
The American System

When President-Elect Franklin Roosevelt Narrowly Escaped Assassination

by Pamela Lowry

On election eve—Nov. 7, 1932—Franklin Roosevelt made the final radio broadcast of his Presidential campaign. In the course of that speech, Roosevelt told his audience that, “A man comes to wisdom in many years of public life. He knows well that when the light of favor shines upon him, it comes not, of necessity, that he himself is important. Favor comes because for a brief moment in the great space of human change and progress, some general human purpose finds in him a satisfactory embodiment.”

The four months between the Presidential election and Roosevelt’s inauguration in early March were momentous and troubling ones. As the worldwide Depression continued to deepen, fascist political parties and groupings had gained strength in Europe, many of them, such as Mussolini and Hitler, backed financially by Wall Street financiers. On Jan. 28, 1933, German President von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor. The Reichstag Fire, which led to Hitler assuming dictatorial powers, followed quickly on Feb. 27.

In the United States, the banking system was in complete collapse, and the strain of feeding the millions of unemployed had overmatched both private and public charitable organizations. President Herbert Hoover, however, sent President-elect Roosevelt a series of letters, pressuring him to continue the disastrous economic policies which had turned the 1929 stock market crash into a self-feeding spiral of destruction. This, despite the fact that the American public had voted for Roosevelt in order to change those policies.

In meetings with Roosevelt, Hoover particularly focussed on the upcoming World Economic Conference which was to be held in London in the Summer of 1933. Hoover wanted Roosevelt to endorse any delegates that he might choose, and to support the policy of Britain to “solve” the worldwide Depression by making piecemeal changes to the gold standard and trade agreements. Roosevelt refused to be drawn in to trying to patch up a failed system, especially when the patches benefitted the European colonial powers at the expense of other nations and territories.

President Hoover also pressed Roosevelt on the question of foreign debts owed to the United States, specifically war debts which resulted from the Versailles Treaty ending World

War I. Hoover and his monetarist Secretary of the Treasury, Ogden Mills, felt that money from these debts would cure America’s domestic economic problems. Roosevelt sharply disagreed. He favored emphasis “on practical steps on a wide front at home, supplementing a broad domestic program with protection for the American dollar in international exchange.” As Roosevelt wrote later: “When the whole machinery needed overhauling, I felt it to be insufficient to repair one or two minor parts.”

Commitment for Building Infrastructure

On Jan. 19, 1933, Roosevelt left New York for a meeting with President Hoover in Washington, and then travelled to Warm Springs, Georgia. There, he met with the British Ambassador, Sir Ronald Lindsay, concerning the arrangements for the coming conference on Versailles war debts in Washington. A few days later, Roosevelt visited Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River and then Montgomery, Alabama, where he announced the massive water management and hydroelectric power project which would be developed by the future Tennessee Valley Authority.

“Muscle Shoals,” said Roosevelt, “gives us the opportunity to accomplish a great purpose for the people of many States and, indeed for the whole Union. Because there we have an opportunity of setting an example of planning, not just for ourselves but for the generations to come, tying in industry and agriculture and forestry and flood prevention, tying them all into a unified whole over a distance of a thousand miles so that we can afford better opportunities and better places for living for millions of yet unborn in the days to come.”

On Feb. 3, Roosevelt embarked with some of his friends on a fishing trip and returned to Miami on the evening of Feb. 15. It had been announced that the President-elect would be visiting Bay Front Park, where a meeting of the American Legion was taking place, and people from a hundred miles around streamed into Miami to have a look at the new President.

One person who had travelled even further to see Roosevelt was Anton Cermak, the Mayor of Chicago, who was

not Roosevelt's political ally. During the 1932 Democratic Convention in Chicago, he had taken his orders from John Raskob of Dupont and General Motors, a wealthy conservative who became chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Raskob was determined to stop Roosevelt's nomination, and Cermak had hired a noisy clique to hoot down any support for Roosevelt.

But now Roosevelt was the President-elect, and Chicago could not afford to pay its 20,000 school teachers. A Chicago alderman, Paddy Bauler, urged Cermak to mend fences with Roosevelt, to see what the Federal government could do to help the city. "I don't like the S.O.B.," replied Cermak, but he nonetheless travelled to Miami to talk things over with Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's motorcade arrived at Bay Front Park, where the President-elect sat on the back of the open car and gave a short informal speech into a microphone. When he finished, Mayor Cermak climbed on the car's running board and Roosevelt, lowering himself into his seat, told him they could discuss Chicago's problems at his private railroad car in an hour.

