

VALLEY FORGE

Address at the 150th Anniversary, French - American Alliance, Valley Forge, May 5, 1928 by Joseph Fort Newton

What memories, what historic echoes the very words bring back to every patriotic heart! What deeds of daring, what almost superhuman endurance they symbolize in the heroic legend of our country! As far back as we can remember, in the pride and tenderness of childhood, our hearts turned to this spot as to a shrine. Today we take off our hats and lift up our hearts, in homage to the heroism of man and the mercy of God.

Surely he is a strange man, and no American at all, who can read the story of the winter at Valley Forge, and not feel his warm heart with a new pulse of love and loyalty to his country, which inspired such devotion and endurance. Who can walk over the old campground, now a lovely park, with its memorial Chapel, an exquisite poem in stone, a Gothic shrine both of patriotism and religion, and not feel that he is indeed on Holy Ground! Such a day should make us renew our vows to the ideals for which men were ready and willing to give their all, lest we forget what the liberty we enjoy cost in sacrifice.

One hundred and fifty years ago this land was the scene of events of vast import and moment, the meaning of which is felt today, not only in our institutions, but in the life of the world. Not simply a new nation, but a new kind of nation was struggling to birth in a new world, a nation "Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It was, indeed, "the last great hope of man;" and at Valley Forge the issue hung in the balance - due to profound discouragement of the people.

Lexington, Bunker Hill and Saratoga were behind; Monmouth, Stony Point and Yorktown were ahead. Between lay the snows of Valley Forge, when the people were depressed, the Army well-nigh demoralized, its moral almost broken, and the fortunes of freedom were at their lowest ebb. If despair had been possible, our fathers would have been the victims of it in that awful ordeal of winter, both in weather and in spirit, when the Chief city of the land was the playground of the enemy, and the ragged remnant of the army, decimated by disease, at times almost starving, was shivering on the hills of Valley Forge.

Even in the brief, austere official documents of the day we realize that the hardship of this camp was more trying than the hazard of battle; and the diaries and letters of the day which gave the vivid human color of the scene makes its details poignant. Huddled in a city of huts, under an icy sky, half-clothed and half-fed, the cause of freedom almost lost, tempted by offers of compromise, and, in the light of a glimmering lamp in a cottage window a tall form pacing to and fro, waiting, watching, planning, praying - such is the picture, and such is its meaning in our history. Valley Forge was not a battlefield where men met the thrilling issues of a conflict; it was a campground where they waited, suffered and endured. It has a glory all its own, a fame complete and perfect, from which nothing can detract, to forget which would be sacrilege.

The obvious strategy of Washington was to keep the British from cutting the Colonies in two, dividing their strength, and defeating their hopes. Lexington and Bunker Hill were memorable, but in nowise vital as compared with the battles that raged about Philadelphia.

The danger lay in the middle states of the long coast line. If a wedge could be driven through the center of the colonial domain, separating their forces and resources, the rebellion, as it was regarded in England, would be broken. But it was not to be so, thanks to the God of history who gave us a leader and Commander who, alike in symmetry of character and splendor of achievement, is one of the greatest men in the records of mankind. Frederick the Great said that the Trenton campaign was the most brilliant of the century, and it was the century of himself and Marlborough. But Washington was supreme, not alone in flashes of genius, such as amaze us in Alexander and dazzle us in Napoleon, but no less in more useful and less glittering gifts which won the loyalty of his people, and led him through the intrigues of friends and the treachery of foes to victory. In the whole story of the race there is no man to surpass him in disinterested nobility, in practical capacity, solid wisdom and majesty of moral character.

It was the military strategy of Washington to prevent the colonial republic from being divided and defeated, it was diplomatic strategy of Franklin and his fellow workers to divide Europe and, if possible, enlist aid for our struggling cause. For several years, work to that end had been going on secretly, and in the autumn of 1777 it became open and distinct, which no doubt explains the conciliatory Bills, offering everything except independence, received and rejected by Congress in April 1778, under the influence of Washington saying, "that nothing but independence would do" In the meantime, von Steuben was training the army in tactics and discipline such as it had not know before; and Lafayette - "the Boy," as Cornwallis called him, derisively - alike by his gallant courage and chivalrous friendship helped to keep American hopes alive.

