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American Democracy: An Interpretation for Schools

ADDRESS BEFORE THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS · NEW ORLEANS · FEBRUARY 23 · 1937

ALMOST three thousand years ago, the Greek poet Hesiod laid down this dictum: "For beasts of the field and for birds of the air hath Zeus ordained one law, that they prey upon one another; but for man hath he ordained justice, which is by far the best."

From Hesiod until now few have dared to dispute that broad distinction. But what justice is has ever been a matter of dispute. It seems always to have been possible under any scheme of justice to justify injustice. There was, for example, in antiquity hardly any protest against slavery. Plato and Aristotle, the greatest thinkers of the ancient world, accepted it as desirable. They held that some men are worthy to be masters; others are fit only to be slaves — fit, that is to say, to be the convenient tools and implements of a superior class — and that slavery is therefore just and right. Less than a hundred years ago, in our own country, Calhoun and many others argued with fiery sincerity that slavery was a divine institution, blessing not only the master but the slave. The slave was not capable of taking care of himself. Therefore a gracious Providence had placed him under a master's care.

It is a tribute to the flexibility and adaptability of the human mind that a predatory philosophy — a philosophy of exploitation — can so easily be dressed up in the habiliments of loving-kindness. Slavery as a legalized institution is dead in civilized lands, but the doctrine which supported it is very much alive; that is to say, the doctrine that there is a class of men who have a sort of divine right to be proprietors and guardians, and another class of men whose divine privilege it is to be their wards. It will be recalled, for example, that in 1902 there was a great coal strike which literally threatened our nation, and that when efforts were being made by the government to settle the strike by arbitration, Mr. George F. Baer, spokesman for the operators, wrote: "The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for . . . by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the Country."

It was against this doctrine of divine right that Jefferson wrote, shortly before his death, that he had "always believed that the mass of mankind was not born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred to ride them legitimately by the grace of God." And it was against this doctrine that he penned the words which were accepted as the keystone of a new nation: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Do we often stop to think, I wonder, of the tremendous import of these revolutionary words — this battle-cry of democracy — in the human struggle of the ages? Great humanists here and there had dreamed in such terms; now for the first time a people sought to build them into the

structure of a nation, thereby lifting the hearts of men everywhere on the wings of a great hope and a great promise.

The poet Shelley wrote of the young Republic with glowing words:

> There is a people mighty in its youth,
> A land beyond the oceans of the west,
> Where, though with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth
> Are worshipped. . . .
> This land is like an eagle whose young gaze
> Feeds on the noontide beam, whose golden plume
> Floats moveless on the storm, and in the blaze
> Of sunrise gleams when earth is wrapped in gloom;
> An epitaph of glory for the tomb
> Of murdered Europe may thy fame be made,
> Great People! As the sands shalt thou become;
> Thy growth is swift as morn when night doth fade;
> The multitudinous earth shall sleep beneath thy shade.

That is a voice of far away and long ago. A hundred and sixty years have passed, and here we are — where one of our own poets could write but yesterday:

> Accursed American land,
> Hide your face with your hand.
> You have betrayed the earth,
> It is your doom's birth.

These lines may sound rather silly in the finality of their bitterness, but it is significant that they could have been written at all. We have in sober truth belied our promise. We have set up and accepted the Declaration of Independence as our national philosophy. So far as we have followed it, so far as we have made it a rule of action, we have been a happy people, and we have disappointed neither ourselves nor the rest of the world. Yet we have not always practiced it, and it is doubtful if we really want to practice it now. We seem to be afraid to give ourselves over to it entirely. We are loath to put all our eggs in one basket. There may be, we fear, some truth in the opposite philosophy, after all,

and so we flirt with both philosophies. We have been told that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon at the same time. But we are not so sure; we take no chances, and so we worship at both shrines. And that is why we are in our present state of confusion.

Furthermore, he who takes his stand firmly on the Declaration of Independence and its implications — on the philosophy, that is to say, of the founders of the Republic — is, by a curious irony, placed on the defensive; he is branded as a "red" — an enemy of the Republic — by the vociferations of those who, consciously or unconsciously, are at war with the very principles upon which the Republic is based.

