

Primary Source Analysis
The Inauguration Address of FDR, 1933
HIST 380

Peter CHINETTI

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Instructor: Professor Czaplicki

The country Roosevelt inherited was economically broken at the time of FDR's inauguration. His speech centers around that problem, and attempts to calm the populace. Specifically addressed in the speech are the issues of unemployment and banker's greed. It is a call to action, even a call to arms. Roosevelt treats the task "as we would treat the emergency of a war." It was a successful speech, with one of the most famous lines in presidential history: "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself!"

This speech can be either read or watched, as it was video (and audio) recorded. The quality of the film is fairly low, as can be seen below:



The audio is also poorly preserved, however the force of FDR's speaking style booms through the noise. One of the interesting observations is the calm size of the crowds. Although the camera clearly reveals a large crowd, there is infrequent applause. The "fear itself" line falls on a silent crowd!

Roosevelt states his intent very early, "a leadership of frankness and vigor." He speaks plainly about how the bankers and businessmen "through their own

stubbornness and their own incompetence” brought the world to its knees. He leans on populist “fat cat”-baiting to create a common enemy in his “emergency of war.” He (as the landslide election proved) had the heart of America, and he was speaking to the common man to reassure them of their choice.

The wording of the speech is transparently confrontational. FDR is unequivocal about who broke the world economy: the “money changers” in the “temple” a clear link the Biblical confrontation between Jesus and money changers. To solve the problem, there are “lines of attack” for a “trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice.” He would “assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people.” There is no listener left questioning the lengths FDR is willing to go to rebuild the economy.

FDR lays out few specifics of what he intends to work on. He does mention regulation of the banking industry, which lead to the SEC, but the rest of the speech is in broad strokes. He mentions dedicating “this Nation to the policy of the good neighborthe neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of othersthe neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.” Unfortunately, this leaves out any specifics on how you could implement such a strategy.

The lack of specifics is symptomatic of the major problem with this speech as a window into the New Deal: it is FDR’s opening. It *is* the grand design, but it has no indication if he managed to wrangle the rest of government. Other sources would need to be found throught the period to show how his grand vision was translated into work “which the present situation of our Nation impels.” The most obvious place to look for corroborating primary sources would be news articles of the period reporting on the programs as they were announced, and as they were built.

FDR’s inauguration is an important work in the history of the New Deal, and in the history of America in general. It primes the plan which is set in motion during the next 100 days and beyond. It introduces FDR’s famous “fear itself” line, and his plan to regulate the banks. It shouts his plan to his “army” of Americans. Although it is only the first salvo in the New Deal, it lays out what is to come.