

Messages for Democrats (August 1940)

*John Q. Barrett**

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In August 1940, Attorney General Robert H. Jackson traveled from Washington, D.C., to his home region of northwestern Pennsylvania and southwestern New York State.

Attorney General Jackson's work at that time was filled with major policy issues. Perhaps most pressing were questions about how the United States, which was not involved in the European war and which was constrained by neutrality and other laws, could provide military assistance to the United Kingdom, which since June had been standing alone against Nazi Germany, conqueror of the European continent. Jackson's other legal issues and projects included criminal law enforcement, intelligence-gathering about potential national security threats, accelerating U.S. military production, and a legislative push for resumption of a military draft.

Summer 1940 also was a hot national political season. In June, the Republican Party nominated lawyer Wendell Willkie—a former Democrat—as its presidential candidate. In July, the Democrats nominated President Franklin D. Roosevelt; after reluctance early in the year (which produced much presidential speculation focused on Robert Jackson) and then months of silence, the President accepted a Democratic convention “draft” and nomination for a third term. On August 17, Willkie delivered, at the Elwood, Indiana, high school from which he had graduated, his formal speech accepting the Republican nomination.

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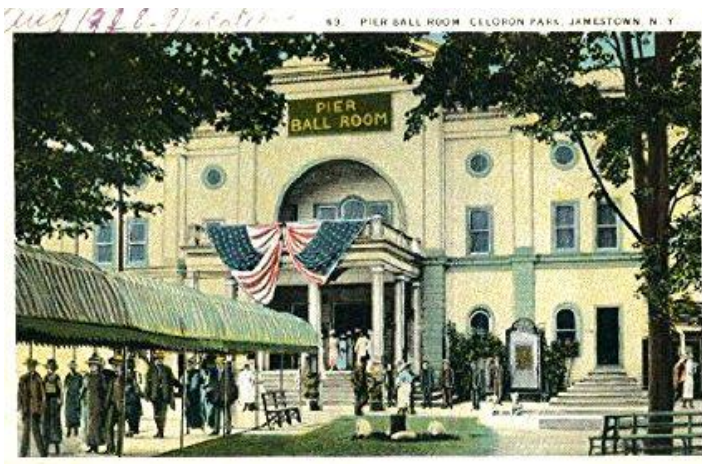
By that date, Jackson was on vacation, spending time with his wife and grown children and also visiting with many old friends. On August 17, for example, he was part of a group that camped and cooked steaks in the woods of Spring Creek, Pennsylvania, his birthplace. They listened to Willkie's speech on a car radio. Some Republicans in the group found it uninspiring and were dismayed.

Jackson hoped to stay away from Washington through the end of August. He made plans, including to speak to local Democrats.

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On Sunday, August 25, 1940, Chautauqua County's Democrats met for what was supposed to be their 5th annual field day, picnic and rally at Celoron Park, a beautiful spot, just outside Jamestown, on the shore of Chautauqua Lake.

Alas, the day was cold and rainy. So after an outdoor performance by the Jamestown Concert Band, the group went inside the Pier Ball Room, a large lakeside building for a program of political speeches. The speakers included New York State Supreme Court Justice Charles S. Desmond of Buffalo, Jamestown's Democratic chairman, a city councilman, Chautauqua County's treasurer, and the County clerk.¹



¹ See *Democrats Hold Rally At Celoron Ballroom Despite Bad Weather*, JAMESTOWN EVENING JOURNAL, Aug. 26, 1940, at 7.

Attorney General Jackson, who was scheduled to be the principal speaker, was absent—he had been called back to Washington to meet with the President and work on pressing matters.

Jackson did send a written message—a short, very political, probably amusing-to-its-audience composition. Jackson's son William, then age 21 and going into his senior year at Yale College, read these greetings to the crowd:

Fellow Democrats of Chautauqua County,

My long-standing habit of being with you at this annual outing will apparently be interrupted this year. Perhaps it is just as well, for while I should enjoy being with the Democrats, I find it very hard to hit my forlorn Republican neighbors with the usual vigor this year.

My old stand-pat Republican friends now have to choose between two Democrats and have no Republican for whom to vote. The once-proud G.O.P. which has so long ruled our up-state has been unable to produce a leader of its own faith. Of course, that ends the Republican Party as an independent force in national affairs. It is really in receivership.

