Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945
Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension

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1919 June 25

Worcester, MA
Address by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Asst. Secretary of the Navy, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute Commencement, June 25, 1919.

The National Emergency of Peace Times.

In the early days of January 1917 - that almost prehistoric time when there was still a German Ambassador in Washington - some of us even then were trying to lay the seeds of true national preparedness by advocating some form of universal training in time of peace and the principle of the draft in time of war. Most of us were perfectly peaceful civilians, and yet we soon found ourselves classified as militaristic jingoists. Indeed prominent men in both parties said openly that to resort to the draft in case of war would destroy the very foundation of our Republic. It is worthy of note that three months later these same men were advocating or voting for the draft law, the most truly American piece of legislation ever enacted. When the crisis of war came opposition to the principle of universal service was scarcely heard in the face of its obvious fairness and efficacy.

And in a little over a year the United States not only had an Army and Navy of 5,000,000 men but had classified about 15,000,000 additional, either for military service or for the economic side of the national task.

In other words there was general and immediate recognition of the duty or obligation or privilege - and I like the last word best - of every individual citizen to take his part in the emergency of war in which his country found itself. Two years ago seems very far off already, and our tendency will be to forget quickly what our own feelings were in 1917 and 1918. Is it not true, though, that every one of us served in some way, and that the further away our service was from the actual zone of fighting the more we
chafed. I know many a splendid soul who was compelled to stay at home for one valid reason or another and yet is just as much a hero as if he had gone overseas. There is no question about the United States having been in this war with its heart and soul, that we were unanimous as far as 100,000,000 people ever can be or ever will be. That after all is but another word for national service in time of war.

It must not be forgotten though that this national service was of ourselves, of our bodies, of our lives - that the draft was a draft of men, not of property. To be sure, the government commandeered a few things here and there, and told us how much sugar we could eat or how little coal it could deliver to us, but broadly speaking the wealth of the country was not drafted, it was borrowed from voluntary lenders. I suppose it would give some of my conservative hearers a distinct shock if I were to tell them how seriously the conscription of wealth was discussed in Washington during last year among both Republicans and Democrats and how imminent such a measure was - yet such is the fact, and we must admit that if the war had continued for another year there would have been much justice on the side of those who demanded that the nation in its crisis should draft property as well as the bodies of the owners of that property.

But what, after all, is the good of talking about a war which is over; why not forget it all, and go back to business and pay off the national debt as fast as possible, and demand a reduction of the income tax, and criticize the government, and raise some very beautiful marble monuments to the heroes of this war, and return to that good old "normal
life" of the good old days when we could do almost anything we chose; that old thought of "I want what I want when I want it!"

Why not? I suppose the answer is that the world moves forward, not back, that those old days will never come again, that we have learned a new lesson, one that has gone, I hope, very deeply into the souls of this generation at least, the lesson of national service.

It has taken the emergency of a thing called war to bring it about, but what then is war? Is it not merely a culmination in physical combat of forces of antagonism which are ever present - even in days of peace? Surely no war in history more than this great World War has represented the ever contending spirit of Right and Wrong in human kind. Even now, when we think of the war as ended, when we read of the great table of the Treaty of Peace at Versailles - even today there are more than a dozen of lesser wars being waged all over Europe, by leaders and peoples so accustomed to take up the sword that they are still using it to settle emergencies real or fancied.

In our own country we have in the past been too prone to think of a national emergency only as another name for war. In many laws the President and the Governors of States are authorized to do thus or so "in the event of national emergency," meaning an armed attack either from without or from within.

Yet, if we will well consider, the nation constantly is passing through national emergencies in the midst of piping times of peace - emergencies which mean the triumph of Right or Wrong, of Progress or Reaction. These crises have come throughout our history, they are in
fact with us in greater or less degree every day and often the smallest in the public eye is the one most fraught with good or ill for the people.

Many of us here can remember some of the more obvious of these — the emergency of Free Silver in 1896, when the country nearly embarked on what is now generally admitted to be an erroneous financial policy — the emergency of the great struggle during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt against those old forces of special privilege which had dominated the National and State governments — the emergency which found expression in the Federal Reserve Act, — the emergency which brought 4,000,000 voters to the call of the Progressive Party in 1912.

