

April 24, 1934

[Remarks following Visit to Home Subsistence Auditorium of Commerce Bldg.]

FDR Speech File

INFORMAL EXTEMPORANEOUS REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
FOLLOWING HIS VISIT TO THE HOME SUBSISTENCE EXHIBITION
AUDITORIUM OF THE COMMERCE BUILDING

April 24, 1934

(Mrs. Roosevelt and a number of the Members
of the Cabinet were present.)

Ladies and gentlemen:

It would have been a great deal better if Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes and some of the others had spoken first because at least I could have had a cue. The only cue I have had this afternoon was a baseball game that was called on account of rain.

This particular subject that we are here today to talk about and to visualize happens to be one of my own pet children. It goes back in my own life a great many years. I think it goes back, so far as I am concerned, to a privilege that I once had. It was the privilege of running for Vice President and being defeated.

It is a privilege for this reason: During three months in the year 1920 I think I spent eighty-nine out of ninety-two days on a sleeping car. I went to forty-two states in the Union. I drove literally thousands of miles by automobile and I got to know the country as only a candidate for national office or a

travelling salesman can get to know it.

In that trip, the one great impression I got of our country was that it had grown up like Topsy without any particular planning. People over a period of three hundred years had been wandering around from one section to another, opening up new territory, starting new industries, haphazardly.

And because the country was so vast, during nearly all of those three hundred years nobody seemed to suffer very much because there were plenty of new opportunities in the way of new land and new industries that were available for generation after generation of our forebears. But as I went over the country I became impressed with the fact that in these latter days we had come, to a certain extent, to the end of that limitless opportunity of new places to go to and new sources of wealth to tap, of new industries to start almost anywhere, and new land to take up and that the time was ripe, even overripe, for the beginning of planning, planning to prevent in the future the errors of the past and planning to carry through in the future certain perfectly obvious economic and social needs that

were new to the country.

Then, later on, eight years later, I had the opportunity in the most populous state of the Union, a state which, after all, while we think of it sometimes as the site of the largest city in the country, at the same time is a state that ranks about fifth among all the forty-eight states in its agricultural wealth. We found in the state of New York that there was no planning and we began to visualize the fact that every acre of the thirty million acres within our borders was fit for something, that it ought to be used for some definite purpose and that it ought not to be used for a wrong purpose.

So, after somewhat of a tussle with the Legislature that did not understand what it was all about, after two years we persuaded the Legislature to make, to initiate a survey of every one of the thirty million acres in the state. As a result of that survey, which is still in progress and will take another ~~four~~ or five years to complete, we shall know in at least one state of the Union what every acre is most suited for.

At the same time, in making this survey, it was just as easy to make it a survey of human and social needs as it was to make it a survey of merely soil and trees and streams.

And we found, as you found in every state of the Union, little pockets of humanity, where the people came from good, sound stock, but where they never had had the opportunity of making good, the opportunity that their brothers and sisters in other communities that were more on the highways of commerce had and were using to the utmost.

These people off in the pockets of our States had never had a chance and so we undertook to find out who the people were that had not had a chance and then we came to another class of people, people in communities that were on the highways of traffic and of commerce and of social intercourse, but who had, for one reason or another, got stranded. They were in communities that had been prosperous a generation ago because of some specialty, because of some factory or industry which had either gone out of business or had been put out of the running through increased competition. There were hundreds and thousands of families in these stranded communities that had no opportunity again of living the right kind of modern, American life.

Now, that is just the story of one state and there are forty-eight of them. While we, as good Democrats, believe in the development of things by states,

nevertheless it is sometimes a very good thing to have some father and mother of the forty-eight states who will be able to tie in various suggestions, find the facts and lead in the development that is so necessary in our social and economic progress. That is why I am so very glad to see a number of the ladies and gentlemen from the Hill, as we call it here, because I am very certain that they appreciate that these great problems go beyond state lines and that national planning must be carried out.

