

The Republican-for-Roosevelt League

Franklin Roosevelt described the cooperation needed between the Executive and Congress to save the nation. Pamela Lowry reports.

In the closing week of his first campaign for President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed the Republican-for-Roosevelt League on Nov. 3, 1932 in New York City. This group of Republicans, composed mainly of owners of small- and medium-size businesses, had rejected the do-nothing policies of President Herbert Hoover and his Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, policies which had turned the stock market crash of 1929 into the deep depression of 1932.

Describing a situation which would be instantly recognized by Americans of today, Roosevelt highlighted the ascerbic and stalemated relations between President Hoover and the Congress, and offered, in contrast, the dedication to the general welfare which should have been common to both the Executive and Legislative branches. When he gave the speech, Roosevelt had been the Governor of New York for four years. During the early years of the Great Depression, he had developed, on the state level, many of the programs which were later to become part of the New Deal. He drew on that experience in telling his Republican supporters what had to change, in order to restore America to its mission.

Here are excerpts from the speech:

I am here tonight at the invitation of a group of public-minded citizens who have placed principle above party. These citizens, whose past affiliation has been Republican, have publicly declared that they consider that a change in the administration of this Government is necessary, that it is, in fact, indispensable to a restoration of normal conditions. And so, on such an occasion it is fitting for me to speak as a citizen rather than as a partisan. . . .

It is necessary, first of all, for us to recognize the simple fact that, apart from the occasional judicial interpretations relating to Government, we have in Washington, as in all the States, two constant factors which are working year in and year out, side by side, and in constant contact with each other—in the case of States, the Governor and the Legislature, and in Washington, the President and the Congress.

Many unthinking people have inveighed against the Congress in every generation of our Republic, little realizing that they are striking at the very fabric of our Constitution. If they would but think for a moment, they would realize that if we were to eliminate the Congress of the United States, we would automatically cease to be a Republic.

The real purpose of the Constitution was based on the rightful assumption that the President and the Congress would be sufficiently right-minded, sufficiently practical and sufficiently patriotic to make every effort to cooperate the one with the other. It is not an overstatement either of the fact, or of the opinion of the American public, to say that the present Chief Executive of our Nation has shown a singular lack of ability to cooperate with the Congress. I am not speaking only of the past eleven months since the House of Representatives became Democratic by the margin of a handful of votes. I am speaking also of the previous two and one-half years, during which time the Congress in both of its branches was controlled by the same party to which the President himself belongs. From the earliest days of the special session which he summoned in the spring of 1929, the relations between the Capitol and the White House have, to say the least, lacked cordiality, understanding and common national purpose.

Let me make it clear that I do not assert that a President and the Congress must on all points agree with each other at all times. Many times in history there has been complete disagreement between the two branches of the Government, and in these disagreements sometimes the Congress has won and sometimes the President has won. But during the Administration of the present President we have had neither agreement nor a clear-cut battle. Either would have cleared the atmosphere and would have been far preferable to the smouldering ill-feeling that has prevailed during the past three and one-half years in Washington.

I believe that I have the right to point out my own conception of the relationship between an executive and a legislative body. I have served as a legislator and as a Chief Executive. I believe that from the point of view of a Governor or a President, his relations with the legislative body can be based on cooperation. The fact is that with the great majority of problems mere partisanship should, in so far as possible, be kept in the background. In meeting this great majority of problems, they can and should be treated primarily from the point of view of national good rather than of party good. Let me add that in the case of most reconstruction legislation, there ought to be no great difference in the policy of the two great political parties.

We are all influenced by our personal experiences. For



FDR Library

Franklin Roosevelt campaigns in Albany, N.Y., in 1932. He appealed for—and received—bipartisan support.

four long years, as Governor of New York, I have been faced by a Legislature Republican in both of its branches. From the beginning, I have worked on the assumption that the members of this Legislature were human beings, that they were patriotic, and that most of our State problems could best be solved by cooperation between them and myself. We have differed on certain matters of fundamental policy. In those cases, I have given them battle. Sometimes they have won, sometimes, and I think in the majority of cases, I have won; but in all these cases, we have had good, clean, open fights. And the people have known the full story of each case.

But, when the problem has been one affecting human welfare, the Legislature and I have always ended by sitting around a table and getting something practical done. That was the history of the labor legislation in this State during the past four years—of the legislation for the improvement of our hospitals and our prison system, of the legislation that enacted that old-age security law, of the legislation that made this State the leader among all the States in providing unemployment relief. In the latter case, I called a special session. I proposed a bill, the Republican leaders proposed another bill, and we had a good old-fashioned “knock-down and drag-out” fight. Finally, we sat around a table; I met them 20 percent of the way, they met me 80 percent of the way; they passed the bill, I signed the bill; the relief work was started, all in less than a month. Contrast that with the fact that it took the Congress six months to get the President to see that such measures were necessary in the Nation as well. . . .

One final point on this subject of cooperation. It seems, of course, fairly obvious that the next Congress of the United

States will have a majority of Democrats in both its branches. Any child can understand that it will be easier for a Democratic President to cooperate with the next Congress than it would be if the present Chief Executive were reelected. But, let me at the same time add this in all seriousness and from my heart. I honestly believe that even if the Congress of the United States were to be Republican in one or both of its branches, I could get along with it better than the gentleman who is running for President on the Republican ticket.

The great issue this year is national, comprehensive and humane. I have painted it with broad lines because it is a program for a great Nation. That is why, from the beginning, insisting upon the principle of a new deal, I have invited to join our cause Republicans who believe that this country needs the tonic of a new alignment of party loyalties, a new and enlightened support of our national faith.

This country needs the tonic effect of such a reiteration of American principles. It calls to its service with particular emphasis the independent and courageous spirits who are willing to leave the household of a betrayed faith, who are asking for substance, not shadows, who are seeking for truth, not names for truth.

In speaking for the common purposes of all of these forward-looking men and women I have, I believe, avoided the delusion that this is a campaign of persons or of personalities. To indulge in such a fantastic idea of my own individual importance would be to betray the common hope and the common cause that has brought us all together this year. A great man left a watchword that we can well repeat: “There is no indispensable man.”

But there are indispensable principles without which Government cannot serve its purpose. These are the principles of fair and open dealing with the public, of using the great powers of the Government to serve no mean party advantage, of keeping promises made to agriculture and labor, of friendly relations between the Executive and the Legislature, of economic peace with foreign Nations, of protection for those who must entrust their savings to others, of social justice for all, and relief for those who are in need.

Reducing it to all the essentials of my speech of acceptance, we want to get for the American people two great human values—work and security. To achieve this end I invite you all. It is no mere party slogan. It is a definition of national need. It is a philosophy of life. I repeat it with a courage lent by the knowledge that I speak a philosophy of Government as well—the ideals which have made us and kept us a Nation.