

## "WHAT MAKES A NATION GREAT?"

TEXT: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people"

(Proverbs 11: 34)

INTRODUCTION Righteousness, and not force. This is what exalts a nation. I believe that America needs to be reminded that there are national interests that are more vital and more important to its well-being than the military interest.

In our country ever since it achieved independence, it has been axiomatic that the military interest should be subordinated to the civil interest. And yet the world situation being what it is, each colossus in the armaments race feeling that it must keep ahead of the other, the military establishment seemingly has priority and takes the first toll and the heaviest toll on our resources. Not in God, not in righteousness, but more and more in the magnitude of the weapons of modern war we appear to have placed our chief trust.

But our minds are not at peace and our consciences are troubled for we know the suicidal character of modern war. We know that our nuclear weapons can blow the world to pieces many times over and could easily put civilization back a thousand years. It is folly and madness to pour the best of our inventive genius into their manufacture and to carry destructiveness to the point at which we are now carrying it.

Someone wrote a salute to a nine-inch gun in these words:

"Whether your shell hits the target or not,  
Your cost is five hundred dollars a shot;  
You thing of noise and flame and power,  
We feed you a hundred barrels of flour  
Each time you roar. Your flame is fed  
With twenty thousand loaves of bread;  
Be silent. A million hungry men  
Seek bread to feed their mouths again".

Former North Carolina Gov. Terry Sanford, now President of Duke University, earlier this week in a news conference spoke out against the military interests of this land, saying that the defense establishment has a "paunch potbelly" and could do better with less money. Said he,

"I will tell you today that I am ready to confront the military head on. They are wrong, and we have been wrong in fearing that challenging the military would bring in counter-charges of disloyalty...."

DEVELOPMENT Coming at this subject from another approach, Alfred North Whitehead, once wrote,

"In the history of the world, the prize has not gone to those species which specialized in methods of violence, or even in defensive armor. In fact, nature began with producing animals encased in hard shells for defense against the ills of life. It also experimented in size. But smaller animals,

without external armor, warm-blooded, sensitive, alert, have cleared these monsters off the face of the earth. Also, the lions and tigers are not the successful species. There is something in the ready use of force which defeats its own object. Its main defect is that it bars cooperation. Every organism requires an environment of friends, partly to shield it from violent changes and partly to supply it with its wants. The "gospel of force" is incompatible with a social life".

Righteousness exalts a nation - not force.

NOT AFFLUENCE      And secondly, not affluence. To be rich in things does not mean that one is inevitably poor in soul, but that is the besetting danger. I believe that America needs also to be challenged at this point.

The temptation is to give too much attention to what is material, to work harder for money and what money can buy - consumer goods, comforts, luxuries - than for anything else, to hold on to them tenaciously and to be fearful of losing them. When this temptation is submitted to, the end result is apt to be an excessive desire for security, a hardening of the sympathies, a forfeiting of the high and fine ideals which gave birth to our land. With nostalgic longing for the noble aims he had cherished in his youth, a prosperous man said about himself:

"Now things are altered; if I care  
To buy a thing I can;  
The pence are here and here's the fair  
But where's the lost young man?"

Certainly what is true of individuals is equally true of nations. If with material wealth there is apt to go a degree of spiritual poverty, then decline and decay are as certain as the night that follows the day.

Our nation is the symbol throughout the world of the affluent society. "Incredible and fantastic prosperity" was the phrase an Asian writer used some time ago in describing our as yet unmatched resources and wealth. America, I feel, needs to be reminded that in our affluence are the very seeds of weakness. We've never had it so good; we have so much to lose. And we are fearful that we may lose it and that what has happened in the past to other prosperous nations may happen to our nation. Many there are who advocate that in order to hold on to what we have we must resist change at home and abroad and maintain the status-quo.

However, it is my own belief and the conviction of many that any mere defense of the status quo against the rising forces of the 20th century and the growing expectations of many is a denial and a betrayal of the ideals that brought our nation into being some 199 years ago last Friday. Now the revolution is world-wide; the 18th century American shot has been heard around the world. It is a revolution not only against political injustice, but against social and economic injustice. Do we oppose it and in so doing align ourselves with reactionary forces concerned only with preserving the vested interests of an affluent minority? Here is the case as put by historian Arnold Toynbee:

"Three quarters of mankind are now still living only

just above the starvation line, and are still frequently dropping below it. Is America going to offer herself to this hungry majority as their leader? If America does take the lead in the American born world revolution of our time, then she will continue to march in the van-guard of mankind along the high road of human destiny. On the other hand, if she were to make the great refusal, she would be side-tracking herself. She would be inviting destiny to pass her by."

