

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Disability Issues and the Presidential Campaign

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On July 26th 1990 I landed in Washington, D.C. and said to a taxi driver “the White House please.” I pulled up at the front gate, feeling like a big shot, knowing my name would be on a list of invited guests. Directed to the South Lawn, I saw hundreds of people with disabilities sitting on the White House lawn and never felt more insignificant.

In moments I was reduced from big shot to insignificant lawyer who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Obviously, generations had lived and died yearning for something like the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and decades of advocacy by people with disabilities had led to this occasion.

When Pres. Ronald Reagan was elected, he appointed Vice Pres. George H. W. Bush to chair the President’s Task Force on Regulatory Reform. Its first press release identified the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the transportation regulations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act as its targets. It was successful at undermining the transportation regulations, but the parents of disabled children organized and maintained IDEA.

At the same time the Reagan administration was trying to keep buses and trains inaccessible, it charged the National Council on Disability by drafting a report titled “Toward Independence” which would inform the President of what people with disabilities needed to live productively in the American mainstream and be free from discrimination. The Council issued its report and Reagan told them to rewrite it in statute form.

Of course, that was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and it required, among other things, that buses and trains be accessible. Vice Pres. Bush endorsed the Americans with Disabilities Act at the same time the Reagan administration, with Vice President Bush’s support, was opposing many of its provisions.



The ADA was originally introduced in 1988. The Bill died but Vice Pres. Bush was running for President and endorsed the ADA as a candidate. After the election the community held him to his promise. The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) demonstrated outside the White House.

Pres. Bush came through and made possible a bi-partisan effort to pass the ADA. Neither Republican Sens. Dole nor Hatch, both credited with being ADA supporters, endorsed the ADA until Pres. Bush gave them the go ahead.

On July 26th, on the stage with Pres. Bush were EEOC Chair Evan Kemp, Republican disability advocate Justin Dart, Sandy Perrino, chairperson of the National Council on Disability and Rev. Harold Wilke, a Washington D.C. minister without arms. After the President’s famous “shameful wall of exclusion” speech he sat down to sign the ADA into law.

We watched as the President held up a pen that had signed the ADA to each of the dignitaries on the stage. The President faced the crowd and each dignitary stepped forward to receive their pen. We wondered what would happen as Pres. Bush held-up Rev. Wilke’s souvenir pen.

Wilke slipped out of his shoe, grabbed the pen from the President’s hand with his foot and put it in his breast pocket, something the crowd thought would be impossible until we saw it. It is, for me, the metaphor that is ADA - just because you don’t think it can be done doesn’t mean it cannot.

The community owes much to George H. W. Bush for his support of the ADA. Usually, the law struggles to keep pace with societal development but, in the case of the ADA, largely due to the support of George H. W. Bush, this civil rights law created aspirational goals and challenged all Americans to meet them.