It has always been so, and perhaps will always be so. Democracy is not a static thing; it is not an established thing. It is a dynamic faith which will always have to do battle. Benjamin Franklin was denounced as a radical. So was Thomas Jefferson. So was Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, Lincoln, who towers above all others in our hearts as the exemplar of a true Americanism, whom James Russell Lowell in his "Commemoration Ode" extolled as "new birth of our new soil, the First American," and whom all the world has honored as the exponent of what is most admirable in the American tradition, was during his lifetime and in his death execrated as a traitor and a tyrant.

Abraham Lincoln began his public career, as everyone knows, at a time when the truth of the opening words of the Declaration of Independence was denied both North and South. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court had said that they were never meant to include all men. A senator from Indiana had declared in Congress that the statement that all men are created equal is a self-evident lie.

With such views Lincoln took direct issue. He said in 1858, "I believe that the declaration that all men are created equal is the great fundamental principle upon which our free

institutions rest." And he said in 1861, in Independence Hall, "All the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn so far as I have been able to draw them from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

To the specious objection that in fact all men are not equal or ever have been, and that the signers of the Declaration could not have meant their words to apply to all, he replied at length in his memorable Springfield Address:

> I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal with "certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
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> This they said and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all men were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to confer the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated to and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people everywhere.

"But," you say, "what has that to do with here and now?" Well, it has just this to do with here and now, that if Lincoln were living and speaking today he might well say to us, changing but little his words at Gettysburg; "Eightscore years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great crisis, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

For democracy has its back to the wall now in the 1930's no less than in the 1860's. Three great powers of Europe

have spurned it utterly, and the continent of Europe trembles on the brink. Nation after nation is sharpening its teeth and claws as if in a predatory world — as if there were one law for man and beast. Government by the people, government by persuasion, government by consent — freedom — is giving place to government by force and terrorism.

On this side of the Atlantic mad winds are blowing. The air is loud with *isms*, and among them the only Americanism which seems to be in evidence is, on the one hand, the hundred-percent, table-thumping variety which is as hollow as it is brazen and, on the other hand, the derisive, debunking variety which is equally false and much more insidious.

In 1923, H. L. Mencken launched his submarine, the *American Mercury*, which was designed to sink every craft freighted with American ideals and aspirations; and since then our smart iconoclasts have continued to satirize and bespatter America, subjecting us willy-nilly to a prolonged debauch of self-criticism and self-disparagement which has been so extreme in both quality and quantity as to have been called by one of our writers the "eighth wonder of the world."

From the effects of that orgy none of us has escaped entirely. In some respects it may have been good for us, by taking the wind out of our brassy patriotism and purging us of false pride and vain conceits. But just where has it left us? Has it left us without faith or pride in the American tradition? It has certainly set our youth adrift without anchorage anywhere.

But what of you and me who have to do with the education of youth? Are we, too, adrift? We talk much about shaping the social order in our schools. What social order? What do we believe? Do we ourselves believe in democracy? Do we believe in the Declaration of Independence as a "maxim for free society"? Do we believe in equality?

Some of us do; some of us don't. Most of us think we do. But most of us are snobs, and snobbishness strikes at the very heart of democracy. It is an offense to our vanity to concede that all men are equal. It is a flattering unction to our souls to deny that they are. We are at times painfully conscious of the nakedness of birth and of death; but we are, for the most part, dazzled by the trappings which are worn between. We are humbled in moments of stress and suffering into a realization of our common humanity, but when the stress is removed, we thank God (or ourselves) that we are not as other men — that we are different.

Of course, men are different. It has been said that even a mother knows that her children are different — that they are not equal. One is robust, another delicate; one is docile, another recalcitrant; one is alert and quick of apprehension, another is plodding and slow. Yet it is a strange mother who does not hold her children equally in her affection and in her concern for their well-being, for their development, for their making the most of themselves. And it is a strange democracy which is not equally concerned about all its people and does not strive to give to all air, sun, and soil in which to grow and make the most of themselves.

