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"WAR AND DEMOCRACY"

An Address by

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On another occasion I referred to a phrase once used by William James--"the moral equivalent of war"--and suggested that it uncovered possibilities of thinking during war time, which it was impossible to neglect. Even if it were desirable to stop thinking of the world and its future because we are fighting, we can no more do, so than we can stop laughing or loving or enjoying life while life still goes on. It is interesting to note that according to a recent study published by the Twentieth Century Fund there are about 112 organizations, public and private, that are engaged in some kind of post-war study. The sum of all our thinking has much to do with the everyday world that we are constantly shaping, and out of which will some day emerge the new world that is to follow our victory. We can no more sit down and shape that new world, sit down and plan it all out beautifully in blue prints and diagrams than we can arrange the pattern of our own individual lives. Those who try to live by the panacea of theoretical reform unrelated to the streaming forces of life are destined to float pretty quietly in the little backwaters that lie aside from the rush of the current. But that is not to say that thinkers and dreamers and philosophers have not enormously influenced the shape of things, or to deny that Kant, Aquinas, Emerson and Steinmetz have not had a greater influence on our lives than Napoleon and Adolf Hitler--that is, in the ultimate run of history.

We are engaged in fighting a war for democracy. To all of us the word connotes certain accepted assumptions--the power to choose our governments, trial of crimes and of civil grievances in courts of

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justice; the free play of criticism and of thought; consciences that are free from the state, free to worship and to practice religion as we choose; control of our personal lives--in ordinary times--by authorities limited to certain accepted measures of universal education and defined policing, necessary to the proper protection and functioning of the state and of its people. About those basic assumptions there is but little dispute. Where once men fought bitterly against a religion being forced by the state on those who would not have it, or to protect their rights against star chamber, or to be represented if they were taxed, today the conflict is over other functions of a democracy.

And this change, I take it, is inherent in the essence of democracy. For if that essence is ultimately rooted in a positive demand for the best of possible lives; if the democratic urge springs from the insistence on life as an end in itself as opposed to the negation implicit in state-worship, then change is the breath of its nostrils, for life itself cannot be static, cannot be mechanistic, but must move and grow in order to endure at all.

The law of democracy also must be the law of tolerance. In the long run you either live next to the fellow who disagrees with you and let him live, or you kill him. If we wished to oversimplify the difference which perhaps essentially separates the democratic way of life from the Nazi way of life, we might conclude that ours is to live and let live, while the Nazis force their way of life on others, and if they do not conform, the Nazis kill. They believe in living, but not in letting others live.

Tolerance is therefore a point of view, which when translated

to the practical level of an everyday life becomes the philosophy of compromise. For if we posit our democracy on the value of competition and on the health of conflicting ideas, we necessarily must compromise in order to remain an organic whole, unless someone sits on top with a club and hits us on the head when we do not conform, when we talk back; and this is precisely what we dislike about the Nazi rule, because our experience, the entire experience of the world, has tended to show that when a people sets up a political all highest, with unlimited authority to run their show for them, the all highest soon becomes a rapacious thing, with ambitions of thuggery unfortunately not limited to his own corner of the earth.

Compromise, then, becomes the basic way of democracy. The word has, I know, an ugly sound, connoting a negative attitude, as if courage were gone and the practical politician changed places with the man who was ready to die for his idea. But I mean it in the sense of give and take, as I have indicated; and of the two I am usually inclined to prefer the practical politician to a Savonarola. Of course it depends a good deal on the idea for which you may be ready to die.

I have suggested that the development of democracy, of the history of the race if you like, saw once bitterly contested ideas gradually take their place in the accepted creed of the people moving from the level of revolution to the half forgotten habit of the accepted. Universal suffrage for us has substantially experienced that change. Today we are in essence a political democracy. With a few striking exceptions the growth of democracy is no longer now on the political, but on the industrial level. The problems which challenge us are

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problems of capital and labor; of the incidence and distribution of taxation; of the vitality of little business in a world of vast enterprise; of the protection of accepted and appropriate business profits based on an economic system which has not thus far proved capable of preventing scarcity where abundance is needed; of the new idea—an idea still in its 'teens, that we need not have the poor always with us, and that the problem is economic rather than moral; that the state should be concerned first and foremost with the problem of unemployment, and that no state can or should endure which is not so concerned; and that freedom from want is as precious as the freedom to say who shall govern us which the American Revolution was fought to achieve.

The last war suggested but did not convince us that democracy could not be isolated. Only a few months ago that was a burning question, as it had not been since the League of Nations was debated across the land and finally defeated. Perhaps the defeat came chiefly from the activities of that little group of willful Senators; but I am tempted to think, whatever their influence may have been, that it worked in a largely sympathetic political climate which had come down to us from the old days of our beginnings, when "entangling alliances" touched the mind of a defenseless little country, big with this new experiment, actually isolated as it were by the will of Providence, and disdainful and distrustful of those ancient tyrants who seemed to have corrupted all but this new world. I do not think that in an integrated world democracy can remain isolated. But the implications of such a conclusion are of vast significance; and the problems it raises, temporarily in abeyance

in the unity of the war, are not disposed of, and will face us with new insistence when the peace comes.

I have suggested that a democratic philosophy largely operates through compromise. This is particularly true with us where differences of race and nationality have not been melted by the years into as yet strikingly national characteristics. More than other nations we are a nation of minorities. In religion no single group forms a unified majority. The great Negro population--roughly a tenth of our entire people--presents difficult problems that must be solved if we are true to our inheritance, and the ring of our words has any honest reality. Is it a wonder that often they are bitter, when, as recently in Detroit, they are denied their lawful rights to occupy houses built for them by the government? And here at least there is no ground for ultimate compromise for those who take their democracy seriously, and who insist that this greatly underprivileged group is given a more equal opportunity to share with the rest of us in the fruits of a democracy that includes us all.

