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**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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**File No. 116**

**1920 April 10**

**New York City - Jefferson Day Speech**

August 28, 1950.

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This is probably the speech delivered by  
FDR at a Jefferson Day dinner sponsored by  
the National Democratic Club, Hotel Astor,  
New York, N.Y., April 10, 1920.

[Mentioned in the New York Times, Apr. 11, 1920]

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The public has fallen into the way of accepting the speeches delivered at this particular banquet as being, after a fashion, the official voice of the Democratic Party. At other times during the year various leaders in various places have spoken on this subject or that subject, sometimes expressing their own views, sometimes expressing what they think should be the Party's views, but on no other occasion do political speeches carry, as it were, the official seal of the organization, as <sup>the</sup> speeches made here. For that reason, I feel a deep burden of responsibility, for never before has the need of clear speaking, of plain statement from a political party been so urgent as at this moment. Never was there such confusion in the minds of the voters at large as to what the dominant parties stand for, as to what are their present ways of thinking, <sup>on this</sup> ~~what~~ what lines they propose to proceed if they are placed in power this year. From our ancient adversaries, the Republicans, comes no voice whatever; only a loud, raucous confusion

of tongues, each in a different key, utterly at conflict even with each other, and those who patiently have tried to unravel from that modern Tower of Babel known as Republican Headquarters the various statements, seeking to find in them some common keynote, some united, coherent, sane platform on which to stand, have found them coherent and united on only one point. Amid all their discords runs the same note, a sort of wail in a minor key, over the awful alleged misdeeds of the Democratic Party. They are so busy scouring for faults, hunting, as it were, for new reservoirs of mud to throw, that they apparently have had no time to consider what they would do were they in our place, let alone what better ways of doing the very things that they object to they would inaugurate were they in power. Let us not commit their error. Let us not, as it were, become so busily engaged in scraping the mud off our clothes as to forget the necessity of standing clearly and definitely for something. No Bolshevik ever formulated so complete a platform

of destruction of all things existing, with no clear suggestion for new things in substitution, as have the revered and somewhat antiquated leaders of the opposition. Let us <sup>and now</sup> here set about to give the voters a choice between something definite and a mere policy of discontent. In thinking over what I would say, <sup>tonight</sup> my mind naturally went back to a somewhat similar condition just before the war in my own Department of the Navy. We have what we call, for lack of a better name, a Naval War College, which is not a college at all but a place where our experienced officers gather to study the latest developments in the art of naval warfare and formulate broad plans of strategy and tactics. It is customary, from time to time, for the Secretary of the Navy to address this body of men, and it is usual, on such occasions, to recount the glorious deeds of the Navy, our perfection in the art of war, the heroic deeds of our ancestors, beginning with John Paul Jones, and to pay a few graceful tributes to the efficiency of the College. But on this occasion

I felt that this was not the kind of speech that would be most helpful, and instead, I urged them to forget the old things and to remember that new conditions in warfare have swept our old anchorages away. I am going to quote part of that speech:

My earnest word, my solemn plea today is to urge you fearlessly to discard worship of all things that are old, and to adopt courageously anything that is new the moment that some new development of the present convinces you that the old way is no longer the right way. It is the courage of the American people in facing new conditions from the time our forefathers dared and mastered the terrors of the wilderness and built therein a new nation with a new government that has made us great today. Holding wisely to what is good in the past, to such principles as stand the acid test of this great war, do not fear to cast aside what have proved to be mere shackles of convention and daringly to go forward."

Gentlemen, I know of nothing better that I can say

now than that. As the submarine and the aeroplane brought about a new kind of naval warfare, so have the effects of this terrible war brought about a new condition in the entire body politic, not only of this country but of all countries. The heavy burdens of war cost, the needless conflict between capital and labor -- these are but two of the many problems which the public will look to the party they elect this year to solve. Are we to be as confused, as uncertain, as cowardly as our Republican friends on these matters? Let us look for a moment at our Republican friends, for I must say frankly that in some ways we may there see, as in a mirror, some of our own shortcomings up to date. Placed in control of Congress under what seems to have been a clearly mistaken idea that the party which could criticize so eloquently could remedy and construct with equal facility, what have <sup>Republicans</sup> they done? Around their council table sit their ancient leaders, whose lack of ability to grow with the country, to think of nothing new with which to meet a new condition

led to the downfall of their party eight years ago., - Like so many ancient Rip Van Winkles, shaking their hoary heads at the new condition of things, scanning the records of our administration with near-sighted eyes for possible flaws to be used as campaign arguments, but without one single intelligent <sup>constructive</sup> idea of what to do about it. What legislation have they introduced in the <sup>recent</sup> past? What theory of procedure have they enunciated? There have been several critical stages in the labor problem. What did they do about it? You can imagine, in fancy, a gathering of these dwellers in the past around the council board.

