

The Delray Democrat

The Second Bill of Rights¹

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“[T]rue individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free men.’ People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The language, sentiment, and concerns sound quaint in the age of Donald Trump, and so they should. They were given [voice](#) more than 80 years ago by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They were prescient but largely ignored for the last half-century. We are paying the price today.

The occasion was the last State of the Union address given by FDR. A transcript of the relevant part of his address is available [here](#) and a film of him reading it from the White House can be viewed by clicking on the still shot below..



FDR Second Bill of Rights (restored)

As FDR looked toward the end of World War II and a period of prosperity for America, he cautioned Congress :

We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people—whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth- is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure.

Roosevelt proposed a *second* Bill of Rights, one that would ensure no American would be hungry or homeless or insecure.

He explained that “*life and liberty*” were protected by our original Bill of Rights but that a second Bill of Rights was needed to guarantee “*equality in the pursuit of happiness*.”

Some of the rights imagined by his Second Bill of Rights were included in bills passed under

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), April 2025, page 9.

FDR's New Deal, or example, Social Security pensions, unemployment insurance, and minimum wage laws, and FDR lived to see a GI Bill that guaranteed World War II veterans funds for college and housing.

The remainder were never enacted or only partly enacted, however. They include rights that citizens of other industrialized countries already enjoy, such as free universal medical care, free or highly subsidized education, and retirement benefits [that greatly exceed](#) those provided by Social Security.

The substantive rights that do exist in America result from [legislation](#) passed by Democrats. Republicans [denounced](#) Social Security as socialism that would “enslave workers” and “prevent business recovery.” Ronald Reagan infamously [warned](#) that if Medicare were enacted, we would all spend our “sunset years telling our children, and our children’s children, what it once was like in America when men were free.”

You would be hard pressed today to find Americans complaining that Medicare robbed them of their freedom, but an easy task to find those who are “ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure.” Over [one-third](#) of Americans would be unable to afford an emergency expense over \$400, however, and [food insecurity](#) affects 50 million Americans, including 14 million children.

It is they who are “not free” because they are “necessitous,” and they are necessitous because the Republican Party is more interested in giving tax breaks to billionaires than they are to promoting the “General Welfare” that our Constitution defines as one the very purpose of our government.

But too many Americans know nothing more than they have been falling behind for decades. They lack the time and education to understand that while Democrats may fall short (usually due to monolithic Republican opposition), Republicans don’t even try to help them. And that’s why the man who would be king is in the White House again: *“People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”*

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is correct that Democrats “are losing elections” because they think “that the power struggle within the party is between progressives and moderates.”

As she recently explained in a [great profile](#) by The New York Times’s Michelle Cottle, “I believe economic populism is the path forward.”

That’s why when – and I say *when* and not *if* – Democrats hold Congress and the White House again, they first need to ask, *“What Would FDR Do?”*

Then they need to do what he would have done had he lived longer – enacting the legislation that would end the long night of “necessitous” men, women, and children and begin a new day in which all Americans can enjoy equality in the pursuit of happiness.

And they need to begin telling everyone that now!