
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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Philadelphia - Drexel Institute Commencement

May 1, 1918

Commencement Address at Drexel Institute of Technology
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Back in the dark ages - about a year and a half ago, I had an interesting talk with a man prominent in national public life on the subject of raising a large army in case the United States should enter the great war. He took the definite position not only that we could create a large force by the volunteer method, but that to do otherwise, to resort to any form of compulsory service would be to destroy the principles of individual freedom on which the whole form of our government rested. Within six months of that time, the National Legislature had enacted the draft law.

It has been a curious phenomenon of our history that political leaders, political parties even, have in scores of cases set up doctrines based on a wholly unfounded theory of human rights under the name of liberty. They have with narrow selfishness set the license of the individual above the good of the whole aggregation of individuals which we call the nation. They have assumed that the individual has a complete right to do with his life as he sees fit, regardless of the effect of his actions on his neighbors. Carried out to its logical end, liberty thus defined would permit a man to keep a filthy pig sty in the middle of a city; or to disturb the sleep of his neighbors. The old common law of nuisance has prevented this from early Anglo-Saxon days, and was left in full force and effect when the United States became independent. Thus it has always been recognized that the community can protect itself against positive actions of an individual which would work harm or hardship on others. No one has disputed this.

But the situation has been less clear in our history in regard to the negative side of individual action. People have said "A man's

home is sacred; it is not our concern what he does with his own life so long as he does not disturb others". And under guise of this doctrine the national slacker has thriven apace. He has been the man who has refused to help put out the fire in his neighbor's house; he is the man who has failed to vote on election day; he is the man who has criticized others without offering to help build something better; he is the man who has shut himself in among his books or who has concerned himself only in his own narrow business; he is the man who has opposed universal military service on the ground that it takes away the "liberty of the individual"; he is the man who has to be asked three times before he subscribes to the Liberty Loan or the Red Cross; he is the man who hopes that Germany and Prussianism will fail and who fails himself to help us win the war.

It is interesting to know that the principle of universal military service, the obligation of all citizens to bear arms for the common defense, has been recognized in every war of our history. Draft troops fought for us in the Revolution. The difference between the past and the present lies in the fact that the compulsory system was adopted only after the volunteer system had failed in whole or in part, whereas, in the present war, the new army was created from the very start under the draft law.

But the vital point of it is that whereas before this time conscription was opposed and resorted to in an extremity, today practically every thinking citizen has come to view it as the fairest method of national defense, as the one which discriminates the least and is without question the safest and most effective. And more than that, it

is now recognized as a fundamental part of our democratic-republican form of government.

Universal military service has come to stay - not only in war but after the war is over and we have learned our lesson, learned that military training is necessary in peace time if we are properly to protect our nation when the crisis comes. And we shall not soon forget that in this first year of the war that has passed we have had the actual conflict three thousand miles away and have been protected by the troops of France and Britain while we could prepare in safety. That will not always happen if future wars come.

But if it be true that we have accepted the idea of universal service in its application to war, may it not be true also that we stand on the threshold of another great discovery? Why do we limit that obligation of service to war and wartime needs? Why are you and I and our neighbor in duty bound to help our nation only in time of war? Why not in time of peace also?

War is after all but a passing crisis in the life of a nation. War is a culmination of evils, a sudden attack on the very existence of the body politic. But the national life can never be called free from danger even in the most untroubled periods of peace. The fight is constant, and will be never ending so long as the nation endures.

People have talked much of internationalism, of a brotherhood of men, of the day when nation will no longer rise against nation. But until that day is here, we must recognize existing conditions; we must not forget that we are a nation, an organized body of people under one government by common consent, and that we owe that government the same duty of protection in time of peace as in time of war.

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It is a curious trait of most Americans that they have looked on the government as a thing apart from their daily lives. They have tolerated it, or criticized it or ignored it as something that was no concern of theirs. And it is interesting to note that for generations the actual governing of the nation has been more or less left in the hands of a little group of men who have made this work almost a profession. It matters very little whether you live in Boston or in New York or in Philadelphia or in New Orleans, you will find that your neighbor or friend who takes an active interest in the affairs of your local or your state or your national government is an exception. Perhaps this is due to money grubbing, perhaps to that same old theory of "individual liberty", but it is true nevertheless that we have not yet recognized the obligation of universal service in its relation to the every day affairs of the city and state and nation.

We who are of today, you who are of tomorrow, have before us an opportunity that is great. It is a pity to call it the duty of service. That word duty so often implies a disagreeable task which must be done, such for instance as the duty of being nice to ones mother in law.

Should we not rather, speak of the privilege of service?