
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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New York City, NY - Board of Trade Luncheon

At New York Board of Trade Luncheon, New York City
February 28, 1930
Better Housing Conditions

The marvelous skyline of New York City with its human bee-hives reaching ever higher and higher until the very clouds hide its towers from the street below, seem always to impress the visitor as the visible symbol of wealth and power. To me, however, these vast structures have always seemed monuments of a thought finer and worthier than mere material prosperity. To me they represent the triumph of courage and vision; the two qualities which have made civilization possible and, above all else, have raised men beyond the level of the brutes.

And it is to you, the business men of New York, and to your courage that we owe these modern miracles of architecture, to you who deal in commerce, in finance and in the development of lands and buildings. I wish tonight, first of all, to pay my tribute not only to the courage which has dared but to the vision and imagination which has enabled you, first, to dream the dream, and afterwards, to make the dream no dream at all, but a tangible thing of steel and brick and tile that reaches a thousand feet into the air and burrows down to the bedrock of Manhattan Island.

Do not let anyone think that this is an exaggeration. Think, for a minute, of the daring, of the vision required to stand upon some corner, past which the city's trade still flows sluggishly, and conceive, in place of the low buildings, holding some few scores of people, a towering monolith holding ten and twenty thousand or more busy workers. If you do not think it takes vision to conceive that, a certain audacity of mind even to think of it, you have little conception of what vision really is. And after that, to pledge your own fortunes, to convince by your own enthusiasm, others to pledge their fortunes also, to stake all, perhaps in the actual construction of these tremendously costly edifices, to pour out millions in a golden stream on empty offices before a tenant has been actually secured: if anyone thinks that does not require courage, a real spirit of adventure and a grim determination to surmount all obstacles, then he has no idea of what real courage means, either.

It is because I appreciate this courage, this determination, this vision which the men of New York have shown, that I make bold tonight to appeal to you to help in something which is still needed to make New York truly the city better as well as the city beautiful. You have just cause for pride in what you have achieved—the tall, slim buildings standing white and clear against the sky—but too often around their feet

cluster the squalid tenements that house the very poor—buildings that should have been destroyed years ago, full of dark rooms where the sunlight never enters, stifling in the hot summer days, no fit habitation for any man, far less for the thousands of children that swarm up and down their creaking stairways.

As you have envisioned and dared to create what we have not inaptly called the "skyscraper", is it too much to ask you to cast your eyes lower and picture to your minds a city of apartment homes where light and air and sunshine are enjoyed by everyone. If you should make this a dream come true, you will have achieved that which will bring you far more than satisfied pride, an accomplishment which will bring you the most gratifying of all feelings, the consciousness that you have done much to make life a happier thing, a pleasanter thing for thousands of your fellowmen. Is this not a worthwhile thing that I am asking of you? This is an old problem and many worthy souls, touched with compassion for the poor, have tried to solve it, but there lie tremendous difficulties in the path.

It is easy to be philanthropic at the expense of others. But even if it were possible, it would not be fair and just to expect a few to bear the heavy financial burden which would fall upon those who convert their present properties to the far more expensive and less remunerative type of buildings.

There are those who say there is no answer, that this city and all great cities must hide in dark alleyways and dingy street buildings that disgrace our modern civilization; where disease follows poverty and crime follows both. I confess, I see no clear way, but I vision just outside these walls, convincing evidence of what your courage, your vision, your resourcefulness have done, and I believe you will take this up as a body, in mutual conference, and apply your most practical knowledge to this matter of the housing of our poor, that you will find the way; and I believe that if you find the way your courage and persistence will see that it is done.