An American philosopher has said that "man is a growing animal and his birthright is development." The belief in that birthright is democracy. Democracy believes in man — in the dignity of man, in the potential nobility of man. Indeed, it stakes its all on man.

That is not to say that democracy is a sloppy sentimentalism. There is respect in democracy, there is admiration, there is sympathy, there is even compassion, but there is no place in it for a false sentimentalism. Some men are not worthy of respect or even of compassion. The greatest lover of mankind — the most compassionate of all who have ever trod this earth — said of some that it were better for them that

millstones be hung about their necks and that they be drowned in the depths of the sea.

With such recreants there is nothing to do but to weed them out lest they choke all wholesome growth. But weeding is not enough. Viciousness may be more a matter of nurture than of nature. Democracy must cultivate its garden. Humanity at its best is the finest flower we know, and a democracy which is true to itself provides conditions where men are free to become the best that is in them. The prime business of democracy is not the making of things, not even the making of money, but the making of men.

I have stated in what respect men are equal in a democracy, merely putting into other words Lincoln's statement that men are equal in their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It should be apparent that this equality is not equalitarianism. Democracy is not a dead level. Its freedom is a freedom to develop in infinite variety. It is a thing of plains and hills and valleys and mountains. And while the plain may not say to the valley, "I am better than you," or the mountain to the plain, "I am better than you," yet the mountain may be all-important to the fruitfulness and charm of the landscape as a whole. And the recognition of that fact — the willing respect, not the grudging envy, of the many for the few who win to the peaks of human character and achievement — is part of a true democracy.

The Jacksonian shibboleth that one man is as good as another, and a great deal better, smacks not of a genuine democracy but of its pinchbeck counterfeit. He degrades himself who pulls another down. He exalts himself who salutes excellence wherever it is found. Greatness casts no shadow of humiliation upon those who value it. Every Lincoln who rises from the plain is a prideful tribute to our human nature. All yapping at the heels of great men is mobocratic, not democratic. There is no down-drag in democracy. Democracy is an elevating, not a leveling, force.

That is a useful fact for us to remember always. American public education is the most democratic institution that we have. It is indeed our very fortress of democracy, and let us thank God for it. Yet permit me to voice a misgiving lest out of our striving to make it more and more democratic there is creeping into it something which is really not democratic at all. When a board of education in a great city decrees that all pupils in the public schools shall be passed automatically from grade to grade, from the kindergarten through the high school, regardless of the quality of the work that they do, one is reminded of the cynical remark of the Harvard professor who proposed to solve the whole problem of democratic education, lower and higher, by conferring the A.B. degree on every American child at birth. That sort of thing springs out of a leveling philosophy, not a democratic philosophy. At any rate, it is not Jefferson's idea of education, or Lincoln's. It is like saying to boys on the athletic field, where real democracy does in fact prevail: "You can run fast or you can run slow or not run at all. You are equal, and the race is not to the swift."

Please do not misunderstand me. I believe with all my heart that education in a democracy must be for the slow as well as for the swift. Every youth is entitled to the kind and degree of training which will enable him to play his part as best he can in the social order. But if emphasis upon that fundamental principle, which is so terribly difficult to practice, actually results in slowing up the swift — in failure to give to the youth of extraordinary talents the stimulus and the incentive as well as the opportunity to develop his powers to the utmost — then education is recreant to the requirements of true democracy. A diversity of talents, nurtured in freedom, means a diversity of functions, and a true democracy is one which cultivates not only the best that is in all but the best that is in the best for the benefit of all.

There lurks always the danger in a sentimental humani-

tarianism, as distinguished from a sound humanism, that it may lower the level of society under the banner of raising it.

Nor does democracy seek to create a dead level of economic status. It has nothing to do with "soaking the rich" or "sharing the wealth." It has nothing to do with the abolition of private property. At least, it is difficult to conceive that freedom means very much if one is not reasonably free to enjoy the fruits of one's labors. To enjoy the fruits of others' labors is exploitation, but to enjoy the fruits of one's own is democracy. If one's own labor is more fruitful than that of others, that harms no man.

