

THE SPOILS SYSTEM IN OPERATION *

I WAS asked down here distinctly on the understanding that I was to be the tail of the kite. That was put first in writing, and for fear I should mistake it and think I was a part of the kite, it was afterward told me personally. Now I am perfectly willing to be the tail, but I think it very hard that the body of the kite should make fun of me.

I am not a mere theorist; I have been a practical Republican politician, and as such I have fallen under the displeasure of some of you, and I came down simply, as our Methodist friends say, "to bear testimony." I want the Republican party to keep the pledges in victory which it made in adversity, and I want to do my small share in making the party keep those promises. It is always easy for an individual or a party to make promises; the strain comes when the party or individual has to make them good. Now the Republican party has committed itself definitely against the spoils system. On that point its platform leaves no room for doubt. President-elect Harrison's letter leaves no room for doubt as to his position. I feel sure that, from a merely selfish standpoint, it will inure to the benefit of the Republican party to keep its pledge; but whether it does or does not so inure, I wish to see that pledge kept. I feel that this is a true reform. For that reason I not only admire and honor Senators Hoar and Hawley,

* Speech at the meeting of the Civil Service Reform Association, in Baltimore, Md., February 23, 1889. *Civil Service Reformer*, March, 1889.

Congressmen Lodge, of Massachusetts, Hitt, of Illinois, and your own able representative, Mr. McComas, as citizens, but I regard them as loyally keeping faith with the party, by the stand they have taken in Congress. On the other hand, when Senator Ingalls sees fit to appear as the mouthpiece and champion of the spoilsman, not only do I feel outraged as a citizen at his appearing in this guise, making himself a part of all that is most evil and most degrading in our politics, but I feel that he is a traitor to his party. I do not think there can be doubt about my position on this question.

I think it is mere idle chatter to talk of the merit system as being undemocratic and un-American. The spoils system is emphatically undemocratic, for the spoils system means the establishing and perpetuation of a grasping and ignorant oligarchy. The merit system is essentially democratic and essentially American, and in line with the utterances and deeds of our forefathers of the days of Washington and Madison. If you will pardon me, I will give a personal experience of mine in New York to prove the corruption of the spoils system. Without expressing too much local pride, I doubt if even Baltimore offers more fertile object-lessons of this sort than New York.

I remember when I was first elected to the legislature receiving several applications for appointment on the police force. One applicant said he wished to be a policeman because he unfortunately had the habit of getting drunk and so could not get any other work. Another wrote me, and I have the letter now, that he wanted me to get a friend of his appointed a policeman because the friend had promised him two hundred dollars to get him appointed, and he knew I would rather have that money go to a Republican than to a Demo-

erat. Another instance occurred during the course of an investigation which, as chairman of a legislative committee, I conducted, into the working of some of the departments in New York. I cannot be absolutely certain as to the details of the figures at this distance of time, but what I shall say is in substance correct. We had under examination the county clerk, Mr. Keenan.

He was one of the most delightful witnesses that was ever before a legislative committee. Not having engaged counsel, he held back nothing and told us the literal truth. We asked him what was the amount of his fees in a year. He said eighty-two thousand dollars a year. Now, that is about a quarter of a million dollars for his three years' term. We asked him what he had contributed to the campaign fund of his party. Well, he didn't know. We pressed him, and finally he replied he could not say whether it was over or under fifty thousand dollars. Then came a question which was asked perfunctorily and to which an entirely perfunctory answer was expected. I asked him if he attended to the duties of his office. He rather electrified the committee by saying very promptly that he did not. I said: "Mr. Keenan, I doubt if you have understood the point of what I have asked you; I mean, do you do your official duties?" He answered: "Yes, when they don't interfere with my political duties." "Now," I said, "will you kindly explain to me what you mean by political duties?" That he evidently regarded as a piece of hypocrisy on my part, for he said to me reproachfully: "Mr. Roosevelt, you are a member of a political organization yourself." He then told us, by way of illustration of the pressure of his political duties, that he was unable to come down earlier in the morn-

ing than twelve o'clock, as he had to spend a good part of the morning "bailing out his 'constituents'!"

I use this illustration merely to point out to you what is a spoilsman's theory of duty. He represented, I believe, the better class of spoilsmen, because there is a worse class—the class that steals. We had at that time a prominent member of the board of aldermen who in his leisure hours was a burglar. In his youth he had followed that trade, and though rather an old man, and one who had risen in the world, he would still resume it occasionally for amusement. We had another very prominent politician who was a "fence," a receiver of stolen goods. Mr. Keenan was a perfectly honest man as far as I know. It never occurred to him that that was not the right way to run a public office. He told us another fact which illustrates the wastefulness of the spoils system. I asked Keenan how he did his duties, and he said he paid his deputy extra to do them. This deputy was paid three thousand dollars a year by the city to do his own work as deputy, but Keenan, out of his eighty-two thousand dollars, paid one thousand five hundred dollars more to his deputy to do Keenan's work. So that gives you the exact market value of the work Keenan had to do. This immense sum of eighty-two thousand dollars was regarded partly as a reward for Keenan's political services, and partly as a fund to defray campaign expenses for his party. A state of affairs like that will inevitably produce corruption in the ballot. In New York City I don't believe there is as much actual buying of votes, although there is a good deal, as there is in the country districts, but corruption is generally effected by buying the district leaders or the district organizations. These would be powerless but for the spoils system.

Pardon me one more personal reminiscence. The last time I appeared before my people for office, a gentleman told me that whatever party I belonged to before the election, after the election I belonged to the party of "the extreme left." Possibly this story will explain my misfortune as well as illustrate my point.

I was at our headquarters one day, when a card was brought in from O'Donovan Rossa. I went out to see him, and he was not a prepossessing-looking gentleman. He came down straight and square and instantly to work. He said I was running for mayor and he would like to help me, and would guarantee me his influence in his journal and in his local dynamite societies for the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars. I told him that I was much obliged for his courtesy in thinking of me, but I would not close with his offer. "I see," he said, "you are running this canvass for your health; I thought you wanted to win." Then I told him there were very few people in New York whom I could afford to insult at that time, but he was one of them, and I would thank him to get out.

These are not exceptional cases, but are the habitual, invariable accompaniment and product of the spoils system in great cities.

I think that, of all people who are harmed by the spoils system, the poor suffer most. The rich man who wishes to corrupt a legislature, or the rich company which wishes to buy franchises from a board of aldermen and pay a big price for it, do not suffer so much as the poor from the results of the system. I dare say that in New York we see the system at its worst, but at its best it is thoroughly rotten, and a disgrace to every community enjoying the right of suffrage.

I am from my heart a Republican. I honor Benjamin Harrison, and I believe the Republican party and the Republican President will have the best chance to do a great work that they have ever had since the close of the Civil War. If they can rise to the height of it, they will confer an immense advantage on the party and an inestimable advantage on the country. I expect from the President an extension of the classified service, and I wish to see Congress repeal the four-years-term act, and make such appropriations that the Civil Service Commission's work shall be unhampered.