REASON WHY

Righteousness. Not force and not affluence exalt a nation. Why? Because the world is built on moral foundations. As the Hebrew prophets taught centuries ago, in the long run it is well with the just and ill with the unjust. Injustice and inequity may be long-lived, but doomsday comes to them at last.

Ultimately, for nations as for individuals there can be stability and strength only through doing right and loving the right. The march of humanity is strewn with the wrecks of states which were prosperous and powerful in their day, but luxury and laxity, corruption and exploitation eventually brought about their decline. Righteousness is the cement of society, and when it crumbles society is marked for decay. Nations, Toynbee insists, are not destroyed from the outside, but destroy themselves. Their self-destruction is due to their defects of character.

Perhaps he oversimplifies the case. Moral judgments are executed in history, but one has to use a qualifying phrase like "in the long run" - for they're not always executed at once, nor are they always executed with precision, nor can we always trace an exact equivalent between the deserts of a nation and its fortunes. Hitler and Mussolini are gone, but they had a bewildering long run and were responsible for an appalling amount of human misery. Nonetheless, the fact remains and history confirms it that the powerful empires and civilizations of the past feel because they decayed within.

Somebody has said that "20th century man is a god in technology, but an ape in life". What should concern us the most is not our military superiority, nor our affluence and standard of living, but rather our need of moral sense and our sensitivity to human values. We need to be reminded again and again that power and wealth in the case of nations are not the ultimate factors. The determining and decisive factors are moral and spiritual.

FINAL SECTION

For Americans, the Fourth of July celebration is always a blending of God and country - a pattern that was set in the beginning days of the nation. Men and women of sturdy, God-fearing character laid the foundations of this nation. They had a deep passion for religious freedom. They had a strong sense of righteousness that came from their Biblically oriented faith. Yes, they knew and they read their Bible. They believed in God as the ruler of a moral universe. They felt that they were responsible in their individual conduct to that kind of God. Do we?

Yes, the "founding fathers" had their faults as some of you know. Blacks were excluded in order to get the Declaration of Independence approved, and women were excluded from the exercise of citizenship through the ballot, to say nothing of the treatment of Native Americans in order to secure the land. And since those three groups - blacks, Women and Native Americans still struggle for justice and equality, it's really a disservice to let America look only at the surface of its well-being in this bi-centennial celebration which has now begun.

All that I have been thinking about this week in terms of what makes a nation a great nation is summed up in these lines by G. Ashton Oldham:

"America first - not only in things material  
But in things of the spirit.

Not merely in science, invention, metors, skyscrapers,  
But also in ideals, principles, character.

Not merely in the calm assertion of rights,  
But in the glad assumption of duties,  
Not flouting your strength as a giant,  
But bending in helpfulness over a sick and wounded world  
like a good Samaritan.

Not in splendid isolation,  
But in courageous cooperation.

Not in proud arrogance and disdain of other races and people,  
But in sympathy, love and understanding.

Not in treading again the old, worn, bloody pathway  
Which ends inevitably in chaos and disaster.  
But blazing a new trail, along which, please God,  
Other nations will follow into the new Jerusalem  
Where war shall be no more.  
Some day, some nation must take that path -  
Unless we are to lapse into utter barbarism,  
And that honor I covet for my beloved America.

And so, in that spirit, and with these hopes,  
I say with all my heart and soul, 'America first'".

PRAYER

We thank Thee, O God, for the heritage that has come down to us,  
bought by other toil and other tears than ours. Steady our hands  
to grasp the torch of the nation's righteousness, which they have given to us.  
Make stable and wise our minds to understand the high entrustment, that the  
light of this people may not fail.