In a sense all great national problems are crises of peace time, and today we face as many as ever. Their solution will inevitably affect the future generations of Americans. Think for a moment of what you and I have to lay hold of and wrestle with and solve even today — the disposition of the railroads, of the telegraphs, in fact of all so-called public utilities; the extension of our commerce in American ships upon the seas; matters of combinations among great industries; relations of capital, labor and the national interests; the development of natural resources above and below the surface; the distribution of population so as to prevent unhealthy congestion; the control of wealth through taxation. Every one of these is very truly an emergency in the great and permanent well-being of our country as affecting itself and ourselves at home. In addition we have taken on for all time a new relationship, recognized by the fact of our entry into the war for civilization, the duty we owe to other peoples and nations and which they owe to us. Some of us are slow to grasp the
thought, yet it is clear as the sun that the United States would commit
a grievous wrong to itself and to all mankind if it were even to attempt
to go backwards towards an old Chinese wall policy of isolation. And even
though we may consider the actual fighting as ended there will be many
crises in international affairs for many years to come. In them the
United States cannot escape an important, perhaps, even a controlling
voice.

These are the larger and more self-evident problems before us. Bound
up in every one of them is another emergency, the actual conduct of the
Government itself. I think it is a fair statement to make that the man-
age of the executive work of government in Washington and in most of
the States and cities has improved in honesty and efficiency in the last
few years. I often wish that Mr. Bryce could come back and visit us in
order to write a supplemental volume called "The American Commonwealth
Thirty Years Later" - I believe he would give us a report of improvement.
The spirit in which the war work was conducted is an example. An honest
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Dead politicians turned over in their graves, and some live ones fainted
when they saw Republicans put into about 50% of the war positions by a
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Mistakes were made of course and some money may have been needlessly
spent as "hind-sight" will show, but on the whole the biggest war this
nation has ever entered is also the war that will prove the most free from scandal, the one conducted with the clearest and highest purpose.

Why, I wonder, should it be necessary to conduct a government in the way in war time and in another way in peace time? Is it necessary for us to go back to the old party narrowness and bickerings? It would seem so if we may judge from the antics of some of those who are running things in the Halls of Congress today. In other words the situation today is so pregnant of possibilities for good or bad that the conduct of our legislative and executive bodies constitutes a very real emergency in the well-being of the nation.

What then is the lesson of these two years? Clearly that national service is a success. Is there a continuing emergency? Yes, many of them, ever present, always of import to our success and our security. If that is so, why should we not demand the continuance of service to meet these emergencies? The answer is clear and definite: We do: from all those millions of citizens who have done their bit in this war, from the millions of young men and women who are taking their places in the world year by year, from them the country expects a continuation of service to the day of their death.

In a hundred ways it can be accomplished. Among those I would put first of all an active participation in the affairs of their government. It will be as good as they make it, no better. We need to get rid of the men who are too lazy to vote, too "important" to attend public meetings, too proud to associate with mere politicians, just as we got rid of the slackers last year. Force them out into the open, shame them into their duty if necessary. This country is too
inarticulate, things go wrong because men and women fear to express themselves, not because they want them wrong. A Congressman is influenced more by one spontaneous letter giving the honest personal opinion of a humble constituent than he is by a hundred telegrams inspired and paid for by some association doing propaganda work. It is just as much your duty and your privilege to take an active part in the public and political affairs of your locality and your state and your Nation as it was for you to lend a hand in the Great War.

And lastly I am very firmly convinced that the war has taught us the need of some form of universal training for the youth of the country. The results of a few months in camp to the benefit of health, of discipline, of broadening the point of view, of building character, are known now to us all. Quite aside from military needs the coming generation cannot be hurt and can be greatly helped and improved by such an experience in early life. National Training, if only for a few months in a life time, will give better citizens. I believe, too, that the great majority of our people want to see it established. It stands against anarchy and Bolshevism, against class hatred, against snobbery; it stands for discipline, good fellowship, order, and a broader Americanism.

When I rowed in an eight-oared shell in Cambridge we used to say of the slacker "he doesn't pull his own weight in the boat." For two years nearly every American has pulled his weight in the Ship of State. Let us by beginning at home with ourselves, and by watching our neighbor also, see to it that the progress of that Ship shall not slacken. So we can continue to be of service in the days of peace.
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July 11, 1919.

