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Book V. 67

ADDRESS
OF
PRESIDENT WILSON

BEFORE
THE PRESS CLUB
IN NEW YORK CITY

JUNE 30, 1916



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ADDRESS.

I realize that I have done a very imprudent thing: I have come to address this thoughtful company of men without any preparation whatever. If I could have written as witty a speech as Mr. Pulitzer, I would have written it. If I could have written as clear an enunciation of the fundamental ideas of American patriotism as the mayor, I should have attempted it. If I could have been as appealing a person and of as feeling a heart as Mr. Cobb, I would have felt safe.

If I could have been as generous and interesting and genuine as Mr. Colby, I should have felt that I could let myself go without any preparation. But, gentlemen, as a matter of fact, I have been absorbed by the responsibilities which have been so frequently referred to here to-night, and that preoccupation has made it impossible for me to forecast even what you would like to hear me talk about.

There is something very oddly contradictory about the effect you men have on me. You are sometimes, particularly in your photographic enterprises, very brutal to me, and you sometimes invade my privacy, even to the extent of formulating my judgments before they are formed, and yet I am tempted when I stand face to face with you to take off all guard and merely expose myself to you as the fallible human being that I am.

Mr. Colby said something that was among the few things I had forecast to say myself. He said that there are some things which it is really useless to debate, because they go as a matter of course.

Of course it is our duty to prepare this Nation to take care of its honor and of its institutions. Why debate any part of that, except the detail, except the plan itself, which is always debatable?

Of course it is the duty of the Government, which it will never overlook, to defend the territory and people of this country. It goes without saying that it is the duty of the administration to have constantly in mind with the utmost sensitiveness every point of national honor.

But, gentlemen, after you have said and accepted these obvious things your program of action is still to be formed. When will you act and how will you act?

The easiest thing is to strike. The brutal thing is the impulsive thing. No man has to think before he takes aggressive action; but before a man really conserves the honor by realizing the ideals of the Nation he has to think exactly what he will do and how he will do it.

Do you think the glory of America would be enhanced by a war of conquest in Mexico? Do you think that any act of violence by a powerful nation like this against a weak and destructive neighbor would reflect distinction upon the annals of the United States?

Do you think that it is our duty to carry self-defense to a point of dictation into the affairs of another people? The ideals of America are written plain upon every page of American history.

And I want you to know how fully I realize whose servant I am. I do not own the Government of the United States, even for the time being. I have no right in the use of it to express my own passions.

I have no right to express my own ambitions for the development of America if those ambitions are not coincident with the ambitions of the Nation itself.

And I have constantly to remind myself that I am not the servant of those who wish to enhance the value of their Mexican investments, that I am the servant of the rank and file of the people of the United States.

I get a great many letters, my fellow citizens, from important and influential men in this country, but I get a great many other letters. I get letters from unknown men, from humble women, from people whose names have never been heard and never will be recorded, and there is but one prayer in all of these letters: "Mr. President, do not allow anybody to persuade you that the people of this country want war with anybody."

I got off a train yesterday, and as I was bidding good-by to the engineer he said, in an undertone, "Mr. President, keep out of Mexico." And if one man has said that to me a thousand have said it to me as I have moved about the country.

If I have opportunity to engage them further in conversation, they say, "Of course, we know that you can not govern the circumstances of the case altogether, and it may be necessary; but for God's sake do not do it unless it is necessary."

I am for the time being the spokesman of such people, gentlemen. I have not read history without observing that the greatest forces in the world and the only permanent forces are the moral forces.

We have the evidence of a very competent witness, namely, the first Napoleon, who said that as he looked back in the last days of his life upon so much as he knew of human history he had to record the judgment that force had never accomplished anything that was permanent.

Force will not accomplish anything that is permanent. I venture to say, in the great struggle which is going on on the other side of the sea. The permanent things will be accomplished afterwards, when the opinion of mankind is brought to bear upon the issues, and the only thing that will hold the world steady is this same silent, insistent, all-powerful opinion of mankind.

Force can sometimes hold things steady until opinion has time to form, but no force that was ever exerted, except in response to that opinion, was ever a conquering and predominant force.

I think the sentence in American history that I myself am proudest of is that in the introductory sentences of the Declaration of Independence, where the writers say that a due respect for the opinion of mankind demands that they state the reasons for what they are about to do.

I venture to say that a decent respect for the opinions of mankind demanded that those who started the present European war should have stated their reasons; but they did not pay any heed to the opinion of mankind, and the reckoning will come when the settlement comes.

So, gentlemen, I am willing, no matter what my personal fortunes may be, to play for the verdict of mankind. Personally, it will be a matter of indifference to me what the verdict on the 7th of November is, provided I feel any degree of confidence that when a later jury sits I shall get their judgment in my favor. Not my favor personally—what difference does that make?—but in my favor as an honest and conscientious spokesman of a great national convention.

There are some gentlemen who are under the delusion that the power of a nation comes from the top. It does not. It comes from the bottom.

Power and virtue of the tree does not come from the blossoms and fruit down into the roots, but it comes from the roots in the obscure passage of the earth where the power is derived, which displays itself in the blossoms and the fruit; and I know that among the silent, speechless masses of the American people is slowly coming up the sap of moral purpose and love of justice and reverence for humanity which constitutes the only virtue and distinction of the American people.

Look for your rulers of the future! Can you pick out the families that are to produce them? Can you pick out the localities that are going to produce them?

You have heard what has been said about Abraham Lincoln. It is singular how touching every reference to Abraham Lincoln is. It always makes you feel that you wish you had been there to help him in some fashion to fight the battles that he was fighting, sometimes almost alone.

Could you have predicted, if you had seen Abraham Lincoln's birth and boyhood, where that great ruling figure of the world was going to spring from?

I have presided over a university, but I never deceived myself by supposing that by university processes you were producing the ruling forces of the world.

I knew that all a university could do if it knew its business was to interpret the moral forces of the world and let the young man, who sat under its influence, know the very truth of truths about where it came from, and that no man could produce it unless he felt in his blood every corpusele spring into delightful life with the mention of ideals which have lifted men slowly, oh, so slowly, up the arduous grades, which have resisted the progress since the world began.

So, gentlemen. I have not come here to-night to do anything but to remind you that you do not constitute the United States; that I do not constitute the United States; that it is something bigger and greater and finer than any of us; that it was born in an ideal, and only by pursuing an ideal in the face of every adverse circumstance will it continue to deserve the beloved name which we love and for which we are ready to die, the name "America."



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