

INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Volume L

MARCH, 1954

Number 1

“History’s Warning Finger”

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Having recently returned from twenty years abroad, I find some of the present-day trends a bit disturbing to an old fashioned devotee of the American way of life. Not a few of the old ideas appear to have become unfashionable, and new ideas are being advanced that have never been advanced before. This perhaps is due to these confusing days of international revolution. Unprecedented conditions may call for unprecedented methods; but this makes it all the more imperative that we bind ourselves to the old covenant of our liberties, lest in the confusion we be swept into adventures destructive of the American way of life.

Never in our history has there been a time when it has been so necessary to cling to the old Americanism; to dedicate ourselves anew to the preservation of the freedoms inseparable from a real democracy and to a reaffirmation of the elemental principles of the fathers; and to war on all isms not Americanism, whether they come from either the right or the left.

To chart our course in the path of the fathers, we have only to read or reread the inspiring story of the American people. History can be read as entertainment since it is but the drama of dead days, and with the atmosphere recreated it can be made as interesting as a television picture of our own time. But the value of history is in the fact that it is a torch that illuminates the past and brings out the mistakes as a warning against their repetition in our own generation. Human nature does not greatly change; and given certain conditions resulting in certain reactions, we may be sure

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that the ultimate reaction to similar conditions will not be greatly different in our own day.

I have the feeling that too many school histories for the instruction of our youth are not quite responsive to the needs of our time. The young people learn about the settlement in Jamestown, about the Revolution, about our various wars and their heroes; but the more vital things in American history that show how we came to have a democracy and our freedoms find too meagre treatment. There is an abundance about our triumphs in war and our material progress in peace; but about that democracy for which so many American boys have died there is much too little. Therefore, youth grows up with the fallacious notion that the blessings we enjoy descended upon us like manna from heaven and without a struggle, and that our free institutions have never been challenged since the adoption of the Constitution.

It is commonly said that the Americans of colonial days were instinctively democratic, and that is true; that before landing from the Mayflower, the Pilgrim fathers agreed upon a democratic system, and that is true. They who broke with the past in Europe to brave the dangers of the wilderness came here to seek the freedoms of which they had been deprived and in search of the liberties compatible with the dignity of man. They came that they might worship God according to the dictates of their conscience and that they might think out loud without fear of spies, punishments, and prisons.

Yes, it is true that the people in the first days of the Republic were instinctively democratic; but it is equally true that powerful forces that despised democracy and scorned individual rights were determined to crush democracy in its incipiency.

The average American does not realize that the Constitution as it came from the Convention made no provision for the protection of the people against the abuse of power by either the executive or legislative branch of the government. This vitally important provision was not omitted because it was overlooked. It was proposed and rejected. It was the protest and the militant leadership of Jefferson that forced the First Congress in its first session to incorporate a Bill of Rights for the protection of the individual and the freedoms of the people. This story is inadequately told in most of the

school histories I have seen. Nor do they sufficiently record that within eight years of the incorporation of the Bill of Rights a desperate effort was made to make a mockery of that covenant of our liberties, to outlaw democracy, to destroy the freedoms, to deny the sacred right of petition, to make the individual a mere cog in the machinery of a police State, and to stamp every man with a liberal or democratic thought as subversive and a traitor.

This conspiracy, the boldest in our history, seized upon the excesses of the French Revolution to create a prejudice against democracy. It began with a crusade to crush the democratic societies, and everyone subscribing to the democratic creed was denounced as subversive. In large centers of population, where hysteria breeds, they created a reign of terror by the circulation of the most fantastic falsehoods—the Big Lies. When the hysteria began to subside, their press ran the amazing story that the French Army had landed in Charleston and was marching northward, kidnapping children, attacking women, and giving plantation houses to the flames, and the hysteria rose again. The mobs, feeding on this hysteria, rushed into the streets, smashing the windows of people defending the democratic concept of society. They made a desperate effort to drive Thomas Jefferson from his post as secretary of state. They played the rogues march under the windows of the author of the Declaration of Independence and the architect of the American way of life. They pilfered his mail in the hope of finding a sentence on which he could be arrested for subversion. They pursued him with spies and they circulated against him the most atrocious lies. They smeared the statue of Benjamin Franklin with mud from the gutters because he was a democrat and a great liberal. And such was the hysteria of the times that the democratic followers of Jefferson were driven from their pews in churches by the insults of hysterical anti-democrat preachers. To arm themselves against democracy, they passed the Sedition Law, the most obnoxious in our history.

