

VIII. THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

THE spirit of America was invoked in strident tones by the third inaugural address of President Roosevelt. But the spirit which obviously moved the President's address revealed no resemblance to the spirit of America.

The spirit in which great Americans have traditionally addressed the people on great occasions was uniformly a spirit of *modesty*. I cite a few examples:

Not unconscious in the outset of the inferiority of my qualifications, experience, in my own eyes—perhaps still more in the eyes of others—has strengthened the motives to diffidence in myself. . . .

—George Washington, Farewell Address, Sept. 17, 1796.

A diffidence, perhaps too just, in my own qualification, will teach me to look with reverence to the examples of public virtue left by my illustrious predecessors, and with veneration to the lights that flowed from the mind that founded and the mind that reformed our system. The same diffidence induces me to hope for instruction and aid from the co-ordinate branches of the government. . . .

—Andrew Jackson, Inaugural, March 4, 1829.

Lincoln's public life was so uniformly an expression of this characteristic modesty that any particular quotation from his utterances would be supererogation.

Roosevelt strikes a new and coarse note—one of vainglory and boasting. "We acted, we acted quickly, boldly, decisively," he says in description of his own role. And in conclusion he explains that he remains President "by the will of God!" Most American Presidents have invoked Divine assistance, but Roosevelt is the first to

claim Divine "sanction" since the "Divine right of kings" was abolished by the Revolution proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.

"The co-ordinate branches of the government continue freely to function," Roosevelt declared, while admitting the dire crisis in the world and "at home." But he did not mention his usurpation of September 3, 1940, when he seized power to dispose of warships to a foreign belligerent power and to negotiate war alliances, nor did he quote Jefferson's words which warned against such usurpations:

It would be perfidious . . . not to warn you of encroachments, which, though clothed with the pretext of necessity, or disguised by arguments of expediency, may yet establish precedents, which may ultimately devote a generous and unsuspecting people to all the consequences of usurped power. . . . Exhortations to disregard domestic usurpations until foreign danger shall have passed is an artifice which may be forever used; because the possessors of power, who are the advocates for its extension, can ever create national embarrassments, to be successively employed to soothe the people into sleep, whilst that power is swelling silently, secretly, and fatally. Of the same character are insinuations of a foreign influence, which seize upon a laudable enthusiasm against danger from abroad, and distort it by an unnatural application, so as to blind your eyes against danger at home.

"The Bill of Rights remains inviolate," Roosevelt said. By thus denying violations he expressed his approval of the rising wave of repressions and limitations on popular rights, which he personally initiated, denying the validity of the Bill of Rights to those who suffer these repressions. He did not mention the Alien Registration Law, for which he bears personal responsibility, and its accompanying modern versions of the Alien and Sedition Law of 1798; nor did he quote the famous Virginia resolutions, and "Address to the People," cornerstones of American democracy, in "protest against the palpable and alarming infractions of the Constitution, in the two late cases of the 'Alien and Sedition Acts.' . . . If a suspicion that aliens are dangerous constitute the justification of that

power exercised over them by Congress, then a similar suspicion will justify the exercise of a similar power over natives. . . . Let the artificers of monarchy be asked what farther materials they can need for building up their favorite system."

"The freedom of elections is wholly maintained," Roosevelt declared. But at that moment he was celebrating the victory of the most gigantic rigging ever put over in the name of an election. The most important new converts to Roosevelt, the "economic royalists," had ganged up on the Republican Party Convention, which they normally control, and forced it to nominate a Democrat, Wendell Willkie, who had specifically engaged himself to stand on the same foreign-policy platform as Roosevelt. Both Willkie and Roosevelt promised the voters peace, in their pre-election speeches, and both agreed to forget the promise after election. To make sure this rigged election would not bring a revolt of the voters, the only party that offered a genuine alternative, the Communist Party, was forcibly and illegally removed from the ballot in the most important states, its candidates and election workers sentenced to prison in other states (one candidate to fifteen years), an official Red hunt instituted everywhere to drive Communists and their supporters out of public or private employment—and Mr. Roosevelt boasts in his inaugural address: "The freedom of elections is wholly maintained." Thomas Jefferson described this sort of election-jobber, in 1795:

These rogues set out with stealing the people's good opinion, and then steal from them the right of withdrawing it, by contriving laws and associations against the power of the people themselves.

Roosevelt's whole program is predicated upon the assumption that the British navy is the "first line of defense" for the American people. He would like to have forgotten the words of Jefferson, which read as if they were written for today in repudiation of Roosevelt. Read this from Jefferson:

We should first let England plunder us, says Jefferson, explaining the policy of Anglophile Americans, as she has been doing for years, for

fear Bonaparte should do it; and then ally ourselves with her, and enter into the war. . . . And, what is to be our security, that when embarked for her in the war, she will . . . not leave us in the lurch? Her good faith! The faith of a nation of merchants! The *Punica fides* of modern Carthage! Of the friend and protectress of Copenhagen! [One year before this was written, Britain had bombarded Copenhagen and captured the Danish fleet, without warning, under pretext of "protection."] Of the nation who never admitted a chapter of morality into her political code! And is boldly avowing that whatever power can make hers, is hers of right. Money, and not morality, is the principle of commerce and commercial nations. But in addition to this, the nature of the English government forbids, of itself, reliance on her engagements; and it is well known that she had been the least faithful to her alliances of any nation of Europe, since the period of her history wherein she has been distinguished for her commerce and corruption. (1810.)

