

## CORRUPTION

SPEECH BEFORE THE HAMILTON CLUB,  
CHICAGO

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I HAVE had a long and, to me, a most pleasant and profitable connection with this club. I had known you before I had attained any special prominence in public life. When I came back from the Cuban campaign it was a committee of your club that was practically the first organization to meet me at Montauk Point, and to ask me to come to speak to you; when I was inaugurated as Governor, a body of representatives of this club were present, and at that time you gave me an Abraham Lincoln inkstand, which has stood on my desk ever since, and which is the one I use now; and I think it was this club which was practically the first organization to be so unwise as to formulate a desire to have me made President—a fact which, whenever any representative body from this club is in New York, I shall do all I can to conceal from the knowledge of Wall Street.

I remember well that at the first dinner of this club which I attended I was brought around by that profound and learned lawyer, the late James Norton, and I remember that the following year he came on to New York to the dinner of the New England Society, I think it was, to speak on behalf of Chicago, and the toastmaster, in introducing him, referred to the fact that Chicago was popularly regarded as having rather a good opinion of itself. And when Mr. Norton got up, he responded that really Chicago had never quite understood why it was not as well entitled to think well of itself as New York was to think well of London.

It was at an address here at the Hamilton Club that I used the expression "strenuous life," an expression which from that day to this I have never more been able to use; and whenever I have come to you, whenever I have spoken either to this club or elsewhere in Chicago, I have always addressed myself to the instant needs of things; for it would not be worth your while to have me come, and it would not be worth my while to come, if I could not speak exactly as I thought upon the questions of the hour. I feel that when I am in Chicago I am in my own city; that I am in one of the centers of the expression

of the vital American spirit. Your problems are my problems, for your problems are the problems of the American people.

Now, there are two chief sources of danger to the American people: lawless violence and corruption; lawless violence, which we most often have to face from among the people who have least of the world's goods; and corruption, which we most often have to face from among the people that have most of the world's goods.

The last time I was in Chicago you were engaged in a struggle with the first evil. It was at the time of the great teamsters' strike, that you remember here, and there was some question of the city authorities not being able to deal with it. You were then face to face with an assault by lawless violence upon the foundation of the American government.

I was coming back from the Rocky Mountains at the time, and I had good friends who earnestly advised me to go around Chicago. I decided to go through it, and stopped here. A deputation of the labor men called upon me, and to them I said what I subsequently said at a dinner at which the then Mayor and the then Governor were present, that, vitally interested though

I was in all real reforms for the betterment of our people, and eagerly though I desired to help uplift those who were down, and so far as was possible do away with the inequalities of fortune that come from the inequalities of opportunity, yet when there was disorder, when there was lawless violence, all questions of reform had to be postponed until the orderly process of the law was resumed; and that, while I hoped and believed that the municipal authorities themselves would be able to deal with the disorder, yet, if they found it impossible, back of the city stood the state, and back of the state the nation.

I did not hesitate to speak directly then, and just as little shall I hesitate to speak directly now.

In the program to-night you have done me the honor to print certain quotations from speeches I have made, mostly before the Hamilton Club; and the final quotation is: "We must see that there is civic honesty, civic cleanliness, civic good sense, in our whole administration of the city, state, and nation."

My friends, the value of a sentence like that consists exclusively in the way in which we try to live up to it. The worth of what

I have to say to you, and whether or not it is worth your while to listen to me, depends upon the way in which we translate words into deeds. It is all right to applaud a sentence like that in favor of civic honesty, stating that civic honesty is essential to the welfare of a nation. It is well enough to applaud it, but woe to you if you applaud the sentence in the abstract and fail to act up to it in the concrete.

It has been well said that the progress, the true progress, of a people can best be gauged by their standard of moral conduct, by their judgment as to what conduct is moral and what conduct is immoral, and by the effectiveness with which they make their approbation of the moral and their disapprobation of the immoral felt. No republic can last if corruption is allowed to eat into its public life. No republic can last if the private citizens sit supinely by and either encourage or tolerate corruption among their representatives.

Each state of the nation, each important city of the Union, has from time to time to face this question. More than once we have been brought face to face with it in the state of New York. You are face to face with it now in the state of Illinois.

I have been reading the reports of the investigations by the two state's attorneys, which resulted in the indictment of four members of the legislature, and together with that I have read the reports of the confession of four other members of the legislature. I was advised to-day by a very worthy friend not to talk on this matter, because it was a "delicate" subject, and he added that no one had been convicted. Now, I feel most strongly that we make the question of public honesty a sham if we limit the use of the word "honesty" to mere law-honesty.

There are big business men whom I have counted as among the most insidious enemies of the real welfare of this republic, although they have been so advised that it would be impossible to convict them, and there have been in the United States, including the state of New York, many public men whose careers have been a scandal throughout the country, although they keep clear of the courts.

Read the confessions of the four men. Read what was developed by the two state's attorneys, one belonging to the one party and one belonging to the other, about the four men against whom they secured indictments, and about other men also. Read that, and I defy any honest man of intelligence

not to come to the conclusion that the legislature whose doings have been exposed was guilty of the foulest and basest corruption, and, therefore, of the most infamous treason to American institutions.

Now, I am a good party man, but I am an American first. When we come to questions affecting the vital principles of American life, I know no party. When such a question as corruption is involved, we cannot afford to divide on party lines.