I was told a few minutes ago that Henry Ford was asked what he thought of this great movement for what we call Subsistence Homestead, and he said, "It must be good because I could never make a success of it." And that is perfectly true. We are starting something absolutely new, something in which we have very little of experience to fall back on, something that has got to be developed through what I call evolution. When people talk to you about the word "revolution" in this country, you tell them that they have one letter too many in that word.

I say it is evolution because of this simple fact: I live in two states, in the country in New York and the country in Georgia. You cannot possibly make a

plan along the lines that we are making for the big objectives for the state of New York that would apply in Georgia, or vice versa. There are all kinds of planning, not just forty-eight plans, but probably a hundred of them, all of which should be tried out, some of which will succeed and others of which will fail.

By this system of trial and error we will evolve in this country, without any question, half dozen or a dozen methods of taking care of our stranded, underprivileged families and give them a chance to make good in a new environment. We will be able undoubtedly, by using a little gray matter -- brain trust or otherwise -- to discover a whole lot of new things that communities can do. Dr. Morgan, the Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, was talking to me this morning, and he said, "Let me give you an example. This does not apply to the Tennessee Valley Authority any more than it does to a great many other parts of the country that we have no jurisdiction over. There are certain sections in that Tennessee Valley where we can grow sweet potatoes which would be the finest in the world. But there is a limit to the sweet potatoes that people can eat. You cannot

eat them three meals a day every day in the year and continue to be healthy, so there is a limit to the amount that can be produced for that purpose. But we are seeking things to make that we can sell; we are seeking a greater business; we are seeking things that will bring in cash.

"Somebody, the other day, put his mind to work on this subject and discovered that laundry starch, made out of the sweet potato, is the best starch in the world and actually, today, we are importing the major part of our laundry starch from other countries."

Now, I am very much in favor of increasing both our exports and our imports, but I can go so far as to say that if we can develop a laundry starch business through the use of sweet potatoes and help those people and a great many others throughout the country where sweet potatoes are grown, it will be well worth while to make our own laundry starch instead of importing it from the outside. Now, that is a discovery three days old and every day that goes by somebody is inventing something, not a patentable invention, but finds some new outlet for the smaller communities in the country.

We have been talking about this tremendous development of our forests and we are going to buy, we are in the process of buying, twenty-five million dollars worth of forest areas to add to this great Government domain on national parks and forests. What are we going to do with it? There are a great many people who live on this land that the Government is going to buy. Are we just going to move them out and add to the congestion in other communities? Well, some of them may want to go out and if they want to go out, it is all right. But, after all, forestry is not merely the acquisition of land that has trees on it and the maintenance of that land in a state of nature for a thousand years to come. The land ought to be used. The trees ought to be used. Certain areas, of course, should be applied to public recreational purposes, but the other areas, the tree crop, should be used just as much as a crop of corn or wheat. It takes longer to grow, but that is the only difference.

There are other countries in the world that have scientific forestry in actual operation, countries whose civilizations go back three thousand instead of three hundred years. Every year they know that they have a perfectly

definite yield of timber, an annual crop. Well, what do they do in their forest areas? In a great many of those forest areas in Europe, populations are maintained which use the bottom land for the growing of their food supplies and which are guaranteed -- let us say that one member of every family in those forests is guaranteed a certain number of months of work in those forests by the state which owns the forest. Now, that is not driving people out of the forests; it is keeping people in the forests in an orderly way with an assurance of making an honest livelihood, of never starving and of having the opportunities of modern civilization.

Now I have said that this was evolution and experimental and I hope you people from the Congress who are here will realize that in these many, many experiments that we are going to try, several hundred of them all over the United States, some of them are going to work, most of them we hope are going to work, but some are not going to work because we have to discover as we go along which is the right way and which is the wrong way.

But, taking it by and large, it is going to be

an experiment from the dollars and cents point of view which is going to be far less costly to the taxpayer of the United States over a period of years than merely handing out money for relief purposes.