This is a tough spot for my old and good friends with whom I have so often differed about politics. Think of my friend Brewer Phillips, who for so many years has been the keeper of the Republican cash box, now being asked to raise money to elect a Democrat. I really think at your picnic you should pass the hat and repay Oscar Lenna, Gust Lawson and Karle Hultquist for the cost of their trip to Elwood, when all they got out of it was to see a Democratic take over what was left of the G.O.P.

I never dreamed the time would come when the [*Jamestown*] *Post* and The [*Jamestown Evening*]

Journal would be whooping it up for a Democrat. Even the leaders of the Manufacturer's Association and the Chambers of Commerce, so long terrified at the thought of a Democratic administration, have now given up hope except to change one kind of Democrat for another.

To say much about the Republicans now seems too much like kicking a man who is down. In June they lost their party to a Democrat, and in November they will lose the election to another and better one. And meanwhile, it is my guess that the Democrat now working within the Republican Party will do more to leave it a permanently split, wrecked and derelict party than all of us have done in a generation by working against it.

Equally tragic with the Republican lack of a candidate of their own is the lack of any issue of their own. It is the lack of real issues which makes the campaign threaten to degenerate into one of personalities. The [Willkie] acceptance speech at Elwood was, as has been appropriately said, half devoted to adopting the New Deal and the other half to claiming that it would cause ruin. A campaign can start in two opposite directions, but it cannot finish that way and I suppose in the course of time we will learn which direction the Republican nominee is going to take.

Until we can learn that, we are pretty much confined to an exposition of our own position, and that is a matter of record. Not only the country but the world has come to know that the outstanding world statesman today, who believes in democracy and free government and is trying to make it secure and workable, is President Roosevelt. In an hour of doubt in world affairs like the present one, it will not exchange the certainties of a tried and experienced president for one whose real views and capabilities are little known outside of the field of high finance.

With all good wishes and regrets that I cannot
be with you, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Robert H. Jackson²

Bill Jackson, who at Yale was vice chairman of the *Daily News* and a prolific, gifted writer, was working that summer in Chautauqua County as editor of the *Chautauquan Daily* newspaper at Chautauqua Institution. On that Sunday, Bill Jackson, after reading his father's message, delivered his own speech—a generational perspective—to the Ball Room crowd. His speech included the following points:

I stand before you Democrats today as one of those many young American who will cast their ballot for the first time in November.

I am glad to speak at this meeting, because I believe that it is right for young people to take not only an interest, but a participation in political activity. And I don't believe this should consist of making up their minds on the basis of what someone has called "the bedfellow theory" of politics, which holds that it doesn't matter so much whether you are right or wrong, as who is on your side. In an overwhelmingly Republican community like Jamestown, you Democrats are used to standing alone for your principles, and for the last eight years you have had the satisfaction of seeing those principles put into practice.

As a first voter, I stand for our President Franklin Roosevelt and I have reasons—three big ones—for doing so: One, National defense; two, the Republican candidate's ideas; and three, the New Deal record.

² *Id.*

(1) National defense. The question here is simply, who is better equipped to defend this nation, Mr. Roosevelt or Mr. Willkie?

(2) As to Mr. Willkie's ideas: The local newspapers, distinguished for years of unmitigated [political] bigotry, and most of the press of the country, have long ballyhooed the Man from Elwood as the savior of democracy. We Democrats are no longer disturbed by the fact that the press always makes it out that whatever the President does is wrong, and whatever an opponent of the President does is right. Don't forget that in 1936 we beat not only the Republicans, but 80 percent of the newspapers of the country as well.

(3) In contrast to this image of confusion—the man for whom Wall Street bought the nomination, the man who now expects the people to give him the election—you know where Franklin Roosevelt stands. Despite the acrimony and the smear that will increase as the weeks go on, you will still have the record of the New Deal to go on.³

* * *

The heavy politicking of this moment was not one-sided. As Chautauqua County's Democrats were meeting in the Pier Ball Room, its Republicans rallied at the Masonic Temple. They heard passionate speeches by many Willkie enthusiasts.⁴

Robert Jackson, in Washington, was too busy to pay much attention. He was working intensely with President Roosevelt, with Department of Justice colleagues, and with other executive branch officials—including Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, perhaps the era's grandest member of the G.O.P.—on what became the U.S.-U.K. Destroyer Deal.

³ *Id.*

⁴ See *Review of News (Local)*, JAMESTOWN EVENING JOURNAL, Aug. 31, 1940, at 14.