At last, after no end of doubt, delay and intrigue. during which Franklin revealed his extraordinary tact, patience and skill; on February 6th, Treaties of Amity, Commerce and Alliance were signed between France and the United States. The Independence of America was acknowledged and made the basis of alliance, and it was mutually agreed that neither nation would lay down its arms until England had conceded our freedom and separate nationhood. A fleet, an army, munitions and supplies were promised by the King of France, who immediately declared war on Great Britain. So, America was united, and Europe was divided, and the issue of liberty in the new world was no longer in doubt.

All historians agree to regard this as the turning-point in our struggle for independence; and so it was. But neither the fleet of France nor her armies were as valuable to America at that moment, as the moral effect, both at home and abroad, of the Alliance. It electrified our country; it cemented a discouraged and distracted people; it restored their shattered morale, when, at eleven o'clock at night, May 4th, the news of the French Treaty reached Washington at Valley Forge - so long did it take the tidings to travel.

May the 6th was a gala day, by General orders; the army, after impressive religious services of thanksgiving and joy, was drawn up under arms; salutes were fired; cheers were given for the King of France and the United States; and in the evening a banquet was given by the Commander-in-Chief to his officers. Today we are met on this campground of an eternal fame and friendship, to

celebrate the anniversary of the thrilling event, mingling prayer and play, as was done of old; beseeching the God of our fathers to make us worthy of a history so noble, a legacy so sacred, and a heritage so heroic.

Once again, after one hundred and fifty years, we have heard the voice of France, the land of Lafayette, in the words of its brilliant Minister of State, appealing to America, the land of Washington, to join hands, as in the days ago, in a treaty, openly arrived at, outlawing war between the two nations forever, as the basis and beginning of a better world order. Truly he is a strange man who can read such a gallant proposal, so definitely made by a practical statesman, and not feel his heart beat faster. What hopes and visions fill the mind as one reads the calm measured words of a great son of France, offering an olive branch of perpetual peace, and the settlement of all disputes by reason and law, thereby giving an example of civilized life to all the world:

"If there were need for those two great democracies to give high testimony to their desire for peace, and to furnish to other peoples an example more solemn still, France would be willing to subscribe publicly with the United States to any mutual engagement tending to outlaw war as between those two countries. Every engagement entered into in this spirit by the United States toward another nation such as France would contribute greatly in the eyes of the world to broaden and strengthen the foundations on which the international policy of peace is being erected."

Here are great words of prophetic overture, worthy to be set to music; and the land of Washington has made memorable response to a spirit so fine and a gesture so gracious. They err who say, cynically, that no good came out of the mad hell of the world war, when in the open forum of the world, two great republics - bound by a common historic faith and friendship - lead the way to the enthronement of law above force and reason above passion, in behalf of a creative and cooperative goodwill. It makes a kinder light from a higher sky fall upon this old campground, and upon the little white crosses in France, where heroes sleep together, since, by the goodwill of God, it shows that they did not die in vain.

At last, or soon or late, so the prophets forfeit and proclaimed by a Divine pragmatism, men will learn that only the ideal is actually practical, and that only when societies and institutions are built square with the righteous order of the world, will they endure. The path of man through the ages is littered with the wreckage of states and civilizations fallen into dust, because they built upon force and not upon brotherhood. So runs the record of centuries, as far back as written history goes.

Must it be so always? Is man too blind to see and too stupid to learn that the visible is set in the Invisible, and that it is the spiritual - seemingly so impalpable and frail - that finally rules, and must rule, because the universe is made on that plan? Today it means much that practical men are beginning to see what poets and prophets have proclaimed from time immemorial - that moral and spiritual laws are universal, and that man is wise only when he learns the way God is going and makes a highway for the Eternal Will.

Today, on these hills of Valley Forge, as we celebrate an alliance for war, may we devoutly hope and pray that God has brought us far enough down the ways of time and tragedy that we are ready, by His Grace, to make a great Alliance for Peace, led by two mighty peoples who more than once have been one in arts, arms, and ideals - France lending aid in the founding of our Republic, and

America lending aid in the salvation of France and so, by a grand adventure of practical and constructive fraternity, lay the corner stone of a new order of the ages, making peace a law and not a dream!

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