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ADDRESS

by

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at the

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in Honor of

ROBERT M. LA FOLLETTE

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In his eulogy of the Athenian heroes who died in the Peloponnesian War, Pericles expressed doubt as to the wisdom of commemorative speeches. He said that where men's deeds have been great they should be honored in deed only.

The privilege of honoring Robert M. LaFollette in deeds has not been left to strangers, but has been a privilege which the people of Wisconsin have accorded to his own flesh and blood. The tradition of progressive statesmanship, which many years ago attracted my youthful admiration, is still carried on in the United States Senate in his very name.

We cannot admit anxiety about the strength of democracy today without confessing an inadequacy in the prevailing statesmanship of yesterday. And we cannot appraise the career of the man we honor in speech today, unless we examine the climate in which he worked and know what he supported and what he protested against. The service of Senator LaFollette included the local post of County Prosecutor, the Governorship of this state, and service to the nation in the United States Senate. It covered almost thirty-five years of our history and the whole range of government. The period was one of transition between two distinct periods in the life of the Republic.

Senator LaFollette has himself described the dominant political power of the earlier part of that period. He described it with affection, for it was the party through which he hoped to work. Comparison of his description with a view of the party

now assembling in Philadelphia must cause those of that party faith some melancholy reflections. The Senator wrote:

> "But the war and the troubled years which followed it had left at least one important political legacy - one of the most powerful and unified party organizations that ever existed I suppose anywhere in the world. I mean the Republican Party. We may never see its like again in this country. It had fought a desperate war for a great and righteous cause. It had behind it the passionate enthusiasm of a whole generation of men."

But the party of Lincoln began to lose its leadership long before it lost its power. It kept its cohesion longer than its ideals. There was slowly growing distrust of it, and instead of seeking followers through the magnificent courage and vision of its earlier days it rested its case on history rather than on any present service. The Senator in his autobiography says:

> "I remember well the character of the ordinary political speeches of those years. Even well down into the eighties they all looked backward to fading glories, they waved the flag of freedom, they abused the South, they stirred the war memories of the old soldiers who were then everywhere dominant in the North."

But the times did not remain as stagnant as the politicians. There was great activity in the land. Huge enterprises were being put together; great empires of lands were being given away to subsidize railroads. The era of trusts and combinations had begun.

Their arrogance and power shocked young LaFollette when the President of one of the great railroads wrote bluntly to the Governor of Wisconsin that he would disregard the provisions of the law of the state fixing a tariff of rates for the company until the courts had finally passed on the question of its validity. Robert LaFollette never forgot that threat to the sovereignty

and dignity of the people of Wisconsin. We know exactly how he would have felt had he in 1935 read the pronouncement of the public utility holding company interests of the United States that they would as a group refuse to obey a law of the United States until its validity should be passed on by the courts.

But the arrogance of the early corporate concentration brought its reaction, known as the Granger movement, just as the later corporate arrogance brought the progressive movement, the New Freedom and the New Deal. Each period of reaction has been followed by an effort of the people to reassert the supremacy of the democratic process.

Robert LaFollette throughout his period of public life opposed the dominance of property interests over popular government in America. He sponsored and fought for many basic changes, such as the direct election of Senators and the income tax amendment, which would make government more responsive to the people and more effective in governing. A body of federal legislation was sponsored by him designed to remedy industrial conditions which he found on entering the Senate in 1906 to be intolerable. One of the first of these seems terribly mild today, but was regarded as vicious radicalism then. It was an act making it unlawful for any common carrier to permit employees to remain on duty for a longer period than sixteen consecutive hours. It was opposed editorially and its constitutionality attacked but later upheld. Another piece of legislation, which now seems to us so necessary and mild that we cannot understand the bitterness about it, was the Federal Employer's Liability Act which relieved workmen following the dangerous occupation of railroading from the harsh and unconscionable rules of the common law which had been evolved by judges under primitive industrial conditions and which left

the employee with few rights and even fewer effective remedies. The modern world accepts beyond question the principle of workmen's compensation but in that day it regarded as nothing less than revolutionary the suggestion that an employee as well as an employer had a right to look to an industry to bear some part of his risks. There was the Railroad Evaluation Act, the Seamen's Act, and many others which embodied the philosophy of the progressive movements of his day.

But this was not all. Robert LaFollette tried for many things which he did not get, but he kept the public conscience from slumbering. He loved the party in whose faith he had been reared, and he tried to guide the Republican Party into a position where it would take definite leadership and become the agency of progressive thought in America. He proposed new legislative reforms to conventions of his party, often to hear them rejected amid jeers and hisses. He knew what the party leaders did not know: that they were hissing themselves to an early death; that the reforms would win, even if the party did not. In 1908 he submitted thirteen planks to the Republican Convention, and eleven of them have since been enacted into law. In 1912 he submitted eighteen propositions, fifteen of which have been written into statute. These included such basic things as physical evaluation of the railroad, creation of a Tariff Commission, publicity of campaign contributions and expenditures, prohibition of injunctions in labor disputes, the creation of a Department of Labor, the extention of the postal service to include a Parcel Post, the adoption of the income tax law, the extension of suffrage to women, and the federal inheritance tax.

