

THE PRESIDENT AND POLIO

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Aug. 10, 1921 — 105 years ago — 39-year-old New York lawyer and politician Franklin Delano Roosevelt felt the first symptoms of what would later be diagnosed as infantile paralysis — otherwise known as polio.

He’d take a few years off to learn to cope with his disease, but he’d successfully run for office again in 1929, becoming governor of New York and then, three years after that, president of the United States.

ROOSEVELT IS STRICKEN WITH POLIOMYELITIS

In August 1921, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt was summering with his family on Campobello Island, New Brunswick, Canada. After a particularly active day, he felt poorly and went to bed early.

The next morning, Aug. 10, he awakened to find he had lost strength in his left leg and could barely stand. His temperature soared to 102 degrees. He was in terrible pain. A doctor was summoned, who diagnosed FDR with a bad summer cold.

But by the 12th, both of Roosevelt’s legs were paralyzed but so painful that even the weight of his clothes caused him distress. On the 13th, he found he was immobile from the chest down. His bowels and bladder stopped working.

On the 25th, a team of doctors diagnosed him as having poliomyelitis. Although travel caused him great pain, Roosevelt was brought back home to New York and admitted into a hospital on Sept. 15.

Once he was under proper care, Roosevelt bounced back as only a man of his famously cheerful disposition could. He took time off from his legal and political career while he found a way to rebalance his life.

Roosevelt resumed his favorite hobby of stamp collecting. He was fitted with steel braces that allowed him to stand — with help from an aide. He began traveling to Warm Springs, Georgia, where he found he could swim and partially stand in the hot springs there.



FDR PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

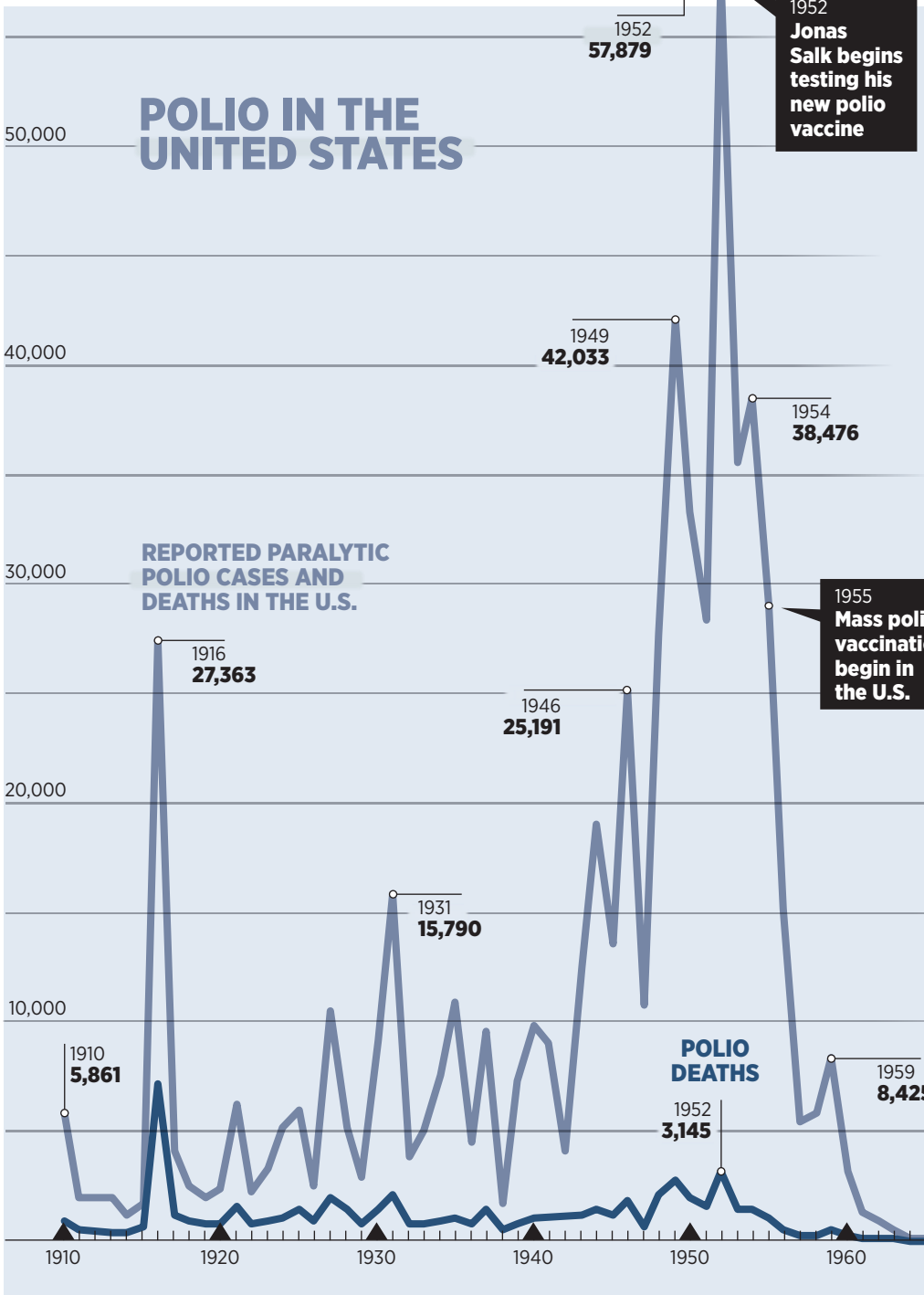
Disliking the look of the clunky wheelchairs in use at the time, Roosevelt designed one for his own use, using a household chair and bicycle wheels. Roosevelt also had a car modified so he could operate the throttle and brakes with hand controls. This allowed him to drive again.

