

**Transcript of FDR's Remarks at a Dinner of the Trustees of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Inc.  
Washington, D.C., February 4, 1939**

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen:

I think I speak for a large number of people at the table who have the diffidence of amateurs in the presence of great scholars. A number of you at the tables have said to me, "Why, we are out of place with these presidents of universities and leaders of learned societies and historians of world renown." I felt that way a little until a few minutes ago it occurred to me that I probably occupied an important historical position at an earlier age than any of you because, when I was twenty years old, I was elected the librarian of the Hasty Pudding Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That was the beginning of a great many years of what my family has called the bad habit of acquisitiveness.

When I was the librarian of the Hasty Pudding Club, I had a small fund at my disposal—I think it was \$400 a year—to buy books for the Hasty Pudding library. Probably the man who is more responsible for my collecting instincts than anybody else—he is long since dead but possibly a few of the older people here will remember him, but not if you are younger than Mr. Morison or Felix Frankfurter, who is six months younger than I am was an old man named Chase, who ran the bookstore for N. J. Bartlett and Company at Cornhill in Boston.

I went to Mr. Chase and I said to him, "I have this fund; I know nothing of what I should buy." And he said, "I am going to give you a course in liberal education on books of all kinds." And I proceeded to buy under his guidance, first for the Hasty Pudding Club and the following year for the Fly Club, books that in those days were very cheap but on which, if they were to be sold tomorrow, either Club would realize a very handsome profit. For example, I bought a complete set of Dickens' Christmas books for \$28. What would they bring today, not just first editions, but first issues? You know what that is. That was the beginning.

One of the first things old man Chase said to me was, "Never destroy anything." Well, that has been thrown in my teeth by all the members of my family almost every week that has passed since that time. I have destroyed practically nothing. As a result, we have a mine for which future historians will curse as well as praise me. It is a mine which will need to have the dross sifted from the gold. I would like to do it but I am informed by the professors that I am not capable of doing it. They even admit that they are not capable of doing it. They say that they must wait for that dim, distant period which Dr. Ford has suggested, when the definitive history of this particular era will come to be written.

I always remember an episode in 1917. It occurred at the White House. I was Acting Secretary of the Navy and it was the first week in March. It was perfectly obvious to me that we were going to get into the War within the course of two or three weeks, depending entirely on when the first ship flying the American flag was sunk by the unlimited submarine warfare of Germany. I went to see the President and I said, "President Wilson, may I request your permission to bring the Fleet back from Guantanamo, to send it to the Navy Yards and have it cleaned and fitted out for war and be ready to take part in the

War if we get in?" And the President said, "I am very sorry, Mr. Roosevelt, I cannot allow it." But I pleaded and he gave me no reason and said, "No, I do not wish it brought north." So, belonging to the Navy, I said, "Aye, aye, sir" and started to leave the room. He stopped me at the door and said, "Come back." He said, "I am going to tell you something I cannot tell to the public. I owe you an explanation. I don't want to do anything, I do not want the United States to do anything in a military way, by way of war preparations, that would allow the definitive historian in later days- these days—to say that the United States had committed an unfriendly act against the central powers." I said, "The definitive historian of the future?" He said, "Yes. Probably he won't write until about the year 1980 and when he writes the history of this World War, he may be a German, he may be a Russian, he may be a Bulgarian—we cannot tell—but I do not want to do anything that would lead him to misjudge our American attitude sixty or seventy years from now."

Dr. Ford has spoken of the new processes of democracy. I am glad he did because it is true that nowadays news moves faster than ever before. We have vehicles of communication that we never had before. It is true that where my predecessor received 400 letters a day on the average, I receive 4,000, but that is only a part of the story. We are able to get our ideas across from one end of the earth to the other in much shorter time than even ten or twelve years ago. Some of us not long ago, in September, listened on a Monday afternoon, at two o'clock, to the personal voice of the leader of the German State, who made an amazing speech in the Sports Palace. The next day the American people, at the same hour, heard the quite sober, appealing and rather pathetic voice of Neville Chamberlain telling his democracy and a great many other democracies the story that the English-speaking peoples had to tell.

There are a great many things besides mere documents and I hope very much that in this collection that is to be got together, we shall have not merely letters and the written words but we shall also have, as a part of the collection—perhaps not kept here but kept in the National Archives under the same general supervision of the Archivist—the spoken word that is being recorded in every country, and recorded in such a way that the records can be permanently maintained for posterity. In other words, the human, the individual factor will enter into the writing of modern history far more greatly in the future than it has in the past.

In the same way, there are other things that need preservation as, for example, the give and take of the controversial Press. After all, it is all controversial and should be. There should be a record to show that form of communication to our own people and to all the world during the actual happening of each event.

