

The Spirit of '76

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

April 15, 1917<sup>1</sup>

A request has been sent forth to all ministers to preach a patriotic sermon this morning. I shall preach my sort of a patriotic sermon as I have always done. I rather regret that this request has been made, for otherwise I hoped to have one Sunday free from direct considerations of matters connected with the war. But it would seem to be, and indeed would be, unpardonable avoidance of an issue that must be met. What I shall say this morning many of you will not agree with. I may say things that I would rather not say, but the occasion is none of my making.

I have been contrasting in my mind this week the difference between the situation in this country and the world today and the situation that obtained in the world and among the colonies of England one hundred and forty-one years ago today. At that time there was no such thing in the known world as a democratic or republican form of government. A few Frenchmen, notably Rousseau, were advocating ideas that have since become more common. France was working up to the great Revolution. But all the countries of the world were organized upon the old basis of authority to a hereditary ruler. The state was private property to be used and made use of in the interests of a comparatively small nobility. The sum total of citizenship, loyalty, and patriotism, was expressed in the terms of taxes and obedience, both to state and church.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 "A Sermon on Patriotism." 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.

Here in America the same thing existed so far as legal enactment and formal allegiance were concerned. The Colonies were ruled by a colonial governor, but not with the consent of the governed. In 1761 James Otis, Advocate General of the Colony of Massachusetts resigned his office rather than plead the cause of the Government, and became the leading counsel in opposition in the suits involving smuggling and the famous writs of assistance. It was during this trial that he made the famous statement that there were "rights derived only from nature and the Author of nature," that they were "inherent, inalienable, and indefeasible by any laws, pacts, contracts, or governments, or stipulations which man could devise." Later John Adams declared that "American Independence was then born."<sup>2</sup>

One hundred and forty-one years ago there were British troops in Boston. There were mobs, and riots. There were committees of correspondence, there was the Boston Tea Party. Everywhere there was disloyalty, everywhere there was treason to the home government. One hundred and forty-one years ago this day there was a very well-defined conviction among these disloyal rebels that a conflict was coming between the rebels and the government, between the disloyal subjects and the King. That conflict did come. Its history, its tradition, its heroism, is part of the breath of life of every true lover of democracy. It was the world against democracy. Even after the French Revolution and Napoleon, the monarchies of Europe united to suppress and prevent the spread of dread republicanism. This new nation replied with the Monroe Doctrine when it was proposed to reestablish control by monarchies of rebel Spanish colonies in the Western Hemisphere.

Now the slogan has changed. It is the world against monarchy. Whether that slogan is true to fact or not, it is interesting to note that it expresses the only pretext upon which people could

---

<sup>2</sup> James Otis (1752-1783) American lawyer and political activist. John Adams (1735-1826), second president of the United States. Davis is taking these quotes from American historian, Albert Bushnell Hart (1854-1943) *Epochs of American History: Formation of the Union, 1750-1829*, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892, pp. 47-8. The "writs of assistance" which Davis refers to enabled the authorities to enter any home with no advance notices, no probably cause, no reason whatsoever. Otis fought these powers.

be rallied to the support of the European war. One other fact is to be noted, and [with] very serious consideration. That is the fact that each government, in order to get the support of the nation, had to present the war as a war of defense or a war in support of democracy. All these facts indicate gains in the spread of opinion in the direction of love for, or devotion to, and belief in, the principles and the institutions that embody the principles of democracy. You may almost circle the globe today and step only on the soil of nations organized according to some measure of republican democratic government. To that proposition, of government of the people, by the people and for the people, we are irrevocably committed. It has been a great achievement. The task is by no means complete, and we must not deceive ourselves with the smug notion that we have accomplished that task. But note that the fact that true allegiance to this country, true allegiance to the flag, which is the symbol of this country, demands allegiance to those principles upon which this nation was founded, for which the revolutionary war was fought, for which the civil war was fought. Any thought, any conduct, whether political or social, that violates those principles, even when done under the cover of patriotism, is high treason to this nation. To the furtherance of these principles, to the greater glory of these principles, to the greatness of the nation because of the completeness with which these principles are becoming embodied in its thought, its institutions, its purposes, its very life, all those in whose nature beats the love of freedom and life, give allegiance without reserve. From this point of view every sermon that I have ever preached, every public address that I have ever uttered, has been backed by as clean and unselfish a patriotism as it is possible for me to muster out of the depths of my soul. But this nation that I love demands a higher allegiance and a more constant loyalty, than the mere jingo-talk in such times as these. Long ago I enlisted in the quiet and silence of my own soul to give all that I am to the increasing glory and power of these principles, these institutions that are the foundation of this Republic. I have come to know what these principles mean to me. Sometimes it has been hard to follow them, but to the best of my knowledge I have followed where they have led me.

We are now living in a nation at war with a great European power which is now the last great nation of the Western World to cling to the principles of authority government. The declaration of war has come after a long period of formal neutrality. It has

come in spite of the wishes of the American people as a whole, and in spite of the wishes of the President of the United States. What the real forces were that have brought about this situation will not be known until long after the war, and perhaps never. Whether our greatest enemies have been foreign nations or domestic factions is a judgement that each must pass on to his own satisfaction. I have opposed the proposition of this nation going to war. I believe that *The New Republic* is correct when it states that,

a great democratic nation gradually forced into war, in spite of the manifest indifference or reluctance of the majority of its population; they have rightly attributed the successful pressure to the ability of a small but influential minority to impose its will on the rest of the country.<sup>3</sup>

I have been in that majority. But the minority has prevailed, and we are at war. According to all the forms of our government, the vote of Congress commits the entire country to the war. The vote of Congress is the vote of the people constitutionally. That the spirit of the constitution may have [been] violated is a point open to debate. All that is now past history. Someday it will come up for review by the nation, and judgement will be passed, but that must be postponed.

I have opposed the participation of this nation in the war because I have believed that it imperils the principle of democracy without which this nation would be dead. To be sure, I hate the institution of war. I think that it is foolish, barbaric, hateful to every conception of life that I hold dear. But that repulsion to war is not, with me as it is with many, a conviction that would prevent me from taking part in a war that I believed a necessity for the preservation of the principles that I hold dear. If I could see that the principles of democracy were really at stake in the war, I would support it. But the war was begun as a result of a long developing process of Imperial rivalry, especially in industrial fields. The Russian Revolution has given it a new turn, and is the first incident that bespeaks in any real way a success for democratic principles and institutions. On both sides the war was in part caused by the fear of democratic developments in domestic affairs. Russia was in the midst of revolutionary demonstrations

---

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *The New Republic*, April 14, 1917.

when the war broke out. Germany was facing a serious conflict with the social democracy. England was face to face with the Irish and Suffrage, and labor disturbances in 1914. All these democratic tendencies were facts in precipitating the war. The war was the culmination, as I have said before, of the forces operating in European life, nationalism and industrialism. It marks the end of an era. It closes the curtain on an age. It was a conflict of Empires.

But wars never end as they begin. The Russian Revolution changes matters very seriously. It may prove the factor that terminates the war and sends a wave of democratic victory throughout the entire world. If that proves true, the price that is paid for the results may not be too great, but in that case, it has ceased to be a war of Empires but a revolution in the midst of [a] war of Empires. It is the spread of that Revolution that appeals to me.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Here the manuscript comes to a somewhat abrupt end.