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**Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”**  
**The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945**

**Series 2: “ You have nothing to fear but fear itself:” FDR  
and the New Deal**

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**File No. 1208**

**1939 March 14**

**Concerning the National Emergency Council -  
Recorded Statement with Lowell Mellett [U.S.  
Government Reports]**

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
LOWELL MELLETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE NATIONAL EMERGENCY COUNCIL

OPEN: MUSIC--("STARS AND STRIPES FOREVER")

(15 SECONDS--FADE FOR:)

ANNOUNCER: UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT REPORTS

MUSIC: (MUSIC UP--15 SECONDS--GRADUAL FADE OUT:)

ANNOUNCER: (OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT) 1 MINUTE

MELLETT: Mr. President, it is the purpose of the National Emergency Council, through the generous cooperation of broadcasting stations in all the States, to present reports by the members of your cabinet regarding the work of their respective departments. The first of these reports will be made by Secretary Hull next week when he will discuss the work of the Department of State.

Since this program is being arranged at your direction, we are asking you to make the opening announcement. The United States Government Manual, published by my department--price \$1.75--no more to you than to any other citizen, Mr. President --carries this foreword over your signature: (I quote) "Only through a clear understanding by every citizen of the objectives, organization and availability of the government agencies can they render truly effective service and assure progress toward economic security." That, I presume, sums up the reasons for

MELLETT:  
(CONTINUED)

these broadcasts, but you are asked now to elaborate the theory behind them and, if you can, to say all that again in shorter words.

THE PRESIDENT: I can say it in different words and, if not shorter, better words, the words of George Washington. In his farewell address to the people of the United States, he said: "Promote then as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge....In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened."

The course thus charted by our first president has been followed consistently since his time. Institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge have been promoted in many ways. The government, federal, state and local, has built schools, supported them financially and aided them in their efforts to make America a nation of educated people. The other most important institution for the diffusion of knowledge during the greater part of this period has been the press. The government's relation to the press has been different from its relation to the schools. Aside from some financial assistance, in the form of less-than-cost postal rates, the Government has supported the press chiefly by protecting its freedom. Whether or not we have the best schools in the

THE PRESIDENT:  
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world--and many of us think we have--it can hardly be disputed that we have the freest press. Government restrictions on the press amount to little more than laws to prevent the printing of obscene matter and articles calculated to incite rebellion. The press is as free as it cares to be or as its economic condition permits it to be.

But now, in our own time, there has come into being another great institution for the general diffusion of knowledge-- the radio. Still in its infancy it already rivals in importance the schools and the press. The government, as the people's agent, has had and has now a still different relation to radio from that toward the schools and the press. It has encouraged and aided its development on the one hand, and, on the other it has set up such controls of its operation as are necessary to prevent complete confusion on the air. In all other respects the radio is as free as the press.

Always the Government has endeavored to follow the suggestion of George Washington that the public be enlightened. Throughout the years it has made available to the press information that is essential to the people. But there has been and there is now a limit to the amount of such information that newspapers can print. Particularly is this true of newspapers published in cities of less than metropolitan size. Newspapers are business

THE PRESIDENT:  
(CONTINUED)

institutions, living on advertising revenue, and they are apt to be as large or as small as their advertising volume requires or permits. This is true and must be recognized, regardless of how seriously or how lightly an individual publisher may take his responsibility to keep the public fairly informed.

So, the Government, in our time, is turning to the radio as an additional means of meeting its obligation to the people. I have watched with interest and appreciation the manner in which the National Emergency Council during recent months has undertaken through the radio the diffusion of factual knowledge concerning government operations. May I ask you, Mr. Director, to report something of your operations?

MELLETT:

All of our broadcasts, Mr. President, have been on local stations, not on the networks. They have taken the form, for the most part, of discussions between State Directors of the National Emergency Council and field representatives of various government agencies. The effort has been to answer any question that may be in the mind of any citizen concerning any phase of the Government's work. Our office in Washington receives a multitude of such questions. Some of the agencies receive even more inquiries directly. So we feel we have reason to know what it is the people want to know. We try in these broadcasts to meet this desire.

MELLETT:  
(CONTINUED)

Beginning last summer with the cooperation of a few stations in a few States our undertaking had grown by winter to the point where stations in 42 States were working with us.

THE PRESIDENT: What Government agencies have made these reports to the people?

MELLETT: The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, the United States Employment Service, the Federal Housing Administration, the Army Engineers--

THE PRESIDENT: That looks like a long list. How many in all?

MELLETT: Forty in all. The present broadcast, Mr. President, and those to follow by members of your cabinet, take a somewhat different form. They will be electrical transcriptions, made here and sent out to the stations. Stations in every State have engaged to present them to their listeners.

THE PRESIDENT: It is hard for me to conceive of any method of diffusing knowledge that would more exactly meet the purpose our first president had in mind, even though radio had not been dreamed of in his time. I am sure the heads of the government departments will not fail to make good use of it. I like the idea of keeping the broadcasts entirely factual in character and the effort to answer the questions in the minds of the people.

THE PRESIDENT:  
(CONTINUED)

When I was Governor of New York I learned that the State Government was performing about 120 different functions of government. Here in Washington the Federal Government carries on about the same number of functions, most of them different forms of or supplementary to the usual State functions. It seems to me important that before the people pass on the size of or the question of continuing these functions they should have an opportunity to obtain some factual information about them. The people, through Congress, have the right, at any time, to end any individual function, to increase it or to add new functions. That is why knowledge of what Government does today is of such great importance.

It should be possible, too, through your broadcasts, to correct the kind of misinformation that is sometimes given currency for one reason or another. In some communities it is the unhappy fact that only through the radio is it possible to overtake loudly proclaimed untruths or greatly exaggerated half-truths. While, to be sure, the people have learned to discriminate pretty well between sober facts and exciting fiction, they have a right to expect their Government to keep them supplied with the sober facts in every possible way. It was heartening to hear your report concerning the questions the people put to the Government agencies. In that connection, please give the

THE PRESIDENT: figures of your own operation in this field.  
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MELLETT; Our United States Information Service during 1938 received slightly more than one hundred thousand letters of inquiry on a wide variety of subjects. The United States Superintendent of Documents received almost three times that many concerning government publications. I do not have the information as to all the departments and agencies, but an indication of the people's interest is given by the fact that the Department of Agriculture alone receives about 7,500 inquiries a day-- or more than two million a year.

THE PRESIDENT: May the interest of the people in the Government never grow less. I am sure it will not, for the people know the Government is their Government.

This is good work the National Emergency Council is doing,  
Mr. Director. Keep it up.

ANNOUNCER: (CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT)

MUSIC: ("STARS AND STRIPES FOREVER")  
(UNTIL FINISH)

*Franklin D. Roosevelt*  
(rec. reading copy)