That, however, does not mean that private property is a graven image — that it is sacrosanct. Man is above things, and humanity above property. To hark back to our exemplar of democracy, Abraham Lincoln wiped out with a few strokes of the pen in the interest of the nation billions of property in slaves. What would he think, I wonder, if he were to return and view the American scene as it is today? He would recognize, what he could not so easily appreciate in his lifetime, when new frontiers promised freedom and escape, that there can be a bondage of circumstances no less than a bondage of law. He would be dismayed on seeing that in a country of enormous resources the majority of the people live close to the borderline of a decent subsistence and at least one-third of them short of it, many of them far short of it. He would at once see the imminent danger in such a situation — danger to the Union. We can imagine him saying that no nation, certainly no democracy, can endure half replete and half hungry. But he would not hope to solve this problem by a pen stroke. He would not think in terms of any revolutionary scheme to make all equally rich or equally poor. He would seek patiently and firmly to lift up and not pull down. He would have no patience with those who

stir up hatred between those who have and those who have not. He would reckon, as we all must, with the fact of greed in human nature. But certainly he would not, as so many do, place all the greed in one camp.

The poison of greed contaminates all classes. Indeed, it has been said that the worship of the golden calf is our national religion. Certainly the arrogance of wealth on the one hand and the adulation of wealth on the other, so far as they do exist, are a madness which threatens the life of democracy. One cannot, however, agree that most people are obsessed by this stupidity. Most people are interested in money, not for itself, but as a competence — as a means to an end; but they are chiefly concerned with something more interesting. They are interested in being good farmers or good mechanics or good doctors or good clergymen or good teachers or good engineers. Theirs is the pride and joy of workmanship. Money is not the main thing. Indeed, any dictionary of biography or any *Who's Who* is a catalogue largely of those who have taken the vow of poverty so far as the great money prizes are concerned, and yet have been and are among the happiest of our people.

We may, therefore, have a happy democracy without equalizing wealth, which is impossible without doing away with private property altogether. But we may not have a happy democracy, we may not have a democracy at all, if we tolerate circumstances which consign millions of people to live in grinding poverty. There is a poverty which is not lovely, which is not honest, which is degrading, which is slavery. The Greeks were at least partly right in their view that extreme poverty is as demoralizing as extreme wealth. Perhaps Rousseau was not far wrong in saying that in a well-ordered society no man is rich enough to buy another or poor enough to be obliged to sell himself. Bernard Shaw's statement that poverty is the unpardonable sin is a bit of

rhetoric, but Benjamin Franklin's homely saying that "an empty sack cannot stand on its own bottom" is common sense. A free man is an upstanding man. Freedom in a democracy means nothing if it does not mean freedom to go about one's work with independence and self-respect.

Freedom to go about one's work! That involves freedom to have work. True democracy has but one class, the working class, in the sense that all its people are in one manner or another productive — of food, of goods, of culture, of beauty; in a word, productive of better and happier conditions of life.

Our most illustrious banker, Mr. J. P. Morgan, was quoted not long ago as saying that civilization is dependent on having a leisure class. He did not mean, I suppose, our largest leisure class; he did not mean the unemployed. He meant, no doubt, those who are not compelled to work, not those who are compelled not to work. Yet the latter command our concern no less than the former. For if it be true that Mr. Morgan's leisure class is upholding and raising the level of civilization, it is at least equally true that the demoralization of enforced idleness of millions upon millions of our people is dragging it down — dragging down, indeed, Mr. Morgan's own class. For what I may term our largest leisure class is, from the point of view of the other leisure class, a recreant population. That is, they have nothing to contribute to the other; they have no purchasing power, and are therefore not an asset but a drag upon it.

Here the lines of Chesterton, written for England, have some pertinence for us:

> "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
> Where wealth accumulates and men decay."
> So rang of old the noble voice in vain
> O'er the Last Peasants wandering on the plain,
> Doom has reversed the riddle and the rhyme,
> While sinks the commerce reared upon that crime,

> The thriftless towns litter with lives undone,
> To whom our madness left no joy but one;
> And irony that glares like Judgment Day
> Sees men accumulate and wealth decay.

