
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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**New York City, NY -
Republicans Club Luncheon - Prisons**

At Luncheon of National Republican Club, New York City
January 18, 1930
Prison Problems

Hell appears to have been the ideal design for a prison in the minds of our forefathers. The narrow cubicles of sweating stone, the little shaft of light that crept between the heavy iron bars, the lack of ventilation, sanitation, of everything which makes life endurable, all to be suffered in sullen silence under the watchful eyes of brutal guards--surely no better form of eternal punishment could be devised to torture lost souls in the hereafter.

In spite of all our remodeling, of all our tinkering and patchwork improving, we have still, in what we boastfully call "this enlightened age," prisons whose physical characteristics have lost little of their ancient horrors so far as their construction goes. Now that we are beginning to realize the perfectly obvious fact, to which we have deliberately shut our eyes for so many years, that the men we send to prison with few exceptions will be returned again to live among us, to be, perhaps, our neighbors, to live as we live, and to have the same rights as we have. We at last understand that not philanthropy but mere common sense, and our own self-protection requires that these men should be released, chastened and reformed if possible, but at least not rendered more vicious, more degraded, than when they were sentenced.

But while, for some years, we have acknowledged grudgingly the truth of this matter and have made spasmodic and sporadic efforts to better conditions, and while, in so far as treatment and personnel are concerned, we have revolutionized entirely prison government and prison discipline, it has required the recent spectacular uprising of small groups of desperate men to make us finally demand that new prisons, better prisons, and prisons that shall not be places of cruel and unusual punishment must be erected immediately no matter what they cost.

Our old prisons, such as Auburn, which is the conspicuous example of what a prison should not be, were bad enough when filled only to their normal capacity, but when we attempt, as we are doing at present, to crowd 6500 men into accommodations none too ample for 4500, we obviously are giving the lie to all our vaunted progress in social welfare.

The truth of the matter is that the extraordinary and seemingly callous indifference which has created this condition has resulted from the fact that very few people have thought seriously about the "prison question" at all. Our whole treatment of

the criminal has been based not upon any logical theory of crime and punishment, but upon waves of transitory interest created by the events of the day. Having no definite ideas upon the subject, we have swayed first one way and then the other as the result of some outstanding event. First the misery, the discomforts, the inhumanities, the grim hopelessness of prison life will be brought to our attention by some impassioned leader in reform and a wave of sympathy for the convicted will sweep over us. We then demand all manner of hastily considered changes in our whole prison system, based entirely upon our sympathy of the moment for the convicted felon. Immediately before even this wave of sympathy has had a chance permanently to affect our treatment of the criminal, some series of coldblooded and inhuman crimes, or, as during the past year, the spectacle of a handful of hardened and hopeless men rising in rebellion against authority, arouses a demand for retaliation and vengeance and we lengthen our sentences, increase our convictions, and demand stern, unyielding and unsympathetic discipline. This is just as fatal to all real enlightened progress in solving this great problem as that worthy but misdirected sympathy which leads us to consider only the physical comfort of the prisoners, without regard to what is needed to effect a real reformation.

But I think at last we have realized that the time has come to give this matter the same thoughtful study, the same intelligence, the same definite and sustained effort along a carefully planned path toward a clearly understood goal that we have applied to other social problems. We must, in fact, go about this business of prison reform in the same way that we have reformed completely our business methods.

I have pointed out in a special message to the Legislature the five main problems and what we must do by legislation to meet them:

First, the need for new and proper buildings. I have spoken already of the 2000 men sleeping in all kinds of temporary makeshifts instead of proper accommodations; and this surplus population is increasing largely because, under our present system of penal treatment, a very great percentage of those whom we release come back again for some new crime. I have outlined a program of building, and building proper prisons is something which may not be done in a few short months, which will give us in 1935 reasonably modern accommodations for 9000 prisoners. I hope by other improvements in our whole scheme of treatment of convicted men by that time we will have so reduced the number of those who return as to make these accommodations sufficient, with only

moderate increases, for years to come. Unless however we appropriate the money needed this year and the succeeding four years as well, until the five-year construction program is completed, we will not be able to reach the goal that we have set. It is not something that may be postponed, if we would end the present intolerable and shameful conditions.

The next thing which is necessary is to work out a plan for the segregation and classification of prisoners. It is obvious that when we place a foolish lad, led into his first crime, in the company of old and hardened offenders, we are making ourselves morally responsible; if he comes out from his comparatively short sentence as hardened and as irredeemable as his associates. It is not pleasant to think of the moral guilt that lies upon us all for this terrible and just accusation, not of making men's bodies uncomfortable, but of destroying their souls.

