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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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At Hobart College Commencement Exercises, Geneva, N. Y.,  
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Governor Roosevelt Receives Degree—Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris  
causa

A fact of great interest in the recent trend of higher education in the United States is the growing appeal by the smaller units which have the courage and the vision still to call themselves colleges. For a few years the glamour of the huge conglomeration of teaching institutions, springing up almost overnight in every State and styling themselves universities, bade fair to eliminate the smaller institutions which sought to retain a more simple purpose. The university theory sought two objectives—a vast, unlimited student body, and the ability to offer to give instruction in every known field of human endeavor. The need for universities of this type may well be granted, but not to the exclusion of the smaller colleges.

History shows that the educational trend of a nation is more often than not, an index of its subsequent economic, social and political record. The renaissance in art, in literature, in science, antedated and did not follow, the great political and religious upheaval in Europe. So also, our own Revolution and that of France followed an educational upheaval that had begun fifty years earlier.

In like manner the present era of economic bigness and consolidation in industry and the rush of human beings to vast cities has come soon after the great growth of the university system.

If this argument be sound, we may look to a swing of the pendulum in the civilization of the years to come, for already a marked change has appeared

in the world of education. It is true that up to the time of the World War, the smaller colleges of America were suffering by the competition and glamour of the universities. In education the average parent and the average boy wanted bigness; wanted a college training in an atmosphere which included fragments of every art and every science known to man; wanted contacts with the mob; wanted the experience of a whole lifetime rolled into four years.

It is perhaps as a result of this educational orgy of business that we have today the marked unwillingness of citizens to give serious and continued thought to political affairs. In other words, the trend towards generalization and consolidation in the educational field has extended in a great degree to the attitude of the individual citizen toward government.

In spite of the constant teaching of the doctrine of service with which many of the younger generation have become somewhat bored, general participation in public affairs has been constantly declining throughout the United States for at least a generation. This steady decline has shown itself in a persistent falling off in the percentage of citizens availing themselves of the right of the franchise. The very large popular vote at the close of the campaign of 1928 need not deceive us, for it bears out the theory that the average voter today will only bother himself or herself to go to the polls when some unusual issue or some picturesque candidate is projected into the field.

In our own State as in every other, the tendency is still towards a continued decrease of interest year in and year out in our government. We cannot blink at the fact that the social and political structure of America has changed to a greater extent since 1900 than during the previous 124 years of our life as a nation.

The same great change has been taking place in other countries, resulting in the phenomenon of dictatorships in many parts of the world.

The important question today is whether the willingness of the individual to allow himself to be ruled in his economic and his political life by a handful of experts is going to continue much longer before the wheel turns. Two historical parallels are perhaps in point. About 400 years ago the feudal system of the civilized world of Europe came to an end. This system of a vast number of largely independent nobles of Church and State had for 400 years borne the same relationship to the political structure which Democracy bears to the structure today, for power was decentralized into literally thousands of towns and castles and bishops' palaces, and each community so created led an economic, social and political existence which was largely independent. With the rise to power of Charles V., Francis I and Henry VIII, the feudal system came to an end.

Concentration along national lines took its place, but while this was going on the wheel had already begun to turn. Largely in the form of the great religious movement known as the Reformation, the individual asserted himself. The Cromwellian Revolution in England and the religious wars on the continent during the 17th century paved the way for the later conception of democracy and representative government.

The other example is the period which immediately succeeded the fall of Napoleon in 1815. For over thirty years the concentration of political and social power throughout Europe was in the hands of kings and prime ministers, and the interest of the average citizen in the affairs of government seemed on the surface to have disappeared. Yet the same hidden undercurrent was at work and in 1848 the civilized world of Europe witnessed the revolt against concentration and the revival of participation by the masses of citizens.

Events in our own times moved faster, yet there is a curious similarity between the tendencies of today and those of other times long gone by. The World War was of far less duration than the Napoleonic Wars, yet it made up in intensity for what it lost in years. Whether it be that after cataclysms of this sort the average citizen is mentally tired, or whether the laws of nature require the rebuilding of the social and economic structure through the medium of a small number of selected type individuals is an interesting question. The fact remains, however, that since the close of the war ten years ago, participation in public affairs by populations as a whole has been conspicuous by its absence.

It seems, therefore, that we may well ask the question: Is there today the same undercurrent leading towards a return of interest and actual leadership on the part of the many as occurred towards the termination of the power of the great kings and queens of the 16th century, and also during the height of the power of the kings and prime ministers who ruled Europe after Napoleon fell?

