

1940

What is Our Democratic Heritage?

Paul M. Hebert

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/hebert_speeches

Date: 1940-10-25

Repository Citation

What is Our Democratic Heritage?, October 25, 1940. Paul M. Hebert Speech Files, Archival Collection LLA0002, Paul M. Hebert Law Center Collection, Paul M. Hebert Law Center Library, Baton Rouge, La.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Law Center History at LSU Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Paul M. Hebert Speeches by an authorized administrator of LSU Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact kreed25@lsu.edu.

WHAT IS OUR DEMOCRATIC HERITAGE ?

Address at the Seventh Annual October Educational Conference

Louisiana State University

by

Acting President Paul M. Hebert

October 25, 1940

WHAT IS OUR DEMOCRATIC HERITAGE?

/// Slightly more than two generations ago, a great American, speaking on English soil, discussing the subject of democracy, took occasion to point out:

"One of the strongest cements of society is the conviction of mankind that the state of things into which they are born is a part of the order of the universe, as natural, let us say, as that the sun should go 'round the earth. It is a conviction that they will not surrender except upon compulsion, and a wise society should look to it that this compulsion be not put upon them."

This observation of James Russell Lowell, taken from his classic essay on Democracy, sums up the traditional American attitude of the past toward democracy. We have been prone to consider democracy as a heritage, as the natural state of mankind, as a part of the accepted order because it is the condition of society into which we as Americans have been born. In the light of present world conditions today, we may with propriety ask whether we are in the words of John Stuart Mill to cease "to consider representative democracy as an absolute principle and regard it as a question of time, place, and circumstance." In America, of course, the answer must be no. And that answer should be clearly predicated upon the realization that there is no trick of perpetual motion involved in forms of government any more so than in mechanics, but that free men will not permit their accepted mode of action and their way of life, their sacred privileges, to be cast aside for utopian solutions of all social and

economic ills. What the answer will be elsewhere depends upon the ultimate direction of triumph of force of arms.

~~As Am. Citizens we~~

~~We Americans~~ quite appropriately subscribe to the democratic ideal, to the democratic ~~state~~ ^{faith}, to the democratic way of life. We accept the benefits of democracy; we extol its virtues, and quite appropriately also, at this tragic and critical hour in the history of the world, we pause in bewilderment, while the ugly head of dictatorship is trying with ever-increasing success to strike freedom from the hearts of men; we pause, I say, quite appropriately and gather for serious consideration ^{of} the nature and elements of democracy; we gather to speculate upon its future course, to consider how it may be best defended, to appraise and understand the role of education in the task of preserving the democratic way of life and solemnly to resolve that the blessings of living in the American way, enjoying the fruits of our democracy, shall not be denied to our sons and daughters in our time.

What is our democratic heritage, and how came we by this heritage? What is the meaning of democracy for every-day-Americans? Can sufficient force be mustered to preserve the benefits of democracy in the modern world? Are we in America worthy of our heritage? And can we rise to the emergencies of the confused and chaotic world of today?

These are indeed the burning issues of the day. They are the questions that underlie the daily headlines. And as we ponder these questions, we should first of all realize and understand that the

ideals of democracy are, at best, difficult of attainment. It is hard for popular government by the majority to achieve the requisite efficiency in function[^] that is necessary to sustain a complicated internal economy. It is difficult to strike the even balance that is ever necessary in the preservation of civil rights. In contrast, in a totalitarian state the way of life is not so complicated. It is not complicated because there are no free men who have the privilege of speaking and thinking; it is easy to do what one is told to do. It is comparatively easy to act if your thinking is done by others and if you are willing to surrender freedom when according them that privilege. It is a part of our democratic heritage that we do not profess to know all the answers. Consequently, the problems of the modern world seem more complex and difficult of solution. But by the same token, these problems present a challenge, an opportunity -- challenge and opportunity appreciated by a race of free men.

