
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension

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**Richmond, VA -
Address to Governors' Conference**

Washington as the symbol and inspiration for present day America, before the Conference of Governors, Richmond, Virginia, Wednesday, April 27, 1932

Governor Pollard, my Fellow Executives, and you my Friends of Virginia:

In the olden days the welcome of the fathers and mothers of Virginia drew hither guests from all the colonies and from all the nations of Europe: you, Governor Pollard, you the people of the Commonwealth of today are giving to us a welcome of equal sincerity, a welcome which we and our families appreciate to the full and will always cherish. Ask us again, and we will come.

At this hour when the purposes of civilization are challenged; when unrest is apparent; when new problems and new valuations call for a new leadership, it is well for America to view again the honor, the purity and the unselfish devotion of him who became the keystone in the making of the Nation, and who rightly won the imperishable title of Father of his Country.

In many ways this great gathering in the Capitol of Virginia constitutes the perfect tribute to the memory of George Washington. To this Commonwealth of his birth have come the Chief Executives of the Sovereignities of the Nation he founded to join with Governor Pollard and with you, his fellow-Virginians, in re-creating in our hearts a deeper understanding of one who, by the Grace of God, continues to shed his influence upon mankind. You my fellow Governors, representing not the 13 original states alone, but states which include vast territories that were unknown and unexplored in the days of the founding of the American Republic—you have equal right

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in our common heritage; and I am certain that the gallantry of Virginia will permit to the State of New York a natural pride in the thought that during the War of the Revolution, and later at the founding of constitutional government, General and President Washington's service to his country lay so greatly in my State.

I call tonight's great gathering a perfect tribute because I am confident that Washington himself would have desired a national tribute. His every prayer, his every thought, his every action, which related to his fellow men—all were founded upon a breadth of view and a breadth of vision that allowed no part to obscure the whole.

I like to believe that at this very hour his spirit is dwelling among us, helping us to turn away from sordid desires, and summoning us to a renewal of the ancient faiths.

It is generally agreed that more has been said and written about George Washington than about any other American. His biographers constitute a varied multitude, from the dry-as-dust scholastic who spends a life upon minutiae, to the "humanizer" who in brisk patois seeks to clothe the Eighteenth Century gentleman in the latest garb of the modern, and not, it seems to me, to the end that we shall understand him any the better.

Far more interesting and, I believe, infinitely more profitable, is what Washington wrote and said and did himself. He made no pretense to oratory or to authorship, and yet in perfect detail and with painstaking industry Washington himself has set forth for us the wisdom of his life. Examination easily puts to rest an all too prevalent impression that Washington was an emblem merely, and that Hamilton and others constituted the real directing genius of that great era. His own letters indicate the extent to which the policies of these brilliant minds were in the last analysis given initial shape and direction by Washington himself. If one will but read he will see the extent to which Washington, in his painstaking way and enlightened by a vast experience, actually directed the making of a nation. Out of his letters emerges the man himself. One is struck by that habit of forceful but homely expression in which, while still a mere boy, he tells us of the assuming of great responsibilities, of his deep interest in the developing of the western lands, of his seeking after every kind of knowledge.

This diversity of knowledge, which, after all, in the foundation stone of his superbly realistic statesmanship, came from the fact that he was probably the most traveled man in the colonies.

My mind has perhaps unconsciously given first emphasis to Washington, the traveler, because we Governors in the space of three days have been given the privilege of seeing more of the old Dominion's territory and landmarks than he could have covered in three weeks. It was perhaps fortunate for our life and limb and comfort that we have substituted a motorized caravan on splendid concrete roads for the chaise, the coach and the saddle on red clay roads.

We remember that before he was 21 he had learned so well the hardships and the promise of the frontier life that his own Governor of Virginia gave to him the responsibility of bearing the message to the French and the Indians around what is now Pittsburgh, that they must withdraw from the Ohio Basin. We remember that he was with Braddock, that he exhibited a native military skill in the face of great odds and a personal vitality and courage in the hour of conflict.

But we are apt to forget all those other journeyings in other years. There was hardly a moment that Washington was not, as he called it, "ranging and scouring the frontiers." He went far west into his own state, north into Pennsylvania, almost to Lake Erie, east into Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. In 1770, for the purpose of locating lands granted to the soldiers of the French and Indian War, Washington journeyed down the Ohio River—the Indian wilderness—carefully judging the land there and viewing himself, wherever possible, the waterways which were so important in his plan for colonizing and developing the West. Other trips took him down into North Carolina, up to New York.

Later, the story of his travels during the Revolutionary War is the story of the travels of the National Army. They are too well known to need repetition here. It is enough to say that when the war had ended, Washington knew his Nation better than any other man of his time. Well could he say: "I have seen with mine own eyes—now do I understand!"

No other President has brought to his office a more complete knowledge of the country—and most of it acquired on horseback at that! Yet, notwithstanding his unique equipment, President Washington decided that it was one of "the duties of (his) station to visit every part of the United States in the course of (his) administration of government." He wanted "to acquire knowledge of the face of the country, the growth and agriculture thereof, and the temper and disposition of the inhabitants themselves."

