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Erla Hallsteinsdóttir / Jan Engberg /

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Wolfgang Mieder

“A Rendezvous with Destiny”

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Proverbial Rhetoric for Freedom and Peace

Abstract

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) is acknowledged to have been one of the greatest American presidents getting the country beyond the depression and guiding it through the Second World War. As such he was an effective communicator, persuader, and at times manipulator. He was very much aware of the importance of language as he dealt with the American people in his famous Fireside Chats, with Congress, and with world leaders like Churchill but also with the general population; from students, parents, and workers to political adversaries like isolationists, communists, and labor leaders. Roosevelt had a keen interest in language as a communicative tool, insisting on using plain English and common sense, and traditional folk expressions. He was eager to coin his own sententious remarks but also relied on proverbs from the Bible to add authority, didacticism, and an element of faith in the future to his uplifting rhetoric. He was equally fond of folk proverbs that he cited knowing that they would ring a bell with his listeners who were eager enough to accept their traditional wisdom. His speeches are also rich in proverbial expressions that made them accessible and at times entertaining by way of their folksy language. Animal metaphors as telling indicators of human behavior are quite prevalent, and so are maritime phrases as symbols of difficult times that Roosevelt as the captain of the ship of state and as an experienced sailor employed with much rhetorical skill. The article is not based on a theoretical linguistic approach but employs a more literary and folkloric narrative style to tell a historical story of great importance.

Keywords

American, communication, history, metaphor, president, politics, proverb, proverbial expression, rhetoric, Franklin D. Roosevelt, speech

Introduction

Even though Franklin D. Roosevelt was educated at such prestigious institutions as the Episcopal preparatory Groton School, Harvard University, and Columbia University Law School, he did not excel as an exceptional student preferring various sports and serving as the editor-in-chief of *The Harvard Crimson* daily newspaper. This journalistic experience of sorts was to serve him well later in his dealings with the press, while his time as editor made him become aware of the importance of language and style both in oral and written communication. He did not show any particular interest in the theoretical underpinnings of politics, economics, or law, and it has been observed that “Roosevelt simply was not reflective or philosophical” (Moley, 1949, p. 32). However, he was most certainly a gifted pragmatist, a quick study, a diligent worker, an amazing campaigner, a superb communicator, a sly negotiator, a far-sighted innovator, and for thirteen years one of the most influential presidents of the United States (Ryan, 1995; Winfield, 2011). He did not enjoy erudite discussions of various forms of government, social structures, or international affairs. His approach to the challenges that confronted him during his time as Governor of New York and subsequently his many years as President of the United States was direct, hands-on, and always with the keen intent of getting things done. The proverb “Deeds, not words” might well serve as the *modus operandi* of this engaged politician who saw his activities as a calling for the well-being of the United States: “The future of America, like its past, must be made by deeds – not words. America has always been a land

* Wolfgang Mieder
Department of German and Russian
University of Vermont
Wolfgang.Mieder@uvm.edu

of action – a land of adventurous pioneering – a land of growing and building. America must always be such a land” (13,377-8; October 28, 1944; the first number refers to the volume of Roosevelt’s *Public Papers* followed by the page number).

Language and Style

As other presidents before and after him, Roosevelt obviously had to rely on numerous advisors and speechwriters to gather together material and to prepare draft documents to get things started as it were (Medhurst, 2003). He took the fortunate opportunity to describe this fascinating process in a lengthy note that he attached around January 17, 1938, to the publication (in his *Public Papers*) of his address on “Never Has a Nation Made Greater Strides in the Safeguarding of Democracy” with which he opened the 1936 Presidential Campaign at the Democratic State Convention on September 29, 1936, at Syracuse, New York:

In the preparation of campaign speeches as well as speeches on other occasions I have called on many different people for advice and assistance. On various subjects I have received drafts and memoranda from different people, varying from short suggestions as to a sentence here and there, to long memoranda of factual materials and, in some cases, complete addresses.

In addition to such suggestions, I make it a practice to keep a “speech material file.”

In preparing a speech, I usually take the various drafts and suggestions which have been submitted to me and also the material which has been accumulated in the speech file on various subjects, read them carefully, lay them aside, and then dictate my own draft, usually to Miss Tully. Naturally, the final speech will contain some of the thoughts and even some of the sentences which appeared in some of the drafts or suggestions submitted. [...]

On some of my speeches I have prepared as many as five or six successive drafts myself after reading drafts and suggestions submitted by other people; and I have changed drafts from time to time after consulting with other people either personally or by telephone. (5,390-2; September 29, 1936)

In an early study of Roosevelt’s preparation of speeches, Earnest Brandenburg concludes quite appropriately that “Roosevelt decided the final phraseology. The ultimate product of combined efforts invariably yielded addresses identifiable as peculiarly *Rooseveltian*” (Brandenburg, 1949, p. 221, Winfield 1990, p. 107). Samuel Rosenman, who was most directly involved with Roosevelt’s speeches, drew quite similar conclusions three years later in his intimate book about *Working with Roosevelt* (1952): “The speeches as finally delivered were his – and his alone – no matter who the collaborators were. He had gone over every point, every word, time and again. He had studied, reviewed, and read aloud each draft, and had changed it again and again, either in his own handwriting, by dictating inserts, or making deletions. Because of the many hours he spent in its preparation, by the time he delivered a speech he knew it almost by heart” (Rosenman, 1952, p. 11).

This is true enough, but what is it with the language and style of Roosevelt’s communications that made them so effective? What did he bring to his speeches that was not part of the more factual rhetoric of his speechwriters? After all, they changed over time and different writers worked on different addresses. What ties these communications together linguistically that is consistently Rooseveltian? It must be his own keen awareness of his common-sense approach to language as a communicative tool to reach and touch the mind and heart of people of all walks of life. Certainly his sense of humor and his delight in telling stories is part of this that hardly originated with his speechwriters. There is also his easily accessible vocabulary in general and his reliance on common phraseology in the form of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and other phraseological units. Not much is said about this in the rich secondary literature on Roosevelt’s speeches and press conferences (Miller & Villarreal, 1945), and yet these matters were clearly instrumental in making him the rhetorical president *par excellence*.

In a section of their long article about “Franklin D. Roosevelt” (1955) the two authors Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo W. Braden have included ten pages on the President’s “Language and Style” (505-515) that to this day is of great value in dealing with his impressive rhetoric that made him such an effective leader at a most critical time in the United States at first and then throughout the world. They start with the statement that “Roosevelt was a conscious stylist. At the heart of his theory of style was an insistence upon clarity and simplicity. He wanted to be ‘clear enough for the layman to understand’ [Eleanor Roosevelt]. He believed he had a duty to keep his nationwide audience informed and this necessitated talking in a language that people could understand. He insisted upon ‘simplification or even oversimplification’ [Robert Sherwood]” (Brandenburg & Braden, 1955, p. 505). But to provide a certain “folksiness” to his at times rather lengthy deliberations, Roosevelt added a whole register of well-known phrases, homely analogies, repetitions, parallel structure, and anaphora. He also was quite the creator of his own sententious remarks, he relied on Biblical references, and he enjoyed historical allusions to well-known figures like Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and others (Schiffman, 1945).

