

Subj: reform convention draft idea
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Reform Party

Speech

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8/8/2000

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Draft for Reform Party Convention in Long Beach, Thursday

Thank you.

In 1912, when I was two years old, Theodore Roosevelt was deciding to get back in the reform game. He had served out McKinley's term as president, been elected to a full term of his own, during which he had pushed through anti-trust, pure food and drug, forest conservation, water reclamation, fair labor standards, and many other reforms that had been in the making since the end of the Civil War.

After his second term, he went on a long safari and wished Taft, his successor, well. When he returned, he found that Taft and his own Republican Party had backpedaled on many important reforms, at the behest of big industry. The soul of the party was in the balance. It was the main street, family-scaled businesses and farms versus the big

railroads, oil, steel, and the rest.

So Roosevelt felt he had to run against Taft in 1912. Remarkably, he rounded up enough delegates to take the nomination away from incumbent Taft, but back room backstabbing at the convention gave the nomination to Taft.

Believe it or not, that sort of thing used to happen.

Roosevelt's supporters walked out, quickly forming the Progressive Party. Roosevelt had to be talked into a third party candidacy. He agreed to it. The split in the Republican Party assured victory to the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, who was also a great progressive reformer--though his reforms were cut short by war.

While Roosevelt was campaigning as the Progressive candidate for president, he traveled to Milwaukee to make a speech to a civic group. It wasn't really his best speech, as he rambled and repeated himself, going on for an hour and a half.

Now, my rule for public speaking is that, if the speaker goes on for an hour and a half repeating himself and rambling, either he has been shot or he should be. In Roosevelt's case, he had been. A fellow named John Schrank, who followed Roosevelt around the country waiting for the right moment, pulled out a pistol and shot Roosevelt in the chest as the ex-president was getting out of an automobile and about to walk into the meeting hall.

The proper thing to do under the circumstances would be to make one's way to a hospital, post haste. Roosevelt, however, insisted that he give the speech first, as the audience was waiting and he had come a

long way himself.

There was a stenographer in the room who took down his every word, spoken to a large crowd without the benefit of a microphone--yet to be invented. His speech started thus:

"Friends, I shall ask you to be as quiet as possible. I don't know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot; but it takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose. But fortunately I had my manuscript, so you see I was going to make a long speech, and there is a bullet --there is where the bullet went through-- ^{the manuscript} and it probably saved me from it going into my heart. The bullet is in me now, so that I cannot make a very long speech, but I will try my best."

He certainly knew how to get an audience's attention.

From time to time during that speech, particularly when he began to ramble and drift and look unsure on his feet, there would be a scurry of officials behind the rostrum, but Roosevelt would wave them off. Half way through the speech he said,

"I know these doctors, when they get hold of me, will never let me ^{Come} ~~go~~ back, and there are just a few more things that I want to say to you." He spoke for another forty-five minutes, laying hard into Mr. Wilson. I repeat his words here so that you may see the nature of his reform sentiment:

"And now, friends... Mr. Wilson has said that the States are the proper authorities to deal with the trusts. Well, about eighty percent of the trusts are organized in New Jersey. The Standard Oil, the Tobacco, the Sugar, the Beef, all those trusts are organized in the state of New Jersey and the laws of New Jersey say that their charters

can at any time be amended or repealed if they misbehave themselves and give the government ample power to act about those laws, and Mr. Wilson has been governor a year and nine months and he has not opened his lips. The chapter describing what Mr. Wilson has done about trusts in New Jersey would read precisely like a chapter describing snakes in Ireland, which ran: "There are no snakes in Ireland." Mr. Wilson has done precisely and exactly nothing about the trusts..."

Roosevelt continued on about the need for federal laws to prohibit child labor and abusive labor practices, so that the harsh employers didn't just go shopping for the most lenient states to put their factories in.

Near the end, just before he finally allowed them to help him out to an ambulance, he clearly described the great divide that had come upon the Republican Party. He said:

"When the... bosses in control of the Republican party... stole the nomination and wrecked the Republican party for good and all --I want to point out to you that nominally they stole that nomination from me, but it was really from you. They did not like me, and the longer they live the less cause they will have to like me. But while they don't like me, they dread you. You are the people that they dread. They dread the people themselves, and those bosses and the big special interests behind them made up their mind that they would rather see the Republican party wrecked than see it come under the control of the people themselves. So I am not dealing with the Republican party. There are only two ways you can vote this year. You can be progressive or reactionary. Whether you vote Republican or Democratic it does not make a difference, you are voting reactionary."

That is what Theodore Roosevelt said.

The fact is, the Republican Party set a course in favor of big business, leaving the main street merchant and the farmer behind, to occasionally pop up in a populist third party.