Jefferson wrote this description of the British role at Munich, one hundred and twenty-eight years before the event.

To complete and universalize the desolation of the globe, it has been the will of Providence to raise up, at the same time, a tyrant as unprincipled and as overwhelming, for the ocean. Not in the poor maniac George, but in his government and nation. Bonaparte will die, and his tyrannies with him. But a nation never dies. The English government, and its piratical principles and practices, have no fixed term of duration. Europe feels, and is writhing under the scorpion whips of Bonaparte. We are assailed by those of England. . . . The object of England is the *permanent domination of the ocean*, and the *monopoly of the trade of the world*. (1813.)

This was written when the British were engaged in sacking Washington and burning the White House, and the Capitol.

Roosevelt is engaged in a gigantic effort to replace this long-standing American tradition with its direct opposite, which is most completely expressed in the semi-official agitation for "union now" with the British empire. That is doubtless why he has publicly rebuked the memory of Jefferson, and paid homage to that of Hamilton. Doubtless also that is why the Democratic Party suddenly ceased to observe Jackson Day. Today's "Anglomen," as Jefferson

called the Hamiltonian party of his time, have of course advanced greatly beyond their predecessors; they dream that in the new Anglo-American world empire, Wall Street will be "the center of gravity," and that "the scepter passes to the United States." Therefore, Jefferson's excoriation of the British "pirates" must now be enlarged to include the Wall Street "pirates."

Roosevelt's policies represent the imperialist denial of the people's right and will to live. His deepest and most subtle violation of the American tradition, the American spirit, in his inaugural address occurs therefore when he seemingly pledges himself to "democracy" most emphatically. Consider the following:

The life of a nation is the fullness of the measure of its will to live. . . . There are men who believe that democracy . . . is limited or measured by a kind of mystical or artificial fate—that, for some unexplained reason, tyranny and slavery have become the surging wave of the future, and that freedom is an ebbing tide. But we Americans know that this is not true.

Yet the best representatives of the American spirit never told our people that the "will to live" of a ruling class (its will to grow richer) would solve the problems of or avoid the dangers to democracy—that is, the masses, the people. The best Americans never tired of warning that democracy, regardless of its "will to live," could not endure unless the masses maintained the possibilities of struggle against minority ruling classes, unless its material preconditions were maintained; they saw democracy's "fate" dependent upon the material factors and political power in the masses, without which freedom would become "an ebbing tide," overwhelmed by the "surging wave" of tyranny and slavery.

Turn to Lincoln: in his Presidential message to the first regular session of Congress (December, 1861), Lincoln fixed precisely the material preconditions for the democracy of his day, without which no "will to live" could be of any avail, in the following words:

Men with their families—wives, sons, daughters—work for themselves on their farms, in their houses, and in their shops, taking the whole

product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand, nor of hired laborers or slaves on the other.

Unless the great body of the population occupies this independent economic position—depending neither upon capital nor hired labor, Lincoln foresaw that "*all of liberty shall be lost.*"

In this Lincoln was but expounding the doctrines of Thomas Jefferson, who foresaw and warned against the rising institution of combined great wealth and political power, such as Roosevelt's war program represents today, and—

Though the day may be at some distance . . . yet it will surely come, when a single fibre of this institution will produce an hereditary aristocracy, which will change the form of our government from the best to the worst in the world. (Letter to Washington, 1786.)

Roosevelt now ignores and hides the most important facts (which he temporarily utilized himself in 1937 in his fight against the Supreme Court). These are:

That the material foundations of Jeffersonian-Lincolnian democracy have been irretrievably lost;

That power-driven machinery has destroyed forever the individual private-property basis for democracy, and transformed the national economy into private property *against democracy*, in the hands of a "hereditary aristocracy" built of wealth and political power;

That there is no way to restore democracy to a solid foundation, except to make the national economy, instead of the sacrifices of war, "a common enterprise" in the hands of the "common people"—which is socialism, the only possible path forward;

When all these things are ignored, hidden, or even denied, as they are by Roosevelt, and substituted by the bare "will to live," which is really only the "will to empire" of the economic royalists, then *the net result is treason to democracy, and violation of the American spirit.*

In truth, Roosevelt is consciously striving to become the great American imperialist leader on the grand scale. This imperialist

role is the antithesis of the living heart of the American tradition. Just as bourgeois historians are rewriting American history to glorify Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr, and General Conway, to replace Washington, Jefferson, Paine; just as bourgeois novelists bring out an *Oliver Wiswell* to embellish treason and spatter mud on the American Revolution; just as bourgeois motion picture magnates produce *Gone With the Wind* and *Santa Fé Trail* to idealize the slave society and drag down the popular understanding of the high character and historically progressive significance of a Lincoln and a John Brown—so does Franklin D. Roosevelt perform a similar part on the American political stage.

Roosevelt represents the negation of the traditional American spirit, as surely and as completely as American imperialism with its fevered ambitions of world empire is the negation of everything represented by Washington, Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln.

New Masses, *February 18, 1941.*