We have learned, let us hope, from the enforced discipline of the last few years some new lessons. We have learned that our old philosophy of prosperity does not work — the Hamiltonian philosophy that if we promote the welfare of big business and industry by tariffs and other favors and subventions the prosperity of the rich will somehow trickle down to bless the common run of men. We have learned that prosperity is rooted in and grows upward out of the common soil of the people, and if that soil is poor or barren, the nation is poor or barren.

And we have learned another lesson. We have learned that leisure is a doubtful blessing, and we have changed our minds about work. The curse which drove man out of Eden, "in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread," has become a birthright for which men are willing and determined to march and fight. Creative work is not drudging work; it is the spice and joy of life, especially if it be one's own work. The farmer whose field is yellow for the reaper does not labor with his ear cocked for the noon whistle. The scholar who is intent on his researches begrudges the hours he has to give to meals and sleep. In many occupations the pride of proprietorship and the zest of craftsmanship make the day's work all too short.

Unfortunately, much of the world's work is not of that character, but of such a character that men go to their tasks grudgingly, pick up their tools with reluctance, and drop them with alacrity:

> For most men in a brazen prison live,
> Where in the sun's hot eye
> With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
> Their lives to some unmeaning task-work give,
> Dreaming of nought beyond their prison wall.

These lines of Matthew Arnold are not a very exaggerated picture of the treadmill monotony of labor in a machine age, where the worker's one interest is in fewer hours and higher pay; hence, strikes and lock-outs and a state of war, or at best an armed truce, between employers and employed.

It is too much to hope that democracy can in any large measure restore the zest of craftsmanship in an age of mass production. But one thing it can do, which some industries have already done: it can enlist the interest of the worker as a stockholder, a partner in the business, so that he will see his piecemeal task in relation to the whole, with the zest which comes from pride of ownership.

But what of those who have no work at all? Here is a great difficulty about which there is sharp disagreement. There are experts (not many) who contend that unemployment is a temporary condition, and there are those who insist that it is here to stay.

One can only venture the deliberate opinion that industry operating for the sake of profit alone will not take up the slack of unemployment. Industry is steadily substituting machines for men — every day, more and more machines. Machines are more efficient in mass production. Besides, they do not strike; at least, they do not strike in concert, and they are deaf to the walking delegate:

> Liberty is waste. The wheels must turn, the wheels
> Must turn, must turn, the wheels must turn the wheels.
> I do not need free men. I need wheels, wheels.
> Free men feel, the wheels run slowly.
> Free men think, and the wheels run wild.
> . . . . . .
> I will have nothing but wheels.

That attitude has much of promise for leisure, but not much for employment. Organized society is, therefore, freighted with the problem of the unemployed. It must concern itself with them, if not as a matter of justice, then as a matter of

safety. Hungry men are troublesome, not to say dangerous. They must be fed. But that is not enough. Enforced idleness is as demoralizing as hunger, and as vital a problem to be met.

I am aware that there are some who insist that there is no problem at all save that which lies in human laziness. Our great Mr. Ford seems to be of that opinion. Mr. Ford is a clever man, but if he means that twelve millions of our men are out of work because they will not work, he insults not only them but his own intelligence. The majority of people prefer to eat their bread in the sweat of their brows. Some don't, but most do.

Can society, then, provide them with work? Of course it can if it will. It cannot, probably, or should not, provide them with work in the fields which are now occupied by private enterprise. But there is in other fields plenty of creative work which it would be profitable to have done. There is for one thing the restoration of the beauty of the American landscape. In our haste and greed to loot an unspoiled continent, we have despoiled a continent. We have swept over it like a scourge of locusts, leaving devastation behind. To repair the damage is the work of a generation at least. There are scrap heaps and rubbish and ruins — relics of a squatter civilization — to be cleared away; billboards to be torn down; highways (which are becoming more and more the domiciles of the American people) to be made attractive by planting along them trees and shrubs and flowers; paths to be built for pedestrians and cyclists; game refuges to be provided for the wild life that we have not already extinguished; rivers and streams to be cleansed of pollution and restored to their charm of clear living waters; and there is also the Augean labor of renovating the slums of our cities.