If, for example, we have a family that is unemployed in a city and that family requires relief in one form or another, for rent, for food and for clothes, say a bare minimum of five or six hundred dollars a year, and that family does not stand any chance of getting employment in the next five years or ten years, isn't it a whole lot cheaper for us to pay twelve hundred dollars or fifteen hundred dollars and make that family self-sustaining somewhere at the cost of two years of relief money? In other words, in one case you are making a permanent solution and in another case you are just carrying out the obligations of the Government year after year to see to it that the family does not starve.

I don't see why there is not greater enthusiasm for planning, except this: That the very word planning does not contain anything very spectacular about it and because it takes a good many years to see results. We are all very apt to go after the things in this life

that we can all throw up our hats and cheer about. We are very apt to favor the panaceas, suggested pieces of legislation which would cure all of our troubles in thirty days. I won't specify which they are, but we are lazy. We don't like to think ahead. And yet, it is the only solution! We have got to think ahead and I believe that more and more, learning as we go along, we are going to come to the conclusion that a very large proportion of our population is out of balance, that it is in the wrong place and that it is doing the wrong things.

Now, lest some of our friends cry, "regimentation", let me make it perfectly clear that we are not going to take people by force, against their wills, out of one occupation and put them in another, or take them out of one community and transplant them to another. We believe we can make this whole program so attractive and practical that we are going to find a great many more volunteers than we can possibly take care of. Just a year and a month ago we started an experiment called the Civilian Conservation Corps and there were a lot of Doubting Thomases. They said, "These boys from the cities, they do not want to go to camp. They do not want to

go and live in tents. They never saw an axe. They don't know anything about woods. What is more, they don't care anything about it. Three hundred thousand boys, why it is absurd! You cannot get them to go and if you do, they will run away the first night they are in camp." I said, "All right, let us try it." So we tried it. Well, what is the answer? Today, if we had the money in this country and if Congress would appropriate it, we would get a million boys to respond tomorrow to go to the Civilian Conservation Camps. (Applause)

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and there is only one objection I have got to this whole program and that is the name, "subsistence". A great many years ago, during the War, I was in England and Lloyd George was asking me how this country was getting on, and I said, "We are learning the meaning of the word 'cooperation'", and he said, "Mr. Secretary, I wish that in addition to learning the meaning of that word, I wish you inventive Americans would invent a new word for 'cooperation'." In the same way, I wish we could invent a new term to take the place of "subsistence". This work we are doing is not a matter of mere subsistence. Subsistence

is just the fact of being alive and we want something more for those families that we are going to give an opportunity to than that. And so I am going to put it up to you good people and if you have any ideas or any thoughts of new language to take the place of the words "subsistence farm" or "subsistence homestead", I am quite certain that the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture or the Administrator of Emergency Relief would be delighted to offer a prize for the winning name.

"Subsistence" does not connote the thought that any of us have in mind. It is not a question of keeping people from starvation. It is a matter that affects education, social contacts, a chance to live. It is the thing that we have called "the more abundant life" and even if it costs a little more money to see that these communities have American facilities in them, this Government is rich enough to provide the additional funds.
(Applause)

I had not meant to speak for more than three minutes, but this is, as I said before, one of my particular pet children, and I hope very much that you will act not merely as personally interested parties, but that

you, who are gathered here today, will go to every section of the United States, every state, every Congressional district, and explain what this is all about.

The great advantage of this from the political point of view is the fact that it affects every Congressional district, the country Congressional districts and the city Congressional districts; it hits them all right squarely between the eyes.

If we look at this from the broad national point of view, I believe we are going to make it a practical national policy of our Government that will take fifty years before we get through with it.

And so, my friends, I am going around now to look at some of the exhibits. I am already familiar with most of them. I can tell you this: That everything that is done along these lines not only has my official interest but my very deep personal interest, and I hope you will keep me in touch with the actual progress of the work we are undertaking. (Applause)

(It will be noted that on page 5 the President quoted from Henry Ford. Following his speech I was told by one of the officials who had evidently carried it to the President that the exact quotation is, "I am cocksure this thing is right because I myself have found it so difficult to do.")