

Mr. Roosevelt and the Third Term

"Resolved, That in the opinion of this house, the precedent established by Washington and other presidents of the United States in retiring from the presidential office after their second term, has become, by universal consent a part of our republican system of government, and that any departure from this time-honored custom would be unwise, unpatriotic and fraught with perils to our free institutions."

The above resolution was adopted by the house of representatives on the 15th day of December, 1875. It was offered by Mr. Springer, of Illinois, after consultation with leading friends of the principle and was carried immediately and almost unanimously, being opposed by the votes of only 18 members out of 251. It received the support and approbation of all parties. Men who quarreled bitterly upon all other political subjects were of one heart and one mind when it came to be a question whether the custom established by Washington and other presidents of retiring after their second term ought to be respected, or could be safely departed from.

So much is now being hysterically written and spoken about Roosevelt, and as he is unquestionably a candidate for a third term, it is well to calmly and dispassionately consider "the precedent established by Washington and other presidents of the United States, in retiring from the presidential office after their second term." I assume that it will be universally conceded that the safety of republican institutions requires that there should be some limit to the eligibility of the chief magistrate. The length of time or the number of terms is not of such paramount importance as that the maximum limit, whether fixed by law or regulated by custom, should be strictly observed. The custom precedent or law fixing this limit, once broken is no longer a safeguard. We are, then, without restraint upon the ambitious and unscrupulous, and life tenure is not only an easy step, but inheritance an almost certain sequence.

All history teaches: "That transgression of customary limitations was uniformly followed by destruction. Everywhere and always it was a fatal symptom of decay; the sure forerunner of ruin. When Caesar refused to lay down his consulship, as his predecessors had done, at the end of a year, and was re-elected time after time, with the acquiescence of the senate and the people, all that was real in Roman freedom ceased to exist. Two republics in France were brought to an end in the same way. Napoleon began by being consul for a term, then was elected for life, and finally became emperor with the powers of an absolute despot. The last Bonaparte was president for four years, was re-elected for ten, and ended like his uncle, by grasping the imperial crown." That two terms shall be the maximum limit of presidential eligibility is as old as the office itself. It is true that there is nothing in the constitution forbidding more than two terms, but the "two term precedent set by Washington, followed by his successors, consecrated by time, and approved by all of the public men of the country had ripened into a rule as efficient in its operation as if it had been a part of the organic law." In England every custom favoring civil liberty, once adopted by common consent, becomes binding upon prince and people. These customs make up the body of the common law, and the English constitution itself is but a collection of them.

Washington, elected and re-elected unanimously, when solicited to become a candidate for the third term, refused and retired to private life, thus setting the precedent, and the congress of 1796 thanking him in

the name of the American people for so salutary an example, said:

"For your country's sake; for the sake of republican liberty; it is our earnest wish that your example may be the guide of your successors, and thus, after being the ornament and safeguard of the present age, become the patrimony of our descendants."

Jefferson, when solicited to become a candidate for the third term, refused. In letters addressed to the legislatures of Vermont, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, he solemnly and publicly announced to the country that he would adhere to the precedent set by Washington, in retiring at the expiration of his second term. In a letter to the Vermont legislature under the date of December 10, 1807, he says: "That I should lay down my charge at a proper period is as much a duty as to have borne it faithfully. If some termination to the service of the chief magistrate be not fixed by the constitution, or supplied by practice, this office nominally for years, will in fact become for life; and history shows how easily that degenerates into an inheritance." And he in the same letter further said: "I should unwillingly be the person who, disregarding the sound precedent set by an illustrious predecessor, should furnish the first example of prolongation beyond the second term of office." Similar expressions are found scattered all through his correspondence, as long as he remained in office (until the expiration of his second term), and after he had retired to Monticello he continued to repeat his firm conviction that strict adherence to the two term precedent was the only safe principle.

