The Conditions of Success

An Address at the Cambridge Union,
May 26, 1910

Mr. President and gentlemen, it is a very great pleasure for me to be here to-day and to address you and to wear what the Secretary

The Cambridge Union is the home of the well-known debating society of the undergraduates of Cambridge University. To the Vice-President, a member of Emmanuel College, the college of John Harvard who founded Harvard University, was appropriately assigned the duty of proposing the resolution admitting Mr. Roosevelt to honorary membership in the Union Society. In supporting the resolution the Vice-President referred to the peculiar relation which unites the English Cambridge and the American Cambridge in a common bond and touched upon Mr. Roosevelt's African exploits by jocosely expressing anxiety for the safety of "the crest of my own college, the Emmanuel Lion, which I see before me well within range." There had just appeared in Punch, at the time of Mr. Roosevelt's arrival in England, a full-page cartoon showing the lions of the Nelson Monument in Trafalgar Square guarded by policemen and protected by a placard announcing that "these lions are not to be shot." The Secretary, in seconding the resolution, humorously alluded to the doctor's gown, hood, and
has called the gilded trappings which show that I am one of the youngest living graduates of Cambridge. Something in the nature of a tract was handed to me before I came up here. It was an issue of the Gownsman [holding up, amid laughter, a copy of an undergraduate publication] with a poem portraying the poet's natural anxiety lest I should preach at him. Allow me to interpose an anecdote taken from your own hunting field. A one-time Master of Foxhounds strongly objected to the presence of a rather near-sighted and very hard-riding friend who at times insisted on riding in the middle of the pack; and on one occasion he earnestly addressed him as follows: "Mr. So and So, would you mind looking at those two dogs, Ploughboy and Melody. They are very valuable, and I really wish you would not jump on them." To which his friend replied, with great courtesy: "My dear sir, I should be delighted to oblige you, but unfortunately I have left my glasses at home, and I am afraid they must take their chance." I will promise to preach as little as I can, but you must take your chance, for cap, in which Mr. Roosevelt received his degree, as a possible example of what America sometimes regards as the gilded trappings of a feudal and reactionary Europe.

—L. F. A.
it is impossible to break the bad habit of a lifetime at the bidding of a comparative stranger. I was deeply touched by the allusion to the lion and the coat-of-arms. Before I reached London I was given to understand that it was expected that when I walked through Trafalgar Square, I should look the other way as I passed the lions.

Now I thank you very much for having made me an honorary member. Harvard men feel peculiarly at home when they come to Cambridge. We feel we are in the domain of our spiritual forefathers, and I doubt if you yourselves can appreciate what it is to walk about the courts, to see your buildings, and your pictures and statues of the innumerable men whose names we know so well, and who have been brought closer to us by what we see here. That would apply not alone to men of the past. The Bishop of Ely to you is the Bishop of to-day; but I felt like asking him when I met him this morning, "Where is Hereward the Wake?"

It gives an American university man a peculiar feeling to come here and see so much that tells of the ancient history of the University.

The tie between Harvard and Cambridge has always been kept up. I remember when
you sent over Mr. Lehmann to teach us how to row. He found us rather refractory pupils, I am afraid. In the course of the struggle, the captain of the Harvard crew was eliminated. He afterwards came down to Cuba and was one of the very best captains in my regiment. At that time, however, he was still too close to his college days—he was separated from them only by about two weeks when he joined me—to appreciate what I endeavored to instil into him, that while winning a boat-race was all very well, to take part in a victorious fight, in a real battle, was a good deal better. Sport is a fine thing as a pastime, and indeed it is more than a mere pastime; but it is a very poor business if it is permitted to become the one serious occupation of life.

One of the things I wish we could learn from you is how to make the game of football a rather less homicidal pastime. (Laughter.) I do not wish to speak as a mere sentimentalist; but I do not think that killing should be a normal accompaniment of the game, and while we develop our football from Rugby, I wish we could go back and undevelop it, and get it nearer your game. I am not qualified to speak as an expert on the subject, but I wish we could make it more open and eliminate
some features that certainly tend to add to the danger of the game as it is played in America now. On the Pacific slope we have been going back to your type of Rugby football. I would not have football abolished for anything, but I want to have it changed, just because I want to draw the teeth of the men who always clamor for the abolition of any manly game. I wish to deprive those whom I put in the mollycoddle class, of any argument against good sport. I thoroughly believe in sport, but I think it is a great mistake if it is made anything like a profession, or carried on in a way that gives just cause for fault-finding and complaint among people whose objection is not really to the defects, but to the sport itself.

Now I am going to disregard your poet and preach to you for just one moment, but I will make it as little obnoxious as possible. (Laughter.) The Secretary spoke of me as if I were an athlete. I am not, and never have been one, although I have always been very fond of outdoor amusement and exercise. There was, however, in my class at Harvard, one real athlete who is now in public life. I made him Secretary of State, or what you call Minister of Foreign Affairs, and he is
now Ambassador in Paris. If I catch your terminology straight, he would correspond to your triple blue. He was captain of the football eleven, played on the base-ball team, and rowed in the crew, and in addition to that he was champion heavy-weight boxer and wrestler, and won the 220-yard dash. His son was captain of the Harvard University crew that came over here and was beaten by Oxford two years ago. [Voices: "Cambridge."] Well, I never took a great interest in defeats. (Loud laughter and applause.) Now, as I said before, I never was an athlete, although I have always led an outdoor life, and have accomplished something in it, simply because my theory is that almost any man can do a great deal, if he will, by getting the utmost possible service out of the qualities that he actually possesses.

