

(June 10, 1941 - ET)

Mr. Wallace, I want to thank you as President, and your predecessor, Mr. Burrus, as well as the members of this organization, for giving me the privilege of being present at this testimonial luncheon which appropriately honors Mr. Eugene Meyer on the eighth anniversary of his reign as publisher of the Washington Post.

I note that the masthead of his newspaper designates him also as the editor and since he is ultimately responsible for what appears in his columns and must pay the bills if his writers should commit libel -- which I trust will never occur -- I suppose he also may be said to bear the burden of responsibility as editor. I am reliably informed, however, that he delegates that authority, in practice, to others who, for some reason or other, he considers more skilled in public affairs than he is.

This is modesty carried to the extreme. For I have been looking over Mr. Meyer's biographical record and I am astounded to discover that he has been appointed to public office by five different, though successive, presidents regardless of party. Offhand, I cannot think of any other man of my acquaintance who has had such a succession of appointments from such a variety of presidents. Indeed, there are few men who have fed at the public trough for such a long period, though I make haste to say that in his case it has always been at a personal sacrifice measured by mundane standards.

I did not discover until just before coming over here that I was designated on the program as spokesman for the occasion, and I must confess that I am awed by a sense of responsibility. I do not know what a spokesman is, but it has certain unpleasant recollections to my mind. The only spokesman I ever heard of in Washington was a dubious, mystical figure attached to the White House. He was perpetually in bad. He was always saying the wrong thing and being repudiated by the President. Time after time, I would see him quoted in the press as favoring this or favoring that. Then there would be an outcry from the public against his position and in no time at all the President would repudiate him. It always seemed to me incredible that this White House spokesman, who supposedly was so close to the President, could make so many mistakes in diagnosing what was in the President's mind or what the President's position was. He got to be known, at least to me, as a symbol for the highest incompetence.

Whatever became of him, I do not know, but he apparently has disappeared from the scene; at least I have not heard about him for years and I do not want, by any stretch of the imagination, to be associated or identified with him. I have never aspired to be a spokesman for anybody but myself. This is partly because I have never found it easy to get other people, whether presidents or publishers or public officials in general, to agree to let me speak for them. I may say, off the record, that my experience in my present capacity has not changed this at all.

Certainly, I could not hope to be a spokes^{man} for Eugene Meyer, not only because he is quite capable of speaking for himself but because I doubt

that we would see eye to eye on various economic problems and issues. In saying that, I am in no way attempting to detract from him for I recognize him as a man who has made a remarkable, in fact a unique, contribution to public service covering a wide variety of fields.

It seems to me that if any man were entitled to be regarded as a spokesman for presidents, at least it would be Mr. Meyer in the light of his service successively under Presidents Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Each one of these presidents appointed him to some position of importance and large public responsibility. It is, in fact, evidence of the confidence that Mr. Meyer has always aroused in those who know him. He would be the despair of a mere politician because you cannot politically classify a man who has fitted into so many and such different political patterns. You can be sure, however, that he has been chosen because of the confidence in him and, most of all, because of his competence.

You will recall -- those of you whose memories are long enough -- that Mr. Meyer resigned his private associations at the outbreak of the war in 1917. He came to Washington, no doubt like many another innocent country boy accustomed only to the simple life and the green fields that spread out from Broad and Wall Streets. Doubtless he thought he would be in Washington for the duration but assumed that that duration had some terminal point. It really has had none in his case for after his distinguished service successively on the Advisory Commission to the Council for National Defense, as a director of the War Finance Corporation, as a member of the Federal Farm Loan Board and Farm Loan Commissioner, as Governor of the Federal Reserve Board during the leanest years in our economic history, as Chairman of the Board of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in the critical months of 1932, and now as a member of the Mediation Board -- after serving in all of these varied important capacities, prior to his present appointment, he became, as you all know, the owner and publisher of the Washington Post. This can hardly be called a private capacity or return to private life. In fact, it is the very essence of being in the midst of all parts of public life.

I shall not undertake in the few minutes of my time to appraise Mr. Meyer's service as editor and publisher, except to say that I think he has set for himself and adhered to an admirable standard of fairness and impartiality in publishing a newspaper with the emphasis on news rather than a mere journal of partisan opinion. I am pleased and honored to be assigned the role of doing the superfluous -- that is, of introducing him to this group, for you all know him as one of our best examples of public spiritedness and public service.