
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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Notes for Jefferson Day Speech

Radio Address to Thirty Luncheons in Honor of Thomas Jefferson,
April 12, 1930 # 394

The Principles of Jefferson and Their Present Application

p. 726
It is entirely fitting that Americans should gather together at this time each year to honor the memory of Thomas Jefferson, not only because he was one of the great founders of our country, but particularly because Thomas Jefferson represented a school of political thought, the principles of which are as applicable today as they were in the early days of the country.

Thomas Jefferson believed in the rule of the majority of all of the people. He opposed the minority of owners of plantations and estates which sought to vest control of the new government solely in its own class.

Thus, from the very beginning there has been a sharp division in American political thought. Jefferson believed that when the people were wholly informed on any issue, the decision of the majority would be right. He did not hold with the theory that only those of wealth and position were fit to rule. He wanted the ballot extended to the fast growing number of artisans and mechanics who were then generally without the vote because of various

property qualifications. It was Jefferson's leadership which won for all classes the right to participate in government and made this country a Democracy.

But there are influences at work today which tend to nullify the principles for which Jefferson stood. Probably the most serious is the failure of a large part of our population to take an interest in political affairs except when aroused on some particularly popular issue. As a result of this tendency toward apathy on the part of those entitled to vote, we are frequently governed by minorities. In recent years especially we have seen the effectiveness with which organized minorities have shaped legislation and dominated elections. This tendency can only be overcome by a general realization of the danger to our whole system of government when we are indifferent except in cases where we are directly affected.

It was always the intention of the founders of our government that minorities should be represented and their views heard, but the basic theory of a Democracy is that the majority shall rule. Not only through indifference on the part of the mass of the voters do minorities control government in some instances, however. We have in this State an unfair system of apportionment which gives control of the Legislature to a small group of reactionary Republican leaders who really constitute a minority.

When I refer to these Republican leaders in this State as representing a minority I do so advisedly. For ten of the past twelve years the Governor and most of the elected State officials have been Democrats, elected because they stood for liberal principles in which the majority of the people of the State believed. Even last Fall, when there was no general election and no issues of State-wide moment figured in the campaigns, the Democratic party polled more votes for candidates for Assembly, by about 35,000 than did the Republican candidates. Nevertheless, we have had to contend with a Republican majority in the Legislature and much excellent legislation, legislation demanded by the majority of the people, has been defeated as a result.

Despite this handicap, however, during these Democratic administrations the people have made themselves heard, first on one issue and then on another, and although it has been difficult at times, the force of public opinion has driven through many progressive measures, some of them in the session which came to a close early this morning.

So I am far from discouraged. I am sure that next year or the year after, or possibly two years after, every one of those measures which we who believe in the principles of Thomas Jefferson want to see enacted into law will be passed. I am confident, for instance, that the people will demand that the opposing party in the Legislature submit a constitutional amendment for a four year term for Governor; an amendment for lengthening the terms of Senators and Assemblymen and for biennial sessions of the Legislature. I feel sure we will some day get a minimum or fair wage board for women and children in industry. I am certain we will place all occupational diseases under workmen's compensation, instead of the few rare and unusual cases which come under the law at present. I am hopeful public opinion will force the minority which is a legislative majority to declare that the labor of human beings is not a commodity to be restricted by laws governing commodities and that the injunction may be used only within limitations in labor disputes. These are just a few of the measures which public opinion still has to place on our statute books if we are to value human rights above property rights.

You see, it is that same old conflict which Thomas Jefferson faced. Jefferson believed in human rights, above property rights, the rights of men above the rights of possessions. Today we have selfish groups which have been able to block much important and human legislation because some property rights would be interfered with, because some employer's pocket-book would be affected if he had to pay a living wage in every instance, or if he had to pay a workman who became ill from some cause associated with the kind of work he was doing.

But we have made a great deal of progress in recent years. We have placed on the statute books many measures which I am sure would have had the support of Thomas Jefferson were he alive. Just a couple of days

ago it was my pleasure to sign New York's first Old Age Security Law. At the time, I said I believed it was an historic occasion, and I believe it will be so considered, although the law is far from as complete as I should like to have seen it. The old age security plan is an excellent example of the effect of aroused public sentiment. For several years little groups have sought to get for New York's needy aged a system of old age relief which would not smack of charity. At first the Republican party was solidly opposed to these proposals, but the Democratic party, holding human rights above property rights, wrote a plank in its platform declaring for an old age pension system.

When I was nominated for Governor a year and a half ago, you may remember I was down South and I was nominated on a platform which I did not see. I was most happy to find on my return that the platform contained an old age plank, for I had advocated such a system for a long time. In the campaign I pledged myself to use every effort to obtain a pension system for this State and when the Legislature convened, I asked for the creation of a commission to devise a plan. That commission, as you know, submitted a plan to the Legislature and so great was the interest which had been stirred up, that the Republicans joined with the Democrats in passing it. I hope that the law can later be amended to make the system a more ideal one.

