AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT

Howard Gillman • Mark A. Graber • Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 8: The New Deal/Great Society Era – Introduction

*Franklin D. Roosevelt*, **Commonwealth Club Address** (1932)[[1]](#footnote-1)

As both a presidential candidate and a president, Franklin Roosevelt consistently advanced two themes: the need for “bold, persistent experimentation” by the national government to restore prosperity and the social and political commitment to providing economic and personal security for all citizens. Roosevelt first articulated these sentiments during a speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, delivered during his 1932 campaign for the presidency. The speech laid out a vision of a new “economic constitutional order” that was as concerned with checking private power and marshaling the power of government to advance the public good as with preventing the abuse of political power. Roosevelt’s Commonwealth Club Address appeals to traditional constitutional concerns such as the protection of the individual and the inappropriateness of “class legislation” that exploits public power to benefit private interests, while emphasizing the need to reevaluate inherited constitutional commitments and the new constitutional challenges to realizing those ideals in an age of democracy and industrialization. In the election of 1932, he assembled the electoral coalition that enabled him to begin to act on that vision.

. . . .

A glance at the situation today only too clearly indicates that equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. Our industrial plant is built; the problem just now is whether under existing conditions it is not overbuilt. Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land. . . .

. . .

Clearly, all this calls for a reappraisal of values. A mere builder of more industrial plants, a creator of more railroad systems, and organizer of more corporations, is as likely to be a danger as a help. The day of the great promoter or the financial Titan, to whom we granted anything if only he would build, or develop, is over. . . . The day of enlightened administration has come.

. . . In other times we dealt with the problem of an unduly ambitious central Government by modifying it gradually into a constitutional democratic Government. So today we are modifying and controlling our economic units.

As I see it, the task of Government in its relation to business is to assist the development of an economic declaration of rights, an economic constitutional order. This is the common task of statesman and business man. It is the minimum requirement of a more permanently safe order of things.

. . .

The Declaration of Independence discusses the problem of Government in terms of a contract. . . . Under such a contract rulers were accorded power, and the people consented to that power on consideration that they be accorded certain rights. The task of statesmanship has always been the redefinition of these rights in terms of a changing and growing social order. New conditions impose new requirements upon Government and those who conduct Government.

. . .

I feel that we are coming to a view through the drift of our legislation and our public thinking in the past quarter century that private power is, to enlarge an old phrase, a public trust as well. I hold that continued enjoyment of that power by any individual or group must depend upon the fulfillment of that trust. . . .

The terms of that contract are as old as the Republic, and as new as the new economic order.

Every man has a right to life; and this means that he has also a right to make a comfortable living. He may by sloth or crime decline to exercise that right; but it may not be denied him. . . .

Our Government formal and informal, political and economic, owes to every one an avenue to possess himself of a portion of that plenty sufficient for his needs, through his own work.

Every man has a right to his own property; which means a right to be assured, to the fullest extent attainable, in the safety of his savings. . . . In all thought of property, this right is paramount; all other property rights must yield to it. If, in accord with this principle, we must restrict the operations of the speculator, the manipulator, even the financier, I believe we must accept the restriction as needful, not to hamper individualism but to protect it.

. . .

This implication is, briefly, that the responsible heads of finance and industry instead of acting each for himself, must work together to achieve the common end. They must, where necessary, sacrifice this or that private advantage; and in reciprocal self-denial must seek a general advantage. It is here that formal Government—political Government, if you choose—comes in. Whenever in the pursuit of this objective the lone wolf, the unethical competitor . . . declines to join in achieving an end recognized as being for the public welfare, and threatens to drag the industry back to a state of anarchy, the Government may properly be asked to apply restraint. Likewise, should the group ever use its collective power contrary to public welfare, the Government must be swift to enter and protect the public interest.

. . .

The final term of the high contract was for liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have learnt a great deal of both in the past century. We know that individual liberty and individual happiness mean nothing unless both are ordered in the sense that one man’s meat is not another man’s poison. We know that the old “rights of personal competency”—the right to read, to think, to speak to choose and live a mode of life, must be respected at all hazards. We know that liberty to do anything which deprives others of those elemental rights is outside the protection of any compact; and that Government in this regard is the maintenance of a balance, within which every individual may have a place if he will take it; in which every individual may find safety if he wishes it; in which every individual may attain such power as his ability permits, consistent with his assuming the accompanying responsibility.

1. Excerpt taken from Franklin D. Roosevelt, President’s Personal File Speeches, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)