Add to this the tremendous task of reforestation, of

restoring wild grass to dust-cursed prairies which should never have been broken, of rehabilitating lands which have been ruined on the principle of "exploit, ravage, and move on," and of preventing at their source the terrific havoc year by year of forest fires and floods, and you have work enough and to spare for the nation. Such enterprises would in the long run yield enormous dividends in the happiness and well-being of all our people, and for the immediate future the zest of useful creative work for the unemployed.

Walt Whitman, in his day, wrote down in a poem a vision of "America Singing" — the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the woodcutter, the shoemaker, the plowman, the wife, and the daughter — all the people singing at their work, each his or her appropriate song. What shall we think now of the burden of that poem? Shall we say it is a visionary dream and therefore dangerous to think upon, not to say act upon? Shall we lock up the prophets who cry aloud unto us, "Where there is no vision the people perish"?

That would be a strange thing — a renegade thing — to say in a country which for five generations and more has been dreaming the "American Dream" and which is now, in spite of its backslidings and reverses, confessedly the richest and most powerful nation on this planet.

Comparisons are odious, especially where one's affections and loyalties are involved. But I know a country across the Atlantic which, compared with our own, is small and poor, but with a degree of general prosperity and contentment which is today the envy of the world. It was once the most powerful military force in Europe. It poured its manhood and its substance into the insatiable maw of war. It bled itself white. It grew weak and poor. It was for a long time rather badly governed by a class for a class. Its people turned with wistfulness and then with hope to the land of

promise beyond the sea. There sprang up amongst them like an epidemic what one of its writers, Selma Lagerlöf, has called a "veritable American fever." They came here in a great welcome migration. They built themselves gratefully and loyally and sturdily into the fabric of our Republic, and are among our most valued citizens. Emigrants from that country are still welcome; to them our gates are open; but they are not coming any more; there is no longer any urge to come. In the home-country they have seized upon and translated into action those democratic ideals which in times past have attracted so many of their compatriots to settle in the United States. They have built up a marvelous system of public education; they have made the means of culture available to all the people — love of the arts and crafts is found in the peasant's cottage as well as in the homes of the well-to-do; and without revolutionary change they have cooperated to bring about a general diffusion of prosperity. There is no great wealth as we reckon wealth in America, but there are no degrading slums and there is no grinding poverty and there is less unemployment amongst them than in any other country of the civilized world. They are a people singing at their work.

Must we then reverse the sentiment of the lines which we used to quote so proudly:

> Have the elder races halted,
> Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
> We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson,
> Pioneers, O Pioneers.

Is it we who now are wearied, we who droop and end our lesson? God forfend! We are still pioneers, only our pioneering must henceforth be of a different sort. We cannot now escape oppression by packing our household goods

in a covered wagon and moving on to a new frontier, a new freedom, a new country. Here where we are is our country; here is our frontier; and here we must make our stand.

That is not easy for us with our habits to do. It has so long been so simple to run away from our problems by packing up and moving on. We have not been trained by necessity for social adventuring; we have not learned to mobilize our common will; we have not learned to think of government as an active partnership of all the people engaged in a common enterprise. There has survived in us something of the feeling of our ancestors who came to this country partly to escape from oppressive governments — the feeling that government is a thing alien to us, something put upon us and not our own; a thing necessary, no doubt, but a necessary evil to be kept strictly within bounds. Moreover, in a nation whose "first business is business," to quote the not-too-happy phrase of Calvin Coolidge, there has been for many years a great anxiety lest government tyrannize over business. Not that business has ever been shy about calling upon the government to intervene in its behalf, but that government is expected to keep out until invited in.

Let it be understood that champions of democracy have no quarrel with business as such. Indeed, it is the clear duty of government to promote legitimate industry and commerce in all ways which are consistent with the nation's good. The quarrel is with those enemies of democracy who would use government for their selfish ends or who would reduce it to impotency as an agency to promote the general welfare.