Inaugural Addresses

His most famous sententious remark that has been registered as a proverb due to its widespread currency in the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder, Kingsbury & Harder, 1992, pp. 203-204) appears in the first paragraph of his inaugural address of March 2, 1933:

This preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give support to leadership in these critical days. (2,11; March 4, 1933)

Slight variants were in circulation already in the nineteenth century, notably Henry David Thoreau’s “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear” from his journal entry of September 7, 1851 as a possible source (Shapiro, 2021, p. 817, no. 16). But Roosevelt helped its proverbial status along by repeating it in later speeches (Houck, 2002; Houck & Nocasian, 2002), including this one about half a year before America was to enter the Second World War:

There are some timid ones among us who say that we must preserve peace at any price – lest we lose our liberties forever. To them I say this: never in the history of the world has a Nation lost its democracy by a successful struggle to defend its democracy. We must not be defeated by the fear of the very danger which we are preparing to resist. Our freedom has shown its ability to survive war, but our freedom would never survive surrender. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” (10,190-1; May 27, 1941)

This is indeed effective proverbial rhetoric, making it perfectly understandable why it gained such a strong foothold in the American psyche during Roosevelt’s lifetime and far beyond to modern times (Moley, 1966; Ryan, 1979, 1988, 1993).

From a paremiological point of view, his short epideictic the fourth inaugural address of January 20, 1945 has a few lines that are truly remarkable in their amassment of proverbial language that has been ignored in the impressive scholarship on this address (Ryan, 1981 and 1988) with the exception of Daniel Ross Chandler’s insightful article on it. He too refers to his schoolmaster’s proverb and Emerson’s quotation long turned proverb that Roosevelt cited “to encourage international cooperation and to promote worldwide community. One could translate Emerson’s wisdom as, as a nation

gives, so the country receives” (Chandler, 1993, pp. 130-131). And it is Chandler, as the lone scholar, who also states that “Like an adroit professor stressing an essential concept, Roosevelt admonished the American citizenry that his people ‘must live as men and not as ostriches, nor as dogs in the manger.’ Consistent with his conclusion was his conviction that Americans must acknowledge their citizenship within the world community” (Chandler, 1993, p. 111). Here is Roosevelt’s deeply felt, philosophical and proverbial argument that begins with the proverbial expression “To learn one’s lesson” that is transformed into the effective “We have learned” anaphora:

Today, in the year of war, 1945, we have learned lessons – at a fearful cost – and we shall profit by them.

We have learned that we cannot live alone, at peace; that our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other Nations, far away. We have learned that we must live as men and not as ostriches, nor as dogs in the manger.

We have learned to be citizens of the world, members of the human community.

We have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that, “The only way to have a friend is to be one.” (13,524; January 20, 1945)

The question remains, at least from a proverb scholar’s point of view, why nobody and not even Daniel Chandler calls the matter by its name, i.e., that Roosevelt is connecting the two classical proverbial expressions “To act like an ostrich” and “To be a dog in the manger” that have their origin in ancient fables and have been translated into many languages over time (Mieder, 2013, pp. 248-291 and 2014, pp. 363-414). Roosevelt had used both phrases before, alternating the “ostrich”-variant with the nowadays more prevalent “To hide one’s head in the sand”.

Concept of Freedom

It is, of course, only natural that the war-time president was preoccupied with the concept of freedom. After several attempts of speaking of two or up to five types of freedom, he zeroed in on four of them that became his very own “global vision” (Kaye, 2014, p. 75) about “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.” The four freedoms became a *leitmotif* for him after he had articulated them on January 6, 1941, in a lengthy Annual Message to the Congress:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon our essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of the world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb. (9,672; January 6, 1941)

This enumeration of the four freedoms of speech, worship, want, and fear, together with the “everywhere (anywhere) in the world” anaphora was indeed an effective peroration of this required State

of the Union Address, as it would be called today (Viebrock, 1993, p. 122). It would be hard to fathom that there was someone in the crowd that would have disagreed with these very basic and essential four freedoms (Crowell, 1955; Engel, 2016). In any case, the four freedoms of speech, worship, want and fear have entered the annals of American history and also Fred R. Shapiro's magisterial *The New Yale Book of Quotations* (2021, p. 694, no. 23) as a proverbial claim for a better world. Roosevelt thoroughly believed that a brighter day will surely come where responsible deeds together with positive words will bring about a better world order (Hitchcock, 2016, p. 217). After all, as he stated proverbially during three of his many press conferences: "Hope springs eternal" (12,61; February 2, 1943; 12,131; March 12, 1943; and 12,134; March 30, 1943). Not losing hope during a horrific war catastrophe should and could give humankind the moral strength to carry on against many odds believing in, and acting upon, the belief in the four freedoms!

Concept of Neighborliness

Franklin Roosevelt's multifaceted references to "freedom" find their match in the frequent appearance of the word "neighbor". In fact, Mary E. Stuckey speaks of "his rhetoric of global neighborliness" in her seminal book *The Good Neighbor. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power* (2013, p. 169), summarizing her findings of Roosevelt's preoccupation with building good neighborly relations with these telling comments: "The implicit connection between Christian morality and neighborliness ran through the entire corpus of his political rhetoric. For Roosevelt, that shape would unequivocally take on the contours of a global neighborhood [...] his Christianized understanding of neighborhood" (Stuckey, 2013, p. 171). Little wonder that Roosevelt frequently referred to the proverbial Golden Rule:

Let us make this Christmas a merry one for the little children in our midst. For us of maturer years it cannot be merry. But for most of us it can be a Happy Christmas if by happiness we mean that we have done with doubts, that we have set our hearts against fear, that we still believe in the Golden Rule for all mankind, that we intend to live more purely in the spirit of Christ, and that by our works, as well as our words, will strive forward in Faith and in Hope and in Love. (9,632-3; December 24, 1940)

In this Christmas message at the end of the first full year of the war, and Roosevelt does not only refer to the Golden Rule but also adds the proverbial triad "Faith, hope, and charity" (1 Corinthians 13:13) to his uplifting message. It was also a good idea to replace "charity" with "hope" as he did on other occasions since this strengthened his desire to instill hopeful attitudes among the people at these dire times.

The actual Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12) appears in its wording but once in the *Public Papers* of Franklin Roosevelt. However, the contextualized reference is of considerable importance in that the President changed it to include his favorite "neighbor"-word:

The thing that we are all seeking is justice – justice in the common-sense interpretation of that word – the interpretation that means "Do unto your neighbors as you would be done by." That interpretation means justice against exploitation on the part of those who do not care much for the lives, the happiness and the prosperity of their neighbors. (4,489-90; December 9, 1935)

But clearly then, the ultimate wisdom of the Bible relating to supportive neighborliness is the proverb "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) that the President quoted four times throughout his *Public Papers*. For Franklin Roosevelt it became a heartfelt slogan for a humane world order based on nations behaving like good neighbors. As such, it is commonly referred to as "The Good Neighbor Policy" and belongs to one of Roosevelt's signature plans and, at least in part, accomplishments (Marks III, 1988):

In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor – the neighbor who resolutely respects himself, and because he does so, respects the rights of others – the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors. (2,14; March 4, 1933; repeated 5,8; January 3, 1936)

What an incredible humane declaration of the incoming president at a time when Adolf Hitler had just come to power in Germany on January 30, 1933, that was to end with the Holocaust and a world war. But here is the vigorous and positive Roosevelt setting the stage for a better world at home and abroad with neighbor caring for neighbor locally and nations getting along as neighbors. And notice how he underpinned his “policy of the good neighbor” with an allusion to the Bible proverb “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) that replaces “love” with respect” in this case.