We have been frequently told that democracy is something more than a mere political conception -- it is a way of life in itself. It has spiritual as well as political foundations. ^{This has a special meaning for us - Catholics} By this is meant democracy embraces values which we hold dear, values outside the political sphere, values of importance far transcending such matters as universal suffrage and the political form that the government shall take. According to John Dewey, "Democracy is the belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and

methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness." This fundamental belief in the ability of the human race and in the dignity of the individual constitutes the veritable foundation inherent in our conception of the democratic heritage that is ours. Democracy teaches, believes, and strives to achieve recognition of the ideal that the lives and souls of men are not mere instruments to be manipulated by the power of the state toward the accomplishment of its preconceived and coolly calculated end. Such a viewpoint reflects the spirit and philosophy of the totalitarian way of life rather than the spirit of democracy. It is thought to afford opportunity for the accomplishment of the high and noble in human aspirations, ideals and prayers. Through the avenue of opportunity, sustained by an abiding faith in the possibilities of human nature, men are left free in accordance with their abilities to achieve in cooperative free enterprise that good life which is said to be the goal of all living.

The concept of our democratic heritage, intangible in itself, embodies other similarly elusive concepts defying accurate definition. American democracy is concerned, for instance, with the advancement of the general welfare; it is concerned with the protection and safeguard of one's civil liberties; it is based on the idea of the government by consent of the governed; its dominant characteristic from the political viewpoint is the appeal to reason ^{in this} ~~and~~ rule of the majority under a government whose chief aim is the achievement or pursuit of

happiness for a race of free men.

In speaking of these concepts I do not mean to imply that the founding fathers thought abstractly of democracy as such. It is true that the Declaration of Independence referred to the equality of men, but the founding fathers were at first primarily concerned with the problem of how English principles and precedence could best be adopted to the conditions of American life on this continent; this was the dominant problem in their minds in the drafting of the articles of confederation and in the framing of the Constitution.

Our American pattern of democracy has evolved slowly and by laborious process. It is the reflection not only of the bill of rights but of the ameliorating influence of Jeffersonian democracy upon the political credo of the Federalists who would have favored a stronger centralized government. Our democratic heritage, indeed, has been purchased at a price; it consequently cannot be expected that this heritage will be maintained without cost to us. We Americans will have to pay the price of the privileges that are ours, to make transition to other forms of ~~government~~ ^{govt. unrec. + impossible.} essential. In appraising our American heritage, we should perhaps frankly recognize that no form of government can guarantee freedom from and elimination of all forms of economic oppression, tyranny, cruelty or greed. In the search for the good life, ^{humanity} ~~human life~~ should constantly strive for the elimination of these evils; but despite the fact that we cannot claim perfection for democracy, we can modestly but not inaccurately declare

that democracy is the best expedient yet designed for the elimination of class distinction, for the opening of the doors of opportunity insofar as it is humanly possible. The democratic heritage will always justify itself, if, generation after generation, it can continue to pass on to the young men of the next generation the opportunity for advancement through education, the opportunity through normal participation in the economic struggle for the maximum realization proportionate to one's intelligence and to one's aspirations and ambitions.

America cannot fail to be profoundly affected by the current of European affairs. If the battle of England is lost, we shall be standing alone in our effort to preserve the democratic way of life. We cannot pursue the path of isolation; the probabilities are against our being permitted to pursue the even tenor of our way. We have already been affected: our commerce has been much reduced, and most assuredly we will have to share the losses of the war whether we become belligerents or not.

Moreover, one is appalled at the complexity of the puzzling question of what is to happen when peace finally comes. The cataclysmic effect of war has its repercussions for generations after the drums are stilled. The dislocation of the economic system cannot be remedied when twenty millions of men under arms are demobilized. If victory is achieved, what kind of an England will we have? What are the consequences of victory? Is America willing

to assume its role in the policing of Europe after peace?

These are all questions which cannot be answered. They are broad enough merely to suggest that when the smoke of battle shall have cleared there will remain the baffling problems -- problems almost incapable of solution, problems of technology and machine production, the problems of distribution in all of its phases -- distribution of wealth, distribution of population, and distribution of goods and services. Out of this evolve the problems of labor, of agriculture, industry, trade, commerce, and all the periodic crises in internal economy.

