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(See page 161.)
F.D.R.: LEADER IN A TIME OF DRIFT

By DONALD S. ROTHCHILD

I

At the 1928 Houston convention, Franklin D. Roosevelt remarked that, "To stand upon the ramparts and die for our principles is heroic. To sally forth to battle and win for our principles is something more than heroic." This was, for F. D. R., no isolated instance of convention oratory, but an expression of the basic tenets of his political credo: unless ideals were successfully applied to real situations, they remained abstractions—no more, no less. In consequence, he attempted to fuse his devotion to progressivism with a keen understanding of the skills of the practical politician. His ability to weave these strands into a harmonious pattern accounts in large part for his success on the American political scene.

II

In the manuscript files of the Colby College Library Treasure Room is this letter written by Franklin D. Roosevelt which helps to illustrate this point. [Printed by permission of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.]

October 20, 1928.

Mr. A. J. Jones
Fairfield, Center, Me.

Dear Sir:

I have not heard what decision you have made as between the two Presidential candidates, but remembering your firm belief in the policies and ideals of Woodrow Wilson, I am encouraged to hope that

1 Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Happy Warrior, Alfred E. Smith (Boston, 1928), 40.
you have decided as I have decided—that under Governor Smith our country stands far more chance of returning to the path blazed out for us by our greatest President, than under the materialistic and self-seeking advisers who surround the other candidate; men whose influence has already made it manifest that high ideals and a forward-looking policy—not only for this country, but for the world—would stand as little chance under Mr. Hoover as they have stood under President Harding, President Coolidge and Mr. Mellon.

To me, the contemptuous casting aside of all of President Wilson’s wonderful dreams of a better world, and the substitution of crass materialism and a dollar-and-cents viewpoint of everything has been a world tragedy. I know Governor Smith and I know that in his own way his interest in humanity, his intolerance of the oppression of the weak and his desire to help those handicapped by circumstances has led him to the same belief as to what our country’s attitude should be, and as to how its course should be guided, as animated President Wilson.

I would deeply appreciate it if you would write me confidentially what you have decided, addressing the letter to my house, 49 East 65th Street, New York City.

Yours very truly,

Franklin D. Roosevelt

When the above letter is analyzed in the context of its times, Roosevelt’s acumen as a practical politician becomes evident. F. D. R., recovering slowly from his attack of polio, had to face the problem of his re-entry into politics. It was not a decision he made alone. Throughout his long illness he had the counsel and encouragement of Louis McHenry Howe, his political adviser and manager, and his wife, Eleanor. But the decision was essentially his, and he made it at a surprisingly early date.

The thoroughness with which Franklin Roosevelt went about his task can stand as a warning to anyone who looks upon a political career as a dilettante’s pursuit. He kept his image before the public by participating in numerous fund-raising efforts, by organizing a resort at Warm Springs for polio victims, by issuing public statements, and by engaging in a highly active correspondence. The last point is of particular importance for the purposes of this paper. Not only did his corre-
Correspondence enable him to remain in contact with his political acquaintances of the Wilson administration and the 1920 presidential campaign—to say nothing of New York politics—but it also fostered his stature as a national figure. F. D. R. realized fully the significance of operating in this manner.

Roosevelt’s voluminous personal correspondence was supplemented by the frequent use of circular letters. A circular letter calling for the rehabilitation of the Democratic party in 1924 brought responses from party leaders in every section of the United States. The above letter to A. J. Jones is one of many hundreds which F. D. R.’s office sent out to persons active in politics at the local level during the 1928 campaign. That there are scores of replies to this letter (almost all wishing F. D. R. well in his New York gubernatorial race) indicates that it was well received. Furthermore, in November and December following his election as governor, he sent out another circular letter to the delegates who had attended the Houston convention, the winning and losing Democratic Congressmen, and the various state and county chairmen, expressing his disappointment over the defeat of the national ticket and asking party leaders to write him with respect to national sentiment as to the role of the party in the years ahead. He denied that the Democratic party faced “extinction.” “Will you write me frankly,” he wrote the Democratic county chairmen, “what you think the effect of the support of an all year round fighting national organization will have in our own district, not only on the Congressional election of two years hence, but in the next Presidential election four years from now.”

Clearly, these efforts helped Franklin Roosevelt maintain his position among the front ranks of American political leaders at a time when his physical disabilities prevented a more active course. But the value of his correspondence was not limited to this alone. The replies themselves were informative, and Roosevelt gleaned valuable ideas from scanning their contents. Frank Freidel, for example, refers to F. D. R.’s purpose in writing the 1924 circular letter as follows:

2 See James M. Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York, 1956), 98.
3 Printed by permission of Mr. Herman Kahn, Director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park.

