
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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Harvard Union Speech

ADDRESS of

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt

at the Harvard Union, February 26, 1930.

Before addressing you this evening, I might say that I have not been offered a medal and I have not refused any medals. So, that being so, do you mind if I speak absolutely informally. I had much rather talk about the navy, as I have been with the navy for seven years next week, and it has been one of the most wonderful experiences that anybody could have; because the naval service is American all the way through - American in the best sense. On the whole, perhaps it does not come well from me as Assistant Secretary to say things about it, but I think that the United States Navy is the most effective part of our national government. It is probable that the country as a whole does not appreciate that there is a certain body of men who, if it had not been for them, the part that our navy played in the war would have been very different. That body of men are the highly trained graduates of a great university, a national university, which is called the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. It was around them that the navy was built, and during the war three thousand graduates of that naval academy made possible the work which the other college men of the country did who came into the service, so that at the end of the war we had taken in and built around that nucleus of 3,000 officers 28,000 other officers, all of them well trained, all of them taking hold of a work that was highly technical and that was quite different from their regular work, and they helped us to get away with it.

Perhaps it is because I have been connected with what I consider an extremely efficient organization that I have seen other organizations from the navy point of view, and it is about the other departments of the government, rather than about the navy itself, that I want to say a few perfectly frank words.

I will preface my remarks by saying that the government of the United States, on the whole, is the least efficient administrative body that we have in the United States, and by that I mean, first, Congress and second, the executive branch of the government. I will take them up and point out different phases to you. It may sound pessimistic, but I believe that it is only by pointing out faults that this country is going to get anywhere. More than that, I firmly believe that unless we set our own house in order, and, by American constitutional means, make our government as efficient as we would conduct our own private individual businesses, then, if that does not come about by orderly means, it will simply mean the

spread of doctrines which seek to effect a change by unconstitutional means.

I wonder how many of you ever read the Congressional Record. I generally read it in the same spirit that I read "Life" or the London "Punch." It gives me keen joy. There is more humor in the Congressional Record every morning than there is to be found in any other comic paper in this country. All you have to do is to think about what it all means. You will see there the Proceedings; first the Senate Proceedings and then the House of Representatives Proceedings, and you will wonder, in reading these, what it is all about; unless, of course, you happen to be an expert in a thing called Parliamentary Law, which was founded by John Lackland in his meeting with the barons, and which has not been materially changed from that time. After you have read the Proceedings themselves, you will wonder what happened in either the Senate or House of Representatives the previous day. Then, at the back of the Congressional Record, you will find the speeches. Those speeches, of course, were never delivered. Far be it from me to suggest that anybody ever talked those speeches out of mouth. They are the result of a simple request, made on the floor of the Senate, asking for leave to print. The Congressman then goes back to his office, and probably having a secretary or stenographer who is capable of doing that sort of thing, he directs that a speech along certain lines be written, with due regards for the feelings of his constituents. The stenographers write very excellent speeches, because they are supposed to know the constituents, whom they have on a very carefully selected mailing list. Thousands of copies are sent out and the result is satisfactory from the point of view of the Congressman, because the people who get them, of course, never read them, but they form excellent material for starting fires.

The Congress of the United States in its running, in the way things are done there, is just about 100 years behind modern American conditions. I am not referring to any one party or to this or that measure, but to the general business-like or unbusiness-like way in which so much legislation is framed and either passed or put over, as they call it, under the rule. There has been a great deal of talk of late of a budget system. They held hearings, and next to the Congressional Record, the hearings form the greatest source of amusement that we have in Washington. Congressional hearings meet and talk and talk endlessly, and then adjourn to allow the stenographers to catch up with the records. They are conducted along strictly party lines, the majority having three members and the minority two, and having decided the question by party vote rather than according to the justice of the case, the report is submitted, and then it is not read because it is made out by some secretary or stenographer.