In the economic sphere, if our democratic heritage is to be preserved, production must be increased, not decreased. Men must somehow be made the master of machines their minds have created. Production of goods and services will not be enough. The means of distribution of goods so essential to the stability and happiness of human kind, for all classes, must be devised. This will involve intelligence and gigantic economic cooperation. Only in this manner can our democratic heritage of a classless society be preserved.

A second measure which it seems to me is essential to the preservation of our democratic heritage falls in the realm of education. Constantly and persistently, youth must be taught the ideals of democracy; the ultimate goal must be held before them; American youth must be taught to participate in the government; they must be taught to appreciate the privileges of citizenship; they must be made keenly aware of the present-day challenge to democracy; they must be

warned of the dangers of propaganda and of the effectiveness of education as the only means of combating deadly propaganda. It is important for American students today to receive the accepted discipline, but training for citizenship is of equal importance.

*Catholic Education
can be found
in its
accomplishments
Catholic Church
State School*

In the last analysis, our democratic heritage must stand or fall on its own merits. It will stand or fall on its ability to ~~adopt~~ ^{adapt} the democratic way of life to the problems of the modern world. Machiavelli long ago advanced the view that democracy cannot exist permanently in the world -- that it is impossible for men to govern themselves; ^{that} the Roman republics were able to continue for such a long period of time solely because of the deep-seated conviction in the national will that it was solemnly necessary at time to appoint dictators, dictators who would assume the power over life and death for the purpose of protecting the interests of the republic or state above the interests of individuals. It remains for the American democratic heritage of the twentieth century to prove the falsity of the Machiavellian assertion. This is a task to challenge the ingenuity of the best minds in America. The Nazi ideology may be the net result of issues that have been created by the problems of the modern world; but our democratic heritage can and will be preserved by social and economic gain and by democratic answers of satisfactory significance in the handling of present-day problems, in the handling of the problems of capital and labor, in the handling of social questions such as unemployment, social

security -- in the handling of the problems of trade, business, industrial expansion and production and distribution. The American heritage possesses elasticity to find the means through intelligent planning, to harness science and technology in the interest of mankind. But democracy must, of course, show increasing competence in the quest to make life more attractive. This means that the fundamental liberties of the human race will be preserved while great social gains are made -- better housing will be achieved; better living conditions; better conditions of labor; ideal conditions of recreation -- in short, the good life.

In the achievement of these goals, what are the characteristic essentials of our democratic heritage which must be preserved?

Democracy is indeed characterized by many attributes: one of the chief attributes is the fundamental belief in the equality of man from which flows our heritage of civil liberties, protected in the Bill of Rights. Under democracy there is no such thing as the divine right of the majority; majorities may control action, but within the accepted forms under due process of law and with full regard to the civil liberties of the individual. The democratic heritage means security of property, personal liberty, freedom, and universal suffrage. The blessings that we enjoy under our democratic heritage are tolerance, justice, opportunity, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of the person.

In totalitarian Germany, youth is taught that democracy is

a vile and vicious way of life. The religious and racial tolerance so characteristic of the democratic heritage is in marked contrast to the constitution of the Nazi party wherein it is declared that none but those of German blood may be members of the nation and citizens of the state. *Catholics have been persecuted* Consequently, no Jew may be a member of the nation. And so the lists of contrasts might be drawn; this foreign way of life which threatens to engulf us would substitute for the dignity of the individual the principle that the first duty of the individual is to the state and that he exists solely for the benefit of the state. Instead of security of property under due process of law, incomes unearned by work *und. die profane* ~~designed by~~ the Nazi party would be totally abolished. Instead of freedom of enterprise, all business would be nationalized and land confiscated. Instead of a great free system of education such as we have in America, we would see the spectacle of a reconstructed educational system fashioned in accordance with the new ideas of a state sociology. Teachers would be told what "truth" the textbooks must contain. Instead of speaking of filling secondary school teaching positions from the normal channels through teacher certification, knowledge of subject matter and training in professional fields would become unimportant. There would be substituted therefor high rank in the Nazi party as had been done under official regulations by the ministry of education in Nazi Germany. Censorship of the press would be established. In short, the vicious system of state

