

A Few Words, Mr. President:
An Open Letter to Theodore Roosevelt
(April 15, 1906)

Dear Mr. President:—

The address delivered by you yesterday at the cornerstone ceremony at Washington¹ has been carefully read and among other things I observe the following :

We can no more and no less afford to condone evil in a man of capital than evil in a man of no capital. The wealthy man who exults because there is a failure of justice in the effort to bring some trust magnate to an account for his misdeeds is as bad, and no worse than, the so-called labor leader who clamorously strives to excite a foul class feeling on behalf of some other labor leader who is implicated in murder.

Obviously you have reference in this paragraph to the leaders of labor in Colorado who were recently seized without warrant of law, forcibly taken from the state of which they are citizens, and incarcerated in the penitentiary of another state in which only convicted criminals are confined. I know of no other labor leaders to whom these remarks could apply, and it seems equally plain that I am one of the “so-called” leaders, if not the particular one, who is “striving to excite a foul class feeling in their behalf.”²

Permit me to ask you, Mr. President, how you know that these men are implicated in murder? Have they been tried and found guilty by due process of law?

Since when, Mr. President, are men charged with crime presumed and pronounced guilty until they are found innocent?

It is true that you do not name these men, but convict them by innuendo. Is this fair? Is it just? A square deal? Is it not, in fact, Mr. President, cowardly to take such an advantage of your high office to pronounce the guilt of three of your fellow citizens, who have as yet not been tried and against whom nothing has been proved?

These men, Mr. President, are workingmen; do you know of any capitalists who have ever been treated in the same way?

Suppose a lot of thugs were to seize a number of capitalists at the hour of midnight, put them in irons, hustle them aboard a special train, rush them into another state, and throw them into the penitentiary. Would you take the same view of the case, coolly pronounce their guilt and proceed to deliver your homily upon good citizenship, the “square deal,” and law and order?

If instead of Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone it had been Depew, Platt, and Paul Morton — that is to say, if instead of innocent workingmen they had been criminal capitalists — would you have treated them in precisely the same manner?

You have told us over and over again, Mr. President, that rich and poor should be treated alike; that all are entitled to the equal protection of the law. That is what you say in substance in the paragraph above quoted. You have repeated this so often that it has become a stale platitude. You have also repeatedly stated that profession without practice is dishonest and hypocritical.

Very well, Mr. President, we will take you at your word; we will judge you by your acts.

I shall not now address myself to you as a “so-called” labor leader, but as your fellow citizen of the United States.

You, Mr. President, are the chief executive of the nation. You are the conservator of the constitution of the United States and you have publicly sworn to support it.

Three citizens have been forcibly seized and deported from the state of their residence into another state in flagrant violation of the constitution of the United States. These men now languish in prison cells.

Let me repeat the charge, Mr. President, without detail. Three citizens of the republic have been deprived of the protection vouchsafed to them under the constitution of the United States. This fact is known of all men; denied by none, not even their accusers. There is not a shadow of doubt about it. It is a clear-cut case. All the country knows it. You, Mr. President, know it. Now, then what are you going to do about it?

Will you make your acts square with your words; your practice with your profession?

It is up to you, Mr. President! You are reputed to have great moral courage and you certainly have great power. Under the constitution, the one that has been violated, the one you have sworn to support, you have the power to redress the wrong that has been done. Will you do it?

All that I am asking is that you shall perform your sworn duty; you are not expected to do more, and you cannot do less without violating your oath of office and betraying your official trust.

If you do not believe, Mr. President, that the constitution has been violated, or, if you have the least doubt about it, please call upon me to prove it.

I am not now handling a “muck-rake;” not looking down, but up — up to you and awaiting your answer.

You are perhaps aware, Mr. President, that some of us are accused of advocating violence. It is not true. As a matter of fact we are resisting violence. In your address yesterday you quoted the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal!”³ Let me quote another, “Thou shalt not kill.”⁴ This is precisely what we are trying to prevent, not lawful punishment, but cold-blooded murder.

In treating with Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone, our comrades, every law and all decency have been trampled under foot. The state in which these men have been stripped of their legal rights and treated as felons is notoriously in control of corporations whose absolute sway has been questioned by these leaders of the working class; and this, and this alone, constitutes their crime, and for this they have been marked for corporate vengeance.

These men, Mr. President, are our comrades, our brothers, and we propose to stand by them and see that justice is done them.

A fair trial will free and vindicate them as certain as the sun shines.

Knowing them as we do to be men of pure character, of absolute integrity and all other things of good report among men, we know that they are wholly incapable of committing the crime with which they have been charged.

It is not pretended that they were in the same state at the time the crime was committed. Not a shadow of crime rests upon them other than the alleged confession of a self-confessed criminal.

These are facts, Mr. President, and in view of these facts we would be craven indeed if we allowed our brothers to be made the victims of such an infamous conspiracy without doing all in our power to save them.

Every step thus far taken against these men has been in violation of law, and the purpose of the whole proceeding is so apparent that any man with eyes can see it.

In this connection, Mr. President, when the question of law and order is raised, I beg of you to remember that we are dealing with corporations that have usurped the powers of state governments; that defy the legally expressed will of the people, as in Colorado, where a majority of 46,000 votes was overridden and treated with contempt; corporations whose crime-inciting shibboleths are: "To hell with the constitution;" "To hell with habeas corpus."

These corporations rule the states and we have had evidence enough to know how they treat law when it interferes with their predatory program.

We are not in favor of violence, but seeking to avoid it. The facts prove it.

We are not objecting to a fair trial, but to a packed jury and a corporation court and the consummation of a criminal conspiracy.

"Thou shalt not kill!" This applies to capitalists as well as workingmen.

If Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone were capitalists instead of workingmen we should still do our utmost to see that they were given a "square deal."

Murder in any form is abhorrent, but most terribly so when committed under the forms and in the names of law and justice.

Wendell Phillips⁵ said that John Brown would have had twice as good a right to hang Governor Wise⁶ as Governor Wise had to hang John Brown.

All we are asking and insisting upon is that our accused brothers shall have the protection of the law, a fair hearing and just verdict, and upon that issue we are prepared to go before the American people.

Respectfully yours,

E. V. Debs

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¹ Roosevelt spoke in the plaza between the Library of Congress and the US capitol building on April 14, 1906, at a ceremony held for the laying of the foundation stone of a new office building for the House of Representatives. This was the speech in which Roosevelt

quoted from the book *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan in reference to the "man with the muck-rake," thereby helping to coin the term "muckraker" for the progressive journalism of his era.

² Reference by Roosevelt is apparently to Debs's sensational "Arouse, Ye Slaves!" article of the previous month — a piece which caused the *Appeal to Reason* to be banned from the mails in Canada.

³ *Exodus* 20:15, *Deuteronomy* 5:19.

⁴ *Exodus* 20:13, *Deuteronomy* 5:17.

⁵ Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) was an 1833 graduate of Harvard Law School that was converted to the abolitionist cause in 1836. Phillips was a renowned public orator and one of the most effective anti-slavery advocates of his day.

⁶ Henry A. Wise (1806-1876), a lawyer from Richmond, was the governor of Virginia who signed the death warrant for abolitionist revolutionary John Brown in 1859. During the Civil War Wise was a brigadier general in the army of the Confederate States of America.