The result was graphically foretold by Edward Livingston in the debate in the House. Note his warning: "The country will swarm with informers, spies, delators, and all that odious reptile tribe that breed in the sunshine of despotic power The hours of the most unsuspecting confidence, the intimacies of friendship, or the recesses of domestic retirement, afford

no security. The companion whom you must trust, the friend in whom you must confide, the domestic who waits in your chamber, are all tempted to betray your imprudence or unguarded follies; to misrepresent your words; to convey them, distorted by calumny, to the secret tribunal where jealousy presides—where fear officiates as accuser, and suspicion is the only evidence that is heard. . . . Do not let us be . . . absurd enough to call ourselves '*free and enlightened*,' while we advocate principles that would have disgraced the age of Gothic barbarity."¹

With this weapon of despotism they fared forth to destroy the democratic press, and scores of editors, bearing the scars of the Revolution, were dragged from their beds at night, lodged in jails unfit for the habitation of a dog, tried before packed juries—presided over by anti-democratic judges responding to the orders of conspiratorial caucuses—and condemned to prison.

For two years in our country this despotism had the people by the throat. Resorting to violence, they tried to close the lips of protest by threats and intimidation. They went so far as to propose to make it treason for a member of Congress to attack the Sedition Law on the floor of House and Senate; and then, frightened by the monstrosity of the plan, they conceded the right of congressmen to speak against the law in Congress, but with the warning that the publication of the speech would be an act of subversion.

The circulation of petitions for the repeal of the Sedition Law was made treasonable. The author of the famous Newburg Letters that rendered such service in the Revolution prepared a powerful petition; and the man who circulated the petition was arrested, paraded on a horse for two hundred miles through the rain to New York City to the mockery of a trial, and thrown into jail.

Anti-democratic judges were denouncing democracy and praising the Sedition Law in charges to grand juries. They were tongue lashing as traitors the lawyers for the accused for daring to appear, in the discharge of their duties as officers of the court, in defense of the victims of this nefarious law.

¹*Annals of the Congress of the United States, 5th Congress, 1797-1799, June 21, 1798, volume 2, pp. 2014-2015.*

Now, hysteria has no sense of humor and some of the proceedings were incredibly funny. When a cannon was fired in salute to President Adams and someone laughingly said it was a pity the ball did not land in the seat of his pants, he was instantly arrested for sedition and imprisoned. When a simple-minded old man painted a sign for a liberty pole with the words "No Stamp Act; no Sedition Law," he was arrested for subversion and thrown into jail, where, long forgotten, he languished in durance vile of three long years.

I submit that it is necessary that the young people should know that our freedoms and inalienable rights did not come to us without a desperate struggle. For two years the Bill of Rights was treated as a door mat. For two years there was no real freedom of the press. For two years free speech was subversive. For two years it was a crime to exercise the sacred right of petition. For two years, in some states, the writ of habeas corpus was suspended. For two years storm troopers, not unlike those of Hitler, roamed the country tearing down liberty poles, smashing the windows of democrats and attacking their persons. Yes, for two years we were setting the pattern for the Stalin's, the Hitler's, and the Mussolini's.

Happily, the vast majority of the American people were jealous of their freedoms; they knew for what they had been fighting in the Revolution; and they rose in their wrath in defense of their liberties under the leadership of Jefferson and they won the victory that determined that ours should be a democratic republic.

Now this is what has happened; this is what can happen again; and if history illuminates the past for the warning and guidance of the future, this story should be known to the oncoming generation to alert it to any future threats to our freedom and the American way of life.