socialism in contrast with our American heritage of democracy would cut off the very roots in personal character. State socialism would eliminate self-help, forethought and frugality -- attributes which nourish and sustain the trunk and branches of every vigorous commonwealth. On the other hand, democracy -- the democratic way of life -- is designed to insure the largest degree of freedom of action for the state, for the community, and for the individual.

When we speak of civil liberties in this American democracy, we are dealing with the major parts of our treasured heritage of a free people. To our courts and to the legislature is committed the guardianship of our deeply cherished liberties. The legislative authority to curtail these liberties may be contested in the form of public opinion and in the judiciary. One or two recent illustrations might be used for contrast as evidence of the meaning of liberty under law as we know it in America. Take for example, the recent flag saluting controversy: two pupils were expelled from an American public school because of their refusal to salute the flag of the United States as part of the daily school exercise. The family of the children were affiliated with Jehovah's Witnesses, and the children, according to the allegation, had been taught that a salute to the flag was forbidden by the Bible. The action was taken to the United States Supreme Court for review where the decision of the school district in dismissing the students was sustained. It is not the result

of this case that matters; it is rather to ask this question: can anyone in the audience imagine such a controversy being raised as a justiciable controversy in Nazi Germany today? But in America, the way is always open for orderly consideration of an alleged right, however capricious, where that right is claimed in the name of civil liberty; and, although the existence of the particular right asserted might ultimately be denied, as was the case in this instance, the important thing is that a judicial tribunal exists to protect our citizens in these matters. The freedom of the press has been invoked when a state statute sought to prevent distribution of allegedly religious pamphlets without first securing a municipal license; similarly, the right of assembly is infringed by an attempt to prevent a public gathering. Peaceful picketing may not be outlawed by statute as this violates the fundamental rights and liberties secured to all persons by the Fourteenth Amendment. The judiciary stands guard and has freely expressed the opinion that in America men must be left free to speak on matters that are vital to them, that opportunity must be thereby provided for falsehoods to be exposed through the process of education and discussion -- education and discussion which are so essential to free government.

I suppose that by now I have said enough to illustrate the general theme that our democratic heritage in America, with its numerous liberties, is a heritage more precious than life itself and that moreover through intelligence and education American democracy

should have the facilities of attacking successfully the economic problems of mechanization and urbanization that so sorely oppress us today. As a nation we have a great political and social heritage. We also have a great physical heritage in the fusion of blood of all races and cultures -- a nation that has been capable of absorbing the poor and the ignorant, a nation that has absorbed turbulent people and has made them over into good citizens who are ready to die in defense of our country -- in defense of our institutions. A nation that can absorb such heterogeneous people as English, Dutch, Swedish, Scotch, Welsh, German -- a nation that can absorb Quaker, Huguenot, Catholic, Puritan, Protestant and Jew certainly must have the vitality to absorb and solve the problems of a modern economic world.

And as we think ahead on this matter of the future of our American democratic heritage, I like somehow to reflect upon the words of Luther Gulick. He writes:

"In the past generation one era of world history closed; a new one is now opening. Apparently this new era will belong to those who can learn to work together intelligently, happily, and productively with the aid of modern science without exploiting natural resources, foreign peoples, or submerged classes. This would seem to require cooperative skill, a high degree of universal education, much scientific research, great capacity for self-government, and the ability to meet changes in the national and social world without panic. If this conclusion is sound, one key to the future lies in education."

To you, ~~members of the Holyn Society~~ ladies and gentlemen, ~~in attendance at this educational~~ conference I can say in conclusion only that this is the challenge that is presented to us all. The vitality of the American democratic

heritage should be equal to the challenge.