In these papers there are a great many things about which I have said little, but the future value of which I already begin to recognize, although a few years ago I would not have thought much about them. Take, for example, from the purely political angle, the method of the appointment of postmasters from 1913 to 1920. It seemed a small thing then, a rather petty thing which took a great deal of my time because, at that time, I was distributing the post office patronage of up-State New York. I happened to be going through some of those files the other day. They form an interesting historical record of appointments in that particular type of public service. They reveal the progress that we have made in twenty-five years. They show how in those days 90 per cent to 95 per cent of all the appointments of

what is, very nearly, the largest appointive group in the Government service was almost wholly political, almost wholly based on the recommendations of the local political leaders of the moment, backed up by petitions from eminent citizens, all of one party. In a very few years, that will form such a contrast with the modern method of applying to a much larger extent the merit system—the civil service method—that it will prove the advances that we have made, even in a quarter of a century.

Another reason that occurred to me the other day, another need for putting some of this material in order, related to some of the Naval papers. Captain Knox, who has been getting out a series of publications of the early Naval records, and who has completed the record of our war with France, to which I contributed some of my manuscripts and material, wrote to me to ask for my manuscript material relating to the first two years of the war between the United States and the Barbary Coast, 1804 and 1805. I wrote back to him that I would immediately look for them and send them over to him to see if they would be of any use in the publication of these new volumes. Well, I could not find them. They are in the White House, I am sure they are there, but I spent at least one hour looking for them and I could not find them. In other words, there it is, the mislaying of somewhat valuable manuscript material relating to a period in our early history that has never been adequately covered from a documentary point of view. Some day, when Dudley Knox or his successor asks for material relating to our war with Quallah Battoo (Sumatra) in 1832, we shall be able to find the material that I happen to have in regard to that very important conflict and the very important diplomatic result that came out of that conflict because, as some of you know, it was largely as a result of it that we undertook first to open up China and then to open its doors.

And so it goes. It is a very conglomerate, hit-or-miss, all-over-the-place collection on every man, animal, subject or material. But, after all, when it is put together and indexed under proper supervision, I believe it is going to form an interesting record of this particular quarter of a century or, as Uncle Henry would say, half century to which we belong.

There is one other subject that has not been mentioned, which I have a certain amount of diffidence in mentioning to the persons concerned. There have been gathered here in Washington for the last six years a very large number of men and women who have left their private occupations and come here to Washington to do service for their Government. They have occupied positions of great importance in the Nation in almost every line of Government activity. Whether those lines covered too many fields is a question for the Congress to determine and not for us, but the fact remains that they have come here; they have rendered splendid service; they have accumulated, each and every one of them, a large personal mass of historical material. Now, I hesitate to speak to any of them and suggest that they could supplement this collection that is to go to Hyde Park by the presentation of their own papers and yet I am perfectly certain that sitting here at the table are good people who, perhaps, may not have any other disposition of their personal papers in mind, who may not wish to leave them to their own children, who may not have some particular college library to which to give them. With this substantial building and with the possibility of adding to its future contents at some future time—and with the aid of the Treasury Department that is one thing we are planning for in case it is needed—I am in great hopes that a large amount of other material will find its way ultimately to this library at Hyde Park.

There are, for instance, records which should not be published at the present time. For example, there are very confidential shorthand records of the conversations during the past two or three years between the Secretary of the Treasury and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in London and the Minister of Finance in Paris, two-way and sometimes three-way conversations over the transatlantic radio telephone. The only records of those conversations are probably the secret records taken down in the office of the Secretary of the Treasury, in the office of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and in that of the Minister of Finance. Now, obviously, records of that kind of private conversations should not be disclosed today, even to a Senatorial committee. There is, however, no reason why they should not be disclosed to the public after a reasonable number of years have elapsed. I have been asking Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and he says that obviously the place to put records of that kind, after this Administration is all through, is in a collection that represents original material of the period. There is a great deal of that.

There are a great many people connected with the Administration who, I think, will be very, very glad to use Hyde Park as a depository for their documents and their original material.

However, as I say, that is not a thing I like to speak about to them in person lest they might think they have to say, "Yes," where perhaps they had some other plan in mind. I think all persons in the Administration should feel wholly free to do as they wish to do with their own papers that do not belong to the Government. On the other hand, if they all know that at Hyde Park there exists a place where they can send them for the permanent care for the benefit of the public and under the control of the Government itself, I think it will be of great additional value to this collection we are making.

The plans—are you going to speak about the plans again?

CHAIRMAN LELAND; I think not, unless you would like to have them presented.

THE PRESIDENT: No, but if anybody would like to see the first sketch plans—they are somewhat preliminary—to get an idea of the proposed location of the building and the proposed type of building, they are right here. It is not an expensive type of architecture. It is permanent, fireproof and air conditioned, whatever that may mean these days. I do not believe in it myself; however, I suppose it is good for papers and other records.

I think you will get a pretty good idea from those plans of the physical aspects of this proposed building.

And now I want to thank all of you for all you have done and are doing. I feel that this whole project, as the W.P.A. would say, is in very competent hands. May it go on. I shall, personally, have the greatest personal joy in watching that building go up and, especially, in watching the trucks, the Army trucks from Washington, D.C., when they begin to roll into the drive and put those things where they will stay for a great many years.