Mr. Roosevelt lost the election, but history went his way. America got the 8-hour workday, and end to child labor, a right to organize workers, food and drug safety laws, civil service, securities laws, an anti-trust law, regulation of railroads and utilities, conservation of forests, and much more. The time had simply come for these improvements, some of which had been coming on for a half century.

Soon after the Civil War, farmers, defending themselves against the growing scale of railroads and other monopolies, had formed Grange associations and other co-ops to combine their buying and selling powers. As Russian peasants were struggling against the concentrated power of the czar, so the American farmers were organizing against the concentrated power of railroads and packing houses and other industries. Our brand of revolution was creative and for the most part non-violent, but it was indeed a revolution.

The farm-based populist movement came into full flower in the 1890s with the creation of the Populist Party, which put tremendous reform pressures on state and national government. Their presidential candidates were James Weaver, an Iowan, and William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska. He won the hearts of farmers by arguing that silver coin should be freely produced by the U.S. Mint. There was a large supply of silver, and this could end the deflation and depression that was putting many farmers in the poor house in the mid 1890s. The paper currency at that time was backed by gold, which was rare enough to prevent the money supply from being rapidly expanded, as the farmers wanted. Bryan's famous speech, where he waved his fists and said, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of GOLD!" was the high

entertainment of his day. Americans loved the performance, but they voted for McKinley: in 1896 and 1900.

By putting progressive reformer Teddy Roosevelt on the vice presidential ticket, McKinley attracted many of the reform votes.

Where did progressives like Roosevelt come from? Well, as American cities and the American middle class grew, farm populists gave way to urban progressives, who, like the farm populists, thought that only the national government could protect them from the monstrously scaled corporations and monopolies and their bought-and-paid-for state legislatures.

Central to the success of the Progressive Movement was the fact that most large cities, at the turn of the 20th Century, had many newspapers who competed with each other to get the best stories of corporate corruption, meat packing horrors, labor condition scandals, and stories of shamefully excessive spending by the super rich. Novelists like Upton Sinclair and non-fiction authors like Ida Tarbell were also writing about the same problems. America's full attention was focused on the need for reform.

The Progressive response to state corruption was to pass a strong series of structural reforms, including new, direct powers for the people, such as citizen initiative, referendum, recall, the secret ballot, and the primary election. These reforms swept through many states, and the 17th Amendment was passed in 1913 to allow for direct election of senators, taking that power away from the crony-controlled state legislatures.

The Populist Party and the Progressive Party never won the White House under its own flags, but their people and ideas did get into the White House and into Congress. The populist and progressive ideas changed

America by introducing structural democratic reforms and by forcing the larger parties to adopt the most popular reform planks and elevate reform-minded candidates within those parties.

Now, at heart, populism is a peasant uprising against the wealthy elite. ~~I can say that because Mr. Perot is not in the room.~~

The uprising can go in the direction of better government and more democracy, or it can go toward ~~scape-goatism~~, demagoguery and dictatorship. All those elements are always visible in America's reform community, and are always cause for vigilance and caution.

The Progressive Movement certainly had a fine fist-waver in the form of Teddy Roosevelt, but he was too much dedicated to the causes of fairness and legality to have ever considered becoming a dictator. Fairness, the Square Deal, was the tenor of Roosevelt and the Progressive movement generally, and we can thank our lucky stars and stripes that it was.

The rest of the world was not so fortunate, as strongmen and their cruelties began to rise up in Europe and elsewhere at that time. The world was moving toward what we now call World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam, but what historians may more rightly call the Sixty Years War--a war between two competing ideas: The one idea is that of individual freedom and diversity; The other idea is that of individual control and uniformity.

I would like to be able to say that the struggle was happily resolved, but the regimentation of our lives and the suppression of diversity is still underway, as the bloody flag of that idea has been taken up by multinational corporations and their puppet political regimes worldwide, including the present White House and most of the candidates running for it. They all seem happy to sell our democracy and the fate

of our natural planet down the river for a campaign donation or two.

Now, friends, if we are to succeed in making any useful structural reforms that might give real political power back to the people, and which might defend the human scale of things--from the family farm and small business to our own position as free citizens--then we must know who we are, politically.

We can make a distinction between populist and progressive. The populists are the old, agrarians rising up against the oppressor elite. They defend traditional values and decry modernizations that undermine their marginal positions of respect and security. They don't like other oppressed people moving in on their slim territory. We see this sort of thing playing out all over the world, and in our own reform community. Then there are the Progressives, who are pro-democracy, pro-inclusion and often, pro-government--also at the expense of the wealthy elite. You can almost use these definitions to define and distinguish the various third parties in America today.