There are two kinds of success. One is the very rare kind that comes to the man who has the power to do what no one else has the power to do. That is genius. I am not discussing what form that genius takes; whether it is the genius of a man who can write a poem that no one else can write, The Ode on a Grecian Urn, for example, or Helen, thy beauty is to me; or of a man who can do 100
yards in nine and three-fifths seconds. Such a man does what no one else can do. Only a very limited amount of the success of life comes to persons possessing genius. The average man who is successful,—the average statesman, the average public servant, the average soldier, who wins what we call great success—is not a genius. He is a man who has merely the ordinary qualities that he shares with his fellows, but who has developed those ordinary qualities to a more than ordinary degree.

Take such a thing as hunting or any form of vigorous bodily exercise. Most men can ride hard if they choose. Almost any man can kill a lion if he will exercise a little resolution in training the qualities that will enable him to do it. [Taking a tumbler from the table, Mr. Roosevelt held it up.] Now it is a pretty easy thing to aim straight at an object about that size. Almost any one, if he practises with the rifle at all, can learn to hit that tumbler; and he can hit the lion all right if he learns to shoot as straight at its brain or heart as at the tumbler. He does not have to possess any extraordinary capacity, not a bit,—all he has to do is to develop certain rather ordinary qualities, but develop them to
such a degree that he will not get flustered, so that he will press the trigger steadily instead of jerking it—and then he will shoot at the lion as well as he will at that tumbler. It is a perfectly simple quality to develop. You don’t need any remarkable skill; all you need is to possess ordinary qualities, but to develop them to a more than ordinary degree.

It is just the same with the soldier. What is needed is that the man as soldier should develop certain qualities that have been known for thousands of years, but develop them to such a point that in an emergency he does, as a matter of course, what a great multitude of men can do but what a very large proportion of them don’t do. And in making the appeal to the soldier, if you want to get out of him the stuff that is in him, you will have to use phrases which the intellectual gentlemen who do not fight will say are platitudes. (Laughter and applause.)

It is just so in public life. It is not genius, it is not extraordinary subtlety, or acuteness of intellect, that is important. The things that are important are the rather commonplace, the rather humdrum, virtues that in their sum are designated as character. If you have in public life men of good ability, not geniuses, but
men of good abilities, with character,—and, gentlemen, you must include as one of the most important elements of character commonsense—if you possess such men, the Government will go on very well.

I have spoken only of the great successes; but what I have said applies just as much to the success that is within the reach of almost every one of us. I think that any man who has had what is regarded in the world as a great success must realize that the element of chance has played a great part in it. Of course a man has to take advantage of his opportunities; but the opportunities have to come. If there is not the war, you don't get the great general; if there is not a great occasion you don't get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of peace no one would have known his name now. The great crisis must come, or no man has the chance to develop great qualities.

There are exceptional cases, of course, where there is a man who can do just one thing, such as a man who can play a dozen games of chess or juggle with four rows of figures at once—and as a rule he can do nothing else. A man of this type can do nothing unless in the one crisis for which his powers fit him. But
normally the man who makes the great success when the emergency arises is the man who would have made a fair success in any event. I believe that the man who is really happy in a great position—in what we call a career—is the man who would also be happy and regard his life as successful if he had never been thrown into that position. If a man lives a decent life and does his work fairly and squarely so that those dependent on him and attached to him are better for his having lived, then he is a success, and he deserves to feel that he has done his duty and he deserves to be treated by those who have had greater success as nevertheless having shown the fundamental qualities that entitle him to respect. We have in the United States an organization composed of the men who forty-five years ago fought to a finish the great Civil War. One thing that has always appealed to me in that organization is that all of the men admitted are on a perfect equality provided the records show that their duty was well done. Whether a man served as a lieutenant-general or an eighteen-year-old recruit, so long as he was able to serve for six months and did his duty in his appointed place, then he is called Comrade and stands on an exact equality with
the other men. The same principle should shape our associations in ordinary civil life.

I am not speaking cant to you. I remember once sitting at a table with six or eight other public officials, and each was explaining how he regarded being in public life, how only the sternest sense of duty prevented him from resigning his office, and how the strain of working for a thankless constituency was telling upon him, and nothing but the fact that he felt he ought to sacrifice his comfort to the welfare of his country kept him in the arduous life of statesmanship. It went round the table until it came to my turn. This was during my first term of office as President of the United States. I said: "Now, gentlemen, I do not wish there to be any misunderstanding. I like my job, and I want to keep it for four years longer." (Loud laughter and applause.) I don't think any President ever enjoyed himself more than I did. Moreover, I don't think any ex-President ever enjoyed himself more. I have enjoyed my life and my work because I thoroughly believe that success—the real success—does not depend upon the position you hold, but upon how you carry yourself in that position. There is no man here
to-day who has not the chance so to shape his life after he leaves this university that he shall have the right to feel, when his life ends, that he has made a real success of it; and his making a real success of it does not in the least depend upon the prominence of the position he holds. Gentlemen, I thank you, and I am glad I have violated the poet's hope and have preached to you.