

December 8, 1934

[Gridiron Club Speech]

FDR Speech File

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Prodigal Son - Reference

Suggestions:

Jim Watson: When you can't talk me, join me

I felicitate the preceding speaker, Mr. Henry L. Mencken, on the temperateness of his remarks and criticisms. I had really expected more fireworks, in the inimitable Mencken style. When he deals so gently with the achievements and misachievements of the present Administration I opine that we must be pretty good, after all.

But why is Mr. Mencken here tonight as the "opposition speaker?" My understanding of Gridiron dinners has been that there are only two unreported speakers --- one a spokesman for the Administration temporarily in power, the other a critic thereof. Thus, through the years, the Gridiron Club has heard Republicans and Democrats and there has been much mirth as the oratological rapiers flashed.

Has the Republican party reached such a paucity of talent that no one ~~unreported~~ branded G. O. P. could be conscripted tonight to do his stuff? How is Mr. Mencken branded? I never regarded him as either a Democrat or a Republican. After following his writings I'd rather listed him as ~~an independent~~ a follower of that famous old Irishman who landed on our shores some years ago and announced, as he got off the boat, "I don't know what sort of government you've got over here, but whatever it is I'm agin it."

I find nothing in "Who's Who in America" to indicate the political leanings of the preceding speaker. He is known as the "Sage of Baltimore," in which city he was born. That State ordinarily goes Democratic, albeit we'll have to admit there was a slight slip up there in the Governorship race last November.

#2 Suggestions:

I must admit that, as irritating at times are some of his pungent strictures, my appetite is invariably whetted for more and his writings give me a chuckle after a hard day at the office. However, comparing the constructive character of his utterances this evening with the super -constructive character of his past writings, I am reminded somewhat of the story of a rustic girl, who, at a midnight folic, had permitted many of the young gallants to kiss here in the darkness of the evening.

She happened to encounter a hare-lipped fellow who possessed the requisites as well as the inclination for such a kissing party. The poor ~~girl~~ girl did not know ~~this~~ this particular young swain was hare-lipped. So after the performance she inquired if something had not been the matter. He replied: "I still have the feeling, but I have lost my snapper."

Somehow, maybe, Mr. Mecken's "snapper" was lacking here tonight.

As usual, the Gridiron Club has presented a great entertainment at this dinner. It has been my opportunity to attend ~~this~~ these semi-annual affairs, off and on, since I was a young Assistant Secretary of the Navy. And, as your president, Mr. Wright, has said the "Gridiron warms but it does not scorch; it broils but it does not sear."

I never took away from a Gridiron dinner a feeling of pique or resentment. I think the country needs a club like this to keep satirical check upon Administrations and public men as they come and go.

#3 Suggestions:

But before I ~~hmmmm~~ come to a more serious vein in my own remarks, a protest or so should be registered. Wasn't it rather unkind that the Gridiron Club had to have a skit on "Vera Vandenberg"? My good friend, Senator Vandenberg, has been celebrating the November elections all by himself. He is one of the few employed Republicans.

Why not let Arthur celebrate, instead of putting him through the steps of the Kermesse waltz, whatever that is?

Nevertheless, the club was considerate of "Vera Vandenberg" when he was not cast along with Messrs. Andrew W. Mellon and Ogden L. Mills in the "Man on the Flying Trapeze" skit.

MORE

#4 Suggestions:

And we ought to have a word of sympathy, rather than a sizzling on the gridiron, for my friend Henry P. Fletcher. There appears to be a demand in certain quarters, not related to my own political party, that he be deposed. I'm not in favor of that. Let's have at least two more years of Fletcher.

Meanwhile, Chairman Fletcher may get consolation out of the fact that every time a political party goes down to defeat there arises a cry about ousting the chairman of the National Committee. Such stories are good for publicity purposes, but it has been my observation that it has always been mighty hard to pry loose a chairman from his job. I don't expect to read in the morning papers tomorrow that Mr. Fletcher has resigned.

I liked that skit tonight wherein William Green and Henry Ford were starying off on a trip together, whatever may have been their differences over the proprietorship of a Pullman car berth. When you can get these two gentlemen into the same sleeping car with Mr. Harriman and Mr. Hecht I feel assured that we will get to "Prosperityville" ahead of schedule.

More seriously, it is my privilege tonight, almost on the eve of a New Year a message of conviction that at last this country has weathered the economic storm and we can see the mountain peaks of better times.

Farm prices are going up again. Debt readjustments are being achieved. Public confidence is rapidly returning. Business in general is on the uplift and government receipts are increasing.

#5 Suggestions:

The Administration is hopeful that the extraordinary for relief and unemployment purposes may be kept to a minimum during the coming year; although somehow the hungry must be fed and the shelterless must have shelter.

The Administration is also optimistic concerning the policies we are trying to press with foreign countries and that such negotiations will broaden our markets abroad and result in increased exports.

Within a month a new Congress will convene. I have no misgivings about its convening. In other words I do not feel, as did another President of the United States, that I will have to lament that "I have a Congress on my hands!"

Indeed, the White House feels that the new Congress will swing along in a spirit of cooperation that has existed between the Executive and Legislative branches of the Government in all periods of national emergency.

We have now reached that point in our program when, guided by the ~~own~~ experiences of the past, we can retain its good features and eliminate the impracticable ones. In this endeavor, whether or not it be satirized as the program of a Santa Claus, I seek the continued cooperation of the Congress, your own organization of news writers, and the American people, regardless of political faiths.