My dear Mr. Hollis:

Many thanks for sending me the copy of my address, which I am sending back to you in slightly corrected form.

May I tell you again how much I enjoyed every minute of my day with you. It was a great privilege, and I hope you will let me come again some time especially if you do not ask me to make a speech.

Always sincerely yours,

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Ira N. Hollis, Esq., President,  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute,  

Enclosure.
Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt,
Aas. Secretary of the Navy,
Washington, D. C.

My dear Roosevelt:

I enclose the pencil copy of your address, also a typewritten copy. If you want to change this at all and will then return it to me, we'll put it into print in our Journal. The meeting was a very fine one and I think your address was very fitting to the occasion. It contained just the kind of thing that those boys ought to hear at this time. Good luck to you.

Yours very truly,

Encl.
The National Emergency of Public Times.

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FREAK GOLF SHOT
BY BOBBY JONES

Holes Out of Shoe Left in
Wheelbarrow by Workman

NEW ORLEANS, June 25—Bobby Jones, Jr., of Atlanta, Ga., Southern golf champion, executed a shot regarded as perhaps the most peculiar shot in putting history after he led off with J. C. Lyons of New Or-
leans, in the first round of matches played in the Southern Golf Association tourna-
ment here today. Jones' ball landed in a shoe which had been left in a wheel-
barrow by a workman for-
tuning the champion to use a miblic
shoe, and made the hole in four.
Jones eliminated Lyons from the tournament, thus evi-

WORCESTER FIRM TO CUT HOURS BUT
KEEP WAGE RATE

Johnson and Dunstall Co., manufacturer of wool spinning machinery at 11 Post Street today announced that beginning July 3 the factory will be operated 50 hours a week instead of 56 as at present. The help will
receive the same pay for 56 hours as for 52. Products being made by the company are being shipped to Japan and South America.

ROOSEVELT TALKS TO ROTARY CLUB

Nearly 200 Rotarians and special guests including large delegations from the Worcester Kiwanis Club, and the Worcester Chamber of Com-
merce, crowded the Bancroft Hotel banquet room this noon to welcome President Woodrow Wilson, assistant secretary of the navy to Wo-

cer.

Kiwanians and Chamber Men Are Guests

The hour-long address of Mr. Roos-
evelt and the other special guests were given a wonderful ovation at the latter part of the address when the Brickmen, 100 men in the gathering, presented the president with a large check for $1000. The president was presented with an engraved ebony cane, the handle of which was made of an ivory handle of a club.

On entering the hall Mr. Roose-
evelt and the other special guests were given a grand reception and the starter of the day. Mr. Roosevelt was introduced by the head man of the gathering, Mr. D. F. Searl, assistant secretary of the navy to the president.

In his address President Roosevelt spoke of the need for the country to do more for the nation.

BROOKLINE POLICE HOLD H. J. CARSON

Chief of Police Corey of Brookline
said he was not a suspect in the
murder of a man in a small shop.

The police point found two
cheques in the man's pockets which
could be traced to the bank in the
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CABLES ELECTION TO GERMANY

Brobdingnagian axle of Carson has gone to Broodlingnagian to being Carson back to Worcester.

VIEW WATER PIPE LOCATIONS TODY

The Joint standing committee of the city today, leaving City Hall at 10 o'clock and will inspect, in section, where particular water pipe
Worcester Electric Light Co.
Park 1600 11 Foster Street

TELLS HOW HUN SBRS WERE SUNK
Rotary Club Hears Interesting Address By Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, assistant secretary to the Navy, told the members of the Rotary club the story of how the German submarine was reduced to impotence in the war, at the weekly luncheon of the Rotary club today in the Bunker Hill.

The speaker was introduced by Dr. Ira U. Bellis, president of Tech, to whom he referred in the opening sentence of his speech as one of the most distinguished men in the navy.

Mr. Roosevelt told of the string of mines which the American forces stretched across the North Sea from Scotland to Norway and of the first steps in the offensive warfare against the submarine which began with our entrance into the war.

Mr. Roosevelt said that in the beginning the Germans submarines operated as in the neck of a bottle, with great surety of sinking a large percentage of the ships which were under way for France and England. He described the methods which drove them out to sea, thus destroying their effectiveness and eventually the morale of their crews.

Mr. Roosevelt left for New York directly after the meeting.

Don't Poison Baby.