This precedent of retiring from the presidential office at the expiration of the second term was adhered to by Madison, "the father of the constitution" and by Monroe, the most popular of all of our presidents, save the first. By Gen. Jackson's time the precedent of retiring at the end of the second presidential term was considered by him, and by the country at large, to be as well established and as sacred as the constitution itself. Jefferson in his autobiography says: "The example of our presidents voluntarily retiring at the end of the second term, and the progress of public opinion that the principle is salutary have given it in practice the form of a precedent and insomuch that should a president consent to be a candidate for a third election, I trust that he would be rejected on this demonstration of ambitious views." How much stronger is that example now than when Jefferson wrote his autobiography. Then it had only been set and sanctioned by four presidents, viz: Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, and our government was then only about thirty-six years of age. Now after more than 122 years of federal existence we find that the precedent has been adhered to by all of our presidents. From Washington to Grant the wisdom and the necessity of the two term rule had never been questioned. In the summer of 1875 a small coterie of selfish and unprincipled politicians began to boom Gen. Grant for a third term, but so jealous was the country then of even a suggestion of the violation of this sacred precedent that the house of representatives passed the resolution heading this article, regardless of party.

The congress of 1796 which "thanked the father of his country" for his salutary example, and the house of representatives of 1875 which deprecated a departure from that example, were both perfect mirrors of existing public opinion, and when the republican federal conven-

tion met in 1876, Gen. Grant's name was not so much as mentioned in the convention for the nomination of a third term. Again an abortive effort was made by designing politicians in the republican convention of 1880, to nominate Gen. Grant for a third term. The advocates of the third term then insisted that the precedent established by Washington and other presidents had reference to more than two consecutive terms, and that, as Gen. Grant had retired at the termination of his second term in compliance with this precedent, and another term having intervened, the precedent had no application. But the great mass of the people, as well as a large majority of the public men were wedded to the spirit of the two term rule and imbued with that principle of public morality which detests a political sham and a fraud.

Since 1880 no effort has been made to set aside the precedent established by Washington and other presidents, until now when it is urged by some that Roosevelt should have another term because, they say, he is a necessity at this particular time; that no one else can perfect the reforms that he inaugurated in his first and second terms, and which have been abandoned by his successor. There were sycophants and flatterers who told Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe the same thing; but the lofty patriotism of those great men scouted such suggestions. There were adherents of the two Bonapartes who prepared the public mind of France for their ambitious and selfish schemes by just such talk and such writings as we are hearing and reading now in this country in reference to Roosevelt for a third term. All of the talk of Roosevelt as a reformer, is the veriest fraud and sham—Roosevelt has denounced all "malefactors of great wealth," but during his two terms as president not one step was taken to regulate or control these heartless and brutal predators upon the public—Roosevelt has always had the support of the "malefactors of great wealth" as the result of corrupt deals. The Steel trust, the Sugar trust, and the great railroad and other great corporations, have been his ardent supporters, and large contributors to his campaign corruption funds. The "malefactors of great wealth" have always given their unqualified endorsement to his suggestions of reform. They thoroughly understand that his diatribes are mere bruta fulmina and only intended to mislead the people.

We are told by these "third termers" that President Roosevelt has really had only one term, for the first term was President McKinley's term, etc. This is as detestable a quibble and sham as that used by the "third terms" in 1880 in their efforts to secure the nomination for Gen. Grant for a third term.

Roosevelt was elected vice president in 1900 to become president in just such a contingency as made him president, viz: the death of President McKinley, when the remainder of the term became, under the constitution, Roosevelt's first term just as surely and as absolutely as if he had been elected president in 1900, he was elected for the second term in 1904, and another term would be his third term, and a violation of the precedent established by Washington and other presidents, just as surely as if he had been elected president in 1900, in the first instance; and that this is the opinion of Roosevelt himself is evidenced by his announcement to the American people on the night of the election in 1904, in which he said: "On the fourth of March, next, I shall have served three and a half years, and these three and a half years constitute my first term. The wise custom which limits a president to two terms regards the substance and not

the form, and under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." But why should any one expect Roosevelt to be bound by this announcement, or have any respect for a tradition or

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