The Tenor of the Times: “Dictator Talk” and FDR

By Jonathan Alter

The Defining Moment: March 5, 1933

Roosevelt’s Inaugural Address had begun the process of restoring hope, but not everyone caught the new mood right away. The press coverage that morning largely downplayed or ignored FDR’s line: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” *The New York Times* and most other newspapers relegated the line to their inside pages, while focusing instead on the vivid wartime allusions he employed five times during his speech – martial metaphors that suggested that there was, in fact, plenty to fear after all. The greatest applause from the large crowd on the east side of the Capitol came when Roosevelt said that if his rescue program was not quickly approved: “I shall ask Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis: broad executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.”

The United States had not been “invaded by a foreign foe” since 1812, but this felt like it. Arthur Krock of the Times compared the mood in Washington on Inauguration Day to “a beleaguered capital in wartime.” For the first time since the Civil War, armed men patrolled the entrances to federal buildings, while machine gunners perched on rooftops. Editors knew that the world war, just thirteen years in the past, had concentrated great power in the hands of Woodrow Wilson’s government. To them it looked as if FDR were proposing the same thing. And so the approving headline FOR DICTATORSHIP IF NECESSARY ran in the *New York Herald-Tribune* on March 5, with similar notes struck in the Inauguration coverage of other major papers

Exactly what was “necessary”? No one knew, including Roosevelt. Even before being sworn in, he had decided on a federal bank “holiday” (a festive term he preferred to Herbert Hoover’s “moratorium”) to give the people who now ran the country a few days to figure out what to do. Then what? Should he assume wartime authority on a temporary basis? Call out the Army to protect banks and maintain order? Mobilize veterans? Unrest was already growing in the farm belt, where mobs had broken up bankruptcy auctions. Four thousand men had occupied the Nebraska statehouse and five thousand stormed Seattle’s county building. The governor of North Carolina predicted a violent revolution, and police in Chicago clubbed teachers who had not been paid all school year. Everywhere, bank runs threatened to turn violent. By the Inaugural weekend, police in nearly every American city were preparing for an onslaught of angry depositors. At least some were certain to be armed.

With so many banks involved, the U.S. Army – including National Guard and Reserve units – might not be large enough to respond. This raised the question of whether the new president should establish a makeshift force of veterans to enforce some kind of martial law. The temptation must have been strong. It hardly seems a coincidence that FDR decided that the first radio speech of his presidency would be specially addressed to a convention of the American Legion, the million-member veterans' organization co-founded after World War I by his fifth cousin, Theodore Roosevelt.

The short speech was scheduled for that Sunday evening at 11:30 p.m. EST, with all radio networks carrying it live across the country. In preparing for the broadcast, someone in the small Roosevelt inner circle offered the new president a typewritten draft of suggested additions that contained this eye-popping sentence:

> *As 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.*

This was dictator talk – an explicit power grab. The new president was contemplating his "right" to command World War I veterans – mostly men in their late thirties – who had long since re-entered civilian life. It was true that they had sworn an oath to the United States on entering military service and that the 1919 founding document of the American Legion pledged members to help "maintain law and order" and show "devotion to mutual helpfulness." But the commander-in-chief had no power over them. Here Roosevelt would be poised to mobilize hundreds of thousands of unemployed and desperate men by decree, apparently to guard banks or put down rebellions or do anything else he wished during "any phase" of the crisis, with the insistence that they were dutybound to obey his concocted "command."

That word – "dictator" – had been in the air for weeks, endorsed vaguely as a remedy for the Depression by establishment figures ranging from the owners of the *New York Daily News*, the nation's largest circulation newspaper, to Walter Lippmann, the eminent columnist who spoke for the American political elite. "The situation is critical, Franklin. You may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial powers," Lippmann had told FDR during a visit to Warm Springs on February 1, before the crisis escalated.

Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic nominee for president in 1928, recalled with some exaggeration that "during the World War 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, Smith concluded, was a similar "state of war." Even Eleanor Roosevelt, more liberal than her husband, privately suggested that a "benevolent dictator" might be what the country needed.

The vague idea was not a police state but deference to a strong leader unfettered by Congress or the other inconveniences of democracy. Amid the crisis, the specifics didn't go beyond more faith in government by fiat. Within a few years, "dictator" would carry sinister tones, but – hard as it is to believe now – the word had a reassuring ring that season. So did “storm troopers,” used by one admiring author to describe foot soldiers of the early New Deal, and “concentration camps,” a generic term routinely applied to the work camps of the Civilian Conservation Corps that would be established by summer across the country. After all, the Italian Fascist Benito Mussolini, in power for a decade, had ginned up the Italian economy and was popular with everyone from Winston Churchill to Will Rogers to Lowell Thomas, America’s most influential broadcaster.

“If ever this country needed a Mussolini, it needs one now,” said Senator David Reed of Pennsylvania, outgoing President Hoover’s closest friend on Capitol Hill. The speech draft prepared for FDR brought to mind Mussolini addressing his black-shirt followers, many of whom were demobilized veterans who joined Il Duce’s private army.

Roosevelt came to office just as the appetite for strong leadership seemed to be surging worldwide. For Americans, German chancellor Adolf Hitler was worrying but new, his leadership to be ratified in a legal election held across Germany that very day, March 5. While Hitler was already seen in the United States as a reckless buffoon, almost no one in the country yet focused on the threat posed by fascism.

The most powerful American publisher, William Randolph Hearst, seemed to favor dictatorship. The Hearst empire extended to Hollywood, where Hearst that winter had personally supervised the filming of an upcoming hit movie calle*d Gabriel Over the Whi*te House that was meant to instruct FDR and prepare the public for a dictatorship. The movie’s hero is a president played by Walter Huston who dissolves Congress, creates an army of the unemployed, and lines up his enemies before a firing squad. FDR not only saw an advance screening of the film, he offered ideas for script rewrites and wrote Hearst from the White House that he thought it would help the country.

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FDR knew the consequences of failing to seize the day. A visitor – unidentified in the press – came to him not long after the Inauguration and told him, “Mr. President, if your program succeeds, you’ll be the greatest president in American history. If it fails, you will be the worst one.” “If it fails,” the new president replied, “I’ll be the last one.”

This sounds melodramatic to Americans in the 21st century, when freedom is flourishing in so many parts of the world. But during the 1930s, democracy was on the run, discredited even by subtle minds as a hopelessly cumbersome way to meet the challenges of the modern age.