
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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ADDRESSES

American System of Party Government, at Democratic Victory Dinner, Hotel Astor, New York City, January 14, 1932

At the Jackson Day Dinner in Washington last Friday, Mr. John W. Davis described Governor Smith, Governor Cox and himself as fellow victims. I too belong in the same category because of the privilege which fell to my lot in 1920 of being on the Democratic National ticket. The experience of National candidacy seems to agree with us for I can report that all four of us are lively enough corpses to do our individual and collective utmost for the success of Democracy in 1932.

In other words, all the living former Democratic candidates for the Presidency or the Vice-Presidency are peculiarly fitted to speak at these victory dinners which are being held tonight in every part of the country. Other people like John Raskob and Clem Shaver and George White and Homer Cummings have had to sit behind the big desk and pull the strings, rake in the shekels, borrow the money and pay it all out again. But we unfortunately who had to travel up and down the length and breadth of the land, making speeches, prepared and impromptu, from train platforms, from automobiles, in great halls and at country crossroads, in fair weather and in foul, at all hours of the day and night—we ex-candidates can appeal to Democrats everywhere, if only on the ground that we have the right to command your sympathy.

It has been suggested to me that at these victory banquets tonight all the speakers may be so overcome with the opportunity of making political orations that they will wholly forget the main purpose of the dinner. Therefore, lest I forget, let me speak to you very informally and very simply for a few moments in regard to a fundamental of the American system of party government. We can indeed go back to the organization of the Democratic Party itself.

In the first administration of George Washington, it was without doubt the hope of the President and of many of the leaders of the Nation that the affairs of the young republic could be conducted without dividing on the inherited British method of party lines. Almost immediately, however, two schools of thought made their appearance; and it became inevitable that the affairs of government could be conducted only by a proper presentation of these schools of thought to the electorate itself.

Many people in the new Nation opposed the Hamiltonian principle—that a small element in the population, composed of the rich, of the well-educated and of the aristocratic families, should constitute a ruling class—but they found an immediate obstacle to effective opposition in the fact that what we would call today the "machinery of publicity" lay almost wholly in the hands of the conservative, privileged group—the political ancestors of the Republican leadership of today.

It was Thomas Jefferson and the friends of Jefferson who first organized a deliberate campaign of education on public affairs. Their sinews of war were meager; their newspapers few and far between. Their appeal was not to those who by virtue of position and education had daily contacts with the affairs of government—their appeal was to the average citizen in the small town and in the vast areas of the country districts in both the North and the South, and from the Atlantic seaboard westward to the settlers who had braved the crossing of the great chain of the Appalachian Mountains.

It was Jefferson and his friends who undertook the superhuman task of disseminating a knowledge of the fundamentals of government to the masses of the people by what might well be called a system of chain letters, by the printing of hundreds of thousands of leaflets and pamphlets, by sending out speakers on horseback into every hamlet and to every farmhouse.

Thus came into being the Democratic Party; by 1800 it was an effective vehicle for the expression of political thought in all the 16 states which then made up the Union.

From that day to this the party has endured through sunshine and storm, and from that day to this it has sought to maintain two of the fundamentals of Jefferson; first, that it could succeed only if in its determination of issues and in its presentation of candidates for office it represented a control not by self-appointed leaders, not by selfish groups, but a control representative of a cross-section of the rank and file which made up its membership; and, secondly, success depended on spreading a knowledge of its principles before the voters of the Nation.

This great principle of the dissemination of facts and of knowledge has been splendidly recognized by the present chairman of the Democratic National Committee. I think that every Democrat appreciates to the full the organizing of a headquarters in Washington by Mr. Raskob three years ago for the purpose of presenting to the public information regarding our national affairs. I am confident also that the effective work of this bureau has been appreciated by millions of those who are not affiliated with our party but who approve presentation of both sides of national problems and national remedies. To Mr. Raskob we owe a debt of gratitude for making this work possible.

We recognize at the same time that it is neither democratic in us as Democrats nor fair to him as an individual to ask that either he or any other individual shall be called upon by a party with a membership running high into the millions to be solely responsible for a continuation of the task. The principles of the party belong to the party as a whole; the duty of enunciating those principles belong to the party as a whole; the responsibility for keeping the machinery going to fulfill that duty is a responsibility of the party as a whole.

That is the underlying reason that members of the party are meeting tonight in many places to start what we are rightly calling a victory campaign. The appeal is not, as in the case of our Republican brethren, to the rich alone, to those few who though perhaps they may have the means have no right to be the sole custodians of the party itself. It is an appeal rather to the rank and file of a party which has continued to exist through more than six generations because its foundations are laid in the first instance in the membership of the party rather than in a few chosen or self-appointed leaders.

If any word from me is needed by way of hearty endorsement of this victory campaign, directed to the whole membership of the party in every state of this Union, you have that word. I hope to see the day when there will be a greater recognition on the part of our rank and file that the party is theirs; that the responsibility for its maintenance is theirs; and that the dissemination of knowledge of our principles should be conducted through their own material aid and assistance.

May I add one further thought on this subject: The existence in the national capitol of a headquarters of Democracy occupied year in and year out, and not just in presidential years, in telling to the people of America the current history of Democracy—that very fact will mean much to the party also in its lesser units in state, in county and in city. It will mean that our candidates for Congress, our candidates for Governor, our candidates for mayor, our party organization everywhere will obtain a deeper understanding of fundamentals and will be able to offer better promises and better accomplishments in the cause of decent and efficient government than ever before. Let us return with conscious purpose to the objectives of Thomas Jefferson and his friends in 1796. Let us strive for the ideal of placing before every man and every woman voter in every part of the

country the opportunity at least of knowing the principles of our party. If they do not agree with those principles; if they decide that they prefer other principles and other men, we can be satisfied with the knowledge that we have done our best honestly, clearly and without malice.