The work of Congress is, of course, divided into committees; there are dozens of them; and there is no way of co-ordinating the work of these committees except through this new system, which has been talked of for the last two or three generations, and which we hope will be put into effect during the course of the next two or three. Recently, though, the budget system has been seriously considered. It is hoped, of course, that instead of having the proportions made for different departments and for different lines of work by the different committees of Congress and having the bills prepared by separate sets of men without any co-ordinating tying together of the organizations; it is hoped that that can be eliminated by having the central budget committee. The idea, of course, has been a splendid one, that every government department will submit its estimates to the central body, which co-ordinating body will ~~submit these sets of figures up to Congress~~ send these sets of figures up to Congress. Then, when these figures get to Congress, they will be submitted to a Steering Committee, which, taking into consideration the amount of money that can be raised by taxation, will be able to announce, as a matter of party policy - which is, of course, correct in our party system - what proportion of money should be allotted to such and such a branch.

When they drafted the bill, however, for this budget system, they ran up against the fact that Mr. John Jones of Ohio had been in Congress 16 years; that he was senior member of a particular committee on appropriations for a particular department; and that this would take away his importance and his job in the Congress of the United States. The result was a compromise in the bill which has practically wiped out its value. It still recognizes the system of having a dozen or more different committees with the concentrating in the hands of a single committee. You must realize, of course, that a body 450 strong is not a practicable operating body; it is altogether too large to work satisfactorily in what we call a Committee of the Whole. When you get any body of that size, the actual responsibility and most of the work has to be done by a few men at the top. Of course, in the actual voting, every member must and should have his say, but there must be a centralization and concentration of responsibility to thoroughly control a body of that size. That is one of the things that we are continually up against in running the government. Let me give you an example of the way things are done.

Take in my department. The bills as they are framed by Congress go into the most minute details; they say exactly how much money is to be spent for each particular object. In the navy they have about 14 separate heads on the naval appropriation bill. Those ~~subject~~ subject heads each contain an appropriation, which again, in the case of each subject head, is divided into numerous details with restrictions to almost every one. Last year the naval bill, because of the superior knowledge of civilian congressmen over naval officers, decided that the appropriation for the Bureau of Steam Engineering, which handles the insides of ships,

should be materially cut down, at the same time allowing the appropriation for the Bureau of Construction, which handles the hulls of ships, to remain the same. The result was that in the case of numerous ships the hulls were ready, but there was no money left to make the machines turn over. When it comes to the question of pay, of salaries of thousands of employees, it is carefully worked out that there has been a certain number of clerks getting \$1800, a certain number of messengers getting \$600, and a higher grade of clerks who get the magnificent sum of \$2300, which is the sum paid to head clerks of bureaus. In some branches of the work you need bright, highly paid men, you need experts, more first-class clerks, accountants and stenographers than you had in another branch of the same business. One branch, the manufacturing end, may use a larger proportion of laborers; another may use a larger proportion of highly skilled mechanics; and yet, in the appropriations to the departments, Congress goes into the minutae of things to the extent that we have to employ absolutely the numbers that they say, and we cannot make any change. I have no hesitation in saying that if I were given free hand in the navy in the matter of pay to employees that I would increase the actual number of dollars paid out to them by five million for one year, but at the same time, through increased efficiency, I would save the government at least fifteen million dollars, making a net saving of ten million dollars.

Then there is the question of remuneration itself. I think that everybody who has studied the question is in favor of the civil service. At least, the civil service, started by President Cleveland, has got us away from the old system of party spoils. Every government position is taken by civil service examination, and on the whole, it works excellently. The trouble is that it stops right there. Once in, always in; once in, future gone. Those two simple facts explain in large part why our government is failing. I have a man in mind in my own department, a man of 45 years old, who went into the government service as clerk twenty years ago. He was a college graduate, had undertaken to study medicine, but could not keep on on account of his health. He went into the government service as clerk and rose because of his extreme ability and honesty, very rapidly, and became a shining example of recognition of merit. When he was 37 he had risen through different grades and was made chief clerk of the Navy Department. That man had got to the top. He has no more prospects in the government service. He was the kind of man who, because of his faithfulness and his willingness to serve, would have stayed on in the government service just as long as he could be useful. Today, as Chief Clerk, he is getting the magnificent salary of \$3,000 a year. He has turned down not once but a dozen times offers from outside firms of from \$12,000 or \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. He would be worth that to you or to me in our private businesses, but he has got to the top, \$3,000, and he will hang on there, trying to support a family, and pretty soon, if Mr. Palmer doesn't do something soon about the cost of living, this man is going to take one of those outside jobs. The man next below him gets only \$2,200 a year. You cannot expect any outlook, future, or progress in the work of these people. I do not

blame them; we ought to blame the system that allows them to drag on at incompetent and impossible salaries. Year after year the attempt is made to put their salaries on an American basis, and year after year these attempts fail, and gradually, as the years drag along, we find that there is no hope. Last week in the House of Representatives, when the appropriation bill was up, a motion was made to put in nine million dollars for essential repairs to war ships that had to be put back in the fleet; it failed. Five minutes later someone moved to pay five million dollars for enforcing prohibition, and it went through with a bang. The same things are true of the Senate as of the House.

