

A Sermon on Patriotism

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

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Last Friday morning I received a request to preach a patriotic sermon this morning. I propose to do so. But in so doing I must conform to a resolve, a habit, a conviction that is part of my very nature, I hope. I have never preached from this pulpit anything that I was not willing to act upon myself. I have never uttered one word calculated to influence any one of you to believe in a doctrine, or to act contrary to your judgement. I have never tried to override your personality and stampede you into an emotional and mob action. I have stated my beliefs, my ideas, my motives of conduct as frankly, and as honestly as I could. I shall continue to do this unless perchance I too may be caught in the mob spirit and swept off my feet.

Many times, during the past ten years I have stated that we are living in an age when changes more fundamental than any in the recorded history of man are taking place. The tremendous changes in religious and philosophical thought which were achieved during the nineteenth century went to the very roots, the very heart of life. We cannot even estimate the effect that those changes are to have upon the life of tomorrow. Into the furnace of this war, not only in Europe but in this country, have been, and are being, shoveled vast quantities of dross that will be consumed by its terrible fire. Whatever may be the outcome, and the outcome will be to the advantage of human life in the long run—whatever may be the outcome—of one thing we may be certain, that many cherished values will be left behind, and

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #6"—that is labeled "Sermons During the War." In this collection were two sermons that noted in their first paragraph a request to ministers to preach a patriotic sermon, this one, and "The Spirit of '76." Both appear to be incomplete given their abrupt endings. Thus, my best guess is that these are two different attempts to draft "a patriotic sermon." Neither has an explicit date. But internal evidence in "A Sermon on Patriotism" clearly dates them to April 15, 1917, very shortly after the United States entered "the Great War," April 6, 1917.

many undreamed-of values will appear and survive. It is a great age in which to live, but we have to pay the price demanded of admittance into its life. We shall see for the time being old curiosities of humanity's past brought out for service in the present crisis, but they will come for their last call. We are in the position of explorers entering upon a journey in an unknown land. We know what things we have needed in the land where we have been, but we know not the things needed in the land flowing with milk and honey towards which we take our adventurous journey. Some of the things we shall take will have to be cast aside; some of the things we will have left behind will prove to be needful and we shall have to reconstruct and revive. Others will be devised to meet the necessity of the life. Such is this great decision that the people in this nation have made and are making. We are travelling in a new and an unknown, and a bewildering country. You feel, as everyone must feel who is at all responsive to community atmosphere, that already we are living in a different Pittsfield than even so short a time as last Sunday morning, when we awoke to the beauties of a glorious spring day, and Easter day at that. That cocksureness, that superficial éclat that comes to the front at such a moment, has given place a deeper, more thoughtful and serious appreciation of the significance of the step that has been taken. Walter Lippman gives expression to this change in a very pungent sentence, "We are living and shall live all our lives now in a revolutionary world,"² a world of restless experiment. To put it another way, the revolution in thought, in ultimate values of life, in religion, that has been going on with such startling results during the past hundred years or more will now be transferred with greater emphasis and keenness to the examination of the institutions and values that have long passed currency among us. That is the long view. It is the logical expression of those principles that were basic and have been operating in the modern world ever since the beginning of the protestant reformation, and before, for that matter. The changes are momentous, searching and pressing.

² Walter Lippman (1889-1974) American writer, reporter and political commentator. In 1913, along with Herbert Croly and Walker Weyl, Lippman was the founding editor of *The New Republic*. This remark quoted here was made in the week after the United States entered World War I (April 6, 1917), *The New Republic*.

Among them is the situation that arises out of the European War. It had its beginnings in a conflict between Empires and allies in the quest for the world market. But it is having an ending that already indicates that the forces that set it in motion have run their course. Even the entrance of this country into the war at this date is but a confirmation of that assertion. Whatever may have been the motives of people who have forced the way upon this nation, whether domestic or foreign forces, the result is the same, expressed by the catch phrase, "a war for democracy." It began as a war of commercial rivals in Europe. It is ending as a revolutionary uprising against autocracy. There is truth in the old saying that pride goeth before a fall.³ The dreamers of world empire, whether on the one side or the other, or in this country, have dug the grave into which they are falling. Unless all indications fail, the men who set round the tables to settle the terms of peace after this war shall have been finished will not represent those men and forces that set the thing in motion.

