January 10, 1941 [Women's National Press Club] 1354

FDR Speech File

EXTEMPORANEOUS ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL PRESS CLUB,
AT THE LUNCHEON
IN THE SMALL BALL ROOM OF THE WILLARD HOTEL,
JANUARY 10, 1941

MRS. ESSARY AND THE CLUB, LADIES, AND OCCASIONAL GENTLEMEN: (Laughter)

I came here, as my custom has been in the past with the Men's National Press Club, wholly unprepared. Whether it was to make Charlie Michaelson lose a bet or for other reasons, I don't know. I recommend that hereafter when you bet with men you put it down in writing. I asked Charlie what it cost; he said it was eight something. Well, that might be eight garments; he thought it was eight roses; he finally allowed it might be eight dollars.

I have had an awfully hard time -- all these mere men around the White House betting I would not come; raising objections, saying I had too much work, and so forth and so on. This morning when Steve (Mr. Early) came in -- in charge of Press Relations -- I felt quite cheerful; "Well," I said, "Steve, I am lunching with your girls today." He said, "My girls?" (Laughter) Lots of people you still have to cultivate.

Of course these days are difficult; I have a lot to do for both my better half and myself. There is only one thing that I think would relieve me greatly, and that would be to give up my Press Conference entirely at the Executive Offices and go over and attend my wife's conferences! Now, that's a time-saving device, and if you think it's all right, I might put it up to the men who come in to see me. My wife would save time and I would save time -- just one of those new, what do you call it? -- reorganizations of Government Departments.

As you know, I have an awfully good time at my Press Conferences,

Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

This is a transcript made by the White House stenographer from his shorthand notes taken at the time the speech was made. Underlining indicates words extemporaneously added to the previously prepared reading copy text. Words in parentheses are words that were omitted when the speech was delivered, though they appear in the previously prepared reading copy text.

and I would like to see some other people have a good time. I get by pretty well, except when some of you ladies ask me frightfully embarrassing questions. The idea! -- we were talking about public works, and a very good friend of mine asked me about the soft shoulders on the side of the highways. Now, really, drive out almost anywhere and you will see soft shoulders! (Laughter) The great question is whether that should be adopted as a national project or not. Of course I said "No" -- because it already is a national project. (Laughter)

But I have an awful lot of worries, and I think that possibly in working out the organization of this effort of ours to build up our own defense and make it possible for the democracies of the world that are trying to survive, it would be a good idea if you would appoint a committee to help. I will give you just one or two examples. You might appoint a committee to go into the long list of problems we are trying to do something about in the way of progress.

All over the country -- let me put it this way -- there seems to be, instead of a small vocal minority, a very substantial agreement on the part of most people that we should go ahead with the building up and enlargement of the present defense program. Now, that means, essentially, that people everywhere are to make some sacrifices. There will be more things to do in every community throughout the land. The idle manpower and womanpower of the Nation is being taken up, to a certain extent. There are a great many people who want to do things to help that don't quite know how to do it. Both my wife and I get letters from all over the country from people who want to help -- from the small communities in every State -- and that brings up the question of how we can best do it.

I will give you the example of my problem, the method of doing it.

A very large proportion of the people who want to help are women -- say women who have homes in Hyde Park and Poughkeepsie, Warm Springs and other places, who have their home duties but who want to do something to help; and there are some -- a good many -- older people among them, people who could not go out and make munitions, could not do actual work in a factory, but could do nursing or something of that kind; and we are studying a method of doing it.

One of the things that we have pretty well decided, just for example, is that it ought not to be centralized in Washington. It shouldn't be just a Federal piece of work that is handled from here. There should be advice from here, so as to keep the thing more or less on the same basis in every State; but we don't want to set up any more Federal machinery than we can help -- the Lord knows we have enough of that already! So the general idea to give these people something useful to do in working toward defense is that it should be decentralized and handled primarily through the various State Councils of Defense, which in almost every State today have been organized under the local conditions in the State; but we may require sort of a tying together in the general outline of the program.

Now, so far, we are all right. I am giving you this to show some of the problems in the making of airplanes and the building of ships.

Then you get two schools of thought; one is that since this, primarily, is the work of women in these communities -- a very large part of it -- it should be handled by women; on the other hand, there is a certain amount of work where men and women should join in the running of it, in the smaller communities, and even in the cities, because the objectives that we all have in mind affect men, women, and children. There is the school of thought that says the organizational work should be handled by men and women in behalf

of national defense down to the grass roots of the city streets; so it has taken about a week or ten days to thrash this thing out, and the general consensus of opinion is that it should be run jointly by the men and women in the different communities. It will take quite a while to work toward that plan. Various people, both here and other places, are working on it. There is substantial agreement, and so, within a very few days (I may take the documents to Hyde Park with me, during the rest period for the next three days), probably next week, we will have some kind of announcement which will start the ball rolling and put the whole country, down to the individual home and the small village, and even the farm, in behind this great national program. As I say, I am using this illustration to show how much you have to think through. Every day we have problems of that kind.

