

DICTATORSHIP: THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

FDR's inauguration took place at the lowest point of the Great Depression. With unemployment soaring and banks collapsing, public fear was so great that many were ready to support sweeping emergency powers for the new President. Dictatorship was on the rise overseas. Indeed, March 1933 was the moment when fascist leader Adolf Hitler consolidated power in Germany. And while Hitler was viewed with concern by many Americans, some expressed admiration for the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

As the inauguration approached, influential voices called for granting Roosevelt unprecedented authority to ignore Congress and even the Constitution. Nationally-syndicated newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann told his readers, "A mild species of dictatorship will help us over the roughest spots in the road ahead." The liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal* asserted FDR should have "the powers of a virtual dictatorship to reorganize the government." Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic Party's 1928 presidential candidate, reflected (with some exaggeration) that during World War I "we wrapped the Constitution in a piece of paper, put it on the shelf and left it there until the war was over." The Depression, he felt, was a similar "state of war."

On Inauguration Day, the *New York Herald-Tribune* ran an approving headline: "For Dictatorship If Necessary." Other newspapers sounded similar notes in their coverage. The immense crowd at the inauguration gave its greatest applause when FDR said he was ready to assume extraordinary powers if Congress failed to act against the emergency. Eleanor Roosevelt found the reaction "a little terrifying," realizing the public would do whatever FDR wished.

Though talk of dictatorship was in the air, FDR chose the path of persuasion and democratic action, not coercion.

The documents contained in this selection are from the collections of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum and are intended to reflect the many sides of this issue.

Document #1:

Page from rough draft of FDR's radio speech to the American Legion, March 6, 1933

Master Speech File

Roosevelt's first radio speech as President was a March 6 address to the annual convention of the American Legion. In an early draft of the speech, an aide included a passage in which the President asserted his "right" as "commander-in-chief" to "command you in any phase of the situation which now confronts us." These startling words—suggesting extra-constitutional powers—were edited out before Roosevelt made his address.

3/5/33

Suggestions:

2nd par. end of 1st line. "Exacting" instead of "serious".

We must battle to eliminate or subjugate these enemies and to remedy the havoc they have wrought. And from the lessons taught and the experience gained in the war upon which we now embark we will use these same forces to build the fortifications to secure us against the menace of future invasion.

We must enlist for that war the forces which recognize the value of discipline and can teach others -- enlist those who can take their designated places in the ranks and sacrifice selfishness and greed in the inevitable battle for the good of all. And I can promise you that the spoils of this war will be a spiritual happiness and material prosperity incomparably greater than ~~that which~~ the meager dividends which victory has thus far paid or ever will pay in "wars of death."

As ~~your~~ new commander-in-chief under the oath to which you are still bound I reserve to myself the right to command you in any phase of the situation which now confronts us. That is the highest compliment within my power.

Document #2:

Reading copy, FDR's radio speech to the American Legion, March 6, 1933

Master Speech File

The final reading copy of FDR's radio speech to the American Legion on March 6, 1933 does not include the startling passage—included in an early draft—about his “right” to “command” the Legion in the current crisis. In the end, FDR asked only for the Legion's “support” for his legislative program.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

FOR RELEASE MORNING PAPERS MONDAY MARCH ⁵~~6th~~, 1933 -

Stephen T. Early, Secretary

Radio Address of President Roosevelt to the American Legion
as delivered by him from the White House Sunday
Night, March 5, 1933.

am glad
I ~~rejoice in the opportunity~~ that this, the first
word addressed by me to the people of this country from the
White House, can be dedicated to the great ideals of sacrifice
and service. The men of the Legion know, *and indeed all veterans and all our graduates* ~~as we all know now~~,
that the essential things of life are related intimately to
these two great words.

The men of the ranks of the Legion, in the trying
days of fifteen years ago, offered for the welfare and preser-
vation of their country the ultimate contribution that a human
being can give.