What a record of far sighted leadership!

No wonder that Woodrow Wilson at Wilmington, Delaware, in October, 1912, disregarded party lines to compliment that "indomitable figure of Bob LaFollette" of Wisconsin. Wilson said "I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, I take off my cap to Bob LaFollette. He has never taken his eye for a single moment from the goal he set out to reach. He has walked a straight line to it in spite of every temptation to turn aside."

It was this deep devotion to democratic results as well as democratic forms of government that guided his long struggle in public life. It was this deep devotion to improvement in our processes that made him so resentful of the coming of war which always deflects our efforts and attention from domestic problems. He knew that our own house was not in too good order. But when war came over his protest, he held that democracy was not only a faith worth fighting for but was also a means to winning. He insisted that democracy function in war as well as in peace.

I did not know Robert M. LaFollette, but as a high school boy I looked upon him with admiration, though he was of a different political party than my family. But in his policy there was an enlightenment, in his hope there was a glow that caught and held young men. I did not mind then and do not mind now that he was called a "radical". That name, always hurled at those who would right wrongs, has become a certificate of character. Wilson was called a "radical", so was Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson - I have even

heard that term applied to Franklin D. Roosevelt! But such a term is selective - no one ever called Warren Harding or James Buchanan a radical! We would lose nothing of our national character if we tore out of our history the chapters written by or about men who were not called radicals. But those chapters in which we take great pride, from the Declaration of Independence down were all the result of the vision and determination of radicals.

Senator LaFollette was the premier example of courage in our public life. Courage makes enemies, but in spite of that, among a virile people courage is good politics. Spender in his book "The Public Life" says this of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman:

> "Again and again one hears it said that a politician has forever done for himself, and again and again it turns out that the supposed unforgivable thing was the foundation of his fortune * * *. It is almost an axiom of British public life that no one rises to the highest public position unless at one time or another he has stood firm against the prevalent opinion and staked his reputation on what appeared to be a failing cause. * * *"

We who gather today are in need of refreshment of our courage and our belief in democracy from the life and example of Senator LaFollette. Democracy, as a way of life and a form of government, is widely challenged in the world today, and the challengers for the moment have won a discomforting degree of success.

It is plain that the democracies of the world need something more than victory in order to survive. Only twenty years ago they had victory in full measure. In less than a generation its fruits have vanished and they are fighting for their very existence. Those who were strong enough

then to write terms of peace are now reduced to the necessity of accepting them.

This spectacle of weakness in the presence of attack by a ruthless, concentrated, and mechanized power has brought to many discouraging thoughts as to the future of democratic society. When the history of these times is written, I have no doubt that it will be agreed that the weakness of the democratic powers was not that they were democratic, but that they were not more democratic. Those who consider the strength of a nation by its number of airplanes or tanks or its naval ratings forget that the strength of nations is still determined by the courage and devotion of the men who wield them, and the most important assets of a nation are the ideals that inspire and the patterns by which it organizes its loyalties and its man-power.

Among the many diagnoses of the ills of democracy I have found none which so well states our plight as that which Robert LaFollette penned in 1912:

> "We have long rested comfortably in this country upon the assumption that because our form of government was democratic, it was therefore automatically producing democratic results. Now, there is nothing mysteriously potent about the forms and names of democratic institutions that should make them self-operative. Tyranny and oppression are just as possible under democratic forms as under any other. We are slow to realize that democracy is a life; and involves continual struggle. It is only as those of every generation who love democracy resist with all their might the encroachments of its enemies that the ideals of representative government can even be nearly approximated."

This lesson from Senator LaFollette should be heeded today. Progress and success of a nation will not be automatic just because it is a democratic nation. It will improve only because people are determined to

improve it, and only when they take the right steps to make it better. And these steps must be guided by wisdom as well as by courage and good intentions. Mere blind enthusiasm and high resolves will get us nowhere unless we are also practical. Arousing indignations at wrongs does no good unless they are directed to a prudent remedy, and the promise of reforms to the ear which are broken to the hope only adds delusion to injustice and weakens the influence of leadership.

Our representative democracy cannot afford to stand still. It is not a device for perpetuating a status quo. We are living in a moving world, and we must move with the traffic or be run over. We must constantly infuse new principles into our constitutional fabric, such as social security and the greater measures of economic justice which have been won in the past seven years. Much remains to be done.

Perhaps no single task is more important than that we adhere to those measures already taken and take additional ones to identify the masses of the American people with our economic order and to identify our economic order with the welfare of the masses of our people. We must not forget that a system which excludes large numbers of people from its prosperity, or from the necessities of life, is impairing their loyalties. Nothing will more strongly fortify democracy than a knowledge among the people that American democracy is their democracy and that this country is their country. If we do that we will not need to worry about whether they will want to defend it.

In these tasks we will get no help from either the reactionaries or the revolutionists. Our hope lies in calm and steady advance of a people

guided by a devotion to liberal and progressive government. We gather today for inspiration for these tasks from Robert M. LaFollette who was one of the forerunners of our liberalism, and we are grateful for his life and work and resolved that they shall not have been in vain.