The other illustration that I wanted to use was what might be called the difference between the problem of 1917 and the problem of 1941 and '40. In those days, as most of you who can remember back that far will remember, we never thought much down here in Washington about the cost of living, and it wasn't wholly the fault of the Administration, after we got into the war. We just hadn't had any experience, and a large portion of the increased costs of that war period had already arisen before we got into the war. In other words, at the end of '15 and through '16 and the beginning of '17, we were, in a sense, an arsenal, as we are today, for European nations; but there was no guidance, and as a result the allies on the other side took an enormous number of things from us, all the way from copper and lumber and raw materials to all kinds of finished products, and especially foodstuffs, and we got into what we recognize now as a vicious spiral. We didn't know it; nobody wrote about it; all we knew was that the cost of living was going up. Simultaneously, it was going around; living would go up; and then organized labor and every-

body else found it was going up and wanted more pay; and up went the pay; and on top of that, up went the cost of living. Costs had gone up and wages had gone up, with the result that during that whole war period we were in the vicious spiral.

There's an old law that that which goes up must come down; it came down with a terrific smash in 1920 and '21. Wheat went up to $2.50 a bushel, even before we got into the war, and it was awfully difficult. Wheat means bread, and wheat went up from 80 cents to $2.50; and when we got into the war, we went at it, hammer and tongs, but it was too late. Mr. Baruch in those days was the head of what might be called the price-fixing agencies; he found wheat at $2.50, and he cut it to $2., but he didn't dare cut it below $2. a bushel.

Copper, we all know today, goes into all kinds of things used everywhere. The normal price, with a very good profit in those days, like today, was around 12 cents a pound. When Mr. Baruch came in and took control, it had got up to 28 or 30 cents a pound.

Cotton, selling at 8 cents a pound, went up to 34 or 35 cents a pound. That raised the cost of living -- sheets, pillow cases, clothes, and everything else.

This time we made a very definite effort, when we started this Advisory Commission last summer, to keep that spiral from operating in this period of stress; and that was why all seven members of this Advisory Council thoroughly understood why, for the first time, we had two people on the policy of the Government. One was Leon Henderson, whose work primarily was and is to keep the price of raw materials down to a reasonable level. There were three people -- Chester Davis representing Agriculture, trying to keep the price of farm products, most of which we eat, down to a reasonable level;

and Miss Harriet Elliott, who was trying to keep the cost of food you buy in stores, and other things that you have to have -- necessities of life that you buy from the retail stores -- to keep those down to a reasonable level too.

And so, as I say, there are a lot of people who never quite understood why, in turning out airplanes, guns, and powder and ships, we had to put on these people that seemed to have no relationship to airplanes and guns and ships. Well, it was something that we learned from the old war, something that we learned even fairly recently from the nations at war. We still have that task before us. So far it has worked pretty well, and the actual cost of living, taking it by and large, for the average human being in this country, is no higher than it was a year ago, or two years ago.

There is a constant effort on the part of people to chisel -- a very obvious thing. Last summer -- no, I guess it was a year ago September, when the war broke out -- somebody passed the word around -- it's amazing how fast things go -- you know the old saying, "Telephone, telegraph, tella-woman!" (laughter) -- I don't understand the latter part of it, but the fact remains that, in a great many cases in this country, word was passed out that there was going to be a sugar shortage -- and an enormous number of women put on a hat and beat it for the corner store! Well, when an enormous number of women do that, any store runs out of sugar; so the store had to say, "No more sugar". That increased the rumor; everybody began to hunt sugar. As a matter of fact, there was plenty of sugar in the country, as we all know; but, naturally, a retail store has only so much in the store; it has more in the warehouse and it can get more from the wholesaler any time it wants. But the price of sugar, within two or three days, in the retail stores, advanced from, say, 7 cents a pound to 10 cents a pound. Well, now, it was human nature

for the storekeeper to make that extra 3 cents. If I had been a storekeeper, I probably would have asked 10 cents a pound, with no right to ask more than 7.

That is the kind of thing we are trying to check in this country at the present time. It is a part of the general economic plan to prevent a price inflation of articles that we use, just as it is a part to prevent a wage inflation which would cause a price inflation.

