

Speeches of Robert M. La Follette

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WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
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Speech - "The Greatest Issue of the Day"

Transcribed version of "The Greatest Issue of the Day", Milwaukee.
Lizzie Black Kandarr Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society.

Ever since the fateful Friday of January 17th when I received notice from the Entertainment Committee of the Literary and Social Life, to be prepared with a 10 minutes 'talk' on the Greatest issue of the day; My mind has been in a constant whirl as to what that vital question really is.

Thinks I to myself, this Society is clamoring for a Correct Solution and the speedy settlement of the Armenian Troubles. Well – They can't that out of me! And then, before I had time for further reflection, Venuella, with her great long arms outstretched came dancing before my mind – imploring me in her most persuasive tones, to try and help her gain her rights. Sorry for you, Venuella, not to-night! Can't possibly expect me to settle that important 'boundary line,' in 10 short minutes, when I myself and every member present has done nothing else but fret and worry about it for the past two months.

Next came gallant struggling Cuba, offering me any and every inducement if I could only help liberate her!

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Mrs. Minona Phipps – scared me most to death by saying I would not be doing my duty to my country, to my children, if I advanced any other cause but that of Woman's Suffrage. And so we came to a mutual understanding and We? decided that the Greatest issue of the day was The New Woman.

You'd do me the greatest kind of a favor if you'd tell them that I had her almost ready for presentation to the society, this evening.- But an incident occurred which changed the whole current of my thoughts.

It was downtown in one of our large furniture stores. The massive front door was gently opened and as mall lad of about 12 years, with dark complexion, and bright but rather dirty face, with unmistakable Hebrew features, carrying on his arm a great long basket, timidly approached the proprietor and with a genuine business air, offered his matches for sale cheap! He attracted the attention of everyone within hearing and the merchant, more pleased with the good salesmanship of the little fellow, than the quality of his wares immediately bought 25 cts worth.

I followed the lad, asked him his name and address and why he did not go to school? He explained the necessity of his having to help support the family. His father was sick, a sister 14 years old, Had never gone to school was doing the housework and taking care of the children, while his mother was occupied all day, tending a fruit stand at the market.

Having had my attention drawn to numerous similar cases of late, my mind became so absorbed in them, that all other thoughts sank into oblivion, and I resolved then and there that I would submit to you the welfare and happiness of the Little Russian Refugees, Knowing that their education and enlightenment is to us the most vital the Greatest issue of the Day.

We must be careful lest history again repeats itself and the outcome of all these religious wars, again culminate in persecution of the Jews. Just because we are Jews, our lives and actions must be above reproach. We must be more honorable, more straightforward than any other nationality.

We must try and uplift our downtrodden and unfortunate brethren, not alone for their own sakes and for that of humanity but for the protection and reputation of our own nationality.

Their misdeeds reflect directly on us and every one of us individually ought to do all in his power, to help lay the foundation of good citizenship in them.

What wonderful strength of character, have these people displayed, when in spite of the hardships heaped upon them, in spite of the oppressions – many of them have surmounted all obstacles and getting along nicely.

The wonderful transition which often takes place in a comparatively short time, is enough to arouse the admiration and wonder of the whole enlightened world; often creating jealousy and hatred in such narrow minded and bigoted relics of the middle ages as are now trying to engender prejudice against the whole Hebrew Race.

Tradition has painted us as proverbial for our skill in money making. I consider this a proud distinction. Who can afford to belittle money. Money is power is necessary for the advancement of civilization, art and science. I do not doubt that through energy and industry, all of those bright little Russians, who have sought refuge in our midst, will in time – be well-to-do.

What I fear most is their ignorance! If we allow things to go on as they are their education will not keep pace with their worldly advancement. And here is where the mischief lies. The fact of it is, they are anxious to learn; but the opportunities are denied them. Can't we help them out of this difficulty? Can't we open up an evening school here where the foundation of their education can be made, the English language taught?

A school of this description was conducted here several years ago, with elegant results, why did we allow it to discontinue? Let us arouse ourselves and our citizens to the seriousness of the situation; to the necessity of immediate action.

Let us all join hands and promise that we will encourage and help this and all other movements towards their educational advancement and you can rest assured, we will gain the respect of the community, and be more than repaid for our time and trouble and the coming generation will be only too glad (proud) to acknowledge their relationship to 'The Little Russian Refugee.

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