Campaigns in the United States have at times been won by an appeal to prejudice, by an appeal to ignorance, by the picturing of principles in false colors, by the presentation of candidates dressed in borrowed clothes. Prejudice cannot live if the facts are known; secrets cannot be hidden if they are shouted from the hilltop. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Hand in hand with the campaign to spread knowledge and thereby in the long run to eliminate prejudice, we have a further task as a party—so to conduct ourselves that we shall never be made the object of the accusation that we have dealt our opponents a blow below the belt. I refer especially and specifically to many men and women in the United States, members of both great parties; men and women using the vehicles of conversation, of books, of magazines and of the daily press, who have forgotten their sense of fair play and at the same time the fact that their victim of the moment is the President of the United States. That they do this in jest or without thought is but poor excuse.

I deplore the tendency to blame all our present troubles on the President. He is perhaps the victim of a theory which holds that the control of the Republican Party reins entitles the holders to use that historic party for the purposes of personal gain. He and his associates have perhaps shown incapacity to contribute leadership in the solving of a national crisis. The battle of the Democracy is pointed not at the rank and file of the historic Republican Party, but at those who today direct its policies; but the battle of the Democracy can never tolerate abuse heaped against the person of the President of the United States.

Party organization in its essentials is built on the same plan as government itself—Federal, state and local. In the same way party government must and should strive for a proper separation and at the same time a proper co-ordination of these three functions. I might illustrate my thought by a current problem which faces every part of our country today. After a period of spending by every form of government—Federal, state and local—we have come to the day when that spending becomes no longer possible. For many years receipts of government from hundreds of sources of taxation filled the treasuries of government with easy income. Today the wells of tax supply have decreased their flow and everywhere the executive and legislative officials are faced with the problem of balancing budgets. In solving this problem these constitutional officers are seeking new sources of taxation, and to nearly all of them is being brought home the forgotten facts that sources of taxation are not without limit and that these sources of taxation cannot with impunity be tapped simultaneously by every kind of government.

We see, for example, recommendations by the Federal administration and by state administrations for the increase of taxes or the levying of new taxes on the same source—the Federal government and the state governments moving at one and the same moment on the payers of income taxes, on the payers of inheritance taxes, on the payers of corporation taxes, on the payers of commodity taxes, on the payers of taxes on realty. The result is confusion; the result is bitterness; the result is unfairness. We have no system; we have no delimitation. Federal and state governments vie with each other in taxing the same source. State and local governments vie with each other in duplicating taxes on the same property.

We have heard much in recent years about business in government and yet I note that those who have been loudest in proclaiming that government should be conducted by business men have had neither the courage nor the intelligence to suggest that the whole taxing system of America be put on a business basis. The time has come when driven by necessity, if for no other reason, America must face this task. The time has come for the 48 sovereignties which have created the Federal machinery of government

to say to Washington: "Let us follow the original principle established in the Constitution in 1787: That the states give to the Federal government certain specific powers and reserve to themselves all other powers. Apply that to the great problem of taxation. We, the 48 sovereignties, must say to each other and to the Federal government, let us counsel together; let us establish for times of peace a definite apportionment of the whole field of taxation. To the Federal government we will give adequate sources of taxation to meet the administrative needs of the Federal government as a government of definite delegated powers. All other sources of taxation we the states, reserve unto ourselves. When that is accomplished it will be possible for the state sovereignties to scan this reserved field of tax sources and to determine which elements in that field can with propriety and justice be allocated as tax sources to local government—to cities and counties and villages and towns."

If we can accomplish this; if we can take even the first steps on this path, the Democratic Party will have accomplished two great results: First, we shall have established a new principle in the progressive improvement of all government within our borders on lines of common sense, of business administration and of a clear line of demarcation between the National government and the states; and secondly, we shall have given to the individual citizen a clearer understanding of and therefore a greater responsibility for the maintenance of the credit structure of each of the governmental units. Furthermore, and of equal importance, by dividing and clarifying the tax sources of government, we shall lift from the backs of legitimate enterprise burdens which in many cases are unfair and inequitably distributed. I have an example immediately at hand. This very week I have recommended to the Legislature of this State four sources of additional revenue, each one of them an increase in existing taxes. Neither I nor the Legislature has any knowledge of whether the Federal government a month or two hence may or may not impose taxes on precisely these same sources. In the same way, neither the Legislature nor I can, until this uncertainty is cleared up, take any practical steps to turn over any of our own town tax sources to the local government units to help them out in the conduct of their local affairs. Even if the State were to allocate new tax sources to the cities or counties or towns, the whole system could be destroyed over night by a sudden taxing of those same sources by Washington.

If we believe in the Democratic doctrine that the functions of our government should be exercised to stimulate not "big business" nor "little business" but all enterprise so as to prevent unfair aggressions by the strong against the weak; if we believe that we must return to the principle of giving an equal chance to everyone, without preferring one over the other, we must insist that this foundation principle be observed by those in control of government. So only can we translate a depression into a mere transition period before we construct a sounder economic edifice.

The destinies and welfare of ourselves and our children are profoundly involved in the initiative and the vision of those charged with the responsibilities of government during the coming year. The Democratic Party asks that responsibility in no spirit of over-confidence, in no spirit of mere partisanship. It seeks to lead because it is more representative of the people as a whole. It believes that in greater measure it can bring to the people attainment of their welfare and of their ideals.

Here is a victory dinner. Let us pledge ourselves to a victory not for party alone, but for the good of the American people.