We recognize, of course, that close cooperation among all of the varied interests is necessary to the solution of a big problem in a big way; that mere action by one civic body can perhaps lead the way but cannot carry through a broad plan without the help of all of the other civic bodies. If New York City were a tenth of its present size, it would be a simple matter to bring the two or three civic bodies together on a common ground. We who know New York, and the magnitude of its geographical problems,

its zoning and residential and business problems, understand that we must deal with the representatives of six or seven million people instead of with the representatives of six or seven hundred thousand people. Nevertheless, the city is notable for the public spirit of its leading business and professional men and women. Furthermore, I am confident that there exists a real sympathy and a great desire to help on the part of those in authority in the city government, and that the officials of the city and the boroughs will be glad to work with the civic organizations towards a common end.

Cast our thoughts back fifty years—the slums of New York were even then a by-word throughout America. Countless books were written describing the horrible conditions of life among the poor in those days. It is a fact that the proportion of residents of this city, who in those days lived under slum conditions was extremely large. These fifty years have shown a marvelous change for the better. The proportion of those who are compelled to live under uncivilizing and inhuman conditions has declined steadily, year by year. Nevertheless there are still many focal points, many whole districts scattered throughout the city where men and women and children are still herded together in a way which is not right according to the standard of 1930.

We have a definite goal—the elimination of these conditions altogether—the seeking within our own lifetime of the day when we can say to the world: New York is a city without slums; New York is a city where every one of its 10,000,000 people can have living conditions which guarantee to them air and light and sanitation; New York is the first American city to get rid of the stigma of the slum.

You who may be interested in the problems of transportation and its sister, trade, are of necessity in a position where you can help to a very great degree in the working out of the plans to bring an approach to this goal—the dwelling places of the inhabitants of our city linked up with the places where our people pursue their daily tasks. There is, indeed, a trinity of problems; the dwelling places, the working places, and transportation, the connecting link between the two. It is for this that I appeal to you to do your very necessary part in this undertaking which is bound in the next few years to demand the attention of the public of the city and of the State.

SPEECH BY GOVERNOR FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

DELIVERED BEFORE THE LUNCHEON GIVEN BY THE
NEW YORK BOARD OF TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION
AT THE HOTEL NEW YORKER, FEBRUARY 28, 1930.

RELEASED WHEN DELIVERED

The marvelous skyline of New York City with its human beehives reaching ever higher and higher until the very clouds hide its towers from the street below, seems always to impress the visitor as the visible symbol of Wealth and Power. To me, however, these vast structures have always seemed monuments of a thought finer and worthier than mere material prosperity. To me they represent the triumph of Courage and Vision, the two qualities which have made civilization possible and, above all else, have raised men beyond the level of the brutes.

And it is to you, the business men of New York, and to your courage that we owe these modern miracles of architecture, to you who deal in commerce, in finance and in the development of lands and buildings. I wish tonight, first of all, to pay my tribute not only to the courage which has dared but to the vision and imagination which has enabled you, first, to dream the dream, and, afterwards, to make the dream no dream at all, but a tangible thing of steel and brick and tile that reaches a thousand feet into the air and burrows down to the bedrock of Manhattan Island.

Do not let anyone think that this is an exaggeration. Think, for a minute, of the daring, of the vision required to stand upon some corner, past which the city's trade still flows sluggishly, and conceive, in place of the low buildings, holding some few scores of people, a towering monolith holding ten and twenty thousand or more busy workers. If you do not think it takes vision to conceive that, a certain audacity of mind even to think of it, you have little conception of what vision really is. And after that, to pledge your own fortunes, to convince, by your own enthusiasm, others to pledge their fortunes also, to stake all, perhaps, in the actual construction of these tremendously costly edifices, to pour out millions in a golden stream on empty

offices before a tenant has been actually secured; if anyone thinks that that does not require courage, a real spirit of adventure and a grim determination to surmount all obstacles, then he has no idea of what real courage means, either.

It is because I appreciate this courage, this determination, this vision which the men of New York have shown, that I make bold tonight to appeal to you to help in something which is still needed to make New York truly the city better as well as the city beautiful. You have just cause for pride in what you have achieved- the tall, slim buildings standing white and clear against the sky- but too often around their feet cluster the squalid tenements that house the very poor- buildings that should have been destroyed twenty years ago, full of dark rooms where sunlight never enters, stifling in the hot summer days, no fit habitation for any man, far less for the thousands of children that swarm up and down their creaking stairways.