My answer to that is "Yes," for though there are few open evidences of it in our political or economic structure, yet there are straws in the wind in the social and educational life of America. This holds true in Europe also, I believe.

I have referred to the inclination in education to query the advisability of further enlargement of the already huge universities, and to question the soundness of the smattering of information on the largest possible variety of subjects which ten years ago was accepted as the standard.

So, also, there is questioning today in the field of economics. Every day that passes, for instance, a hundred small storekeepers go out of business or are absorbed by the new business device known as the chain store. That means that a hundred independent owners of their own businesses either transfer to some other business or become employees of a great impersonal machine. We see the same trend in every form of manufacture, in transportation, in public utilities, and in banking. Twenty-five years ago, even five years ago, the average town was served by a gas or electric light company which was owned by neighbors, in other words, members of the community itself. Today it is hard to find a gas or electric light company which is not a part of a great system centering in New York or Chicago and with an ownership distributed through a large portion of the United States.

So, too, in the world of government. This address is by no means a plea for a return to the State's Rights theories of fifty or seventy-five years ago.

It is intended, however, to call definite attention to the political tendency towards concentration. It is perhaps inaccurate to call it a tendency towards concentration. It would be more accurate to describe it as the gradual building up of power in the federal government because of the lack of interest on the part of the individual in local government. In other words, we are drifting into federal centralization, not because we are in favor of it, but because it is the inevitable result of our own failure better to conduct our local governing functions.

If there is failure on the part of a State to provide adequate educational facilities for its boys and girls, an immediate cry goes up that a department of education should be established in Washington. If a State fails to keep abreast with modern help provisions, immediately the enthusiasts turn to the creation of a department of health in Washington. If a state fails adequately to regulate its public service corporations, the easiest course is to ask the Interstate Commerce Commission or the Federal Trade Commission to take jurisdiction.

I am very certain that the cause of all of this is not any deep conviction on the part of any considerable number of citizens that we need or ought to have a highly concentrated and centralized governing machine in the District of Columbia. I am certain, on the other hand, that the underlying reason is far more negative and that it is based on the indigestible mass of new details which have come into our lives, the lack of sheer physical time which the individual can give to thoughtful consideration of basic principles.

In other words, we are pursuing the easiest course. We are passing the responsibility to someone else. The first and most immediate result of the lack of interest in our own local affairs has been the growing incompetence of local government. In the old days town meetings meant something, not just on occasions, but year in and year out. Town boards were far more alive to their responsibilities, far more sensitive to public needs and public feelings than they are today. The result of our inattention to local affairs is that the control has fallen into the hands of professional politicians who use their positions, often dishonestly, often extravagantly and almost always inefficiently.

What, then, is the answer to be? It lies, I think, in the hands of the younger generation which now and for the past few years has been arriving

at the age of full citizenship. It is my hope and my belief that the trend to greater individualism and simplicity in the educational world will be followed as in the past by changes in social, economic and political thought.

In other words, I hope that I am right in taking the field of education as an index finger which will be followed in our community life.

On you of the younger generation falls the immediate responsibility. On the one hand, you have the right to allow the drifting to consolidation and centralization of government to continue. If you do this, you do so with your eyes open to the fact that it is a new experiment, that it may work, but that no stages of the world's history give examples where it has worked. Every previous great concentration of power has been followed by some form of great disaster. During the time of centralization all has seemed happy and prosperous. The mass of citizens have had food, have had clothes, have had occupation and have had abundant pleasures. It is unnecessary for me to cite the examples of Greece, of Rome and of the 19th century.

Has our civilization the greater knowledge and the greater moral force which will enable it to stop in time? After all, the other course which goes to the fundamentals of the individual and the average citizen is the haven of refuge to which civilization has always returned after it has been on a prolonged spree.

In other words, it is time for us to take stock—to ask ourselves whether we should not now, as individuals, turn our steps towards that simplified goal. Perhaps, in so doing we can be of greater service to our country than if we were, with our eyes open, to throw ourselves into the purpose of becoming captains of industry or mere consolidators of consolidations. It may account in our lives for less advertising in the public press. It may account for smaller bank accounts, and at the same time, it may account for vastly more happiness in our lives.

If the field of education is our guide, I am right in believing that the pendulum has swung and that the swing will carry with it in the days to come a return on the part of American citizens to some of the wholly sound and wholly proved fundamentals of government.