

Address to the Roosevelt Institute, November 12, 2004

Chancellor Robert L. King

It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to address this distinguished organization. And I'm especially pleased that SUNY will be a part of the Roosevelt Institute's series of educational conferences on New York's Governors.

There is – as many of you have said – a strong and inseparable relationship between the history of New York State and the history of America.

The story of that relationship is a fascinating one, but I think it becomes more fascinating, and more revealing, when it is told from the biographical perspective of New York's governors.

Most of you here are prominent historians, so I will be careful to avoid any pronouncements about New York or SUNY that could be considered, at best, hyperbole, or, if you're really paying attention, just plain wrong.

But I think it is accurate to say that no state in America has influenced the direction of our nation more than New York, and, by extension, New York's Governors.

I am speaking of the cumulative influence of course; I'm not suggesting that New York or any state could claim prominence over Virginia or Illinois when it comes to the producing great leaders who ultimately shaped the America's destiny.

Over the course of two-and-a-half centuries, there are certainly pockets of time that when that was not the case. America's forefathers were not from New York. In fact, New York's ultimate prominence in the 20th and 21st Centuries was as foreign a concept to the as the concept of Wyoming leading America into the 23rd Century is to you and I.

There is a totality of influence that should to be taken into account. It's not just that four of New York's Governors went on to become President – or that two of the four -- TR and FDR -- are on every historian's very short list of America's greatest leaders.

Certainly that's part of it. But New York's influence upon the rest of the nation goes far beyond its contribution of two of its greatest presidents. New York, with the State Capitol as its staging point, produced many great leaders who never became president, yet still colored our national history in lasting ways.

Nelson Rockefeller comes to mind... so does Alfred E. Smith, Thomas Dewey and Dewitt Clinton, and – I think time will tell – our current Governor, as well as his predecessor, Mario Cuomo. In fact, it was Cuomo's decision not to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 effectively gift-wrapped the election for Ronald Reagan.

And even though Governor Dewey suffered one the greatest presidential upsets in history, he continued to influence the times as the nation's great crime fighter.... much in

the same way that Rudy Giuliani still does today...

...Or Alfred E. Smith, a bold reformer who restructured state government, reduced the number of elected officials statewide, and centralized the budget process – a move that was mirrored around the country.

Clinton DeWitt opened up a new frontier, connecting the Great Lakes System with the Atlantic Ocean. He was mocked by the public and his peers for thinking the Erie Canal could actually be built. Those who complained about “Clinton’s Ditch” didn’t have the capacity to imagine something they’d never taken the time to contemplate. And, more than anything else, I think having a grand vision is a trait that has been always been inherent in the men who served as Governor in New York.

And, of course, the nation is well-acquainted with the events that shaped the two Roosevelt presidencies. But what about the events that shaped the Roosevelt’s themselves?

Unless we believe they instantaneously became great leaders upon taking the oath of office, its clear to me that there’s an important story that began in Albany -- a largely untold story about some of the men who shaped our nation’s history.

After all, with Washington and Lincoln, history reaches all the way back to childhood, cherry trees and pennies looking for clues into the greatness of these men. With the Roosevelt’s, it should at least reach back for years.

As you all know, it was the signature of Governor Thomas E. Dewey, in 1948, that created State University of New York. Prior to that, New York’s public system of higher education wasn’t a system it all. It consisted of 32 totally unrelated public institutions, with a combined population of 27,000 students.

Dewey’s signature brought all of those schools and students together, into a single entity, with a common purpose and a shared set of principles.

And in the 56 years since, the number of SUNY campuses has doubled – from 32 to 64. And the number of students has gone from 27,000 to more than 413,000.

But in the nearly six decades since the unification of these campuses took place, one principle has always remained the same.... and it is a principle that is consistent with original Dewey’s vision of creating a single statewide system of higher education.

A united system of higher education always made sense to me, but it wasn’t until I became Chancellor that I truly understood why. SUNY’s campuses, its students and its faculty members – as part of the combined, united entity that Governor Dewey envisioned and created – all seem to play off of one another’s strengths... in a way that has consistently raised the bar of expectations and overall performance.

The disparate entities of SUNY seem to rise up with one another, and it's not the result of competition among the campuses. It's actually the opposite of competition. It's an ambitious, curious and intellectual synergy that is contagious among our 64 campuses.

Perhaps you're wondering when I will stop selling SUNY and draw a link between SUNY and the big moments of American history. I don't know that I can. I'm not even sure that doing so proves anything.

Whittier College is a good school but sharing space with that fine institution upon the mantle of national influence is not necessarily something that SUNY is trying to achieve.

However, it is reasonably accurate to say the following: SUNY was, in fact, created by a Governor who became President of the United States -- but only for about half a day, and only in the city of Chicago. *[Note: Chicago Tribune Headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman!"]*

At SUNY, we take the strictly bi-partisan view that -- whether it was FDR or TR -- Governor Dewey or Governor Pataki -- New York's influence upon our nation has always been a positive one because it did, and does, inject New York's principles into the national discussion.

In many cases, the historical impact these Governors had on America will remain subjective, and un-judged by history -- which is all the more reason to examine their lives for our own understanding.

SUNY should, and will, be at the forefront of the effort to promote the impact that New York's Chief Executives have had upon the direction of this great Republic. We look forward to working with you.

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