The deep necessities of peace are no less serious.
It is a mistake to assume that the virtues of war differ
essentially from the virtues of peace. All life is a battle
against the forces of nature, against the mistakes and human
limitations of man, against the forces of selfishness and inertia,
of laziness and fear. These are enemies with whom we never con-

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

-2-

clude an armistice.

To the end that the efforts I am giving in these first days of my administration may be crowned with success and that we may achieve a ~~really~~ lasting restoration of national well-being, I invite the support of the men of the Legion ^{and of} ~~I ask this of~~ ^{all men and women} who love their country, who know the meaning of sacrifice and who, in every emergency, have given splendid and generous service to the nation.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

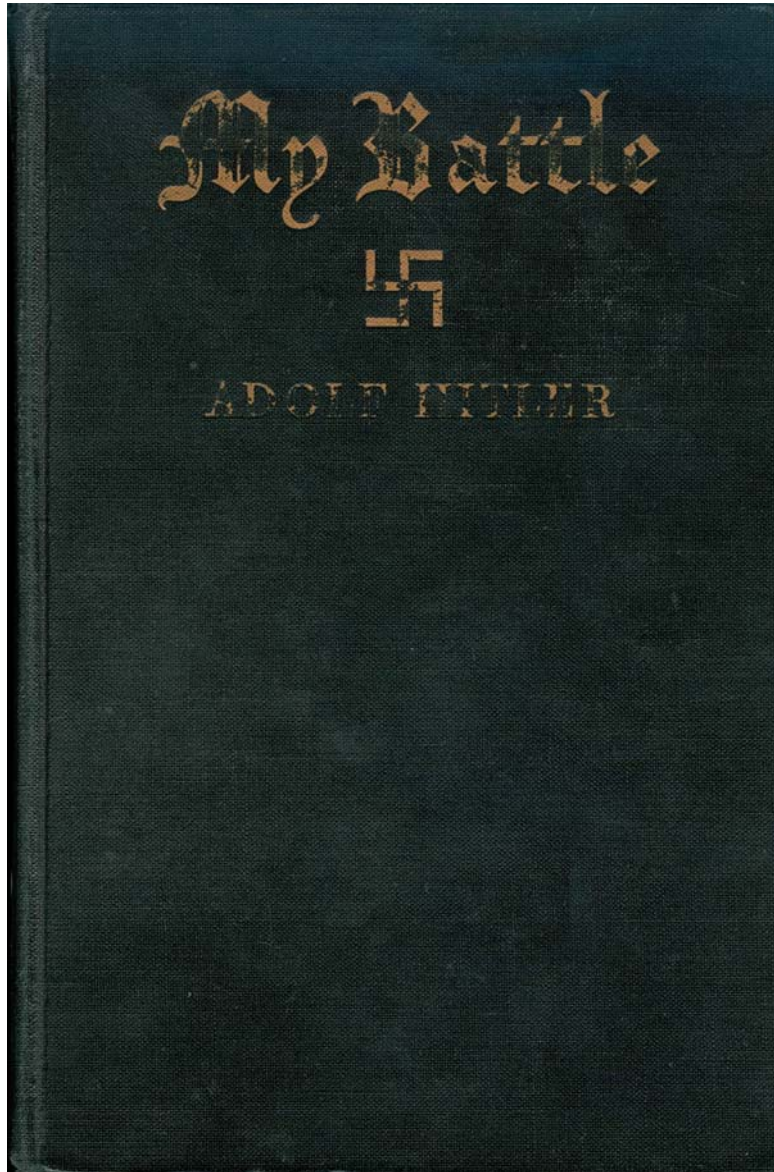
Document #3:

Adolf Hitler, My Battle, abridged and translated by E. T. S. Dugdale Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933

FDR Library Book Collection

In one of the great coincidences of twentieth century history, Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler assumed power at nearly the same moment in 1933. This is FDR's personal copy of the 1933 English translation of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This edition was edited and published in America at the time when Hitler was coming to power. The edition failed to include the sweeping anti-Semitism of the original.