I take just this much account of party in such a case. While I will do my best to get hold of the thief of the opposite party, I will try, if possible, a little harder to get hold of the thief of ~~my own party.~~

When I was President I endeavored to act so that there should be no need of raising the cry among my opponents of "Turn the rascals out," because I turned them out myself just as fast as I could get at them.

Now, mind you, take my words as worth less than nothing, unless, in looking back, you can see that they were justified by my deeds.

Examine what went on in the Post Office Department, or anywhere else, when corruption was alleged with anything like an offer of proof.

Now, in making these investigations I

struck two different sets of cases. There was one set of cases where prosecutions would lie. In those cases I turned the matter over to the Department of Justice. In addition, there was the larger class of cases where there was not sufficient ground for prosecution, but where it was evident that the man was an unfit and an improper public servant; and there I turned him out; and when now and then the man back of him, occasionally belonging to a coördinate branch of the government, would come up and say: "Oh, there is no conviction against him," I said, "No, I dare say that he has practiced law-honesty, but he is a crook, and out he goes."

Now, I could do that with the appointive officers, who held office under me; with the elective officers there is but one body that can do that, and that is the people. It depends upon you, upon the people of America, whether you will permit a man to represent you because he has been acquitted in a court of law, or because there has been a mistrial, so that enough jurors have believed in him to get him off,—whether you will permit that man to represent you, or whether you will take the stand that where you have evidence of a kind which may not be legal, but which convinces every honest man of



intelligence, you will not submit to the pollution of American life by putting such a man in high official position.

Now, in each nation, in every form of government, there are base flatterers. The same individual who in a monarchy would be a courtier and flatter the king, in a republic turns demagogue and flatters those whom he thinks will cast the most votes. They are of just the same type. The one is just as bad as the other; the only difference is that they are functioning under different conditions. It is a favorite — I won't say argument — but a favorite assertion of men of that type when some public servant has been found guilty of conduct that should disgrace him to say, "We will go to the people for his vindication; we will see if we can't secure him an election." Sometimes they succeed. A great many thoroughly good people, thoroughly good citizens, have no special means of information, are ignorant of what really has happened, and may on occasions like that be misled; but if they are misled, and if they do, so far as in them lies, attempt to vindicate a dishonest and unfaithful public servant by electing him, they don't vindicate him, they merely disgrace themselves and us.

I call the attention of the people who

make that argument to this fact: We produced in New York once an arch scoundrel whose fame became international, — Boss Tweed, — and after Tweed was convicted he was elected to the state senate as a “vindication.” Has that made any difference in the judgment passed upon Tweed’s honesty by history? Not a bit, but it shed an unfortunate light upon the standards of some of the citizens of New York at that time. They did not help Tweed. They did not help his reputation. They hurt themselves, and they hurt the entire American body politic, for none of us can commit such a folly without having the effect felt both by ourselves and by others.

If because a postmaster who had been guilty of crooked transactions could not have been convicted in a court of law I had permitted him to continue in office, I would not have made that man’s character good; I would merely have shown that mine was bad; and the same thing applies to the body politic.

In other forms of government than ours there may be a certain kind of progress even if the average man is not what he should be; but in our government, in a great democracy like ours, the stream cannot rise higher

than its source. You cannot have honesty in public life unless the average citizen demands honesty in public life.

If the people of America are content to send to represent them in the state or the national legislature men who they know in their heart of hearts have not obtained their offices honestly, but have obtained their offices dishonestly and by corruption, who they know have practiced corruption in public life, they may make up their minds that they will get the government to which they are entitled, and a bad government it will be.

Now, my friends, I do not suppose that if we decline to be honest and to insist on honesty in public life for our own sakes, we can be expected to do so for the sake of others; and yet, in addition to making the appeal for honesty to you and to the citizens of Illinois, for the sake of Illinois, and for the sake of America, I make the appeal also for the sake of the world.

Last spring, in Europe, there were two things that struck me especially as I talked with the average man. The first was that the man looked toward America as the land of golden hope, as the land of a partially realized ideal, as a land where it was really being shown that the people could govern

themselves justly and righteously and in their own interest.

And the second thing was that that faith in America was continually being shaken by stories that reached them of corruption in American business and in American public life.—Every act of corruption here, every gross scandal, every bit of flagrant dishonesty in big business or in politics, or in connection with the complex web that weaves together strands of big business and strands of politics — every such instance, when carried abroad, brings sneering satisfaction to the heart of every reactionary, who is glad to say: “Yes, that is what comes of democracy. That is what you get when the people try to govern themselves. It shows that they cannot govern themselves.” And every such instance dims the hope of the poor and the oppressed who strive to believe and haltingly do believe that here, somehow or other, we have arranged a condition of things in which the injustices of the world elsewhere are at least partially remedied.

My friends, I ask you men of Illinois that you purify your politics, that you hold accountable the scoundrel, great or small, who has been guilty of corruption, that you insist on cleanliness in your public life; and I ask

it in your name and for your sakes; I ask it for the sake of the American people; and I ask it for the sake of all the nations of the world, that their hope may not be made dim, and that they may continue to cherish the ideal of the possibility of having a government of, by, and for the people, that shall mean also a government of justice and a government of honesty.