They have a privilege called Prerogative, and that is the right to talk us to sleep. That was not such a terrible thing in the days of Daniel Webster and other early gentlemen, when the country and the questions before it were small and there was not much business before the house. Today proceedings drag along, and the other day they got to such a point - so many people wanted to make speeches - that they had to devote an entire session to see who would make the speeches, and in what order they should be made. They have been sitting there now for nearly a year, and during that eight or nine months they have passed but one constructive measure, the railroad bill. And from now on, I venture to predict, they won't pass another constructive measure before November 5 next. To-day every move that is made by both sides is a move touched in some way with the question of party or political advantage. It would be a perfectly simple thing if they could forget prerogative, precedent, parliamentary law and Magna Charta, to put into effect any business man could do it - a system by which the legislative branch of the government would move along American lines; they would put it on a par with almost any other business in the country. If that is true of Congress, it is only fair to say that the same thing is true of the executive departments. Most of them have grown up like Topsy and show functions such as the framers of our government would have been surprised and horrified to see.

I want to tell the latest version of Little Eva and the three bears, only in this case, there were four. It shows one of the delightful situations we are up against. Up in Alaska there are several species of bears, one of which happens to be a bear which was found near one of the original reservations maintained by the army when Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1860. This particular bear began to be exterminated by the army people, and a law was passed, protecting this bear, and the carrying out of this law was given to the charge of the War Department; and today the War Department, after half a century, continues to maintain jurisdiction over this particular species of bear. Not very far away on some islands is another species of bear, and I suppose that those on the outside had to get onto the island originally on some kind of vessel, or a cake of ice, so that bear was placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Commerce, and the Secretary of Commerce is the father of those bears. Then, along a little while later, somebody went up into the interior and found some wonderful, big, open spaces there, which he assumed

would some day become wheat fields. There were some bears there, and because of the possibility of wheat fields, I suppose, they were placed under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Agriculture, and today the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Meredith, is responsible for the well being of those bears. Of course Alaska is filled with many different species of bears, so they didn't know quite what to do with all the other kinds of bears in Alaska, and they put them under the Secretary of the Interior. So you see, the bears in Alaska are indeed well taken care of. Four great departments are responsible; each maintains a fairly large organization for the protection of bears. Of course that is ridiculous, but the same thing is true of many much more important matters.

Take the question of the navy. You have probably got the idea that there is only one Navy Department. There are four, and there are five navies. Prior to 1916 there was a navy of the United States that had more vessels in it than the regular navy, and that was the War Department navy. The War Department maintains more vessels afloat than the Navy. Their vessels were divided up among three or four different bureaus in the War Department, some on the Panama Canal, others on the coast, and others in the Philippines, each bureau maintaining repair facilities, dry docks, some repairing ships in private yards next to navy yards. There is another navy under the Treasury Department, called the Coast Guard, consisting of revenue cutters which patrol the waters around the coast, and which are efficiently conducted by the Coast Guard. The saving of life and the towing in of disabled steamers is done by the Coast Guard. There is a provision that in time of war it comes under the Navy, and during the war the Coast Guard rendered splendid service. It is now back and doing its own repair facilities, training facilities, etc. In the Department of Commerce there are two navies; one is the Coast and Geodetical Service which runs vessels along the coast, and they maintain their own separate little bureau, and have their own separate repair stations. There is also the Lighthouse service, maintaining its separate personnel and all the other paraphernalia. So you see, you have an example of five departments that are all separate but which, with the exception of the merchant marine, should be maintained as a unit, using the same repair facilities, the same source of supply, and saving millions of dollars every year.