The Assassination Attempt Failed

Just then, five or six shots rang out, and Cermak slumped to the ground. Roosevelt, with his heavy braces, was physically incapable of ducking down, and the driver of the car started to move it forward to get him out of danger. But Roosevelt ordered him to stop, and told the Secret Service to put Mayor Cermak in the car with him. At that point, no one knew how many people were shooting, or whether there would be more shots fired. Roosevelt held Cermak in his left arm and used his right hand to feel for a pulse. When Cermak seemed to regain consciousness, Roosevelt said, "Tony, keep quiet—don't move. It won't hurt you if you keep quiet."

While Roosevelt's car sped to the hospital with Cermak, it was discovered that a New York detective and the wife of the president of the Florida Light and Power Company were both in critical condition from gunshot wounds, and that another woman and child had been slightly wounded. The shooter, Giuseppe Zangara, had jumped up on a bench only 35 feet from Roosevelt's car, but when a Miami housewife named Lillian Cross saw his gun, she reached up and grabbed his arm, partially deflecting his aim.

Zangara, a relatively recent immigrant from Italy, was a bricklayer who later declared in jail that he hated all kings, presidents, and rich people. He also claimed that when he lived in Italy, he had been involved in a plot to assassinate the King of Italy. A newspaper clipping which he carried in his pocket was a description of the assassination of President William McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York in 1901.

Immediately after Zangara's shots had rung out, members of the crowd contended with the Secret Service and police to capture him. A member of the American Legion punched him in the face, and shouts of "Kill him!" and

"Lynch him!" were heard. Two policemen put Zangara on the luggage rack of one of the cars in Roosevelt's group and knelt on top of him so that the crowd couldn't get at him. Even when he was taken to the Miami jail, the crowd outside yelled "Give him to us!"

Whether this was overzealousness in the heat of the moment, or a more sinister coordinated effort to eliminate Zangara before he could be thoroughly investigated is an unanswered question. The leadership of the American Legion, founded by the Mellon interests in 1919, had close ties to Mussolini's Fascist regime. The Legion's National Commander in 1922-23, Col. Alvin Owsley, told his audience not to forget "that the Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion is to the United States."

In 1931, the American Legion Executive Committee passed a resolution praising Mussolini as a great leader, and the Legion's National Commander of that year, Ralph O'Neill, presented a copy of the resolution to Mussolini's Ambassador to the United States. The existence of the "Business Plot" of 1933-34, which involved a plan to mount a quasi-military coup d'état against President Roosevelt, was later confirmed by a special U.S. House of Representatives investigative committee, the McCormack-Dickstein Committee. Marine Corps Gen. Smedley Butler testified that he was asked by a leading member of the Legion to recruit a fascist army, much of it from the ranks of the Legion.

Whatever was the intent of elements within the crowd at Bay Front Park that night, Zangara lived only 33 days after the shooting. He was tried, convicted, and then executed for the murder of Mayor Cermak on March 20.

The day after the assassination attempt, Roosevelt visited Cermak at the hospital and they had their meeting about the Chicago teachers. The President-elect also visited the other shooting victims, all of whom survived, and he sent a grateful telegram to Mrs. Cross.

The World Economic Conference was held in London in July 1933, and President Roosevelt sent the delegates a cable insisting upon larger objectives than mere currency stabilization among a few nations. He stated that, "The sound internal economic system of a Nation is a greater factor in its well-being than the price of its currency in changing terms of the currencies of other Nations. . . . The Conference was called to better and perhaps to cure fundamental economic ills. It must not be diverted from that effort." Due to pressure from the British Empire and its European allies, the Conference did not act as Roosevelt hoped, but 11 years later, in 1944, his ideas were brought to fruition at the Bretton Woods Conference in New Hampshire.

Two days before he died of complications from his wound, Mayor Cermak listened to President Roosevelt's Inaugural Address on the radio. Roosevelt took the oath of office while placing his hand on a 1686 Dutch Bible that belonged to his great-great-great-grandfather. He had opened it at the 13th chapter of First Corinthians: "And now abideth faith, hope and charity; but the greatest of these is charity."