Likewise, after many years of unceasing efforts the people have at last won assurance that the State-owned electric power resources on the St. Lawrence will be developed by the State in the interest of all the people. Here again, public development of waterpower was blocked by selfish interests which dominated the other party until the people as a whole became so insistent the Legislature was forced to recognize their voice. As a result, I am shortly to appoint a commission which will prepare a plan for public development for submission to the next Legislature.

I am sorry I cannot report a sweeping revision of the Public Service Commissions Law as another accomplishment of this Legislature. Some important changes were made, but the public service bills of the majority leaders as finally passed in the closing hours of the session, being weak to start with, were made wholly futile by amendments insisted upon by the utility companies. I am afraid we must wait until public opinion is more fully aroused before we can get a public service law which truly represents the will of the majority, a law which, if passed, will result in lower electric light and telephone bills for the household users, and at the same time give to the companies a fair return, not on imaginary values but on the actual investment they have made.

Be very certain that we are carrying on an age old conflict for the square deal for the average man and woman, and that if Thomas Jefferson, the great advocate of the greatest good for the greatest number, were alive today, he would give us his support and wish us Godspeed. Keep up the good fight. We are on the side of right and right will prevail.

The Jefferson

Albany Jefferson Day
Dinner

Tenth Infantry Armory

April 12th 1930

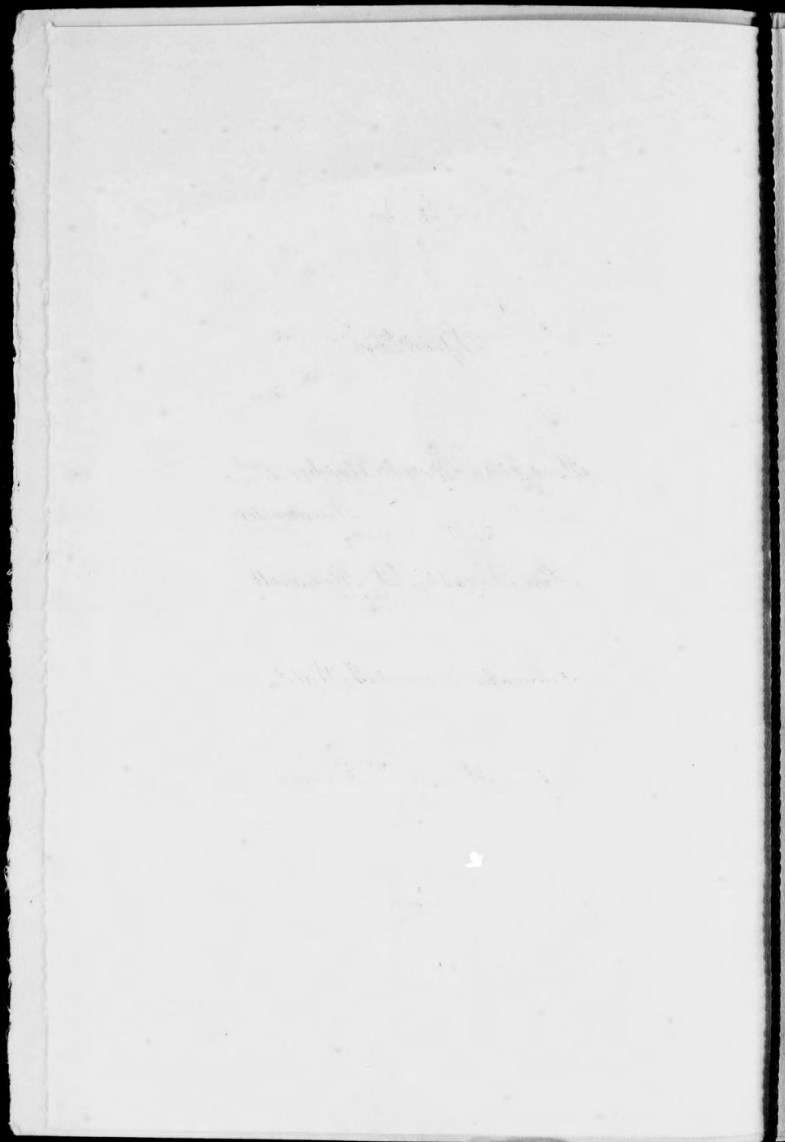
Speakers

*Hon. John Boyd Thacher, 2nd
Toastmaster*

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt

Senator David F. Walsh

Hon. Herbert H. Lehman



Menu

Cream of Celery, aux Croutons

Celery

Olives

Larded Sirloin of Beef, Mushroom Sauce

Garden Peas, Country Style

Pissole Potatoes

Hearts of Lettuce, Russian Dressing

Neapolitan Ice Cream

Cakes

Coffee

Autographs

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John Boyd Thacher, 2nd

Honorary Chairman

John J. Murphy

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Stanley Williams

Rensselaer Taylor

- (1 Prisons)
- (2 Banks)
- 3 Judicial Reforms
- (4 State Police)

(5 Ports)

6. Agriculture

(7 Highways)

8. Old Age

(9. Census)

10 Labor

11. St. Lawrence

12. Congress - Telephone

(13 Savings)

14 Bureaucracy

Budget

11 teleph

Local government

elections