Then we come down to one other thing, and that is talking about the future -- about priorities. There is a great deal of nonsense written about priorities; and so far, after six months of this very great effort on our part, we have avoided putting priorities into effect. I will give you an example: You know that in every community there is a tremendous amount of steel that is used for all kinds of things -- big buildings, little buildings, all kinds of building construction -- and so far we have thought that there was enough steel to go around for not only the program of defense -- planes, ships, and so forth and so on -- but also for the civilian needs, so that any person wanting to put up a house with a steel frame -- even a cheap house -- would get that steel to put up that house. Well, the question hasn't arisen quite yet; it may. Suppose, with this new program of new contracts -- additional contracts for the democracies overseas -- we have greatly to increase the output in this country of the steel goods; all right; the present steel capacity of all the steel mills may not be enough; then we have to ask the question, Who gets it first -- civilian needs or allied needs? That time hasn't come. With some other articles it may not be far off. We may have to resort to priorities.

Then there is another thing: suppose we run into a situation where some particular group of people, in order to make a few cents extra, in a

very human way, such as corn on the market -- push it up beyond any reasonable level; in a case of that kind, if they decline to follow a request by the Government -- I was referring to this a few days ago -- if they won't be patriotic and give up that excess profit, then we may have to use priorities as a method of preventing them from filling some of these civilian orders until they put the price down. Nothing particularly high-handed about that, because the Government has an obligation to see that the whole economic scheme of things in the country is not upset by two or three selfish people in one place and two or three selfish people in another.

So I think this particular period we are going through is one of the most interesting, certainly in my lifetime, because we are putting into effect things that we know, from past experience, that there ought to be an answer to -- things in the past that shouldn't have happened -- and we are trying now to put in operation, I may say, preventive measures to keep them from happening. That's only a natural and logical process in the line of making democracy work in a difficult time; and that's why it is an awful nuisance, but a very great privilege, to stay on in the White House after the twentieth of January. There are more new problems than any -- I suppose -- any President ever had before, certainly in my memory, except in the days of Mr. Wilson in 1917 and 1918. We have learned a great deal from that period. I think the country as a whole realizes that these things are not only necessary but that they are very advisable to our future.

In the same way, there are a great many things which mustn't be torn down. There is an awful lot of nonsense that is talked about, thinking in such terms that a lot of petty annoyances of the last few years will be removed. I had a man come in yesterday, a very old friend of mine, a grand person; but what he was saying to me in effect was, "I would like to get out

from under SEC; I would like to avoid (and he put it this way) having to keep half a dozen people just making out reports for the Securities and Exchange people." I said, "Why? Do you want to do some new financing?" He said, "Maybe." Then I checked up and, sure enough, he wanted to do some new financing. The financing he wanted to do was the character that was done in 1928 and 1929; it was the kind of financing that might very easily be oversubscribed by a lot of "suckers".

We have all been "suckers". We have all needed Government protection. Probably every person in this room has lost money, personally, through being a "sucker", or has lost money through a so-called trustee. Well, I know four or five people here who have lost money through trustees--banks and trust companies -- that had funds -- funds that were needed by men, women, and children, old and young -- where the trust company, under the old dispensation, would take over bonds, stock, and things like that -- eager to underwrite and take part of that new issue, and then if they couldn't sell it all to the public, parcel it out to the trusts that they were responsible for -- like you and me.

This whole supervision that we have built up in the past eight years is not intended to be restrictive; it is intended to protect "Innocents Abroad" -- like you and me. I think the general public appreciates that. It does mean more paper work; and as you people all know what paper work is, perhaps I can best close by saying that some kinds of paper work are a nuisance -- filling Government reports, income tax returns -- but some kinds of paper work, like the kind you turn out -- that is a privilege! Thank you!

(Applause)

I forgot this (holding up a little metal donkey) entirely. This was given to me a few minutes ago, and it is a democratic donkey; and be-

cause the applause when I stood up came from all over the room -- which is different from what it was on the Capitol Hill the other day, I decided that this Club, as a whole -- Republicans and Democrats, both -- should have a democratic donkey -- so there it is! (Prolonged applause)

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Ready to be typed

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STATEMENTS FILE

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questions. The idea! -- We were talking about public works, and a very good friend of mine asked me about the soft shoulders on the side of the highways. Now, really, drive out almost anywhere and you will see soft shoulders! (Laughter) The great question is whether that should be adopted as a national project or not. Of course I said No, because it already is a national project. (Laughter.)

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I forgot this (holding up a little metal donkey) entirely. This was given to me a few minutes ago, and it is a democratic donkey; and because the applause when I stood up came from all over the room -- which is different from what it was on the Capitol Hill the other day, I decided that this Club, as a whole -- Republicans and Democrats, both -- should have a democratic donkey -- so there it is! (Prolonged applause.)