This we ask in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen

TEXT: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach  
to any people" (Proverbs 14:34)

### INTRODUCTION

Righteousness, not force. There are national interests that are more vital and more important than the military interest. In our country ever since it achieved independence, it has been axiomatic that the military interest should be subordinated to the civil interest. And yet the world situation being what it is, each colossus in the armaments race feeling that it must keep ahead of the other, the military interest has priority and takes the first toll and the heaviest toll on our resources. Not in God, not in righteousness, but more and more in the magnitude of the implements of modern war we put our chief trust.

But our minds are not at peace and our consciences are troubled for we know the suicidal character of modern war. We know that with our nuclear weapons we could put civilization back a thousand years. We know that it is folly and madness to pour the best of our inventive genius into their manufacture and to carry destructiveness to the point at which we are now carrying it. Many feel that if we hold fast to our ideological, national and racial rivalries and place on our scientists the bitter burden of the prostitution of their skills in preparation for a hydrogen war the result could well be the liquidation of the greater part of the human race.

Someone wrote a salute to a nine-inch gun in these words:

"Whether your shell hits the target or not,  
Your cost is five hundred dollars a shot;  
You thing of noise and flame and power,  
We feed you a hundred barrels of flour  
Each time you roar. Your flame is fed  
With twenty thousand leaves of bread;  
Be silent. A million hungry men  
Seek bread to feed their mouths again."

### DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

Coming at this subject from another approach, Alfred North Whitehead, has this to say:

"In the history of the world, the prize has not gone to those species which specialized in methods of violence, or even in defensive armor. In fact, nature began with producing animals encased in hard shells for defense against the ills of life. It also experimented in size. But smaller animals, without external armor, warm-blooded, sensitive, alert, have cleared these monsters off the face of the earth. Also, the lions and tigers are not the successful species. There is something in the ready use of force which defeats its own object. Its main defect is that it bars cooperation. Every organism requires an environment of friends, partly to shield it from violent changes and partly to supply it with its wants. The Gospel of force is incompatible with a social life."

Righteousness exalts a nation, not force, not affluence. To be rich in things does not mean that one is inevitably poor in soul, but that is the besetting danger. The temptation is to give too much attention to what is material, to work harder for money and what money can buy - consumer goods, comforts, luxuries - than for anything

else, to hold on to them tenaciously and to be fearful of losing them, to fail to put first things first and give their rightful place to the supreme values. When this temptation is yielded to, the end result is an excessive desire for security, a hardening of the sympathies, a forfeiting of high and fine ideals. With nostalgic longing for the noble aims he had cherished in his youth a prosperous man said about himself:

"Now things are altered; if I care  
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#### TRUE OF NATIONS

Certainly what is true of individuals is equally true of nations. If with material wealth there goes spiritual poverty - decline and decay are as certain as the night that follows the day. Our nation is the symbol throughout the world of the affluent society. "Incredible and fantastic prosperity" was the phrase an Asian writer used recently in describing our as yet unmatched resources and material wealth. We need, however, to be reminded that in our affluence there are the seeds of weakness. We have never had it so good. We have so much to lose. We are fearful that we may lose it and that what has happened in the past to other prosperous nations may happen to our nation. Many there are who advocate that in order to hold on to what we have we must resist revolutionary change at home and abroad and maintain the status quo. Some time ago the "New Yorker" had a cartoon showing a well-dressed woman sitting in an easy chair at a sumptuous resort and saying, "Wouldn't it be perfect if it wasn't for Russia". Russia could change everything. Change must be resisted.

However, it is my conviction and the conviction of many that any mere defense of the status quo against the rising forces of the 20th century is a denial and a betrayal of the ideals that brought our nation into being some 190 years ago tomorrow. Now the revolution has become world-wide; the 18th century American shot has been heard around the world. It is a revolution not only against political injustice but against social and economic injustice. Some of our citizens are suspicious of it because every revolutionary movement attracts Communists. But if for that reason we oppose it we are going to find ourselves aligned with reactionary forces concerned only with preserving the vested interests of an affluent minority. Since social revolution is a world-wide, the towering question is whether it is to be a revolution of a democratic or communist character. Here is the case as put by historian Arnold Toynbee:

"Three quarters of mankind are now still living only just above the starvation line, and are still frequently dropping below it. Is America going to offer herself to this hungry majority as their leader? If America does take the lead in the American born world revolution of our time, then she will continue to march in the van of mankind along the main high road of human destiny. On the other hand, if she were to make the great refusal, she would be side-tracking herself. She would be inviting destiny to pass her by"

#### THE REASON WHY

Righteousness, not force, not affluence, exalts a nation. Why? Because the world is built on moral foundations. As the Hebrew prophets taught centuries ago, in the long run it is well with the just and ill with the unjust. Injustice and inequity may be long-lived but doomsday comes to them at last.