Our immediate menace today comes from the Communists, just as the other day it came from the Fascists—the same tribe. But today we face and fight a system beyond the comprehension of normal minds. We are facing the most barbarous forces the world has known since Genghis Khan sallied forth to reduce mankind to slavery. They rule their people and the nations they have enslaved by terror, with guns and clubs. They dare not permit the light of the truth to penetrate behind the iron curtain. Their cynical dishonesty,

their baseness, brutality, and treachery stagger the credulity of civilized men. They make international agreements with the mental reservation that they are not therewith bound by honor. They entered into an agreement with Churchill and Roosevelt; and before the ink was dry on his signature, Stalin and his minions proceeded to violate the agreement without a semblance of a sense of shame. This was then unprecedented in the relations of civilized nations and from that hour the signature of Moscow has had no significance. They are a menace to the human race and to a Christian civilization; but ultimately we shall crush them with the truth and emerge from the struggle with our freedoms intact; with our freedoms intact—or the victory will be theirs, not ours.

They have with uncanny cleverness insinuated their agents into strategic positions in every free democratic nation in the world, but we alone appear to be threatened with hysteria. Now, fear is a phantom that pursues the coward, and hysteria is the child of fear. I know, you know, that beyond our borders the people read with amazement about our manifestations of fear and conclude that we are uncertain of ourselves and live in deadly fear of Russia. In England, where the people suffered so cruelly from the Fascists and Nazis and are in more imminent peril from the Communists than we, they go about their appointed tasks with reasonable serenity and dignity and refuse to break into a run. They, too, have their problems because of the insinuation of enemy agents into strategic positions. Not long ago, they discovered that two trusted officials in strategic positions in the Foreign Office were Communists only after they had made their escape to Russia. Even so, I have yet to hear that any Englishman has questioned the loyalty of Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden. Perhaps the English do have a sense of humor after all.

I have sometimes wondered if the near-hysteria which threatens our country contributes greatly to our international prestige, or to our reputation for courage, poise, and rational thinking; and I have sometimes wondered if the free nations that are our allies can have confidence in our leadership of the democratic world if we have no confidence in our leaders, in ourselves, or in each other.

Why is it that the shadow of fear hovers over us like a black cloud? Returning home after a long absence I have

found old and intimate friends strangely reticent in discussing any controversial subject. Of what are they afraid? Then, in former times the word "liberal" had a pleasant sound in American ears; but I find that liberals are now suspected and I sometimes wonder if old-fashioned devotees of democracy are entirely in the clear.

President Eisenhower rendered a service of incalculable value in the war against fascism and communism; but he has never rendered a greater service than when he protested against book burning and solemnly warned us against hysteria and the danger that in fighting communism we may lose the very freedoms for which we are fighting. His recent speech in New York, which I heard, set forth some fundamentals of Americanism with lucidity, simplicity, and force. His recent declaration that we shall not attempt to bully and alienate our allies, on whose support we may be dependent, was that of a statesman of sobriety and common sense. He is entitled to the support of all Americans, regardless of party, in his demand for legality, decency, and fair play.

Reactionaries and the foes of the freedoms always try to take advantage of the crimes of revolutions to turn back the hand on the clock of democracy. Our immediate mission is to meet the peril of communism with all we have; but it would be a mistake not to guard against creeping fascism. Hysteria is the natural ally of fascism; we cannot forget that it was hysteria that swept the hysterical Hitler into power. It would be tragic if before the sod has settled on the graves of our heroic dead we show undue tenderness and partiality to the foes of yesterday who were equally bent on the destruction of our freedoms. We must realize that the Fascists and Nazis, while a bit battered, are still unbowed; that the mobs of young men who attacked the American and British embassies in Rome are Fascists still, imbued with a cold hatred of the great Democracies that crippled their fascist order; and we know that there is a minority element in Germany seeking the rehabilitation of naziism.

It is too early to forget that the American boys now sleeping beneath the sod under alien skies went to their deaths with the thought we had projected into their minds that we were fighting against fascism and for democracy; and if these boys can be conscious of what goes on here below we never want them to feel that they went to their deaths with a lie upon our lips.

I have mentioned fascism simply because we have some fascist-minded Americans who say that democracy is not equipped for a successful challenge to communism; that we must fight the devil with fire; and that the fascist method is the best. I have seen that fallacy acted upon before. When I was in France for two and a half years just before the war I was shocked by the general acceptance of the Goebbels propaganda that democracy is dead and that we must make our choice between communism and fascism. I heard that constantly in social circles in Biarritz and San Jean de Luz. That is the reason that the Democracies lost all their diplomatic battles between the advent of Hitler and the march on Poland. For five years in Europe, democracy was on the siding and the main line was kept free for the expresses of fascism and communism, flying insulting banners. We don't want that to happen again. It was that state of mind that put our freedoms in peril and made the World War inevitable.