The president of the national Chamber of Commerce not so very long ago made a plea for inefficiency in government, arguing that "a strong government eats holes in our liberties." "Whose liberties?" may well be asked. But, in fact, that is just what a strong government may do. It may destroy our liberties or it may promote them, depending on whether

the government is really our own or not. Many seem to insist that government be merely a police agency to be called by telephone when thieves break through and steal. They do not conceive of government as a democracy, that is to say, as a corporate partnership of all the people working together in their quest of the good life. But that is what it is. In the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution the purpose and function of government is explicitly stated. It is to secure to all its citizens their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; it is to promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

That is a large order, but a true democracy must be clothed with power to do that much. It can do no less.

Lincoln used the power of government to destroy the liberty of Americans to hold slaves, in the interest of a larger freedom. What, then, is liberty? What is freedom? We hear it said nowadays that liberty and equality are incompatible terms — that if we have liberty we cannot have equality, and if we have equality we cannot have liberty.

It is all a matter of definition of terms. If by "equality" we mean, not absolute equality, which is equalitarianism, but a condition where all men are equally free to develop the best that is in them, and if we define "liberty" to mean, not liberty in the absolute, which is anarchy, but a thing which is generally diffused among the people by limitations at this point and that, then liberty and equality are inseparable terms. It should be obvious enough that liberty is a relative thing. It can exist only to the extent that it is limited by laws which insure that freedom for some is not tyranny for others.

Abraham Lincoln has discussed that question. He said:

> The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty. And the American people just now are much in need of one. We all declare for liberty, but using the same word we do not mean the

same thing. With some, the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name, liberty. And it follows that each of the things is by respective parties called by two different and incompatible names, liberty and tyranny.

The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act. . . . Plainly the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of liberty.

These words of Lincoln are still strangely apropos. Let me speak in terms of one example. A certain publisher is strong for the freedom of the press, but uses that freedom to curb freedom of speech. He is free to use the power of an astronomical fortune and a clanking chain of more than a score of newspapers with immense circulation to corrupt public opinion, to degrade and enslave public taste, to calumniate patriotic and honorable men, and recently to terrorize the teachers in our schools and universities from thinking and speaking the truth. Manifestly what is liberty for the wolf is not liberty for my colleagues.

Perhaps this one instance may point the answer to the question, What, then, is a free society? A free society, like a free man, is one which sets bounds to the baser impulses which degrade and enslave human life in order to liberate and give scope to what Lincoln liked to call "the better angels of our nature."

To promote that freedom is not now quite so simple as it was when Jefferson lived or even when Lincoln lived. There was not then much need of government. A continent, largely unexplored, offered hope and opportunity to live in freedom. Each man upon his isolated farm on the frontier was in a great measure monarch of all he surveyed. He was free and self-sufficient in a degree that one cannot be free in an urban civilization. Rules of the road, for example,

were not important on the broad prairies. One could drive right or left, forward or backward, or round and round, and harm neither oneself nor others, but if one exercises such freedom now in the dense traffic of a city, one dies or others die and their freedom dies with them.

The complaint against the growth in the scope and complexity of government in our modern age is either silly or insincere. That is not to say, however, that we should not agree with Jefferson that that government is best which governs least. That government, in other words, is best which governs only enough to secure to the individual the largest domain of freedom which is compatible with the freedom of others. "All men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." There is no divine right of kings, there is no divine right of class, there is no divine right of the state, and, I may add, there is no divine right of circumstances, of the status quo — of "things" (as Emerson said) to be "in the saddle and ride mankind." But there is the sacred right of the individual soul to live its own life, to think and speak its own thoughts, to seek its own spiritual and material well-being without let or hindrance, so long as it does not trespass upon the equal rights of other men. That is democracy; anything else — call it communism or fascism or what you will — is tyranny.

Only let it not be forgotten that a democracy which is too weak to preserve the sovereignty of the individual in that domain of freedom which is rightfully his is not true to its name. It is not a rule of the people; it is not a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Government in a democracy must be potent with the strength of all the people. It must be stronger than any gang or group or bloc or league or legion. It must be stronger than all organized principalities and powers within it which seek to defy it or to use it for their own ends. It must be stronger

even than those political parties which have in past years joined issue mainly on the question as to which was the rightful proprietor of the United States.

