

Spring 1934

[Gridiron Club Dinner]

FDR Speech File

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ROUGH DRAFT SUGGESTIONS FOR THE GRIDIRON CLUB

Reading
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President Wright, Members of the G. I. C., and guests.

When I returned to Washington on Friday I observed that I was a tough guy. In making that observation I did not have the Gridiron Club particularly in mind, but evidently the Gridiron Club took me literally. There are degrees of toughness and there are various kinds of guys. The most common type of tough guy is the one that would have grabbed that crown when it was presented to Jim Wright at the beginning of the dinner. I'm not that type. In the first place the crown was the property of somebody else. It didn't belong to me. Secondly, I didn't want it, and thirdly, a crown is not needed in America.

I've had long experience with the Gridiron Club as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, as Governor of New York and as President. You have to be not only a tough guy but a regular guy before you can be a guest of the Gridiron Club. When you sit as a target for four hours ducking the barbs and the slap sticks and the javelins which are hurled at your head, and then when the last song is sung and the last skit is concluded, you are expected to come up smiling with a bright and clever speech — well, you just have to be a tough guy.

I always learn something from the Gridiron Club. It's not always new, it's not always important, but it's always interesting. I've learned something tonight. I was about three years old when the Gridiron Club first saw the light of day. When the Gridiron Club was born, I had made some progress in learning the alphabet. I ought to know more about the alphabet than the Gridiron Club. I saw it first. But I must confess that you have outstripped me. You are familiar with letters which I had almost forgotten. When it was suggested this evening that my Republican friends made the

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mistake of not capitalizing on the alphabet when they were in power; that instead of going on a financial spree, they should have gone on a spree of letters, I realized I had been remiss in my A.B.C.'s. I feel we are making real progress in getting out of the soup, but if I had only thought to use the Gridiron Club as an alphabetical agency to handle the general state of the Union, to pass upon and solve all our perplexing problems, how much farther we would be. If we had for instance a G. I. C. agency in cooperation with a Wickersham Commission *for relief rather than for reform* - *a. b. c.* I am certain our troubles would be at an end.

While I was fishing in southern waters -- ~~hoping to snare a Kingfish~~ among others -- I had considerable time for reflection. My son, Elliott, already has told about that. The investigating committee of "White House correspondents rendered a sort of "Scotch" verdict.

I did some thinking about the forthcoming dinner of the Gridiron Club and how the present Administration would be put on the gridiron. The natural thing to do was to change places. I asked myself: "What would you do if you were a member of the Gridiron Club instead of the President of the United States,"

And, down there on the Nourmahal, waiting for the fish to bite, I soliloquized something like this:

"Well they've got to say something about the New Deal; have a skit on Doctor Wirt; take a slap at Harry Hopkins and the C. W. A.; give the razzberry to the Attorney General; take the Vice President for a satirical "one way" ride; kid General Hugh Johnson of the N. R. A.; refer to the alleged massacre of the Constitution -- so often bewailed by other

speakers and the drive of the Administration to round up delinquent taxpayers."

I imagined that the Gridiron Club satirists would have something to say about the air mail controversy; the over-ridden Presidential veto of the Independent Offices Bill, with its back-pay restorations and veterans' benefits, and a demand that the head of the present Administration, (myself), answer the question:

"Where do we go from here?"

Well! Where do we go from here. I ask you.

What is the program for the Fall dinner of the G. I. C.?

I have just seen inaugurated the new president of your club, who, I understand from confidential reports, is a club conservative. Secret reports -- and they must be anonymous because they come to me from friends of the G. I. C. -- indicate that in this club, restricted and exclusive as its membership is, there are groups and factions, right and left wings, dissensions, alphabetical designations, elder statesmen and insurgents.

I can not foresee that you have any plans now for the Fall dinner of this club. Your actions and skits depend upon the trend of events.

And so do the policies of the Administration, which will be unfolded as Congress adjourns, summer comes in, old problems are solved and new problems arrive. But I will assert that the country is better off than when I last spoke to you, "off the record". And we shall continue to use every agency, whether it has an alphabetical designation or not, to get this country out of the rut or morass of depression.

The Gridiron Club has not been sparing in its efforts to bring about such an examination by the officials of the government, and, it should be needless to say but I will say it anyhow, that no process that tends to make us more sensible of our duties and more sure not only of our objects, but of the processes by which we seek to obtain those objects, is otherwise than welcome. I think that this principle should extend beyond the government; to put it bluntly, I believe that the time has arrived when the Gridiron Club should put some questions to itself.

You have brought together a brilliant galaxy of the wealth, influence and talent of the United States. I see before me men who occupy the most important positions in our business world, who have come many miles to be present at this session of the Club. Now with no desire to venture acrid criticisms, I want to ask you if the return you have made to this brilliant audience is adequate? In short, have you given these gentlemen their money's worth?

Do you think, for example, that you have been funny enough to make them feel that their journey hither was worth while? I put it to your honored President, who, if I understand your constitution, is supreme in these affairs, and who has neither a Congress to consult nor a Supreme Court to satisfy, whether he thinks that the Gridiron is living up to its reputation?

Naturally, as a guest, I must reserve my own opinion on the subject. If I indulged in splendid commendation, I would be subject to the charge of fulsome adulation to my hosts. If I took the other extreme, I would be unmindful of the obligation imposed on every guest to appreciate the effort and to make no strictures on the performance.

The Gridiron Club is the only body that can gracefully investigate your imposing organization. If reform is required, you alone can do the reforming. I am sensible, of course, of the controversies that must arise in a body composed of fifty eminent critics, each of whom is convinced of the infallibility of his judgment and his own special qualifications to say what is true in art and what is true in politics, what is true in finance, what is true in relativity.

I know the danger of listening to gossip, and the greater danger of accepting such gossip as absolutely veracious. It is true, according to reports, that the Gridiron cloakrooms are seething with tales of discord that compel attention even though there may be doubt of the accuracy of such tales. It is rumored on the highest authority that the Gridiron musical committee, hereafter referred to as the G. M. C., and the committee responsible for the unlyrical ^{or gag} part of the entertainment, to which we will refer for the purposes of brevity as the G. C., have not the highest opinion of the productions of each other.

If your investigation should determine that your show has not been up to standard, perhaps whatever is lacking may be attributed to these administration controversies. Forgive me if I also advert to another report, emanating, I may say, also from the highest Gridiron authorities, that there is criticism in your membership over the radicalism of your President. I am not stating it as a fact but simply repeating a report current all through the nation that your President has gone to the extreme left in determining that hereafter there shall only be one skit per year based on Alice in Wonderland. While I am about it, I may as well tell you the whole of the story. It runs to the effect that one of your ex-Presidents is in open revolt because he is not allowed to take the part of Alice

herself, or of the white queen but always finds himself cast to the role of a white rabbit. This may not seem of any importance to any of this distinguished company, but let me tell you as one not without experience, that there is more soreness, more sense of injury in giving a man one job when his heart is set on another than even in giving him no job at all. Let me repeat, I am not charging that this sort of disorganization exists in the Gridiron Club.

If I were a columnist, instead of a mere looker-on at your festivities, I could fill my column day after day with such reports and get away with it as gracefully as do some of your distinguished members who are giving the people the low-down, dead inside of political and governmental matters; With, I may add, no more convincing authority than I cite in reference to the dissensions of the Gridiron Club. I hope you will accept these remarks in the spirit with which they are spoken. The Gridiron's purpose is entertainment.

If what I have said is construed as criticism, I hope that you will regard it as constructive criticism. You know the Washington formula. Anything complimentary is constructive criticism. Anything that is unpleasant to the object thereof is mere partisan carping. I am conservative, at least to the extent of refraining from attempting to change this particular tenet of politics and journalism.

In conclusion, I would leave you tonight just a couple of thoughts about the responsibilities of the office I now hold. As I entered the last days of the campaign of 1932 it was increasingly apparent that, if I came into the Presidency of this country, my lot would not and could not be an easy one.

I sensed that, as would anyone within sound of my voice in this unreported speech of mine this evening. The idea bore down upon me when I became President-elect, and again when I was inaugurated. As I went into office there were closed banks, others that must be closed, general unemployment, a feeling of anxiety throughout the country, and a milling around of men and women who had but little hope for tomorrow.

What has happened so far all of you know. I have said and repeated in public statements and radio addresses that there must be a way out of this confusion. ^{also} I have ~~said~~ said that this Administration probably would make mistakes, but would undertake to correct such mistakes as soon as their fallacies became known.

From the outset, the Administration has sought constructive criticism, whether in the news columns, the editorial pages, the stage or a club which, for nearly fifty years, has held up the looking glass so that men in public life might glimpse themselves.

We are going to carry on, I trust in a non-partisan, non-political way. The woods are clearing. I bespeak the cooperation of all Americans, however they may feel about past or pending legislation in Congress, Albeit I would not ask any member of the executive or legislative branches to sacrifice their own personal convictions if they regard such convictions as in the interest of the country.

The more of these dinners I attend, the more grateful I am that there is a Gridiron Club, and let me assure you that I have full appreciation of your versatility and that I constantly marvel at your continued enthusiasm. And let me go further and tell you, in all sincerity, that however much fun you get out of the President of the United States, it isn't a tithe of the fun he gets out of you.