Over the rest of the 1920s and with the help of his wife, Eleanor, and his circle of aides, Roosevelt learned how to become mobile enough to work again.

In 1928, Roosevelt was elected governor of New York. Four years later, he ran for president and won, defeating Republican Herbert Hoover in an astounding landslide, 472 electoral votes to 59. This made Roosevelt the first physically disabled man to be elected president.

The White House, at the time, was not wheelchair-friendly. Ramps and an elevator were added. FDR’s staff made sure that any official photographs were taken from angles that didn’t show his disability. Even the media complied, with a “gentleman’s agreement” to not show the president in a wheelchair.

Roosevelt served two terms as president, working to pull the country out of the Great Depression with a series of economic programs he called “The New Deal” and addressing the nation directly via his radio “fireside chats.” With the world clearly headed toward war once again, FDR ran for and won an unprecedented third term as president in 1940. He died of a brain hemorrhage on April 12, 1945, not long after the start of his fourth term in office.



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

The number of cases of polio in the U.S. shrank dramatically over the past 70 years, thanks in large part to a vaccine that first went into widespread use in the U.S. on April 12, 1955. **Dr. Jonas Salk** refused to patent the vaccine he had developed. “There is no patent,” Salk said. “Could you patent the sun?”



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In 1961, **Dr. Albert Sabin** perfected a live polio vaccine that could be taken orally — as opposed to by injection, like Salk’s. This made it easier and faster — not to mention cheaper — to give immunizations.

By 1979, the United States had been declared free of polio. Work continues to eradicate the disease from the rest of the planet. In 2016, 46 cases of polio were found worldwide. By 2019, that was down to just 15. In 2020, the number had risen again to 69 but was back down to 39 in 2025.

WAS FDR MISDIAGNOSED?

There were some oddities with FDR’s polio: His paralysis moved up his body — at least in the beginning. He felt intense pain in his paralyzed legs. And polio nearly always infected children — rarely men well into adulthood.

In 2003, an immunological pediatrician at the University of Texas wrote in the Journal of Medical Biography that FDR’s symptoms seem less like polio and more like a rare autoimmune disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome.

Guillain-Barré syndrome, or GBS, was first detected in France in 1916. It affects only one or two people out of every 100,000 every year. To properly diagnose GBS requires a sample of spinal cord fluid.

The good news: Roosevelt’s possible misdiagnosis resulted in an effort to develop a polio vaccine and in the creation of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis — better known as the March of Dimes.