His many journeys carried him north to Crown Point in New York; south to Savannah in Georgia; west to Gallipolis in Ohio; east to Boston and to Kittery in Maine. A student of his travels has recently plotted, after months of careful research, the routes followed. That map shows that Washington covered vast distances, keeping in mind the means of transportation of those days.

This first President of ours was enormously in touch with his United States—the states that he, perhaps more than any individual, made united in fact.

Extraordinarily for an individual, he animated his country, motivated it, inspired it. In the eyes of universal adulation he became its symbol. The special point is—that he did all of this at first-hand: he did nothing vicariously; he delegated next to nothing in his Americanization.

He knew at this same first-hand every geographical section of the colonies he made into a nation. Even in these days of Pullmans, motor-cars and airplanes such itineraries would be a remarkable achievement on the part of a public man half as busy as he was.

This sketch map of his ubiquitous travels looks like an inter-lacing of the nerves of the American body-politic. Along these nerves, radiating into all parts of the Nation, Washington lived and moved and had his being. To repeat: most of the mileage he made on horseback; no limousine roof over his head to shut out sky and cloud and sun and stars. He rode erect, open-eyed and slowly. As he rode he had a chance to see, to observe, to note and to learn—afterwards well to remember.

While he loved best the serene life of a master farmer at Mount Vernon, it was not given him to enjoy such peace for any considerable time. His life was a succession of long, arduous periods of public service. For six years, military duties relating to the conflict with the French and Indians exacted his energies and at times seriously endangered his health. For the next 16 years his life at Mount Vernon was more and more disturbed by that growing spirit of revolt against the mother country which stirred the colonies. Then the eight years of revolution with its interludes of despair and disaster. When peace with England came, the affairs of the young nation were still critical and nearly six years were given to the making of the new nation. Finally, eight years of the Presidency—perhaps the most arduous of all. It is difficult to find any parallel in history for this career, made up of a hard succession of tasks, each, it would seem, harder than its predecessor. It was a lifetime of stern and seemingly endless difficulties. Other lives in other nations and other times have been similarly filled with action and with tasks—America has no Caesar, America has no Charlemagne, America has no Henry the Eighth, America has no Napoleon, America has no Lenin: America prefers and always will prefer her Washington.

When he laid down the care of office in 1797, he had completed practically 45 years of service—for his country and his countrymen—a period covering a succession of infinitely critical times of stress. In spite of a constant burden of treachery, of injustice, of slander and criticism and often of the stupidity of his associates, he maintained—with a few exceptions, when he displayed delightfully human fits of temper—a calm and patient devotion to fundamental issues.

We who have suffered ourselves the pains of public criticism can realize what he meant when he said toward the end of his long career, that he had been "assailed in such exaggerated and indecent terms as could scarcely be applied to a Nero, a notorious defaulter or even to a common pickpocket."

He met his problems by patient and informed planning, enlightened by a lively imagination but restrained by practical prudence. This practical and prudential manner of working has made him seem to many historians ultra-conservative, but careful examination of his policies shows that they were far-reaching and liberal for the time and circumstances under which he was working.

Speculation for example was prevalent during his career. Some of this, of course, was unavoidable in a period of rapid expansion in a virgin and immature country, but its effect on the industry and habits of the people and on normal economic affairs he deeply deplored. In writing to Jefferson in 1788, he said: "I perfectly agree with you that an extensive speculation, a spirit of gambling, or the introduction of any thing which will divert our attention from agriculture must be extremely prejudicial if not ruinous to us." Some of my fellow Governors have given voice to this same thought during these past three days.

With respect to the rise of manufacturing, he did not commit himself to a governmental policy of encouraging only manufacturing, constantly pointing out that manufacturing should be considered as an aid to what he conceived to be the dominant economy of the country—agriculture. In a letter to Lafayette, he stated in substance, that he would regret to see manufacturing draw vast numbers of workers from the land, and that he felt that such a result was not necessary.

Washington repeatedly emphasized the responsibility of government for the encouragement of agriculture. This real Father of his Country spoke repeatedly of the wisdom of developing agricultural aid and, in 1796, his message said: "It will not be doubted, that, with reference either to individual or national welfare, agriculture is of primary importance. In proportion as nations advance in population and other circumstances of maturity, this truth becomes more apparent, and renders the cultivation of the soil more and more an object of public patronage." What a pity that recent national leadership and, therefore, recent national thought has so little heeded that precept!

Because he saw that agriculture was a thing that was not susceptible to the principles of competition, it followed for him that it was intimately related to and dependent on governmental policy. Consequently, in his magnificent matter-of-fact manner, he reasoned directly from what he saw to what he thought ought to be done by the government, not disturbing his mind by mere efforts to reconcile conflicting schools of economic theory. It is some such matter-of-fact attitude that modern statesmen might apply in greater measure to public problems. To concern ourselves less with theory and more with a realism based on the hard lessons of experience, is to serve well the memory of Washington and also the fundamental interests of popular government.