Sententious Remarks

Being the conscious stylist and rhetorician who saw himself as somewhat of an educator of the nation, Roosevelt has a certain propensity for coning his own sententious remarks with “a rendezvous with destiny” and “live in infamy” standing out and together with others having attained proverbial recognition and currency. This is most certainly true for a statement that Roosevelt made in his speech of June 27, 1936, accepting his renomination for a second term as President of the United States. The country was still struggling with economic recovery, and the developments in Europe did not look favorable towards a peaceful world order. So the President knew that he was facing stormy waters ahead, and perhaps in recalling the poem “I Have a Rendezvous with Death” (1916) by the American poet Alan Seeger (Shapiro, 2021, p. 727, nos. 1-2), declared that the nation had a rendezvous with destiny but not death, a typically positive attitude by him (Freidel, 1990). His well-chosen words have long become a sententious remark with proverbial claim:

This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny

There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny. [...] Here in America we are waging a great and successful war. It is not alone a war against want and destitution and economic demoralization. It is more than that: it is war for the survival of democracy. We are fighting to save a great and precious form of government for ourselves and the world. (5,235-6; June 27, 1936)

That this sociopolitical fight has a moral underpinning can be seen from the inclusion of the Bible proverb “For whomsoever much is given, much shall be required” (Luke 12:48), a definite rhetorical practice by the President.

The equally famous declaration that President Franklin Roosevelt made after the surprise Japanese attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on August 7, 1941: “A date which will live in infamy.” It was the first sentence of Roosevelt’s address to Congress on December 8, 1941, asking that war be declared between the United States and Japan:

A date which will live in infamy

Yesterday, December 7, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. [...] Always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premediated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory. [...] I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire. (10,514; December 8, 1941)

The short war message of not even two pages with its quotable peroration standing at the beginning will never be forgotten, with the President emphasizing “the infamous duplicity behind the Japanese attacks; they carefully and deliberately prepared their military onslaught, masking their preparations behind neutral and formal diplomatic negotiations” (Stelzner, 1966, p. 434). But there was no time for the President to despair or to withdraw with the United States entering the war in Europe as well after Germany declared war against America on December 11, 1941. It was he who untiringly worked for the war effort, supporting the soldiers as well as the civilians with words and deeds. Of course, his many sententious remarks played their important role in these efforts that can be summarized with the very last sentence of his last speech that he no longer could deliver on April 13, 1945, as planned after his death the day before: “Let us move forward with strong and active faith” (13,615-6; April 13, 1945).

There can be no doubt that “he enjoyed the apt word, the memorable phrase” (Crowell, 1958, p. 242) that helped to communicate with people in accessible and at times enjoyable language.

Here is but a list of some of Roosevelt’s aphorisms, maxims, and sententious remarks of which some have gained some notoriety and inclusion in quotation dictionaries and might just become proverbs:

We cannot merely take, but we must give as well. (2,14; March 4, 1933)

Freedom and opportunity do not mean a license to climb upwards by pushing other people down. (4,341; August 24, 1935)

Democracy is not a static thing. (4,405; October 1, 1935)

Government can be no more than the collective wisdom of its citizens. (4,422-3; October 17, 1935)

Freedom cannot be bestowed, it must be achieved (5,357-8; September 16, 1936)

Civilization is not national – it is international. (7,491; August 18, 1938)

Force produces no solution for the future good of humanity. (7,532; September 27, 1938)

When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger. (8,461-2; September 3, 1939)

Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth. (8,557, October 26, 1939)

Opportunities to us mean new duties. (9,59; January 19, 1940)

A selfish and greedy people cannot be free. (9, 302; July 19, 1940)

Yesterday’s answers are inadequate for today’s problems. (9,441; September 20, 1940)

Freedom in itself is not enough (9,547; November 2, 1940)

History cannot be rewritten by wishful thinking. (10,61; March 15, 1941)

Nations will learn to work together only by actually working together. (12,503-4; November 9, 1943)

Poverty anywhere is a danger to prosperity everywhere. (13,127; May 17, 1944; Shapiro, 2021, p. 694, no. 27)

Bible Proverbs

There is no doubt that Franklin Roosevelt had a solid religious upbringing at home, going to church with his family on Sundays, and hearing words from the Bible from his mother. Later, when he was a young student at the Groton school, he also received invaluable religious instruction about the wisdom of the Bible from Reverend Endicott Peabody, who as Headmaster of Groton saw to it that the students received a proper Christian education (Wicker, 2017, pp. 15-19).

As President he linked religion and politics repeatedly in his ethically informed rhetoric. He even went so far as to cite from the list of the Ten Commandments, rendering his remarks into rather direct admonitions:

Thou shalt not kill (Exodus 20:13)

This new generation, for example, is not content with preachings against that vile form of collective murder – lynch law – which has broken out in our midst anew. We know that it is murder, and a deliberate and definite disobedience of the Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” We do not excuse those in high places or in low who condone lynch law. (2,519; December 6, 1933)

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife (Exodus 20:17)

Today the United Nations are the mightiest military coalition in all history. They represent an overwhelming majority of the population of the world. Bound together in solemn agreement that they themselves will not commit acts of aggression or conquest against any of their neighbors, the United Nations can and must remain united for the maintenance of peace by preventing any attempt to rearm in Germany, in Japan, in Italy, or in any other Nation which seeks to violate the Tenth Commandment – “Thou shalt not covet.” (12,33; January 7, 1943)

The last paragraph is of special interest for two reasons, the first and primary being that the President shorted the command to “Thou shalt not covet” to warn any belligerent country against wanting to take over a neighboring nation rather than a wife. But it must also have gone through Roosevelt’s mind that coveting someone’s wife or another woman for that matter while being married to Eleanor was not the proper ethical thing to do. And yet, his extra-marital affairs have been well documented (Persico, 2008) and went on with the knowledge of his wife who ever more took on her own acknowledged persona as a sincere and engaged voice in American and world affairs, especially also in women’s issues during and after the war. Even presidents have to be careful that they don’t get carried away with preaching ethics and morality to others without taking a close look at themselves.