The New Republic has been one of the strong influences in this country that has consistently and intelligently urged the entrance of this country into the war. The passage which I am about to quote is, therefore, the more worthy of consideration. In speaking of those who have opposed the war this paper says, They have seen a great democratic nation gradually forced into war, in spite of the manifest indifference or reluctance of the majority of its population; and they have rightly attributed the successful pressure to the ability of a small but influential minority to impose its will on the majority of its population.⁴

I have been among that unfortunate majority who, the *New Republic* says, opposed the war. But all that is now past history. The judgement of future generations will decide upon the wisdom or folly of the momentous step that has been taken.

One hundred and forty-one years ago this very week the farmers, in open rebellion at Concord bridge, resisted the armed force of England. That was the first great overt act that resulted in this Republic, which today, in spite of its shortcomings, is still the hope of democracy. In those

³ See Proverbs 16:18.

⁴ Editorial, *The New Republic*, April 14, 1917.

principles, toward which, with some measure of success, the people of this country have been working, I have been brought up, and educated. In accord with the principles, not the dogma, of a democratic government, based upon the conviction of the ability and the disposition of the people as a whole to govern themselves for their own best interests, I have thought and acted ever since I can remember. I believe in the full fundamental principles of democracy, democracy of thought, democracy of government, of industry. It is the religion of democracy that I believe in and preach. All that I cherish in the way of the big religious, social, and idealistic values of life are centered around that principle of democracy. To me it is the supreme duty and obligation of our nation to carry those principles through into life. For that I have studied, worked, thought, lived. Long ago I enlisted in the service of my country in its supreme mission of bringing to fruition upon this continent the most glorious nation of people, free and strong and noble. Every tendency that I have seen that worked against that mission for this country I have fought as I have been able. Every move that has been in the direction of realizing that end I have supported, regardless of its effect upon myself. I claim no credit for this attitude. It is the thing that interests me, the thing that I love. It is not a matter of spectacular flag-waving emotion, it is a settled purpose that through me nothing shall be done knowingly or willingly that shall imperil the principles, or such institutions as the principles animate, of that government of the people, by the people, for the people.

I have never used the municipality, or the natural and patriotic impulses of people, an impulse that I regard as one of the most sacred of life. I say that I have never made use of institutions or patriotic impulses to foster my own ends, either professionally, financially, or in any other way. Such things are too repulsive to me. But I want it understood that the nation that I love, is the nation that is making heroic efforts to further and establish the principles of democracy. I want it distinctly understood that the flag that I love is the flag that is symbolic of freedom. The patriotic hymn calls not only that flag shall wave, but that it shall wave over the land of the free, and homes of the brave. This nation, that I love, has been not a system of police and laws that would protect my person and property, defend my rights for me, but the nation that I could give without shame the best that I have to give for its principles and its institutions. I have dared to hope, but this

is a thing that one does not talk about, I have dared to hope that I might have the courage to die for that nation if need be, because I see there something so great for the lives of future generations, your children and mine, that it would seem to be a joy to add the most that I could do.

But there are some things that I cannot do even for that nation, and one thing is, that I cannot stand before you today and urge anyone to do a thing that I have not first done myself. If the time comes, in spite of the fact that I hate war in all its forms, if the time comes when I believe that my loyalty to those that I love and see working against great odds in this nation, if the time comes when loyalty to those principles demands my physical strength as well as my moral strength to defend them, I shall enlist. But I shall never ask anyone else to enlist for such a hazard. That is a decision that one makes on his own account.

But one more statement I must make. There is one great principle that is involved in a democratic nation. No nation can remain free and democratic if it attempts to impose its freedom upon an unwilling neighbor. Both then become slaves, and the life the spirit that once animated the free nation gives way to the spirit of Empire, and Empire is incompatible with democracy. We may assist people in their efforts to protect themselves against tyranny, but we cannot compel them to accept freedom. That is something that each individual, each nation, each age has to achieve for itself. It grows up from within, and it registers itself without.

But there are great things to be done for democracy. Terrible as this war is, important as the entrance of this nation into the war may prove to be, they are but incidents to the task. The long process that will still remain, even after the physical battles for democracy may have been won, [and] will demand a higher courage, a higher intelligence, a higher consecration, a greater ability than war ever has called out.

I mention some of those qualities, one which is applicable even now. It is the ability to keep free from hatred, and revenge in times of stress. We are at war with the German

nation. I feel just the same about them now as I did before the war. I hated the form of government that they operated under.⁵

⁵ Here the manuscript comes to a somewhat abrupt end.