It is because of this lethargy, or this abnormal state of mind bordering on hysteria, that a rereading and reappraisal of American history, making clear the meaning of democracy, and how it came to us, is of primary importance. Perhaps the old, reared in a day when men had time to read and think, do not require it; and the middle-aged must have understood the meaning of democracy before the twin devils of totalitarianism confused the millions with their clamor, and they may well reread what they once read and recall what they once thought. But the old are passing out, and the middle-aged will soon be old, and the future of our country is with the children of today who will be the citizens of tomorrow. That means that these children must be drilled in school in the meaning of Americanism, and how it came to us after a bitter struggle.

The other day the school commissioner in New York City announced the publication of many thousands of pamphlets against communism to be distributed in the schools, and that is well enough; but I wondered why many thousands of pamphlets should not be published for the schools in support of the democratic creed; in simple explanation of its meaning; illustrated by the immortal words of its supreme interpreters, Jefferson and Lincoln; and with an honest explanation of why American boys died not long ago on the battlefields of Europe and Asia. In this day of mortal combat between ideologies

it is not enough that the oncoming generation should be against something; to give meaning to its opposition it must be for something. When and if it has to march against the hammer and the sickle, we want it to have a banner of its own.

The Stalin's, Hitler's, and Mussolini's in their fight for the souls of men, took the child at its impressionable age and poisoned its mind with their lies. It is our duty to teach the child what democracy means, how it came to us, and how it may be destroyed. I submit that school histories should stress the creed of the American way of life, or they fail in a primary function; and that this creed should be impressed upon the minds of the oncoming generation.

This creed is simple: We believe that democracy charts the American way of life. That means that we believe in the freedom of the press. That means that we believe in the freedom of speech, the right to think out loud without fear; that we believe in intellectual freedom, the freedom of the human spirit; that we believe in the Bill of Rights, and that whittling away any part of it reduces by that much the protection of the people against the abuse of power; that we believe that a police State is an abomination in the eyes of God. That means that we believe that the public schoolhouse is the advance post in defense of our institutions, and that the startling if not subversive belittling of the public schools, the prevalent slashing of their appropriations, the prevalent denial of their budgetary needs, and the fashionable sneers at them today, are undermining the bastion of American defense. That means that we believe in the unification of all free nations to meet the menace of communism, and that it is an utter stupidity to say that we shall need no allies if a world war comes; that we believe in peace as long as it can be maintained without compromising one of the democratic ideals or rights; but that rather than submit to the chains of slavery, to the crushing of the human spirit, to the silencing of the thoughts of men, and the degradation of the dignity of man, we shall be prepared to fight to the last man and the last dollar. This is the American creed for which so many American boys have died.

It is not enough that the American youth should hate communism or fascism; it is necessary that it should love something—love and understand those elemental

principles embodied in American democracy that stand for liberty, decency, and human rights, and are the guardians of our freedoms. We despise communism because it aims at the destruction of our freedoms and the American way of life that we love; let us be on guard lest in moments of hysteria we sacrifice the things we love to the things we hate. That would be the supreme Moscow triumph.

I am sure that nothing I have said is new or subversive. It is the old Hoosier philosophy. The thoughts I have submitted were drilled into me many years ago here in Indianapolis. Here at Shortridge [High School] I sat under the teaching of one of the greatest women I have ever known—Laura Donnan. Her vibrant spirit was in tune with that of the founding fathers. She dedicated her life to making oncoming generations worthy of their heritage of liberty by making its meaning crystal-clear. She rendered an incalculable service to this community by impressing on the young their patriotic obligations; and she made an indelible impression on the minds of all who sat under her inspiring teaching. What I have said may be taken as a salute to her memory.

Yes, we shall fight communism to the finish; and fight fascism to the end; and we shall fight them in such a way that when we emerge with victory we shall find our freedoms unimpaired, the old Americanism uncompromised, and our flag still the flag of the free.