It cannot be denied that that political rhetoric does take on a sermon-like nature with such references to the Bible. It is truly amazing how the President is ever ready to argue for the survival of democracy and the protection of the American way of life, using the proverbial Christmas Message “Peace on earth, good will toward men” to keep up the spirits of the entire population. And yet, at the same time he had to address the war that overshadowed his presidency for the last few years. Already as early as 1938, fearing that war would come and spread, he argued hopefully with the well-known proverbial expression “To beat swords into ploughshares” (Isaiah 2:4) that peace might remain:

And so the pledge I have so often given to my own countrymen I renew before all the world on this glad Christmas Eve, that I shall do whatever lies within my own power to hasten the day foretold by Isaiah, when men “shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (7,651; December 24, 1938)

Yet this uplifting Christmas message to the nation of 1938 was negated but one year later in the following depressing message at Christmas after the war had begun in Europe. This time he recalled the related Bible proverb “He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52), still hoping that the war might be controlled in the spirit of this proverb and if not, that the United States can stay out of it:

I take heart in remembering that in a similar time, Isaiah first prophesied the birth of Christ. Then, several centuries before His coming, the condition of the world was not unlike that which we see today. Then, as now, a conflagration had been set; and nations walked dangerously in the light of the fires they had themselves kindled. But in that very moment a spiritual rebirth was foreseen – a new day which was to lose the captives and to consume the conquerors

in the fire of their own kindling; and those who had taken the sword were to perish by the sword. There was promised a new age wherein through renewed faith the upward progress of the human race would become more secure. (8,606; December 23, 1939)

Of course, this was not to be, but not surprisingly, the President employed various other Bible proverbs to comment on the war situation, with the two “sword”-phrases having appeared frequently in other writings that have dealt with times of war (Mieder, 2014, pp. 247-254). The first paragraph is a positive yet drastic statement about the war effort with its sacrifices, with the second reference stating prophetically that Nazi Germany will soon reap the storm of defeat:

In the sweat of thy brow (face) shalt thou eat bread (Genesis 3:19)

In our country, in the countries of our brother allies, the people who live by the sweat of their brows have risen mightily to the challenge of the struggle. They have given their sons to the military services. They have stoked the furnaces and hurried the factory wheels. They have made the planes and welded the tanks, riveted the ships and rolled the shells. Production of war materials here is now the greatest in our history, but it is not yet enough. It will be greater still. (11,355; September 5, 1942)

They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7)

As for Germany, the tragic Nation which has sown the wind and is now reaping the whirlwind – we and our allies are entirely agreed that we shall not bargain with the Nazi conspirators, or leave them a shred of control – open or secret – of the instruments of government. We shall not leave them a single element of military power – or of potential military power. (13,352; October 21, 1944)

One special proverb may serve as a summary of Roosevelt’s reliance on the wisdom from the Bible. It speaks of mankind and its dependence on faith, arguing that there is more to life than material matters. It appears in both the Old and New Testaments and has long become generally accepted folk wisdom without necessarily thinking of its Biblical origin: “Man cannot live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4). At the time when the President cited it, the United States had not yet entered the Second World War, but it surely was wise to remind the population of its religious strength:

We people of America know that man cannot live by bread alone. We know that we have a reservoir of religious strength which can withstand attacks from abroad and corruption from within. We people of America will always cherish and preserve that strength. We will always cling to our religion, our devotion to God – to the faith which gives us comfort and the strength to face evil. (9,557; November 4, 1940)

Folk Proverbs

Moving on from Bible proverbs left off, the following paragraph from Roosevelt’s campaign speech on October 31, 1936, at Madison Square Garden in New York City might well serve as a transition to his equal propensity of citing folk proverbs. It is in fact quite a unique statement in its amassment of four preformulated phrases, one of them being a reference to the “golden calf” (Exodus 32: 4 and 8) of the Hoover administration and the two proverbial expressions of “To twirl one’s thumbs” and “To roll up one’s sleeves” arguing metaphorically that during Roosevelt’s first term such do-nothing attitude was overcome by actively bringing about positive change:

For twelve years this Nation was afflicted with hear-nothing, see-nothing, do-nothing Government. The Nation looked to Government but the government looked away. Nine mocking years with the golden calf and three long years of the scourge! Nine crazy years at the ticker and three long years in the breadlines! [...] For nearly four years you have had an Administration

which instead of twirling its thumbs has rolled up its sleeves. We will keep our sleeves rolled up. (5,568; October 31, 1936)

But how about that fourth proverbial line of “Hear-nothing, see-nothing, do-nothing?” It could be an appropriately altered version of the originally medieval Latin proverb “Hear, see, and be silent” (Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder, 1992, p. 290), but perhaps even more likely it is a sarcastic play with the triadic proverb “Hear nothing, see nothing, speak nothing” that in the Anglo-American world has long gained currency as “Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” together with the three monkeys making appropriate gestures (Mieder, 2005a, pp. 35-50). It would be hard to imagine that Roosevelt would not have had the image of the three monkeys from one of the many little figurines or from a cartoon in mind when he changed the “speak nothing” to “do nothing”, thus accusing Hoover’s presidency of complacency and indifference. Interestingly enough, Earnest Brandenburg and Waldo W. Braden quote this very passage in their otherwise superb and lengthy study of Roosevelt’s rhetorical prowess observing that “in political campaigns he [Roosevelt] often demonstrated his adeptness at using stinging ridicule and biting sarcasm” (Brandenburg & Braden, 1955, pp. 513-514). Right on, but how about at least a cursory comment on the proverbial language!? The lack thereof is not at all unique to these two rhetorical scholars but is the same in all other rhetorical studies. Proverbs and proverbial expressions just don’t seem to be of interest or of relevance – an unfortunate state of affairs to be sure.

Interestingly enough, despite his clear inclination to cite traditional proverbs in his speeches, he only used the specific “proverb”-designation twice in the large corpus of his *Public Papers*. In both cases he is citing the translation of foreign proverbs, feeling perhaps that he had to identify the texts as such to make people realize that he was quoting traditional sayings from other cultures in these instances:

And so I was just thinking of an old idea of self-discipline – an old Chinese proverb – of a Chinese Christian. He prayed every day – he had been told to pray to our kind of God – and his prayer was: “Lord, reform Thy world, beginning with me.” It is rather a nice line for us all to keep in the back of our heads. (10,561; December 17, 1941)

The other text in which Roosevelt identifies the foreign proverb as such, was employed in a rather humorous situation during one of his many press conferences (White, 1979):

I thought of putting in here, but I didn’t, an old Balkan [Bulgarian] proverb, which I cannot have even attributed to me, because at the present time I don’t like to call names any more than I have to. It’s rather a nice old proverb of the Balkans that has, as I understand it, the full sanction of the Orthodox Church. This is off the record – *complètement* – (*Laughter*) look it up in an encyclopedia of Balkan proverbs if you want to – it runs something like this. Mind you, this is okayed by the Church. It says, “My children, you are permitted in time of great danger to walk with the Devil until you have crossed the bridge.” (*Laughter*) Rather nice! (11,479; November 17, 1942)

Speaking of the devil, to put it proverbially, here is a fascinating statement by the President in which he “plays” with the old English proverb “The devil can cite scripture for his purpose”:

Millions of unnecessary words and explanations and solemn comments are uttered and written year in and year out about the great men of American history [...]. The purpose of all these comments is either to induce the party leaders of today blindly to follow the words of leaders of yesterday; or to justify public acts or policies of today by the utterances of the past, often tortured out of context. Yes, the devil can quote past statesmen as readily as he can quote the Scriptures, in order to prove his purpose. (9,29, January 8, 1940)

One can't help but wonder whether Roosevelt in this case did not realize that he was characterizing himself in a certain way. After all he was quite the artist in using them for his own benefit as well. Be that as it may, the President liked yet another "devil"-proverb, indicating that he was well-versed in folk language:

It is sufficient for me to point out once more that the difficult and dangerous situation into which the United States had got itself was due to the general attitude, "Every man for himself; the devil take the hindmost." Individuals were seeking quick riches at the expense of other individuals. Geographical sections were seeking economic preference for themselves to the disadvantage of other sections. Cities were recklessly offering inducements of manufacturing plants to move away from other cities. (3,123-4; March 5, 1934)

As can be seen, the proverb "Every man for himself; the devil take the hindmost", with both halves also current independently, is well suited to comment on economic matters that were very much in the forefront during the 1930s. Staying with his preoccupation with economic issues during the first two terms of his presidency, here are a few additional passages dealing with such issues in a more indirect way via illustrative proverbs known by his audience. In the first passage he combines two colorful proverbs and even identifies one with the introductory formula "the old saying". In other cases he employs the markers "common wisdom" or "adage", but it remains a conundrum why he shies away from the term "proverb" that everybody in his audience could identify with to be sure:

The proof of the pudding is in the eating / It all depends on whose baby has the measles

Greater trade is merely another word for more production and more employment; and that statement ought to be understood in every farmhouse in the country. The proof of this particular pudding is in the eating; the best way to judge the new accord is to see how it works out. Analyze and remember the sources of the objections, analyze the motives of the objectors. Remember, too, the old saying, "It all depends on whose baby has the measles." (4,489; December 9, 1935)

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Most of the great Federal Commissions were set up in the belief that "an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure." The Federal Trade Commission was no exception to that sound legislative intent. Prevention of unfair business practices is generally better than punishment administered after the fact of infringements, costly to the consuming public and to honest competitors. (6,299; July 12, 1937)

The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining

Sometimes I get bored sitting in Washington hearing certain people talk and talk about all that government ought not do, people who get all they wanted from government back in the days when the financial institutions and the railroads were being bailed out by the Government in 1933. It is refreshing to go out through the country and feel the common wisdom that the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining. (6,431; October 12, 1937)

But Roosevelt was equally versed in much older proverbs, to with the classical Latin proverb "Caveat emptor" which he employed three times in a matter of two days in March of 1929, calling it an "old doctrine" and changing it ingeniously to the "new doctrine of "Caveat vendor":

What I am saying to Congress in the message is that it applies the new doctrine of *caveat vendor* in place of the old doctrine of *caveat emptor*. In other words, "let the seller beware as well as the buyer." In other words, there is a definite, positive burden on the seller for the first time to tell the truth. (2,96; March 29, 1933)

The third reference is from an early press conference, and as can be imagined, it was during the many meetings with the press that he spontaneously quoted proverbs. Such occurrences can be taken as

proof positive that proverbs belonged to the natural rhetorical repertoire of the President. It is not known whether some of the speechwriters incorporated proverbs into their drafts, but the conjecture that such folk speech patterns were added by Roosevelt himself to his addresses makes eminent sense.

Roosevelt also was clever in employing the popular proverb “You can’t have your cake and eat it to” in two press conferences separated by a couple of years. In the first instance he also included the proverbial expressions “To take it on the chin” and “to put someone in a straight jacket” for good measure. In the second passage he manipulated the proverbial expression “To not see the forest for the trees” to add a common metaphor to the proverb at hand. And again, these are extemporaneous comments, paying witness to Roosevelt’s proverbial prowess without any speechwriters involved!

It means giving up, of course, on the part of the American public, and therefore of the manufacturers in the country – the businessmen of the country – a great many things which were all very nice and pleasant in our normal lives, and substitute for them the things that are necessary to carry on this aid to the democracies that we are giving at the present time. Well, it is going to hit a lot of people, sure, but you can’t eat your cake and have it too. That is the message to give to the American people: “You can’t eat your cake and have it too.” If you do one thing you have got to go all out for it. If you are going to do the other thing – lie down and take it on the chin – it will be putting us in a strait jacket that we won’t get out of for one hundred years. I think that should be told quite frankly to the public. (10,176-7; May 23, 1941)

You know some of the things I have said about Washington. The people are very apt to get confused by the trees, don’t see the forest as a whole. The largest thing that we are after in all of this discussion is a very old thing which hasn’t yet been solved, and that is keeping the cost of living down. You can’t eat your cake and have it too, when people are shying off from keeping the cost of living down. (12,252-3; June 15, 1943)

Of course, there are also times when Roosevelt simply alludes to a proverb, knowing that his audience knows it only too well, as in the following case of “Politics make strange bedfellows”:

It is found in the very strange assortment of political bedfellows who have been brought together in the Republican political dormitory. Many conflicting interests, many irreconcilable social outlooks, many fundamentally opposite economic attitudes, have been thrown together under one political roof. The only *common* philosophy and the only *common* purpose they have is to get wholly rid of all the New Deal – lock, stock and barrel – and to get control of Government in their own hands for their own purposes. (9,531; November 1, 1940)

Notice that the President has added the proverbial triad “lock, stock and barrel” for good measure in this attack on the Republicans.

Of course, the war effort was moving ahead, with ever more sacrifices being called for from the population. And what a rhetorical stroke of genius on the part of the President to recall the agricultural proverb “Don’t lay down the plow until you are at the end of the furrow” in his argument that there can be no rest on the way to victory at the end of 1944. This time he used the marker “old saying” to indicate that he was citing proverbial wisdom that he most likely learned from farmers with whom he enjoyed good relations earlier in his presidency. Within just the following few lines he also called it a “rule of common sense” as well as a “maxim” before repeating it in a somewhat altered way to stress the work towards victory:

There is an old saying about sticking to the plow until you have reached the end of the furrow. Every rule of common sense and patriotic thought makes that maxim applicable to our conduct in this war. And so in the name of our wounded and sick, in the name of our dead, and in the name of future generations of Americans, I asked you to plow out this furrow to a successful and victorious end. (13,425; November 19, 1944)

Since President Abraham Lincoln was one of Roosevelt's favorite predecessors whom he liked to cite as shown in the chapter on Roosevelt's reliance on quotations, it seems appropriate to end this discussion of his use of proverbs with the proverb that "Right makes might." When he used the proverb the first time, he also employed it as an anonymous piece of sociopolitical wisdom which it most assuredly is in fact:

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy. (6,351; September 13, 1937)

But three years later in a radio address of October 24, 1940, being the historian he was, he attached Abraham Lincoln's name to it by recalling the former president's powerful words during one of his major speeches of February 27, 1860, while he was still hoping that the Civil War could be avoided (Mieder, 2000, pp. 25-27): "We have confidence in the ability of the democratic system which gives men dignity, to give them strength. And so we say with Lincoln: 'Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it'" (9,498; October 24, 1940). Roosevelt might well have thought that this significant proverb was coined by Abraham Lincoln, and he would have been in agreement with most Americans who conjure up Lincoln's name more often than not when citing it (Mieder, 2021a, p. 157). Be that as it may, with or without Lincoln's name attached, "Right makes might" has been and should continue to be the perfect proverb in the paremiological repertoire of American presidents.

Proverbial Expressions

Proverbial expressions, those traditional phrases of folk speech, are easily integrated into oral and written communications, adding commonly known bits of formulaic and often metaphoric language to otherwise rather prosaic texts. Since they are incomplete sentences without any particular structure or even rhyme, they flow almost unconsciously into the normal rhetorical flow. This is certainly the case with most instances of their appearance in Franklin Roosevelt's speeches, but there are also occasions where he must have integrated such colorful language intentionally into his deliberations. In a campaign speech for the presidency of October 6, 1932, he chose the related proverbial phrase "To speak plain English" to underscore his desire to employ accessible language for all to understand:

I have described the entire compass of my policy as a "concert of interests" – North and South, East and West, agriculture, industry, mining, commerce and finance. With this broad purpose in mind, I have further described the spirit of my program as a "new deal," which is plain English for a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of Government toward economic life. (1,782; October 6, 1932)

But speaking of his "New Deal" programs, he had chosen the somewhat militaristic proverbial expression "to be a call to arms" to end his acceptance speech of the Nomination for the Presidency on July 2, 1932, at Chicago (Oliver, 1945, p. 281):

I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people. (1,659; July 2, 1932)

Considering his privileged upbringing at Hyde Park, it might come as a surprise that he cared deeply for the well-being of the American Farmers and their farms. But it must be remembered that he grew up surrounded by farms and that the State of New York is in large parts to this day made up of farm communities. In any case, as he dealt with the fate of American agriculture during the depression and later during the war, he relied on various proverbial expressions to add a colloquial tone to his heartfelt concern, to wit this personal statement with the proverbial phrase "To make both ends meet"

contained in it: “Therefore I am not boasting, when I state in very simple words that all my life I have had a deep and vital interest in farm problems of all kinds; and I might add that I know by personal experience how difficult it is at the end of each year to make both ends meet on a farm, let alone to make any profit on it” (1,26; October 19, 1928).

Roosevelt was, perhaps legitimately accused of being aloof and distant at times, but such statements show that he could be empathetic and more than willing to lend a governmental hand not only to the farmers but to all those who were suffering the most during those difficult economic years. To a large degree he did this by interspersing his economic messages with emotive proverbial expressions that added common sense to his remarks:

To have a roof over one's head

But you will be doing something more important than becoming millionaires. You will be building up for future generations the soundest kind of American life and I will, I think, know that even though you do not make a great deal of money, the odds are a thousand to one that you will never starve. And you will always have a roof over your heads, and you will have good educational facilities, and that is a great deal more than many in industrial life can be assured of. (2,232; June 12, 1933)

To be at the bottom (top) of the ladder

Men and women in the professions, the overwhelming majority of the small storekeepers, a growing number of the bankers and business men – they are coming more and more to see that the continuation of the American system calls for the elimination of special privilege, the dissemination of the whole of the truth, and participation in prosperity by the people at the bottom of the ladder, as well as those in the middle and at the top. (7,168; March 23, 1938)

References as these show the ease with which Roosevelt integrated metaphorical expressions into his rhetoric, pulling his audience along who could visualize the sociopolitical issues at hand. Here are a few more instances where Roosevelt deals with important economic matters and adding emotional expressiveness to his remarks by way of the proverbial phrases:

To throw something (money) out of the window

Let us all fix that fact in our minds so that there shall be no doubt about it and so that we may have a clear and intelligent idea of what we have been doing. We have not been throwing the taxpayers' money out of the window or into the sea. We have been buying real values with it. Let me repeat: The greater part of the budgetary deficits that have been incurred have gone for permanent, tangible additions to our national wealth. (8,45; January 5, 1939)

To make a mountain out of a molehill

I want to leave the proportion between these three groups of taxes just where it is today. That means that if we reduce so-called deterrent taxes on business corporations, we must find substitute taxes to lay on business corporations. That language is as plain as an old shoe. Let me give you an example of what I call making a mountain out of a mole hill. There is a great hullabaloo for the repeal of the undistributed earnings tax. You would think that this was the principal deterrent to business today. Yet it is a simple fact that out of one billion one hundred million dollars paid to the Federal Government by corporations, less than twenty million dollars come to the Government from the undistributed earnings tax – less than two per cent of the total. (3,348-9; May 22, 1939)

Even though Roosevelt did not often rely on proverbial comparisons, his use of “As plain as an old shoe” was a fitting if somewhat drastic metaphor to let off some steam about arguments about various types of taxes.

Regarding Roosevelt's use of proverbial phrases to express his deep-rooted conviction of the utmost value of a democratic government, it might come as a surprise that he relied on the highly metaphorical expression "Not to see the forest for the trees" to bring this across to his audience. Here is first of all a personal statement that he made during his Fireside Chat of April 28, 1936, in which he argued that fear has disappeared and that the faith in the democratic form of government has been restored:

The most difficult place in the world to get a clear and open perspective of the country as a whole is Washington. [...] That is why I occasionally leave this scene of action for a few days to go fishing or back home to Hyde Park so that I can have a chance to think quietly about the country as a whole. "To get away from the trees," as they say, "and to look at the whole forest." (4,133; April 28, 1935)

As the marker "as they say" indicates, Roosevelt is perfectly aware that he is manipulating a proverbial expression here that his radio audience surely enjoyed. It is exactly such proverbial language that helped to bring his Fireside Chats closer to the hearts and minds of the American people (Braden & Brandenburg, 1955). The following passages illustrates how Roosevelt employed the proverbial expression as a metaphorical argument for people to look at the big picture of the government at work for them:

Don't you agree that it is better to work unitedly to balance national income and national outgo at a level where Government can do the things that have to be done to preserve our people and our resources [...] I keep saying, "Do not lose sight of the forest because of the trees." Let us always distinguish principles and objectives from details and mechanics. You cannot expect this Administration to alter the principles and objectives for which we have struggled for more than six years. (8,351-2; May 22, 1939)

It is noteworthy to observe how the President throws his very being into these proverbial arguments to look for the big pictures rather than getting bogged down by details.

During the years from 1939 to 1945 he spoke relentlessly to the nation, encouraging all to participate in the war effort and to make whatever sacrifices that were necessary for freedom and democracy to survive under the threats of dictatorships. And once again he found proverbial expressions to add folk language to his speeches that added a much needed humane tone to his pleas. One of them was the negative employment of "To turn back the clock", arguing that the hope in a democratic future does not allow going backwards:

Democracy has a new significance these days, for the world, whether spelled with a capital or a small "D," has merged the meaning of both. In its world-wide application, it means the defense of the great freedoms against the encroachment and attack of the dark forces of despotism which would reenslave the globe by turning back the clock of progress half a thousand years. (10,334-5; August 21, 1941)

Little wonder that Roosevelt's speeches up to the attack at Pearl Harbor are filled with statements that the United States must be forever vigilant and prepared for possible war. That was no easy task with the isolationists voicing opposition to the "war"-talk, believing that America was plenty far away from what was going on in Europe. As expected by now, he found the perfect emotive and somatic proverbial expressions to add a solid dose of folk language to his arguments:

To talk out of both sides of the mouth

There are people in this country, I am sorry to say I can't recognize any faces here, but some in this room – who are adopting a rather curious attitude, which I should say hadn't been thought through. These people say out of one side of their mouth, "No, I don't like it, I don't like dictatorship," and then out of the other side of the mouth, "Well, it's going to beat

democracy, it's going to defeat democracy, therefore I might just as well except it." Now, I don't call that good Americanism. (10,136-7; April 25, 1941)