There is an interesting difference between these two main branches. American reformers agree that an overscaled monster is stalking the land and ~~and~~ damaging the position of the individual. But if you set the reformers down with a police sketch artist and ask them to describe the giant, half of us will describe multinational corporations, and ~~the~~ other half of us will describe government itself. This division goes back to FDR's administration, I think, when the cost, size and power of government seemed to be hurting the position of small businesses more than helping protect them from the monopolies.

The traditional urban progressives, on the other hand, have felt that government is the common tool of community, and have tended to not see it as the enemy.

While the anti-government and the anti-corporation reformers may be on a long term collision course, they can today agree on a common enemy: the control and expansion of government as a direct result of sleazy corporate and union campaign donations. If we can all join hands just long enough to force corporate and union money out of our politics, then we will have a democracy to fight over again.

Here is old Teddy's comment about special interests. I know you have probably heard it before from me, but it is worth repeating. He said:

"Our government, national and state, must be freed from the sinister influence or control of special interests. Exactly as the special interests of cotton and slavery threatened our political integrity before the Civil War, so now the great special business interests too often control and corrupt the men and methods of government for their own profit. We must drive the special interests out of politics. That is one of our tasks today...The citizens of the United States must effectively control the mighty commercial forces which they have themselves called into being. There can be no effective control of corporations while their political activity remains. To put an end to it will be neither a short nor an easy task, but it can be done."

Well, that is what he said, and it frames the unfinished business of the 20th Century that we must successfully conclude with our efforts.

But the American reform community, unlike the time of Roosevelt, is a house divided. I do not mean that it will fall, but that its impact cancels itself out. If the Greens, who believe in campaign finance reform, split some votes away from the Democrats; and the Reforms, who believe in campaign finance reform, split some votes away from the Republicans, we are in a dynamic equilibrium where progress will be slow.

As reformers, we are divided by differing views of whether government should be the arbiter of spiritually-driven values, or whether we should leave the big decisions on life and death to individuals and their own religious and ethical traditions.

We are divided by whether an overscaled government is the main problem, or overscaled corporate organizations are the main problem, and we do not seem to have a consistent and useful principle for deciding what the proper scale for these human activities ought to be, so that they do not crush individual freedom and individual prosperity. But I think we could work out that principle if we tried, and it might unite us.

In addition to our common call for campaign finance reform, there is another thing that unites America's reform third parties and should make us embrace each other as brothers and sisters--well, shake hands anyway. It is the fact that we are parties of heartfelt ideas; we are not brothels where we sell our souls for contributions and power, unlike the major parties.

Now. Don't get ahead of me. I am not suggesting some grand merger. The idea of Greens and Reform people even trying to agree on even the lunch menu for a convention is an entertaining thought. Tofu and whisky do not mix. Throw in some Libertarians and Natural Law people and you might as well have the Anarchists organize it.

But what shall we do with this fascinating fact that all of us want campaign finance reform, and that all of us are stymied in our other reform goals until it occurs?

Well, the major reform parties in America would do well to investigate the possibility of a one-time joint ticket in 2004. Any one

presidential candidate would never be able to perfectly represent all of the positions of America's diverse reform parties, but here is the important thing to remember: He or she is not going to win, so we really don't have to worry about how they will govern.

All we have to worry about is whether our combined muscle will be sufficient to move the incumbent president, who will be running for reelection, and the sitting Congress toward the adoption of that thing that brings us together: campaign finance reform. I think it might. Nothing would shake the major parties more deeply to their bones than to see such an effort, and nothing less will motivate them to shed and shun the influence of the special interests.

I know you have enough to argue about through these exciting days and nights. But I think a good way for you all to stay friends is to have a long term strategy for the issues you share in common.

Now, you know my rule for speakers who go on too long, so I will come to a close.

When I spoke to many of you in Dearborn last year, I told you that optimism and love are the most powerful political forces. I told you that, in walking across America, I had discovered a great reason for our optimism, and it is the profound longing for clean and free government held by every American I met. The ideals of Americans change, but they do not lose their essential qualities, and those qualities are an addiction to freedom, a demand for equal participation, and an appreciation for the sacrifices that have been made for our position as a self-governing people.

We are a nation of reformers, so we must never despair. Our democracy is a great river, and it wears down, over time, all the selfish men and women who stand in its way. It moves us toward equality and fairness

and prosperity. Sometimes, when we are going slow through the meanders of this river, we cannot see that it is moving ahead. But it is. I look how America has changed over my lifetime and I am amazed at how we are kinder and more equal, even though we often worry we are less civilized and more shallow. We change, we mourn the old ways, but we cannot help but be who we are, which is a nation of reformers who care deeply for our country and for each other.

It is a wonderful responsibility. I hope we can do it forever as friends.

Thank you.

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