I could go on and cite other examples. There are five, I believe, secret services. There is that originally maintained by the Treasury Department, and the men in that service are supposed to operate only in discovering counterfeits, and such things. Then, of course, the Department of Justice has its own secret service, running along the same lines, covering a large part of the same kind of work. The State Department has a small secret service; the War Department has its secret service, called the military intelligence, and the Navy Department has the naval intelligence, which, half the time is engaged in purely civilian work. So you see how perfectly

impossible the system of organization is, and especially now at the close of this war, when hundreds of new kinds of work have been undertaken by the Navy. The usual way to select the department which is to undertake a new kind of work is to shut ones eyes and say "Eney, meeneey, miney, mo" and then take any department that you may happen to strike at the end of the sentence. It is a hit or miss way of doing things; what is needed is a complete re-organization of the work each department performs. That is the first step: re-organization and re-apportionment of work among the different departments along lines of simple business sense. Secondly, the question of the actual work of the departments themselves must be taken up. It is a curious and interesting thing that no two departments in Washington employ the same methods of accounting. The treasury department has a gentleman to receive the figures of receipts and expenditures from the different departments, juggle these figures into some final kind of balance sheet, and turn them over to the Secretary of the Treasury to be welded into a whole as an annual report to Congress. Some departments keep good modern accounts; others keep theirs in the same way that they were kept in 1789.

Do you realize, to go back to the question of naval employees, do you realize that there is absolutely no hope for a man's old age in the government service. Almost every other business in the country provides for some system of pension, with the object that when a man gets to a certain point where he can no longer be of use to the business ~~efficiently~~ efficiency of a concern, he either goes down to a slightly lower grade and performs work which he can probably do, or else goes on the retired list, with the promise that he shall be supported by the funds of the company. That does not exist in the government service and does not exist in the naval service to any large degree. An officer goes on "retired service" at the age of 64, and if he happens to live longer than his wife, he will get three-quarter pay, but if he should die, his wife gets nothing. It may be possible for her to get a pension through Congress or \$30 or \$40 a month, which, in these days, is practically nothing; and so, while if a naval officer lives, his family will get three-fourths pay while he lives. In the case of civilian employees, when a man's time of usefulness is over, we are confronted with the definite problem of firing him and letting him go on and starve, or of keeping him on and lessening the efficiency of the government.

I had the other day a case in one of the navy yards of an old man who had served faithfully in the navy yards since the days of the Civil War. He was competent and had become a master mechanic in charge of 1500 or 2000 workmen in his shop. He had gotten to be 70 years old and they reported that the old man could not keep up the pace any longer, that he could not get around among the shops to see that the work was being done, and with great regret I had to reduce him to the position of Quartermaster, which is immediately below that of master mechanic, and reducing his pay. He stayed on in charge of a whole shop for a couple of years and then I had to reduce him to the rating of which is just

above the rating of mechanic. He hung onto that until just the other day, and word came that he could not even get around ~~him~~ to bass fifteen or twenty men, and they recommended that he be discharged. He is 77 years old, has a wife and no children, and has not been able, on government pay, to lay much aside; so I am confronted with the question of approving the recommendation of letting him go to starve or of reducing him to mechanic or laborer and letting him earn enough, from day to day, to keep soul and body together.

That is the sort of question that every administrator in the government is confronted with all the time. In the end, the bringing in of American principles of employment would save this nation a great sum of money every year. Perhaps this year, or next year the saving would not become apparent, but I take it that we are not working for this year or next year only, but for the years to come. What we do today is going to have effect on the government of our children, and so unless we act pretty soon, this great mass called the government of the United States, legislative and executive, is going to get more and more unwieldy, less and less American, more and more a travesty on good government. Perhaps it would not be this or in the next ten years that we will suffer, but in the end it is bound to produce discontent, and that is why I believe in the extreme importance of immediate action; that is why I believe in the extreme importance of everybody with good, common sense, that desires to help, getting into the game.

There is a whole lot of talk about college men in politics. I remember talking to President Eliot when I was an undergraduate. There was a question at that time of the size of the ignorant vote. He said, "If the vote should be limited to holders of college degrees in the United States, the government would go on the rocks and the country follow it in six months. At a time like the present, the college men can be of particular assistance, not solely because of education and ideals, but we have got, and I think, and I hope, especially here at Harvard, we have been imbued with the idea that we owe a certain service to the nation. I do not like to call it by the term of a debt, of an obligation; it is rather, I like to say, the word privilege; it is a privilege rather than an obligation of service.

