose of this project was to develop the first atomic bombs, and to use these to end the war with Japan. It was only after Truman became president did he find out about the multibillion dollar program; the side effects of the dropping of this bomb were also a mystery to him.

Ten years after the death of her husband, Eleanor Roosevelt was interviewed by Clayton Knowles of the *New York Times*; up until this time, Roosevelt did not reveal any details of the president's health. However, Eleanor continued with the cover-up; she stated that Bruenn and McIntire told Roosevelt that he "Could easily go on with the activities of the presidency." The former first lady claimed that at the time of the 1944 election, President Roosevelt "never gave his health much thought."⁹⁶ Roosevelt's statements were contradictory to Suckley's diary, which confirms that the health of President Roosevelt was a concern.

The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Amendment: Problem Solved?

The "shocking" death of Roosevelt, his deception and succession by Truman brought about concern in Congress; they felt that a closer examination of the process of filling an unexpected vacancy in the White House was needed. While Congress could not agree on a prompt solution, they agreed that no other president should be able to successfully conceal a "deadly secret" from Americans. It was not until 1967 that the Twenty-Fifth Amendment was passed and ratified; this provided for the first time what would happen if the current president was no longer able to lead. The Amendment states: "In case of the removal of the President from office or of his death or resignation, the Vice President shall become President." In addition, the president has the ability to deem himself "unable to discharge the powers and duties

⁹⁵ Truman, 3.

⁹⁶ *New York Times*, August 9, 1956; Lomazow and Fettmann, 200.

of his office, transferring powers and duties to the Vice President.⁹⁷ With a majority, the president can be removed from office, if it is felt that he is no longer able to lead the country; there is a problem with this Amendment, despite their considerable concerns for his health, no one in Roosevelt's cabinet would have initiated this procedure. The major flaw with this improvement is that it does not require the president to have a medical evaluation, implying that any decision to forcibly remove him or her from their position is primarily political- not medical. It is obvious that Congress cannot rely on a White House physician to verify a disability.

The Final Act of Deception

Following the death of Eleanor Roosevelt, everyone who played a pivotal role in the presidential cover-up was gone- except Howard Bruenn. After twenty years of silence, 1963 seemed like the right time for Bruenn to “publish the record;” however, he “wished to wait until enough time had passed.”⁹⁸ Bruenn published his article on April 12, 1970- the twenty-fifth anniversary of Roosevelt's death. In the paper, Bruenn maintained that Roosevelt's illnesses did not prevent him from performing his duties. As Bruenn revealed that Roosevelt had metastatic melanoma and hypertension, he maintained that the president was still able to “exercise his judgment...in guiding the war effort.”⁹⁹ While it was determined that Bruenn published a “landmark” paper, it was simply the final act in the cover-up.

A Man Older Than His Years examines Franklin Delano Roosevelt's actions as he determined the course of his medical battle. Realizing that his political career was in jeopardy, Roosevelt took extraordinary measures all the way to the White House to ensure that he did not prematurely lose his place in office. With his doctor's assistance, the thirty-second president was determined to convince our nation and countries abroad that he was healthy. During Roosevelt's third and fourth terms as President, he and his doctors assured the public that

⁹⁷ <http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am25>

⁹⁸ Lomazow and Fettmann, 206.

⁹⁹ Bruenn, 12; *New York Times*, April 12, 1970.

the he was in good health. Neither he nor his doctor's ever disclosed serious ailments the leader of our country had, putting the United States in grave danger during a tumultuous time period. The president's declining health put a nation imperiled by the war abroad in further danger. Roosevelt's condition was not just a hindrance physically; it also augmented his competence as a leader. The decision making and mental functionality of Roosevelt was not what it once was; at the Crimea Conference he was the sick old man of Yalta. For decades subsequent to April 12, 1945, Roosevelt's ambition to privatize his wellbeing endangered our county's own welfare. President Roosevelt had a complex relationship with the infectious disease that crippled him—polio. During Roosevelt's stretch as President of the United States, his largest secret was never directly revealed. Among the thousands of people who deliberated with him and the millions saw him, none of them looked upon him as a paraplegic. Roosevelt took extreme measures to insure that his handicap was privatized; as the President sat before Congress, reporters and photographers, only his torso was shown above his desk. Roosevelt's boxed off podiums gave the impression that the president was no different physically than the chiefs before him; if this secret were not hidden, in an instant the public's conception of Roosevelt would change. In 1933, if the American voters knew what we know now about Roosevelt, the probability of the man from Hyde Park, New York becoming President of the United States would be slim.

Appendix



A.

B.



March 1936

An image of Franklin D. Roosevelt taken three years after his first inauguration as president shows a dark spot over his left eyebrow. Some doctors speculate that it may have been a melanoma.



September 1939

The spot is also visible in an image of Roosevelt making a radio address in 1939. It vanishes after 1940, though whether it was removed for a biopsy or for cosmetic reasons is unknown.



June 1944

A portrait of Roosevelt from June 1944 shows no spot. Less than a year later, Roosevelt died from a stroke, shortly after being sworn in to his fourth term as president.

THE NEW YORK TIMES PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEYMANN/CLIPPER

C.



D.





E.

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