Unlike many others in America and Europe, Roosevelt had few illusions about the new German Chancellor. Fluent in German, FDR was familiar with the original German language version of *Mein Kampf*. He wrote in longhand on the book's flyleaf: "This translation is so expurgated as to give a wholly false view of what Hitler really is or says—The German original would make a different story."



Jonathan Russell

The White House

1933 -

This Translation is so expurgated
as to give a wholly false view
of what Hitler really is or
says - The German original
would make a different story

Documents #4 and #5:

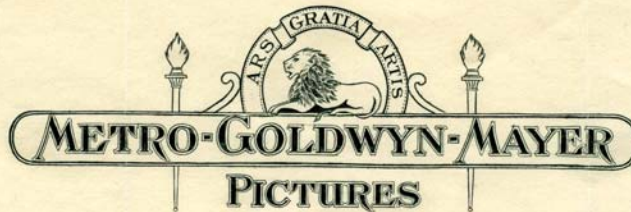
N.M. Schenck to Stephen T. Early, March 11, 1933

FDR to William Randolph Hearst, April 1, 1933

President's Official and Personal Files

In April 1933 publisher and film producer William Randolph Hearst released an MGM feature film titled *Gabriel Over the White House*. Hearst believed America needed a dictator to lead it through the crisis of the Great Depression. His film presents an approving picture of a fictional American president who dissolves Congress, declares martial law, and creates an "Army of Construction" to rehabilitate the nation.

Hearst sent the script for his film to FDR and correspondence indicates Roosevelt and others screened an early version of the film at the White House and made suggestions for revisions. Document #4 is a March 11, 1933 letter to White House press secretary Stephen Early from MGM's president that refers to certain "objectionable features" that would be removed from the film. Document #5 is an April 1, 1933 letter from President Roosevelt to Hearst in which FDR notes that he is "pleased" with changes made in the movie.



LOEW BUILDING-1540 BROADWAY
NEW YORK

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

March 11, 1933.

Mr. Stephen T Early
Secretary to the President
White House
Washington D C

*ackd
3/12
mm*

My dear Mr. Early

Mr. Hays has told me of your telephone call to him relative to the picture "Gabriel Over the White House", of the specific report you had heard, and of his assurance to you of the care which would be exercised.

I want to reassure you on all of this.

The print which was sent East was, as you know, simply a working print. The studio had in mind changes, and additional changes have been suggested from here; many and long telephone conferences have been had about it; all bookings have been delayed; and the studio is at work in developing new ideas, suggestions and eliminations. It is our hope, too, that it may be affirmatively serviceable. When this work is all done, the print will again be shipped here for us to see before it is concluded.

You may be very certain that before the picture is released it will be free from all objectionable features, and will be presented to you for screening. As to all of this I will be glad if you will assure the President.

I am

With kindest personal regards,

Sincerely yours,

W. W. C. C. C.
President

NMS:HH

NO AGREEMENT OR ORDER WILL BE BINDING ON THIS CORPORATION UNLESS IN WRITING AND SIGNED BY AN OFFICER

P.P.F.

April 1, 1933.

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Dear Mr. Hearst:-

I want to send you this line to tell you how pleased I am with the changes which you made in GABRIEL OVER THE WHITE HOUSE. I think it is an intensely interesting picture and should do much to help.

Several people have seen it with us at the White House and to every one of them it was tremendously interesting. Some of these people said they never went to movies or cared for them but they think this a most unusual picture.