If it be objected that what I have been saying smacks of that dull prospect which we name utopia, let me reply that we need have little fear lest a greater devotion on the part of more of us to the principles laid down in the preambles to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution may deprive us of the zest of living in an imperfect world — a world in which we have to do battle. We have lived and, doubtless, shall continue to live in the midst of a warfare between two philosophies: the one, which, stripped of all benevolent disguises, is a predatory philosophy; the other, a humanistic philosophy which holds to the preciousness of human life, which believes in the dignity and worth of our human being, which puts humanity above class and man above things, and which seeks to create a social soil and climate wherein every human personality may grow and flower and be fruitful, each in accordance with the nature and capacity of each.

To enlist our students in that humanism, to reveal to them the real symbolism of the flag, to clothe the skeleton of our history with the radiant power of an idea — in a word, to imbue them with the true American tradition as against its bogus counterfeits and all extremes of left and right which threaten to destroy it — that is the task of the American schools, and it is high time they went about it, now that we are by no means sure whether we "shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth."

Perhaps we are doing better than I think, but I am sure we are not doing well enough. Go across the Atlantic; go almost any place where democracy lies dead or sleeping; go to Germany of all places, for example, and you will see an astounding phenomenon. You will see a nationalism so

extreme and ominous as to have no parallel in history — a national ideology founded on myths and lies, implemented by savagery, and hell-bent for war. Yet because all the instrumentalities of propaganda and education, above all, the schools, from the kindergarten through the university, are devoted to its promulgation, you will find youth submitting itself to it with gladness and enthusiasm. In that nationalism youth has found itself, has discovered the joy of belonging, of being loyal to something outside of itself, of believing something with all its might, and of marching together with a common faith towards a common goal. The goal is unspeakably false; but there is something splendid, terribly splendid, in their marching together. Then come back home, and you will see our youth believing in what, belonging to what, devoted to what? You will find them in general rather apathetic and indifferent, many of them drifting blindly on this tide or that, having little in common save a common disenchantment with democracy, a common yearning for some new fashion of government, with little or no understanding of the tyrannies which are the alternatives to democracy, and with little or no appreciation of the long struggle of the ages — the battles fought and the blood shed — to produce the vision and the beginnings of the fact of a free people engaged in a national partnership in quest of the good life. They may know something of the dry bones of our history and government, but there is no march music in what they know.

I do not, of course, propose that we borrow the methods of the Nazi or the Fascist or the Communist state. I do see that they have done what we have failed to do. They have enlisted their youth in the cause of the nation. They have given them the joy of belonging. I see, furthermore, that the old war between democracy and absolutism has now reached a critical stage in the world, and that the lack of

spiritual integration in our democracy in contrast to the complete solidarity of the totality state is a weakness which we cannot view with complacency. It seems rather important that we ourselves should be not only in the geographical but in the spiritual sense a nation — a union. And it seems a pitiful confession of weakness for us to say that we cannot be united in that sense without resorting to a regimentation which we abhor.

We do not need to inculcate patriotism by the distortion of truth. We do not need to fabricate national myths in order to have a national soul. The truth is enough — the vital truth and all the truth, no glossing over unpleasant aspects of it. There have been times when the American tradition has been weak; there have been times when it has all but broken down; there are dark shadows in our history to which we cannot honestly close our eyes. But we can keep our eyes open to them in our study and in our teaching and yet be able to say with the poet, "O Beautiful, my Country!"

The American tradition is a noble tradition. What can compare with it? What in all the world holds greater promise? It is something which should challenge the soldier that is in our youth. It should not be difficult to enlist them in its cause, to let them see it as it is in its beginnings, in its epic struggle and its never ending quest, never finally victorious, but never driven from the field — not a mushroom philosophy, born of the night, neither an outworn creed, but something ageless and immortal, yet peculiarly our own; something to believe in, something to cleave to, and something to battle for.

That would be a great thing for us to do for our youth and for the nation, and it is all that we should do. It is not for us to preach a new social order in our schools. All that we need do, and all that we should do, as teachers, is to

make the American tradition, with all its vicissitudes up to now and all its implications for today and tomorrow, a vital force, so that our youth may step into the uncertain future from a firm footing in our living past.