Of the nationalism that dominated Washington's policies, another Virginian President said, speaking at the darkest moment of the Great War, July 4, 1918, at Washington's tomb in Mount Vernon: "It is significant—significant of their own character and purpose and of the influences they were setting afoot—that Washington and his associates, like the barons at Runnymede, spoke and acted not for a class, but for a people. . . . They entertained no private purpose, desired no advantage." So spoke your President and mine—Woodrow Wilson.

This absence of sectionalism, together with his interest in the means of knitting the scattered people of the new nation together, was the imperishable contribution of Washington. And it was born, as we know, of a firm and accurate knowledge. He saw that nothing could be gained by preaching a mere theory of unity. He first grasped the units and then sought the means of union. He identified the sections and interests, sought with a sympathetic and penetrating mind their special problems and needs and stated them with fairness and courage. Then he sought whether by

roads or waterways or by less material instrumentality of education, the means of national unity. First identify, then unify. "The separate interests," he said, "as far as it is practicable, must be consolidated; and local views must be attended to, as far as the nature of the case will admit. If the union of the whole is a desirable object, the component parts must yield a little in order to accomplish it."

It is of interest to note at this Conference of Governors the essential part of a circular letter addressed by him to the Governors of the states at the close of the War of the Revolution. He said: "With this conviction of the importance of the present crisis, silence in me would be a crime. I will therefore speak to Your Excellencies the language of freedom and of sincerity without disguise. . . . There are four things which I humbly conceive are essential to the well being, I may even venture to say, to the existence, of the United States, as an independent power:

First. An indissoluble union of the states under one Federal head.

Second. A regard to public justice.

Third. The adoption of a proper peace establishment; and,

Fourth. The prevalence of that pacific and friendly disposition among the people of the United States which will induce them to forget their local prejudices and policies; to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity; and in some instances to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the community."

Nearly a century and a half later we, as Governors, can accept that calm advice from our first President. We can accept from him those fine fundamentals, and learn from him that theory without practical action moves a nation but a short distance along the path of progress.

When that early morning march on Trenton got under way in the darkness and snow of a Christmas night in 1776, Sullivan sent word to Washington that the muskets were wet and could not be discharged—"Tell the General," was Washington's reply,—"use the bayonet. The city must be taken."

Washington would have us test his policies by present needs, not by a blind and unreasoning devotion to mere tradition just so long as the fundamental is sound. Certainly he did not permit himself to be bound by the past. He met one great critical challenge after another by a calm appraisal of the facts and an ever refreshed knowledge of the social and economic condition of the people of his country—all the people, high, middle and low—and in so doing, he faced more than one unpleasant truth, when a less great man would have clouded his vision by a lazy optimism.

Our styles may change, our means of unity are ever transformed by mechanical invention and by increasing knowledge. To the roads and waterways of his age and generation are now added railroads, air transportation, the telegraph and telephone, the radio and that portentous and enormously valuable national interest, giant electrical power. To surround new means of national usefulness with proper safeguards and legitimate assistance is the way of a statesmanship that depends upon knowledge and facts rather than theory and prejudice. We need education, justice, foreign relations, all cut to the pattern of modern necessity, but above all, unity in the spirit and form of Washington's common sense. . . . A unity based upon a deep and sympathetic knowledge of differences; for knowledge puts away fear, and fear is the father of disunion.

May his spirit watching over us here in his native state and his native land breathe upon us his courage, his sympathy, his knowledge, to the end that we, his children, may safeguard and foster through all the years the great trust he has given into our keeping.

Join me in therefore these, his words:

That your union and brotherly affection may be perpetual; that the free Constitution which is the work of your hands may be sacredly maintained; that its administration may be stamped with wisdom and virtue; that, in fine, the happiness of the people of these states under the auspices of liberty may be made complete—this is my unceasing prayer to Heaven.

GUERNSEY T. CROSS, Secretary to the Governor

STATE OF NEW YORK

EXECUTIVE CHAMBER

ALBANY

GOVERNOR FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT'S SPEECH BEFORE THE CONFERENCE OF

GOVERNORS - WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 1932

Governor Pollard, my fellow Executives, and you my friends
of Virginia:

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of a hard succession of tasks, each, it would seem, harder than its predecessor. It was a lifetime of stern and seemingly endless difficulties. Other lives in other nations and other times have been similarly filled with action and with tasks - America has no Caesar, America has no Charlemagne, America has no Henry the Eighth, America has no Napoleon, America has no Lenin: America prefers and always will prefer her Washington.

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May his spirit watching over us here in his native State and his native land breathe upon us his courage, his sympathy, his knowledge, to the end that we his children may safe-guard and foster through all the years the great trust he has given unto our keeping.

Join me in therefore these his words:

"That your union and brotherly affection may be perpetual; that the free constitution which is the work of your hands may be sacredly maintained; that its administration may be stamped with wisdom and virtue; that, in fine, the happiness of the people of these States under the auspices of liberty may be made complete - this is my unceasing prayer to Heaven."