Always sincerely,

W. R. Hearst, Esq.,
San Simeon,
California.

LT

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Documents #6, #7, #8, #9:

Howard Atterburg to FDR, March 9, 1933

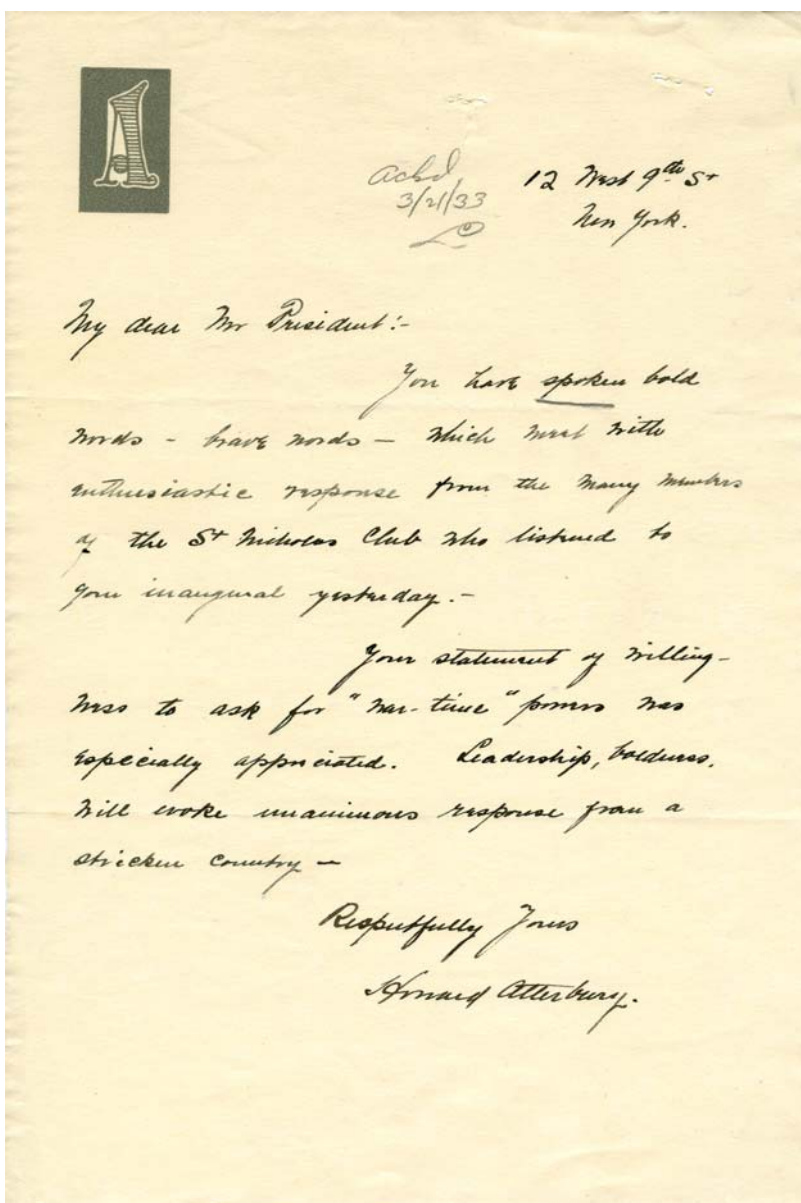
Alpheus Geer to FDR, March 8, 1933

J.H. Meaux to FDR, March 11, 1933

Joseph T. O'Neill to FDR, March 5, 1933

President's Personal File

Hundreds of thousands of Americans wrote FDR congratulatory letters after his Inaugural Address. Many writers commented favorably on his promise to assume "broad executive power" similar to that of a wartime president, if necessary. Though FDR never claimed such powers, public reaction to his words provides a sense of the fear and panic in the nation in March 1933.



Association Better Citizenship, Inc.



41 EAST 42ND STREET
NEW YORK CITY

VANDERBILT 3-3455

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(LV)



ROOM 1000

8 March 1933

President Franklin D. Roosevelt
White House, Washington D.C.

My dear Mr. President:-

Heartiest congratulations upon your marvellous Inaugural Address. It could not be improved upon. *111*

I am enclosing a pamphlet I wrote one year and half ago. You may get some idea from it which may help. Please disregard the copyright.

You should be given wartime powers, and then draft the nation, should things get worse. Then there would be plenty of food, clothing and shelter for all.