Already a month before Pearl Harbor the President warned that sacrifices will have to be made no matter what and that people will "have to roll up their sleeves" to do so. And a year after America had entered the war, he chose a proverbial expression, this time "To tighten one's belt" to argue that the war will continue to be a hard fight of sacrifice. And yet, despite having to pay a great price, as the proverbial phrase has it, the ever-hopeful and forward-looking Roosevelt spoke of ultimate victory in due time:

The choice we have to make is this: Shall we make a full sacrifice now, produce to the limit, and deliver our products today and every day to the battlefields of the entire world? Or shall we remain satisfied with our present rate of armament output, postponing the day of real sacrifice – as did the French – until it is too late? [...] The second choice is the approach of the blind and the deluded who think that perhaps we could do business with Hitler. For them there is still "plenty of time." To be sure, many of these misled individuals honestly believe that if we should later find that we can't do business with Hitler, we will roll up our sleeves later – later – later. And their tombstones would bear the legend "Too late." (10,478-9; November 6, 1941)

You have been accustomed for many years to showing your concern for the welfare of your own neighbors through contributions to your community chest; and also we must stretch a handclasp of hope and courage across the seas. We must transform some of our new buying power into giving power as we face redoubled needs on every hand at home and abroad; and prepare to pull our belts tighter for the hard fight ahead. (11,408; October 5, 1942)

As he had already said "in plain language" in the spring of 1941, "We shall have to make sacrifices – every one of us. The final extent of those sacrifices will depend on the speed with which we act now! I must tell you tonight in plain language what this undertaking means to you – to you in your daily life" (10,64; March 15, 1941). His proverbial rhetoric was certainly a large part of this plain language with which Roosevelt communicated *par excellence* with the American people. As President, he saw his mission to maintain freedom and democracy and to keep the faith and hope for a peaceful world once again after the war. All of this he expressed, as he had done so many times before, in one of his celebrated Fireside Chats on October 12, 1942, this time integrating the proverbial expression "to pull the chestnuts out of the fire" (Dawes, 1997) with its metaphor going back to an old fable for good folkloric measure:

There are a few people in this country who, when the collapse of the Axis begins, will tell our people that we are safe once more; that we can tell the rest of the world to "stew in its own juice"; that never again will we help to pull "the other fellow's chestnuts from the fire"; that the future of civilization can jolly well take care of itself insofar as we are concerned. But it is useless to win battles if the cause for which we fight these battles is lost. It is useless to win a war unless it stays won. We, therefore, fight for the restoration and perpetuation of faith and hope and peace throughout the world. (11,425; October 12, 1942)

Animal Metaphors

It is amazing how much Roosevelt relied on traditional proverbs and proverbial phrases with animal metaphors to add colorful folk wisdom to his explanations:

No use to close the gate after the horse is gone

These bills add little to the broad authority already exercisable by the commission in this field and, in view of the recent consolidation of the utility industry under holding companies, look very much like locking the gate after the horse has been stolen. (1,253-4; April 25, 1930)

Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs

Industrialists kill the goose which lays the golden egg when they keep prices up at the expense of employment and purchasing power. Industrialists kill the goose which lays the golden egg when they cut wages and thereby reduce purchasing power. Either policy is self-defeating and suicidal. (7,64; January 25, 1938)

Don't burn down the barn to catch (get rid of) the rats

The treasurer of a company came in to see me the other day. He raised that question, both on the undistributed earnings tax and on the capital gains tax. I said, "You admit the principle?" He said, "Certainly." I said, "The principle ought to be the principle of nondiscrimination [...]." He admitted the whole thing; and then I said, "Well, do you think that I ought, because there is a tremendous agitation at the present time, to say, 'Don't burn down the barn to catch the rats'?" as you say. He said, "Certainly, there come times when you have got to forget principle." (7,268; April 21, 1938)

To shed crocodile tears

When, at the end of this famous week we are getting into, you see all the crocodile tears about the burden on our grandchildren to pay the Government debt, remember this: Our national debt after all is an internal debt owed not only by the Nation but to the Nation. If our children have to pay interest on it they will pay that interest to themselves. A reasonable internal debt will not impoverish our children or put the Nation into bankruptcy. (8,351; May 22, 1939)

In any case, Roosevelt also cited the proverb "Don't swap horses crossing a stream" with its variants "Don't swap horses in mid-stream" or "Don't switch horses in the middle of the stream" (Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder, 1992, p. 311). Most Americans associate the proverb with Abraham Lincoln, who did in fact use it on June 9, 1864, after having been asked to run for reelection: "I have not permitted myself, gentlemen, to conclude that I am the best man in the country; but I am reminded, in this connection, of a story of an old Dutch farmer, who remarked to a companion once that 'it was not best to swap horses when crossing streams'" (Mieder, 2000, pp. 34-35). In a detailed study of the proverb it has now been shown that it was already recorded in 1834, long before Lincoln's humble use of it who never claimed to have originated the popular proverb that resurfaces at every reelection campaign of American presidents (Mieder, 2008, pp. 205-225). Knowing about Roosevelt's inclination to refer to Abraham Lincoln, it comes as a surprise that while he used it during his first campaign for the presidency in 1932 (Gravlee, 1964), he never mentioned the name of the former president:

There will be many in this Nation during the coming months who will implore you not to swap horses crossing a stream; there will be others who will laughingly tell you that the appeal should have been worded, "Do not swap toboggans while you are sliding downhill." But it seems to me the more truthful, the more accurate plea to the people of the Nation should be this: "If the old car in spite of frequent emergency repairs has been bumping along downhill on only two cylinders for three long years, it is time to get another car that will start uphill on all four." (1,638-9; April 18, 1932)

Next comes the "Horseman of Delay": Emblazoned on his banner also are words of the Revelation, "And it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season." I suppose this is what the Republican leaders mean when they say, "Don't change horses while crossing the stream." What they really mean is, "Don't run the risk of crossing the stream at all." (1,832; October 25, 1932)

This paragraph is truly unique in that the President changes the traditional proverb into the innovative anti-proverb "Do not swap toboggans while you are sliding downhill." What better way to deride the Republicans than to maintain the structure of the old proverb and changing its elements to argue that their policies are leading the country economically downhill into prolonged depression. No wonder

then that Roosevelt does not mention Abraham Lincoln in this polemical campaign rhetoric. Surely, however, he would have been quite interested in such modern anti-proverbs as “Don’t change houses in mid-stream” or “Never change diapers in midstream” (Litovkina & Mieder, 2006, p. 127) as just a couple of examples of the modern inclination of changing traditional proverbs into innovative anti-proverbs to have some linguistic fun but also to create new wisdom better suited for changing times (Mieder, 2021b, pp. 1-36).