Now, if we are going to put an end to this--and put an end to it we must--we must know clearly what we intend to do so that we can design our new construction accordingly, for the type of building, the kind of discipline, and even the size and capacity of a prison depends entirely upon the exact use to which we intend to put it.

But granting that these two important things have been worked out, granted that we have proper accommodations and proper classification and segregation--after our prisoners have been decently housed and separated so as to avoid making professional criminals out of amateurs, what are we going to give them to do? An idle prisoner becomes a bitter prisoner in an amazingly short time. Work is the only sure preventive of brooding, and this work must be something more than mere routine exercise. It must be interesting; it must be real work, something that achieves something, for it is the feeling of achievement that gives work its power to bring about forgetfulness of the unpleasant.

In no particular have we been more backward than in solving what we know as the "prison labor" problem. It is complex and involves the working out of a plan which shall be acceptable to manufacturers; to our free labor, and to those who are experts as to what will most assist the prisoner to become a useful citizen. If our State Crime Commission in its forthcoming report is not prepared to lay out a definite plan for proper labor for all prisoners, it is my intention immediately to appoint a special commission. This commission will consist of representatives of our manufacturers;

our labor organizations and our expert penologists. They are to sit around a table and work out a scheme of prison labor which will be recommended by all three groups. It is also my hope, in consideration of the constantly increasing number of youthful prisoners—boys who have been led into crime from sheer idleness or lack of knowledge of how to earn a living more usefully—that a real trade school education, in as many varied lines as we can find adaptable for this purpose, be given them. I do not know of any one thing which will make these youths useful citizens when they pass out of the prison gates so much as an education in a good trade, under competent supervisors in the use of modern tools and machinery which will make them really skilled workmen and tremendously shorten that most critical period where they must immediately earn a living or return to criminal ways.

The next important thing which we must do, one which is of peculiar importance in view of the necessarily overcrowded conditions which will continue until our building program is completed, is vastly to improve our whole system of parole. We cannot extend the theory of parole under our present plan. It is illogical and wrong to have the work of the Parole Commission undertaken, as at present, by a Board consisting of the wardens of the different prisons and the Commissioners of Correction. It is a man's job in itself, to say nothing of the impropriety of giving the parole power virtually to those in charge of the daily life of the prisoners. We have laid far too many other important duties on these men to expect them to be able to give full attention to working out a scientific extension of the parole theory. I look to the creating of a real Parole Court consisting of well paid experts who have, in addition, a real interest in the work. I am asking for the placing of far more authority under such a Commission than the Parole Board now enjoys. Just what changes in our laws are needed for this and just what the functions and duties of this Commission should be are matters to be determined by those who have made a lifelong study of the problem. I will announce on Monday the appointment of a voluntary committee of six persons, known not only in our State but throughout the country as being peculiarly qualified to speak with authority in this matter, and I have been promised their immediate attention to this question as a public service, to the end that within the next two weeks I may frame a definite working plan based on their years of study which I can submit to the Legislature.

It is my hope to create a body so responsible and so competent as to make it possible to use them as an advisory board in the matter of the hundreds of applications for pardon and commutations of sentence which now lie so heavily on every Governor's shoulders. It is impossible for the Governor to know or for the Governor to investigate all of the many circumstances of which he should be informed in determining these questions of pardon and commutation. It is not legal authority that is needed in this case, but efficient machinery to conduct the preliminary research needed to assure a right determination.

We are at present convicting our criminals under what have come to be known as the "Baumes Laws" which mathematically increases the length of sentence for each new offense until the fourth conviction carries with it a sentence for life. I do not at this time recommend specific changes in these laws. Their effects, their merits, and their faults require expert study from actual observation of conditions since their adoption. But it is my hope, if I can secure the establishment of this real Parole Court, that after practical experience during the next recess of the Legislature they will be in a position to make recommendations in this matter both to the State Crime Commission and to our Legislature of actual conditions rather than upon a theory of what would be improvement.

I have tried to explain as briefly as I can our present prison problem and what we propose to do about it. This is certainly one thing in which politics never should be allowed to enter, and on which all parties should reach a common agreement for the common good. I feel confident that although my political party is not the party to which the members of this club belong, I will receive in this great effort to improve our prisons and our present methods the hearty support of every member.

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