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol5/iss7/3
What Roosevelt hoped to achieve was to discover some liberal position upon which all party factions could agree. He wished to analyze the replies in order to find "what seems to be the common meeting points of Democratic minds from the North, South, East and West." When he had these clearly in mind, he felt he would be better able to make concrete suggestions. 4

III

While the letter to A. J. Jones reveals something of Roosevelt the politician, it is perhaps even more interesting in the light it sheds upon his political principles. Franklin D. Roosevelt was a political warrior, but not an undirected one. He opposed religious bigotry and remained steadfast in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson at a time when these postures were unpopular in many quarters. He entered into the political arena with every intention of winning the fight; not to gain power for its own sake, but to further the causes he believed in. In short, F. D. R. felt it "excellent to have a giant's strength" as long as one used it for worthwhile purposes.

In accepting the gubernatorial nomination in 1928, F. D. R. described himself as "a disciple in a great cause." 5 What "great cause?" In a vague, rather amorphous way, he seemed to bring together and up to date the progressivism of his "Uncle Ted" and that of Woodrow Wilson. In repeated speeches he stressed the need for improving the conditions of the farmer, lowering tariffs, curbing the power of the government to infringe on the rights of the individual, honesty and integrity in law enforcement, conservation of national resources, and cooperation with other nations. Gradually Roosevelt's brand of progressivism emerged as a philosophy distinct from that of his predecessors, but it was a slow process and one which involved prolonged testing and re-formulation in the tumultuous decades of the 1920s and 1930s.

In soliciting A. J. Jones' support for Al Smith in the 1928 election, Roosevelt touched upon three important strands in his fabric of good politics and good progressivism: 1) his intolerance of the "materialistic and self-seeking advisers" surrounding Hoover, 2) his admiration for Wilsonianism, and 3)
his support for Al Smith. The last two points need greater amplification.

With the passage of time, F. D. R.’s memories of Wilson grew fonder. He tended to overlook episodes such as Wilson’s opposition to his 1914 candidacy for the United States Senate and to dwell upon his role as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the Wilson administration and upon his race for the vice-presidency in 1920. Since Cox maintained a safe distance from embroilment in Washington politics, it was natural that he should balance his ticket with the selection of a Wilson man. Roosevelt, however, “was a rather anomalous Wilsonian.”

Rexford Tugwell explains this as follows:

There could hardly have been anyone in the official family so little really identified with it. Before the war he had been almost insubordinate in pressing for action; while the war was going on, he had no part whatever in shaping policy and he had in fact been outside the decision-making circle. Also, he had a good many friends who were not only not Democrats but were very active Republicans . . . There was reason to believe, besides all this, that Wilson still regarded Franklin with a rather chilly and questioning eye.

Yet, despite these chilly glances, one cannot lose sight of the fact that Roosevelt campaigned as a Wilson Democrat in 1920—even to the extent of taking a fairly strong position in favor of the League of Nations. F. D. R.’s enthusiasm for the League stemmed directly from his contact with Wilson. On Wilson’s return voyage from Europe aboard the George Washington, he discussed his visions of the future international order with his young Assistant Secretary of the Navy. The effect was electric. Roosevelt became a champion of the League overnight and, upon disembarkation, engaged in an extensive speaking tour calling for its ratification by the Senate.

After Senator Lodge and his colleagues refused to accept the League on Wilson’s terms, Roosevelt continued to espouse its cause. In 1920, Cox and Roosevelt stumped the nation urging the ratification of the Covenant, but to no avail. The forces of drift and retreat were too strong. Even F. D. R., himself, was caught in their grips. He supported the League but did not rule out negotiation on the means for its implementation. In this respect, his approach differed somewhat from Wilson’s.

7 Ibid.
Thus, in his speech accepting the vice-presidential nomination he declared:

The League of Nations is a practical solution of a practical situation. It is no more perfect than our original Constitution, which has been amended 18 times and will soon, we hope, be amended the 19th, was perfect. It is not anti-national, it is anti-war. No super-nation, binding us to the decisions of its tribunals, is suggested, but the method and machinery by which the opinion of civilization may become effective against those who seek war is at last within the reach of humanity.”

Certainly such a “practical” man would not rule out a few face-saving concessions to achieve his larger objectives. In fact, such an outlook was the very essence of F. D. R.’s political creed.

Roosevelt’s support for Al Smith was a key feature in his efforts through most of the 1920s to achieve a place for himself in the world of politics. He saw his own political future in terms of Smith’s, for victories which Al Smith scored were his as well. They were both members of the Empire State team, and Roosevelt could not aspire for the team’s captaincy until the front runner had had his day in the sun. At least, this was the picture until November 1928.