As you have envisioned and dared to create what we have not ineptly called the "skyscraper," is it too much to ask you to cast your eyes lower and picture to your minds a city of apartment houses where light and air and sunshine are enjoyed by everyone? If you should make this dream come true, you will have achieved that which will bring you far more than satisfied pride, an accomplishment which will bring you the most gratifying of all feelings, the consciousness that you have done much to make life a happier thing, a pleasanter thing for thousands of your fellowmen. Is this not a worthwhile thing that I am asking of you? This is an old problem and many worthy souls, touched with compassion for the poor, have tried to solve it, but there lie tremendous difficulties in the path. It is easy to be philanthropic at the expense of others. But even if it were possible, it would not be fair and just to expect a few to bear the heavy financial burden which would fall upon those who convert their present properties to the far more expensive and less remunerative type of modern dwellings.

There are those who say there is no answer, that this city and all great cities must hide in dark alleyways and dingy streets buildings that disgrace our modern civilization; where disease follows poverty and crime follows both. I confess, I see no clear way, but I vision just outside these walls convincing evidence of what your courage, your vision, your resourcefulness have done, and I believe if you will take this up as a body, in mutual conference, and apply your most practical knowledge to this matter of the housing of our poor, that you will find the way; and I believe that if you find the way your courage and persistence will see that it is done.

We recognise, of course, that close cooperation among all of the varied interests is necessary to the solution of a big problem in a big way; that mere action by one civic body can perhaps lead the way but cannot carry through a broad plan without the help of all of the other civic bodies. If New York City were a tenth of its present size, it would be a simple matter to bring the two or three civic bodies together on a common ground. We who know New York, and the magnitude of its geographical problems, its zoning and residential and business problems, understand that we must deal with the representatives of six or seven million people instead of with the representatives of six or seven hundred thousand people. ~~ANY~~ Nevertheless, the city is notable for the public spirit of its leading business and professional men and women. Furthermore, I am confident that there exists a real sympathy and a great desire to help on the part of those in authority in the city government, and that the officials of the city and the boroughs will be glad to work with the civic organizations towards a common end.

Cast our thoughts back fifty years - the slums of New York were even then a by-word throughout America. Countless books were written describing the horrible conditions of life among the poor in these days. It is a fact that the proportion of residents of this city who, in these days, lived under slum conditions was extremely large.

Just one thought back fifty years the slums of New York were even then a by-word throughout America. Countless books were written describing the horrible conditions of life among the poor in those days. It is a fact that the proportion of criminals at this city when in those days lived under such conditions was undeniably large.

These fifty years have shown a marvelous change for the better. The proportion of those who are compelled to live under uncivilising and inhuman conditions has declined steadily, year by year. Nevertheless there are still many focal points, many whole districts scattered throughout the city where men and women and children are still herded together in a way which is not right, according to the standards of 1930.

We have a definite goal- the elimination of these conditions altogether- the seeking within our own lifetime of the day when we can say to the world; New York is a city without slums; New York is a city where every one of its 10,000,000 people can have living conditions which guarantee to them air and light and sanitation; New York is the first American city to get rid of the stigma of the slum.

You agencies who may be regarded as expert and interested in the problems of transportation and its sister, trade, are of necessity in a position where you can help to a very great degree in the working out of the plans to bring an approach to this goal- the dwelling places of the inhabitants of our city linked up with the places where our people pursue their daily tasks. There is, indeed, a trinity of problems: the dwelling places, the working places, and transportation, the connecting link between the two. It is for this that I appeal to you to do your very necessary part in this undertaking which is bound in the next few years to demand the attention of the public of the city and of the state.

At New York Board of Trade Luncheon, New York City, February
28, 1930

Better Housing Conditions

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