If the government can be put on a more business-like basis, including both the legislative and executive, it will hold out for the average man, and especially for the college man, the greater hope of greater opportunity to express that privilege of service. Hundreds of you, as I know, will, when you graduate, want to help, and you will cast about for some way to help. You will not have the inclination, in all probability, to go into government service as

an administrator or a clerk with the idea that at the age of sixty you may become Chief Clerk of a bureau, drawing \$2000 a year. I sound extremely pessimistic; I am not pessimistic, but I believe in seeing both sides of a question. I believe that we can help by making public the facts. I believe that this question is not one of party; there has been altogether too much said about what this party is going to do and what that is going to do. When you get to know parties as well as I do, you will find them the greatest cowards in the world. At the present time both are engaged in dodging the issues of universal training.

The other day a convention was held in the state of New York by one of the parties. There was a great deal of talk about whether they were going to indorse universal training in some form, and finally after the great minds of the party had gotten together and talked it over backwards and forwards, they put this magnificent statement into their platform: We believe in the creation of a trained citizen soldiery. What in hell that means, I don't know. It means absolutely nothing. It is provided for, in the first place, in the constitution. We have always believed in a trained citizen soldiery. We have always know that a million men would spring to arms over night, and we have always known that we did not have the arms to give them the next morning. Now that particular party adopted that platform last week. The other political party is going into the state of New York this week; they will adopt a platform in the same way. They will be afraid to go on record; they won't go on record either for or against. So do not blame it on the party, democrats or republicans; blame it on the men who are running your parties; blame it on the men who have not got the courage to say yes or no. There are mighty few questions in this world that can't be said yes or no to. It is very seldom that you get asked, "When have stopped beating your wife." You can't say yes or no to that question, but that happens very rarely. It is time that parties became more definite, and the only way they can be pushed into it is by criticism of party leaders on that one score, and the way criticism will help will be by people of the United States becoming more intelligent, and talking common sense, instead of politics. We are very apt to get into arguments on the subject of politics, and it usually ends in a general damning of this, that, or the other things, and it ends in talk and not in action. I would like to see elected this year people in Congress who would be on record as favoring a business re-organization first of this country, because charity begins at home; and then ~~namix~~ of the people who are chosen to spend the money, in other words, the executive branches of the government. That time will come, not through parties, but through men. You will have the opportunity of taking part as individuals in the choice of your members of Congress and in the election of them. Very often you will be confronted by a choice between two evils. That is always a difficult situation; it is a situation which most frequently comes before us in Washington itself. I think we have gotten over very largely the old condition of voting because of family or environment.

There was a boy back in my home town, just came back from "over there", who met an older man, an acquaintance of his, last fall just before election, and he said, "How are you going to vote?" The older man said, "I am going to vote, such and such a ticket, straight." And the boy who had just come back said, "Why?" The other man drew himself up with pride, and said, "Because my grandfather did." Then this youngster said, "Well, if you are so stuck on your grandfather as all that, I think the best thing you can do is to walk down to the dock by the river, jump overboard, and join your grandfather."

This punk talk that we hear about the period of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln makes me exceedingly tired. I engaged in an argument with another man a few days ago, and in my discussion I left out the history of both Republican and Democratic parties prior to 1900. He started in when I got finished and talked to me for twenty minutes, to prove that George Washington was a republican. I do not believe that he was a republican; I believe he would be perfectly horrified at the new conditions, the dear old gentleman wouldn't understand. None of the previous generation, even, can understand the problems that we are facing; they are not Washington's or Jefferson's; they are ours. And so, we cannot prove for a long time, until history is written, who was responsible for the United States winning the war. We cannot even prove that the United States did win the war. Let us be frank, let us face conditions as they are, as they present themselves this summer. Let us work for men that we can trust, men with common sense, men who will be above mere party or mere persons, men who will help to put this country back on its feet. We are not through with this war yet. I believe that we have some of the most serious of our problems still before us. May we all help; may we all look to that future with courage and with a willingness to serve.