There are spheres, then, wherein compromise becomes intolerable, becomes impossible, where abandonment of some basic conception tends to make insincere the whole program, and makes the preachment of the democratic faith nothing but an expression of hypocrisy to the ears of those who come within the exception. No democracy can endure

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without translation of faith into action. As with other organic entities democracy comes to be known by its works. The distrust of parts of the British Empire for its rulers grew from the failure of the government to translate into practice the doctrine of self-government and now, when a federation of nations is being actually achieved within the British Empire, and despite increasing awareness of the problem by British Officials, here and there distrust, bred of the past, hampers the present. With us I have instanced the Negro problem. Only those blind to realities would insist that this can be solved overnight, or except through the evolution of good will translated into good action. But at least public officials can insist that wherever the opportunity is offered, justice shall be dispersed for all alike, opportunities kept open, and the power of government held steadily behind the ideals of government.

I have suggested to you that democracy is a growing process, and that today it is operating on an industrial level, applying its processes to such immediate tasks as the elimination of unemployment and the assurance of large scale production. In facing the post-war problems it will be necessary, in order to prevent the collapse of our system, changed overnight from a war to a peace basis, to act aggressively and with speed during the period of readjustment. We insist on this kind of action in war; and the first months of peace will present problems no less difficult and no less immediate than those that faced us in the first days of war. In this war we have had to arm with the greatest speed in order to meet the challenge of a foe whose chief advantage was that he had been longer preparing. In the sudden peace, we shall have to act with

swift effectiveness to prevent a collapse, following, perhaps, a short post-war boom. The situation will be somewhat analagous to the dark days of 1933, when the banks were folding up. The government could and did act quickly and effectively. The government can and will act in the same way when the time comes.

The Congress is evidently aware of the immediate needs of the post war period, for the War Powers Acts, giving very great powers to the President in the war emergency, extend some of these powers for six months after the termination of the war.

I do not mean to imply that government is the only way in which a free people can exercise its authority, or that putting great powers in government does not involve taking great risks. Public needs can be furthered in many other ways. A striking example is the use of co-operatives, so effectively employed by the Scandinavian countries before the war, and not developed in our country to anything like their possibilities. And we should remember, as I think we have realized during this war, that as long as the people keep the ultimate control in their hands, as long as free elections and free courts endure, the people can not only give their government powers to function effectively, but will insist that these powers be used for the active good of the community.

Just as the democratic growth changes in emphasis or direction, as new problems arise, our conception of the scope of government follows these changes. Our original conception was greatly influenced by a reaction against the tyranny which we had shaken clear. Government had become the symbol of that tyranny, for the history of the struggle for freedom had largely been a history of resistance to government oppression.

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The checks and balances and division of powers in our Constitution were the national expression of that distrust. In a small population, mainly agricultural, scattered, homogeneous, when life was largely bounded by the immediate and simple interests of the local community, there was no need for the strength of a government that later was necessary to deal with the vast industrial problems of the nation. As the nation grew, and the country became industrialized, the conception of a government whose role was largely negative changed to the conception that government must actively interest itself in the welfare of the citizen. Free universal education was the first expression of this change. Social legislation in the last decade has been its most recent example.

The ancient conflict of authority and liberty therefore is as acute as ever. I have dwelt on the problem on the political and governmental level. But ultimately the amount of authority that a government finds it necessary to exercise depends to no small extent on the discipline of the people themselves. In a democracy force cannot be imposed on an unwilling people in the long run; and no law can be enforced against the tide of popular approval. The more disciplined is the individual, the more civic minded and civically unselfish, the less need is there for government controls. The state, to function humanely, must be continually enriched by the individual citizen, not merely the office holder but the community leader whose leadership raises the community thinking to the needs of the nation.

This is true of every vital organism. The man after whom this college was named, Jean Baptiste de La Salle, was such a leader. He came from a stock which had provided France and Spain with statesmen,

diplomats, explorers. He turned from the quiet of a rectory to the tough considerations of elementary education, particularly among the poor who were without it. He instituted the method, revolutionary three hundred years ago, of group teaching as opposed to what amounted to the current practice of private coaching. He realized and insisted that teaching was a profession, and that to teach adequately teachers themselves must be taught. A priest of the Church, he knew and loved Latin, but could see no wisdom in teaching a French boy Latin so that he might subsequently learn French and arithmetic. He was a great pioneer, and you particularly, and the world at large, owe him a debt of gratitude that is not forgotten.

Democracy can never be static. Either it will move forward, as it has for the last 150 years; or it will be smothered under the tyranny of those who hate its strength and its aims, as for the past few years it has ruthlessly been suppressed among those people where the Nazis had their will. After the war the test of this growth will be the ability of the great democratic countries to produce and distribute on a consumers' scale, to meet the people's needs, no longer limited by the theory of a scarcity economy. The more production the more work. Fortune quotes a college boy as saying: "I don't mind fighting if it is necessary. But I don't want to spend two or three years in the Army and then come out only to be told by an aged idiot that I can't have a job until the budget is balanced."

Recently the Vice President, speaking at a dinner of the Free World Association in New York with splendid eloquence, yet very simply, said this: "Yes, and when the time of peace comes, the citizen will again have a duty, the supreme duty of sacrificing the lesser interest for the

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greater interest of the general welfare. Those who write the peace must think of the whole world. There can be no privileged peoples. We ourselves in the United States are no more a master race than the Nazis. And we can not perpetuate economic warfare without planting the seeds of military warfare. We must use our power at the peace table to build an economic peace that is just, charitable and enduring."