"The coal miners have walked out," says one.

"Yes," responds the other, "I trust our press bureau has already blamed the Democratic Party."

"Certainly, certainly," immediately replies the leader, or chairman, or whoever he may be. "Would it not be a good idea to have our leaders in Congress immediately pass proper legislation to bring this distressful condition to an end?"



"Splendid!" Comes the unanimous response.

"What shall it be?" some more practical member inquires.

And then, gentlemen, imagine the dead silence which ~~was felt~~<sup>held</sup>, until, finally, from some corner, one of the ancient seers advises, with an audible sigh of relief at having solved the question,

"I think perhaps our safest plan will be to continue to blame all the Democrats from the President down, because if we should suggest anything and it did not work, we might be blamed for it."

That, gentlemen, is a fancy sketch, perhaps, but it is exactly what they did on this and every other problem which has come up. Gentlemen, I don't care how many hard names our party is called so long as they cannot truthfully call us cowards. We were swept into power because we were not cowards; because we had made the term, "standpatter" no longer an honorable title for a Republican office holder but an epithet of scorn and contempt. Shall we now catch contagious fears from the other party, and ~~for fear~~<sup>because we are afraid</sup> of not being able to suggest something which will please everybody, suggest nothing and thus please nobody?

Far be it. Let us here announce to the voters of this country that the Democratic Party will go into the campaign this year with definite principles, with definite remedies, with a definite theory which which to face the complexities that confront our country.

Let us announce that we will not wait for the other party to formulate a program and then devote ourselves to criticizing it, but that we will ourselves, as soon as our counselors and leaders may meet, draw up in no uncertain language a platform which will be for once, at least, a real platform — something to stand on firmly with two feet, and not, as, alas, platforms in the past have too often been, something to crawl under to escape the wrath of the populace. If we do this, gentlemen, I have no fear, however dismal a picture the pessimists of our party may draw of the future of our party. I frankly do not anticipate anything but shiftjuggling with words and evasion of anything definite from our opponents. How can they, with their present leaders, evolve any other plan of campaign? Appeals founded

on mis-statements to this class of voters, and to that class of voters, which, if run in parallel columns, would flatly contradict themselves; <sup>of</sup> magnifying the inevitable errors which any red-blooded man must make in the course of his career, and which any red-blooded party must make if it would really lead, into horrible scandal stories of inefficiency. Vague promises to the laboring man that capital will be crushed beneath his feet, and equally vague but somewhat more substantial promises to the business man that labor will be curbed -- whatever that may mean -- all these we ~~must~~ <sup>may confidently</sup> expect. It is my belief, gentlemen, that if guessing was ever permissible, one famous sentence was forgiven by the recording angel. That was Farragut's terse reply to the Senator Lodges of his staff: "Damn the torpedoes." Do not let us be afraid of criticism of our ideas. We may not be able to evolve the best of all possible answers to the questions which stare us in the face, but I would be ashamed of my party if I felt we could not evolve a better answer than they have shown any ability to make. Let

them continue to babble about our unprotected infant industries, forgetting that since the time when that was an effective catch-word these industries supplied a warring world with material. Let them continue their secret conferences with this monopoly and that monopoly in regard to how much fat can be fried for the coming campaign. We have been very busy during the last few weeks, gentlemen, sending back home the anarchists which our Republican friends insisted on importing so as to keep the price of labor in this country down. Let them again urge the continuation of that ruinous policy, which has spread red anarchy in our midst if they want to. I, for one, am not going to complain.

But let us all remember that the great thing for the Democratic Party today is to forget that we are Democrats. Never will our Republican friends forget that they are Republicans first and patriots afterward. Let us remember that our first duty is as Americans, and not as Democrats. Let us sacrifice this little, petty party game or that tempting chance to improve our party's status ~~WHIXX~~

at the expense of the country that may arise and remember ~~that~~.

*our first*  
~~have~~ a duty as American citizens <sup>is</sup> to give the best that is in us

toward solving America's problems.