But there is another sententious remark by the President that has the makings of becoming a proverb. It has, however, not been registered in quotation or proverb dictionaries thus far. In the Internet it is Roosevelt who is credited with its original formulation and perhaps it can gain greater currency yet, preferably as the gender free variant “Nobody can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it.” Roosevelt spoke it in one of his Fireside Chats of December 29, 1940 (Ryan, 1988, p. 163), when he told his fellow citizens that there could be no appeasement with ruthless Nazi Germany and that the United States “must be the great arsenal of democracy” (9,643; December 29, 1940):

No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it

The experience of the past two years has proven beyond doubt that no nation can appease the Nazis. No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it. There can be no appeasement with ruthlessness. There can be no reasoning with an incendiary bomb. We know now that a nation can have peace with the Nazis only at the price of total surrender. (9,638; December 29, 1940)

This statement was made close to a year before Pearl Harbor, but both of these passages with their proverbial sententious remarks signal to a certain extent that the President sensed that the country would be drawn into the world war eventually.

Maritime Phrases

One thing is for certain, Roosevelt saw himself as the captain of the ship of state in the troubled waters of his time, observing already as Governor of the State of New York that the sturdiness of the “ship of state” is not tested in the proverbial calm waters: “It is not calm waters but the stress of angry seas in time of storm that tests the soundness of the construction of any ship; the Ship of State is no exception. I conceive it to be not only the duty of a State to promote the prosperity of its citizens, but to aid them in every possible way during dark days when prosperity has been succeeded by adversity” (1,100; January 7, 1930). As an experienced sailor he quite naturally relied on maritime expressions to add metaphorical color to his communications (Schmitz, 2021, pp. 1-11). He certainly relied on a number of boat related proverbial expressions to deal with the economic problems that the government was facing on behalf of the American people:

To pull one’s weight in the boat

Let us well remember that every child and indeed every person who is restored to useful citizenship is an asset to the country and is enabled “to pull his own weight in the boat.” In the long run, by helping this work we are contributing not to charity but to the building up of a sound Nation. (3,63; January 30, 1934)

To rock the boat

As I said to him [a publisher]: “You remember the attitude in those years of 1927 and 1928 and 1929, the first three-quarters of 1929. ‘Everything is lovely, boys; don’t rock the boat. Everything is fine. Everybody is making money. Look at the Stock Exchange. Everything is grand. The first thing you know we will have one chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage, if we just let everything alone’.” (6,313; July 23, 1937)

To pull on one’s oars

The forward march of Hitler and of Hitlerism can be stopped – and it will be stopped. Very simply and very bluntly – we are pledged to pull our own oars in the destruction of Hitlerism. (10,441; October 27, 1941)

To rest on one's oars

We ordinarily do not release production figures because they might give aid and comfort to the enemy. [...] While these figures give you some idea of our production accomplishments, this is no time for the American people to get overconfident. We can't rest on our oars. We need more and more, and we will make more and more. (11,29; June 25, 1942)

With this the last maritime expression “To be in the same boat” has been reached. It goes back to Cicero's classical Latin phrase “In eadem es navi” from 53 BCE that has been loan translated into many languages, making it a truly international metaphor for being in the same situation with other people. It appears but once in Roosevelt's *Public Papers* at the end of a press conference of August 25, 1942, where the President emphasized that sacrifices will have to be made ever more as the war went on:

After all, let's talk about it [wage stabilization] in a common-sense way. Suppose the cost of food were to go up 30 percent. Do you think we should keep the national wage scale down to where it is now? I don't. But, on the other hand, if you keep the cost of food down to where it is now, why should labor get an advantage? We are all in the same boat, and we are going to make some pretty tough sacrifices – on the part of everybody – before we get through. (11,343; August 25, 1942)

However, some years ago, when I worked on my article “‘We Are All in the Same Boat Now’: Proverbial Discourse in the Churchill-Roosevelt Correspondence” (Mieder, 2005b, p. 187-209), I discovered in the first of three volumes of their letters a truly amazing appearance of that proverbial expression in an exchange between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, both of whom had been involved in naval administration and thus well-versed in maritime expressions. On December 7, 1941, the exact day when Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt called Churchill to tell him about this treacherous event and to let him know that he would ask Congress to declare war against Japan the next day with Churchill agreeing to do the same. Some five years later Churchill remembered the call this way:

In two or three minutes Mr. Roosevelt came through. “Mr. President, what's this about Japan?” “It's quite true,” he replied. “They have attacked us at Pearl Harbor. We are all in the same boat now ...” I got on again and said. “This certainly simplifies things. God be with you,” or words of that effect. (Kimball, 1984, p. I, 281)

This account is corroborated by a short exchange between the two men during the following two days. After having asked Congress to declare war on December 8, 1941, stating that the attack will be remembered as “a date that will live in infamy” (10,514; December 8, 1941), Roosevelt sent the following telegram to Churchill:

The Senate passed the all-out declaration of war eighty-two to nothing, and the House has passed it three hundred eighty-eight to one. Today all of us are in the same boat with you and the people of the Empire and it is a ship which will not and cannot be sunk. (Kimball, 1984, p. I, 283)

One day later, on December 9, 1941, Churchill telegraphed back, citing the “boat”-phrase once again to express metaphorically that they are tied together against their common enemy, with Germany having declared war on the United States that day as well:

I am grateful for your telegram of December 8. Now that we are as you say “in the same boat” would it not be wise for us to have another conference. We could review the whole war plan in the light of reality and new facts, as well as the problems of production and distribution. I feel all these matters, some of which are causing me concern, can best be settled on the highest executive level. It would also be a very great pleasure to me to meet you again, and the sooner the better. (Kimball, 1984, p. I, 283-284)

Churchill, rhetorical proverbialist just as his friend Roosevelt (Mieder & Bryan, 1995; Mieder, 1997, p. 39-66), even concluded his telegram with the proverb “The sooner the better!” They and their respective countries were now joined at the hip, to employ yet another traditional phrase. There is no doubt that proverbs and proverbial expressions served them well rhetorically as they fought to bring the Second World War to a victorious end. Not knowing how to express it better, here is the last sentence of my study on this significant reliance on this universal phrase (Mieder, 2005b, p. 200): “The proverbial expression ‘to be in the same boat,’ uttered at one of the deciding moments in world history, served Roosevelt and Churchill well as the quintessential metaphor for their joint struggle, and as such is a convincing proof that the proverbial language does indeed run the whole gamut from banal cliché to sublime wisdom.”

Conclusion

As can be seen from the last page of this study in particular, it follows a narrative style to be found more in literary and folkloric approaches to paremiology than in the strictly linguistic methodology of phraseology. The purpose was to show how sententious remarks, Bible and folk proverbs, and proverbial expressions were of major importance for the effective communicative style of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As such, the study does not only deal with numerous proverbial statements but has at its scholarly heart the idea of telling a story of the tumultuous years leading up to and including the Second World War. It has to be remembered that the United States was not eager to go to war until it became clear to Roosevelt that after the attack at Pearl Harbor there was no more choice than to become part of the struggle against Japan and Nazi Germany. As president, it was Roosevelt who mobilized Americans to take up the fight, and to a large degree he succeeded by way of his energetic and engaged rhetoric, with proverbial language playing an important communicative role. Proverbs and proverbial phrases without contexts can, of course, be analyzed in various ways, but it is in contexts where they take on significant meaning. This study, then, is a story of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s important use of proverbial language to save the world for democracy – a superb example of the rhetorical prowess of proverbs before and during a decisive moment of world history.

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