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The New Era and the Present Administration

An Address by Mr. Bryan, Before the Fifth Annual Banquet of the Lincoln Commercial Club, January 6, 1914

Mr. President and Members of the Commercial Club:

I appreciate the favorable circumstances that have made it possible for me to be here just at this time, and I desire to thank you for your very hospitable reception. I am grateful, too, for the kind words spoken by your presiding officer, in presenting me to you. It is very pleasing to come back and to find a club of this size, so earnestly devoted to the welfare of this beautiful city. I can very easily imagine that your enthusiasm, already marked and at high pitch, will be even increased as you gather inspirations from your president. He is full of the spirit that means progress, that means advancement, and that means success.

This club is a very harmonious club. I have been impressed with that tonight, and I want to start well by saying something that will have universal approval. It has not always been my lot to secure universal approval; sometimes many years have elapsed before I did. But I want tonight to say something that will immediately win universal approval. I want to say that, having traveled throughout the country and the world, I have never seen a finer body of men than those whom I face tonight. How many of you indorse the statement? All in favor say aye: (Unanimous ayes.)

I do not know just why it was that this one club should find its membership stopping at the sixteen hundred mark. It only shows that the ratio is a sacred thing. I was glad, too, to learn tonight that this is a democratic club. It was not always so, but a great change has come over the country, and customs grow up to meet conditions. There is a new custom, adapted to the new condition; it is not proper now to ask a man his politics, for if he is a democrat, he will tell you so, and, if he is not, you should not embarrass him.

In coming back among you, it is delightful to see so many faces that are familiar; to some I can attach a name. I only wish I could connect a name with each face. I have longed, from the time I entered politics, for that genius, so useful to the public man, of being able to remember the name of everyone whom I know by face. But while I think I can pick out a great many of you, and not only give your last name, but your first name also, and probably tell each one of you how many times you voted for me, or against me, yet I can't do it in every case, and whenever I come back and see a face and can not think of the name, it reminds me of the case of an old colored man of whom I heard.

He lived back in slavery days, and had a wonderful memory. His master was very proud of his memory; so proud, in fact, that one time he made a contract with the devil, by which he

was to give Hezekiah to the devil, if the devil could catch him in a lapse of memory. So the devil undertook it; he found him plowing in the field one day, and suddenly appeared before him and said: "Hezekiah, do you like eggs?" Hezekiah says, "Yes, sir," and the devil disappeared. He waited for twenty years; then he suddenly appeared before Hezekiah and asked: "How?" Hezekiah answered: "Fried." I wish I could take up these conversations just where we left off with them in the campaigns.

I am glad to find an improvement; I think even the newspapers here do better than they did. I used to have great trouble with some of them some of the time, and with all of them most of the time. I used to be reminded, by some of the things they did and said, of a story that a Canadian brought down here. He said that up there they had a Scotchman named Duncan Frazier, who got into parliament. Once when they were discussing corporal punishment in the schools, he made a speech against this kind of punishment, and at the climax of his argument shouted, "The worst whipping I ever got in school I got for telling the truth." A voice came out of the audience, "And it cured you, too, didn't it Duncan?"

I was somewhat at loss to know just what I should say here. Of course I knew what you wanted me to say, but I could not say it. I knew you wanted me to say that the next time I came, I would bring a new postoffice building under one arm and a regional bank under the other. When you have an expectant audience like this, it is pretty tame not to be able to say more than that I will do the best I can. I am especially anxious to get a regional bank in Lincoln, because from the politics of most of the banks here I think we need a good bank. But thinking over this occasion I thought that I might follow the suggestion of the great Scottish poet, who

said that men will talk of what runs in their heads. And probably if I talk about the things that run in my head, I can make a more satisfactory speech than I could if I attempted to guess at what is running through your heads. And so I take for my subject "The New Era," and I shall tell you something about the era upon which we are entering, and of the man under whose leadership we are entering it. I am more encouraged to do it by the fact that this is, as your president declared early, a democratic club.

Someone has said that history is a record of the lives of great men, and surely we cannot overestimate the profound influence that a human being can exert upon the history of his time. I believe that when history is written,—the history of this time,—that it will be said that this is the beginning of a new era, a new and great era, and that the one in the White House, who bears the burdens of leadership, measured up to the responsibilities of the time.

I am near enough to Woodrow Wilson to get his measure. I not only read the things that you read in the papers, but I hear things that the newspaper men do not hear. And I have a chance to measure the man. The surveyor has to have two points fixed in order to establish a line, and so in public men you must have two points fixed before you can measure the man. In the case of the individual, you can measure a man somewhat by one point, but you cannot get a line on a public man without two. The first point is the matter of conscience. In the case of the individual, if he is a conscientious man, if he does what he believes to be right, you must respect him whether you agree with him or not. The man in private life who follows his conscience, is entitled to the respect of everyone who knows him, no matter how he may err in the opinion of those about him. And in public life also, it is as important that a man should follow his conscience. There is nothing else that is reliable. The burdens of a high position are too great to be borne by any man who does not put the approval of his conscience above the applause of the multitude. And the wise man knows that the more closely he follows his conscience, the more likely he is to have the applause of the multitude.

I know Woodrow Wilson well enough to know that he is conscientious. I know him well enough to know that you can awaken him at any hour of the night and present to him any question, no matter what it may be, and he will decide it according to what he believes to be right, and take the responsibility. That is the first point fixed,—but that is not enough in the public man. A public man may be conscientious and yet wrong, and if he is conscientious

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