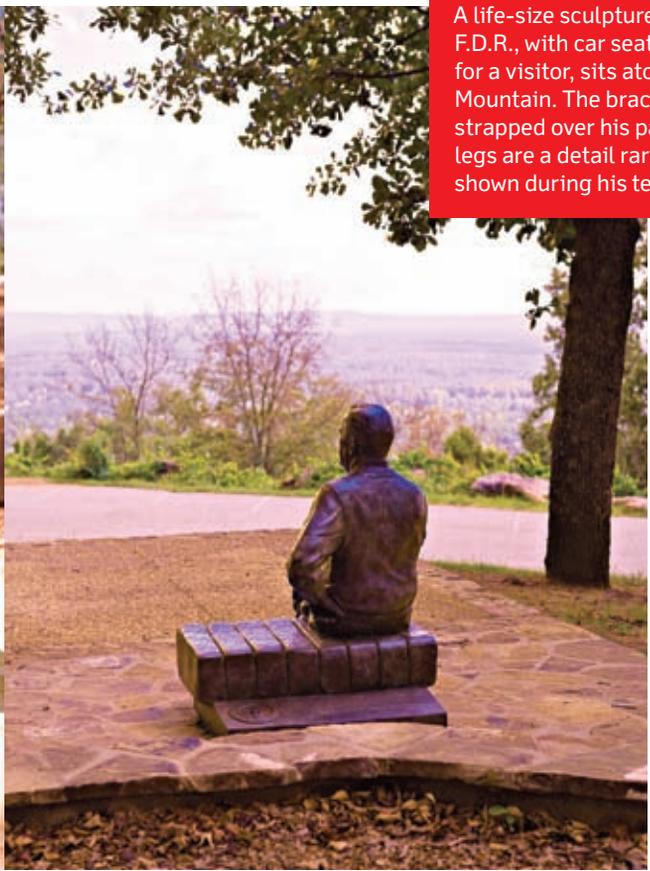


A life-size sculpture of F.D.R., with car seat space for a visitor, sits atop Pine Mountain. The braces strapped over his pants legs are a detail rarely shown during his tenure.



# My Chat With F.D.R.

Sitting with a President, even one cast in bronze, holds a special poignance. By **Joe Rada**

All the Presidents I've encountered seem larger-than-life. That giant marble Lincoln on the National Mall. Washington, Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Lincoln (again), big as a mountain, gazing from Mount Rushmore. The only Confederate President, Davis, carved astride a colossal horse on Stone Mountain.

Even the three real live Presidents I've seen up close—Carter, Reagan, and Clinton—always seemed towering to me. Perhaps it was their lofty status or simply that I looked up at them from a press-corps gallery.

The closest I've ever felt to a President, though, involves a refreshingly humble, actual-size bronze statue of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It sits atop Dowdell's Knob in a state park named for him, gazing into west-central Georgia's Pine Mountain Valley. Better still, there's room on his bench for me.

**A Favorite Place** F.D.R. frequented nearby Warm Springs—on 41 trips between 1924 and 1945—and favored this spot on Pine Mountain for picnics. He had a bench-style car seat placed where he could take in a grand view. There he would either be alone or speak one-on-one with people who sought him out even during these health-related getaways. (A polio sufferer, he soaked in local mineral springs for therapy.)

Designed by Martin Dawe of CherryLion Studios in Atlanta and unveiled last year, the sculpture depicts F.D.R. wearing leg braces over slacks. In his day the press dutifully avoided showing such frailty in the leader of the Free World. Seeing him this way now makes him seem more real, more accessible.

**May I Join You, Sir?** I approached the President late one day when nobody else was on Dowdell's Knob, and I felt compelled

to ask his permission before sitting. If I told you he answered, I'd be sitting in a different kind of therapeutic institution right now.

We sat together in silence, gazing in the same direction as the setting sun doused the broad landscape in golden hues. This titan of history, presented on a human scale, reminds me of my grandfather, a tall, dapper gentleman wearing a sweater-vest over a dress shirt and necktie even for a casual picnic. As when speaking with my late grandpa, I found myself talking in soliloquy, more working out my own thoughts than expecting a response.

If something seemed slightly askew, it was that this iconic figure, known for his frank fireside chat radio broadcasts, serves now as such a good listener. As I got up to leave, I thanked him for his time, adding, "Mr. President, I'm glad we had this talk." ●

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