Postal Telegraph-Cable Company

PRESS TELEGRAM

In "Prejudices", Sixth Series, Mencken said:

"Most of the evils that continue to beset American journalism today, in truth, are not due to the rascality of owners nor even to the Kiwanian bombast of business managers, but simply and solely to the stupidity, cowardice and Philistinism of working newspaper men. The majority of them in almost every American city, are still ignoramuses, and proud of it. x x x x x

"I have myself been damned as a public enemy for calling attention, ever and anon, to the intolerable incompetence and quackery of all save a small minority of the Washington correspondents."

In "Prejudices", Third Series, Mencken says in part:

"Third-rate men, of course, exist in all countries, but it is only here that they are in full control of the state, and with it of all the national standards. x x x x

"That the United States is essentially a commonwealth of third-rate men -- that distinction is easy here because the general level of culture, of information, of taste and judgment, of ordinary competence is so low."

In his "Notes on Democracy", Mr. Mencken says:

"Politics under democracy consists almost wholly of the discovery, chase and scotching of bugaboo. The statesman becomes, in the last analysis, a mere witch-hunter, a glorified sniffer and snooper, eternally chanting 'Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum'. It has been so in the United States since the earliest days. x x x x

"Government under democracy is thus government by orgy, almost by orgasm. Its processes are most beautifully displayed at times when they stand most naked -- for example, in war days. The history of the American share in the World War is simply a record of conflicting fears, more than once amounting to frenzies. The mob, at the start of the uproar, showed a classical reaction; it was eager only to keep out of danger."

"In Defense of Women", published in 1918, Mr. Mencken says, in part:

"What we need, to ward off monarchy and safeguard the Constitution and a republican form of government, is more of this sniffing. What we need -- and in the end it must come -- is a sniff so powerful that it will call a halt upon the navigation of the ship from the forecastle, and put a competent staff on the bridge, and lay a course that is describable in intelligible terms."

In the Fifth Series of "Prejudices", Mr. Mencken makes this statement:

"A Washington correspondent is one with a special talent for failing to see what is before his eyes. I have beheld a whole herd of them sit through a national convention without once laughing.x x x x x

"I know of no American who starts from a higher level of aspiration than the journalist. He is, in his first phase, genuinely romantic. He plans to be both an artist and a moralist -- a master of lovely words and a merchant of sound ideas. He ends, commonly, as the most depressing jackass in his community -- that is, if his career goes on to what is called success."

In "Making a President", by Henry L. Mencken, the author made the following political prophecy:

"Roosevelt will probably carry all the Southern States that Al lost in 1928, despite the difficulties that the repeal plank is bound to raise in some of them, but he will certainly lose New York, and there is little chance that he will carry Massachusetts and its tributaries. He may win nevertheless, but if he does it will be by a kind of miracle."

In the same publication, subsequent to the Chicago Convention, Mr. Mencken said:

"But Roosevelt won, and now the party begins the campaign with a candidate who has multitudes of powerful and implacable enemies, and is in general far too feeble and wishy-washy a fellow to make a really effective fight."

Mr. President and Members of the Gridiron Club: As I have been privileged to attend Gridiron Club dinners through the years, I am impressed with the thought that age cannot wither or custom stale the infinite variety of the Gridiron Club. But in some features I have observed that the old order changeth; that a kind of renaissance is creeping over this ancient institution. While many of your jokes are perhaps still as venerable as your years, I have seen signs that you are not afraid to take on a thing simply because it is new, or to break away from a tradition which has nothing except age to recommend it.

For instance, you have changed the opening of your dinner. Tonight you changed it for the second time. If this continues you will soon have what the distinguished Chief Justice of the United States might call a precedent. I came to Gridiron dinners when I was Assistant Secretary of the Navy and again when I was Governor of New York. I have never forgotten how you started your dinners in those days. Just as the guests were about to begin on the first course there was always a crash at the curtain on the F Street side of this hall. I understand it was made by Jim Preston, who dropped a mass of broken crockery from one tin container into another. It made a bang that always startled the diners. Immediately thereafter the President of the Club would rap his gavel and gravely ask:

"Mr. Blank, what was that terrible crash?"

Mr. Blank would go to the platform and in impressive tones announce something like this:

"Why that was Jim Farley trying to explain how the Democrats lost Vermont."

Or perhaps he would say: "Why that was Senator David Reed trying to get out of the tornado in Pennsylvania."

Everybody would laugh and the dinner was off to a good start.

But at the last dinner there was no crash at the curtain. Instead, the proceedings were opened with an alphabetical parade through this hall, in which many members participated. Apparently the crash at the curtain is a thing of the past for tonight the proceedings were opened with a Santa Clause parade. Thus, after fifty years, the Gridiron Club is changing. It is getting a move on itself, making a recovery, I hope, and in any event keeping abreast of the times.

Witches - Red Tent & Story.
Custom of Grid. Hall -

Henry L. Abraham - Manager - by Sam Fletcher
Voted for me -

Comptrolr. Vandenberg on not having
Whorean my share put away, what
a sick hat.

Grandpa's furbin - 118 years.
Rustical Sun - So many have
come back to Father

Pharisee & Samaritan

Jim Watson - When you can't like 'em
; the 'em