A benevolent autocracy is the most efficient form of government. A democracy is simply an oligarchy.

The unit of value should be based upon Labor (Service) not on gold or any material substance. Money is the reward of service. We make the reward of service earn more rewards of service (interest) which is illogical. That is the error in our system.

I am writing rather disjointedly so as this letter may be shown you. You would never read a long one, I know.

You will probably remember me from our two talks in Albany. My nephew, Langdon Geer, married your niece Dorothy Roosevelt. You may remember I told you that.

Most Respectfully and Cordially

Alpheus Geer

WISCONSIN RADIATOR FURNITURE COMPANY

PRINCIPAL OFFICE AND FACTORY

MAYVILLE, WISCONSIN

March 11, 1933

*ackd.
3/21/33
L.D.*

My dear Mr. President:

You are not sailing into the fog and mist alone as this cartoon would indicate. The prayers, good wishes and backing of all right thinking Americans are with you.

Should the politicians in Senate and House, fail to give you the power to cope with the situation that confronts you, we the people of this country will come to Washington and clothe you with the power, irrespective of them.

Your inaugural address was an inspiration. Now, may God grant you health (you have the courage, unless I have gaged you wrong) to carry forward your mission. And may He spare me to see the restoration of a Government, by and for the people (a thing we have lacked since the Civil War).

The day of the special interests, the politician who seeks office only for the emoluments therein and the brave boys under guise of war service, who never even reached our seaboards, but possibly stumbled over the door sill of some speakeasy for a 25% disability and hundreds of other like abuses, I pray are over.

However, the boys who reached France and suffered, they and their dependents are entitled to every consideration.

Now. May He guide direct and keep you safe.

Yours to command,

JHM:NM

J. H. Means

Chicago, Ill. March 5th, 1933.

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt,
Washington, D.C.
Honorable President:-



First, let me say that I was thrilled to the utmost at your masterful and courageous address yesterday in which you showed very clearly a thorough understanding of the conditions existing in our great Country to-day.

I am one of the twelve million in this Country to-day who know not where to turn for a livelihood even though a competent thoroughly seasoned Executive.

I am one of probably one million who sauntered serenely from Home last Saturday morning to the door of my Bank with Two Dollars in my pocket and with the intention of withdrawing from my store of cash sufficient funds for the needs of the week end in the way of food, etc. and was surprised to find that a Moratorium had been declared at three o'clock that same Morning at the behest of the men who are supposed to guarantee safety for the use of my money as they see fit.

What to do next week to provide the necessities of life, I know not. Therefore, I hope the veil will be lifted at once as, while I am self-contained, it's hard, very hard to maintain my equanimity and not become panic.

I feel confident and every one to whom I have spoken feels confident that you have the courage and that you will relieve this situation as quickly as possible, but:

We all hope that you will relieve it from the standpoint of Humanity, Charity and Permanency, based on the Constitution of this Great Country of ours and not on the basis of the thoughts of the many advisers who have gone to Washington to seek, No, I am wrong, who have gone to Washington to lobby and to force, if possible, a solution that will be primarily to the interest of the Banker.

I know that you will have this thought in mind and I say, it may sound harsh, but the Money Changer must take his licking and take it quick or he will not only go down to ruin himself but he will take us with him as to-day he has a rope around our necks from which we cannot free ourselves as long as they control the situation.

Let's start all over again, the common people are trying to do it and most of us are still keeping our chin up under the most trying conditions. Take the control of Gold out of the hands of those who have failed so miserably. Put this control in the hands of the Government, where our Constitution meant that it should always be. Let's start all over again and let none receive a Dollar unless they produce or labor for it. Assume a Dictatorship, eliminate red tape, turn about the ship and you will be immortalized because the mass of the American People are with you and those who have failed us so miserably, must accept your dictates or forever drop all claim to leadership or authority.

Very sincerely yours,

Jos. T. O'Neill
1126 Randolph St. Oak Park, Ill.