Roosevelt’s struggle on behalf of Al Smith gained him national attention at the 1920 convention. His able speech seconding Smith’s nomination for the presidency not only endeared him to Al (who reciprocated by seconding Roosevelt’s own nomination for the vice-presidency) but hastened his emergence into the upper echelons of Democratic leadership. Roosevelt became his party’s second choice on the ticket—an accomplishment partly attributable to Tammany’s good grace as well as to other factors, such as his identification with the Wilson administration and his family political heritage.

Following the defeat of the Democratic ticket in 1920 and his attack of polio, Roosevelt was sidelined from active campaigning. Nevertheless, he continued his efforts on behalf of Smith. In 1922, with Hearst actively seeking the Democratic nomination for governor of New York, F. D. R. put pressure on Smith, in public and private, to accept the nomination. Smith protested his preference for continuing in his more remunerative work as president of a trucking company, but in the end he

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succumbed to the public’s wishes. Because of his infirmity, Roosevelt was only able to play a small role in Smith’s victorious New York campaign in 1922; however, part of the Smith-Roosevelt team was on the move again. And Franklin Roosevelt would not be long in making a reappearance on the national scene.

The presidential year of 1924 brought Roosevelt back on the national stage for a fleeting interlude. In May, following Roosevelt’s early announcement of support for Smith, the Governor formally asked him to take charge of the pre-convention campaign, a responsibility he accepted with alacrity. Although his strenuous efforts on Smith’s behalf were not crowned with success, Roosevelt emerged from the convention struggle a contender for future honors. His famous “Happy Warrior” speech electrified the New York crowd. No longer was he a polio victim to be pitied, but a force to be contended with.

The defeat in 1924 made Smith and Roosevelt more determined than ever to win their objective four years thence. Their relationship was limited almost entirely to political affairs. The purposefulness inherent in their association is shown, in part, by a letter “private citizen” Roosevelt wrote to the Hon. Alfred E. Smith in which he advised the latter on the strategy he should pursue during the difficult interim period before announcing candidacy.

You are gaining in the esteem and confidence of people in every state and as long as things are going well along that line, it is better to saw wood and keep out of the political side of things. This does not mean that you should keep quiet. I hope, on the contrary, that you will find an opportunity between now and the first of the year to speak on a non-political subject in the west and in the south. 9

In other words, Roosevelt felt that Smith had every reason to expect the nomination in 1928, and he wanted to be sure that Smith would be the strongest possible candidate by the time the convention assembled.

By 1928 the Smith bandwagon was in full steam. Roosevelt, who did not serve as Smith’s pre-convention chairman, worked hard, nonetheless, on Al’s behalf during this period. He met political leaders in the South and the Midwest in his search for votes and again directed Smith’s forces on the convention floor.

His efforts reached their pinnacle when he delivered his nominating speech. Supported only by canes, Roosevelt was the very soul of gallantry as he roused the delegates to the standards of Al Smith. Smith was nominated by the Houston convention on the first ballot. His entrance into the national arena left a great gap at home, a gap which F. D. R. filled after strenuous urgings on the part of Governor Smith and others. The reasons for this reluctance partly involved matters of health and timing. Nevertheless, Democratic leaders in New York were greatly relieved when Roosevelt finally indicated a willingness to run, for his vote-getting appeal upstate was seen as a strong bulwark for Smith in the state as a whole. The arrangement was advantageous for both Smith and Roosevelt. The latter campaigned on a Smith platform and exhorted his listeners to support Smith at every possible juncture. That Roosevelt won while Smith lost was not so much a consequence of Roosevelt’s campaign omissions or commissions but of the fact that the U. S. electorate was not yet ready for a downstate New Yorker.

Certainly Roosevelt’s letter to A. J. Jones is valuable as an indication of some of the outstanding facets of F. D. R., the political man, at a crucial turning point in his successful career. The letter clearly identifies his support for progressivism by its attack on the forces around Hoover as well as by its approval of both Wilsonianism and Al Smith, the Democratic candidate for president. In a larger sense, it demonstrates a “realist’s” attachment to the cause of liberalism at a time when liberalism was out of vogue. The possibilities inherent in a combination of good liberalism and good politics are overlooked by most people. Roosevelt saw these possibilities clearly, and this combination became the springboard for his unusually successful career. In these terms Roosevelt filled a vacuum on the American political scene. He offered real leadership at a time when people were yearning for it. That he accomplished this within the context of the American liberal tradition will be to his lasting credit.