Ultimately for nations as for individuals there can be stability and strength only through right doing and love for the right. The march of humanity is strewn with the wrecks of states which were prosperous and powerful in their day, but luxury and laxity,

corruption and exploitation brought about their decline. Righteousness is the cement of society; when it crumbles society is marked for decay. Nations, Toynbee is insisting, are not destroyed from the outside, but destroy themselves. Their self-destruction is due to their defects of character.

Perhaps he oversimplifies the case. Moral judgment are executed in history, but one has to use a qualifying phrase like "in the long run" - for they're not always executed at once, nor are they always executed with precision, nor can we always trace an exact equivalent between the deserts of a nation and its fortunes. Hitler and Mussolini are gone, but they had a bewildering long run and were responsible for an appalling amount of human misery. Nonetheless, the fact remains and history verifies it that the powerful empires and civilizations of the past fell because they decayed within.

During the Second World War when the fortunes of France were at their lowest, one of her countryman said: "France's main trouble is a matter of morals and morale". I mentioned Hitler a moment ago; he gained a position from which he had power to do great harm. He could never have reached it or remained in it but for the sins of silence and indifference and lapses from duty on the part of the people, not only in Germany, but in other lands as well. So, what should concern us most is not military superiority and keeping ahead in the armaments race. Somebody has said that "20th century man is a god in technology, but an ape in life". What should concern us the most is our need of moral sense and sensitivity. We are allowing technological training to supercede education in human values, in human relations. We need to be told over and over again that wealth and power in the case of nations are not the ultimate factors; the determining and decisive factors are moral and spiritual.

THE BIBLE This is the emphasis of the Bible. Righteousness exalts a nation. The Old Testament prophets blamed national disasters on Israel - not on her enemies. In political and military reverses and national disasters they saw the judgments of God on the nation for its lack of fair and honorable dealing. Daniel so interpreted the decline and fall of mighty Babylon. Who that has read it can forget the story of Belshazzar's feast and the writing on the wall: "You are weighed in the balances and found wanting". Babylon fell to the Persians, but it was first destroyed from within by decadence, indulgence, careless irresponsibility.

It could happen here. Men and women of sturdy characters laid the foundations of this nation. They had a strong sense of righteousness. Most of them derived it from their belief in God as the ruler of a moral universe. They felt that they were responsible in their individual conduct to that kind of a God. And not only in their individual conduct, for they recognized that more than a personal integrity was required of them. They laid great stress on public morality and on the responsibility of the individual citizen in his public life to foster, promote and safeguard it.

I think this is where we fall down. Our churches are concerned about personal integrity; they must be equally concerned about social integrity and as active in building up one as the other. Too long we have proceeded on the assumption that the most vital church is the one that provides responsibilities to keep laymen in church during the week. More and more, however, the truly vital churches are emphasizing the importance of the layman's vocation and witness in the world. Today, the vital church is the one that inspires concern in its members about the building up of a just and equitable society. And because of their concern, they go into civic organizations, into areas of public life where the action is, where the decisions are made; they seek to arouse the public conscience; they play their part in righting social wrongs; they endeavor to put into practice through the week what they profess on a Sunday in church.

This is the vocation of the Christian layman today and it is the church's task, I feel, to train and equip him to fulfill it.

All that I have been saying about what makes a nation a great nation is summed up in these lines by G. Ashton Oldham:

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Some day, some nation must take that path -  
Unless we are to lapse into utter barbarism -  
And that honor I covet for my beloved America.  
And so, in that spirit, and with these hopes,  
I say with all my heart and soul, "America first".

LET US PRAY: God of our fathers, we pray thee today for the nation that the fathers founded. We thank thee for the heritage that has come down to us, bought by other toil and other tears than ours. Steady our hands to grasp the torch of the nation's righteousness, which they have given to us. Make stable and wise our minds to understand the high entrustment, that the light of this people may not fail. This we ask in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen