

The American MERCURY

THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

BY RUSSELL DAVENPORT

THE unique — and perhaps fatal — fact about the United States is that it was born with a purpose. It was the child, not merely of geography and power, but of an idea. It was an invention.

Almost all the great American statesmen have recognized this fact. They have seen the U. S., not merely in terms of sovereign power, but in terms of man. "The cause of America," wrote Tom Paine, "is in great measure the cause of all mankind." Said Thomas Jefferson, "I have no fear but that the result of our experiment will be, that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master. . . . Nor are we acting for ourselves alone, but for the whole human

race." Said Andrew Jackson, "Providence . . . has chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race." Abraham Lincoln was concerned lest government of, by, and for the people perish, not merely from America, but from the earth. And in our own time Woodrow Wilson said, "Let us remind ourselves that we are the custodians in some degree of the principles which have made men free."

This fact about the United States is unique because no other nation — certainly no great power — came into being in this way. Other nations have given birth to purposes. But a purpose gave birth to the United States.

Yet it may also prove to be fatal:

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for if America is the outcome of a purpose, it follows that in order to maintain America intact, the purpose must be maintained intact. America without a purpose would undoubtedly be a very great power: yet it would not be America as we have known America; it would be something else. The preservation of what we call the "American way of life," so vividly summarized in the Declaration of Independence, must certainly involve the preservation of the purpose around which the Declaration was conceived. Should we lose the purpose we would inevitably lose the meaning of the Declaration of Independence.

II

As we look out across our time it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the American purpose, or the American sense of purpose, has dwindled. There were plenty of evidences of our purpose just before and during World War I — for example Woodrow Wilson's great battle-cry, "Make the world safe for democracy." That phrase sounds phony to us today, but this is because we have made it sound phony. As a G.I. of that war I can testify that the American purpose, thus expressed, had meaning in those days. Says Sumner Welles, in *The Time for Decision*, "We had been thrilled to the depths of our emotional and intellectual being by the vision that Woodrow Wilson held out to us of a world order founded on justice and on democracy. . . . Not

least was our pride that our United States had asserted leadership in this great crusade."

It was only after World War I that the concept of purpose began to dwindle. Though tricked out with a little international finery, the Republican platform of 1920 was in effect a denial of any purpose beyond our shores. In Harding the people elected an adroit politician who had at one time or another spoken on *both sides* of the American purpose, which was then symbolized by the League of Nations. During the twenties the concept of the American purpose was liquidated in the concept of American prosperity. Americans forgot that they had any purpose other than their own well-being, and any suggestion that they had entered World War I with the intention of fulfilling a purpose was anathematized by the intellectuals as "propaganda."

There has been much speculation concerning the causes of the depression of 1930 and the reasons why the nation was unable to recover from it. As one who has done his share of the speculating, I should like to suggest that the real answer is not to be found in economics, where we have mostly looked for it. The real answer is, I believe, that America lost her sense of purpose, as regards mankind. Of all the criticisms levelled against the New Deal, there is one that I should like especially to recommend to future historians for their serious consideration. This is not "maladministration." It is not "bureaucracy." It is

not even the almost suicidal ignorance of the New Dealers regarding business and industry. It is, rather, that the New Deal tried to "fix" America without restoring the sense of purpose that *is* America.

Swept onward by the isolationist intellectuals, the New Deal developed a body of policies which, with a few exceptions (such as the Hull trade treaties), followed a nationalistic line. Using hindsight, we can see now that the only way out of that long depression was the economic improvement of *other* peoples; the creation of world markets, not only for goods but also for capital; and the maintenance of our armed forces, especially naval and air, at a realistic defensive level for the protection of peaceful trade. Yet these measures would have been political heresies in the thirties.

None of the New Deal's domestic economic gadgetry could work, because the New Deal's foreign policy was faulty. And its foreign policy was faulty because it could not conceive of a purpose for the United States.

III

During the last year a tremendous change has come over American psychology. The great naval victories in the Pacific, the Italian campaign, and the epic forcing of the coast of Normandy have demonstrated that we are a very great and powerful people. From a dark and negative era of domestic frustration and international timidity, we have lifted ourselves to

a point where — if we knew how — we could inaugurate one of the most positive and productive eras in our history.

Just at this critical point, however, the U. S. finds itself bewildered. We seem to be drifting through a world of fire and destruction, without a goal. We do not find within ourselves positive answers capable of leading us out into a new future. Neither the political leaders, nor the parties, nor the press, nor the schools, nor the church, nor the intellectuals seem able to frame a great, new American affirmation.

As a result, just when we ought to be providing leadership for the world, we have become involved in a host of secondary issues — the soldier vote, labor, future jobs, bureaucracy, monetary stabilization, etc. Some of these issues may not appear secondary — indeed, many of them are of crucial importance. Yet they are secondary in the sense that we cannot decide any of them until we have decided one issue that is at once simpler and more profound: are we going to proceed in the manner of Tom Paine, with a purpose, or in the manner of the last two decades, without a purpose?

This is the issue that every American must decide for himself, before he can decide any other issue.

For myself, I have irrevocably cast my lot with Tom Paine. I know that millions of other Americans have, too. And I believe that as this momentous issue becomes clearer, other millions will feel the same way. I don't think

Tom Paine's America is finished: I think it is just beginning.

Casting one's lot with Tom Paine, however, means the acceptance of a fundamental proposition, defining the American purpose in general terms. This proposition is:

The purpose for which the United States was founded, and in which it must persist, is to make men free.

If we accept the purpose we must accept the proposition. But as soon as we accept the proposition there falls upon us a heavy burden of definition. To free what men? To free them how? And what do we mean by freedom?

IV

I do not think that up to now we who believe in Tom Paine have done a very good job in clarifying and modernizing our belief. I think we have let the people down in this regard, and have made it exceedingly difficult for those leaders who agree with us to act effectively in the political sphere. I think that, privately and publicly, we had better get to work. And by way of practicing what I preach, I want to offer the following set of principles, which appear to me indispensable to a definition of freedom in our time, and hence, of the American purpose in our time. The principles are four in number. They are dynamically interrelated, no one of them being valid without the support of the other three. And they constitute, in my view, a minimum platform for those who would rather

die than return to the America of Warren G. Harding.

1. *Freedom cannot be exclusive: potentially or in fact it must include all mankind.*

This is one of the cardinal principles of American democracy which we apply with confidence within our own borders. We do not think of freedom as the possession of farmers, or of labor, or of employers: if one group is to have it, all must have it. Otherwise, we know, it will fall.

In only one respect do we intentionally violate this principle, and this is in regard to racial differences: we have not even yet granted political and economic equality to the Negro, and this means that we are trying to some extent to keep freedom exclusive for whites. This attempt cost us one bloody war, and will cost another if we continue on our present course. For if freedom is to survive for one, it must be established for all: the attempt to make it exclusive *in any sense* is suicidal.

Equally urgent is the application of this principle beyond our shores. Freedom cannot long survive in America if we conceive of it as exclusively American. The attempt to make freedom exclusive nationally will in the end be just as fatal as the attempt to make it exclusive racially or factionally.

Those who interpret the American purpose as a world purpose are accused of unwarranted idealism. Yet they are really more practical than their

“isolationist” opponents. They see clearly that the surest way to preserve our own freedom is to expand the base of freedom beyond our own shores — help others to be free — get them on our side. If our purpose is exclusively American we shall always be in danger of finding ourselves alone. If our purpose concerns mankind, we shall never be alone.

Of course we cannot reach out to the world in terms of conquest and empire: we cannot force people to be free. Our job is rather to encourage men, as Jefferson put it, “to govern themselves without a master.” By our policies of state we must strengthen those who already have freedom, and encourage others to try for it. We must make freedom safer and more easily available.

To do this we must encourage a generous (and sometimes a commercially unprofitable) outflow of ideas, resources, appliances, and customs from our free society. And we must bear a heavy and *definite* share in the maintenance of world peace, without which freedom cannot thrive, even here at home.

When Tom Paine said that the cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind, he was speaking as in a vision. But today this statement is no vision, it is a fact — a fact of applied mechanics, aerodynamics, and electronics. If the people of Wisconsin want to be free, they must concern themselves with the freedom of the people of Pinsk, Peiping, and Patagonia.

2. *Political freedom cannot be segregated from economic freedom.*

The basis of freedom, to be sure, is political, and is set forth in the Bill of Rights. Yet the Bill of Rights is meaningless in our industrial society for any individual whose resources fall below a minimum, or decent standard. The Bill of Rights does not bring the benefits of freedom to the man who lacks the resources to maintain his health, or whose scanty income is consumed in trying to maintain the health of his family. Nourishment, shelter, medical attention, care of children, are essentials of modern freedom, and the ability to maintain them irrespective of the decision of an employer is just as much a part of freedom as is the right of free speech. Indeed, the maintenance of a minimum security is integral to the right of free speech, because when men are insecure they cannot dare to speak freely.

This is the great, new revolutionary principle that we of our time have discovered. It is a principle that we have had to add to the original formula of the founders, in order to make freedom a reality in an industrial age. And we have only made a beginning. If political freedom is to survive, we must bring about a much greater degree of economic freedom, in terms of security, than we have hitherto attempted.

And here again our efforts cannot be confined to ourselves, cannot be exclusive. If we are to promote the concept of freedom in other lands,

we must help the peoples of those lands to raise themselves to a decent economic level. Poverty-stricken peoples lack the education and resources of freedom; and moreover, if our policies of state increase or prolong their poverty, this will eventually turn against us and our idea. Thus, if our purpose is freedom, one of the big tasks of the immediate future is to raise the standard of living of other peoples. Such a policy would constitute a protection of our own standard of living, far more practical than the so-called protective tariff — and far more inspiring.

3. *But while security is necessary to freedom, the two are not synonymous: the free life is a life of risk.*

This is the principle that the New Deal mislaid. Indeed, the struggle to obtain minimum economic security has been so intense that the country has become divided into two camps: those who put their whole emphasis on security and those who put their whole emphasis on “free enterprise,” risk, and profit. We have not as yet been able to understand that the two are complementary, that one cannot exist without the other.

The psychological fruit of freedom is individual initiative, the ability and willingness of the individual to risk his time and energy and resources on something he very much wants. When our society fails to grow this fruit it will become barren; and if barren, nothing can stop it from degenerating into a slave society. Thus,

whatever restrictions and regulations may be necessary to our future stability, and however much the necessities of life may have to be socialized, there must always remain a large (indeed, infinite) area of “free enterprise,” in which individuals can anticipate rewards for risks that they undertake. This means that markets must remain open and that competition must be, not only enforced, but encouraged.

But if freedom of enterprise is essential to the American purpose, so is freedom of work; and in a mass-production society, freedom of work can be achieved only through union organization. Employers who fail to recognize this fact are violating the first principle here set forth — that is, they are trying to keep freedom exclusively for themselves. The American unions are, in a real sense, guardians of American freedom; they must not be curtailed but, on the contrary, greatly expanded. On the other hand, the violation of the principles of democratic unionism by selfish union leaders (of which there are still many) should be checked and punished by the people.

4. *Freedom is not a license: basically, it is a discipline.*

Here is another principle that we have mislaid. We think of freedom as a general franchise to do anything we want; yet this is true only so long as we are resolved *not* to do certain things. A society composed chiefly of murderers and robbers could not be

a "free" society, in our sense of the word; it is only after murder and robbery have been mastered by the overwhelming majority that people can begin to be free. Freedom is a state of being for animals that are highly evolved. If we want it to continue we must encourage the evolution.

The discipline of freedom is not a state discipline, but self-discipline administered by the state. And Americans are relatively far advanced along this road. However, the distance that lies ahead is infinite. Especially in foreign policy, we must learn that our freedom depends upon our ability *not* to do certain things which we would otherwise do — things which people with a primary desire for power or empire (for example) certainly would do.

The fulfillment of the American purpose, therefore, depends in the final analysis upon whether our future citizens can be taught a higher political discipline — in the homes, in the schools, in the churches, and in the press and radio.

V

Any attempt to condense fundamental political issues into a few words runs the danger of generalization. The above principles are, admittedly, general. Yet they are susceptible of elaboration in detail, and if the reader will thus elaborate them in his mind my belief is that he will find them productive.

In any case, as already observed, it is important to conceive of them as an interrelated whole. No one of them can stand alone. It is meaningless to say that freedom must be universal (not exclusive) unless we also agree that its realization is an economic as well as a political task. It is dangerous to insist upon economic security as an ingredient of freedom unless we also insist upon freedom of enterprise and work. And it is despicable to preach freedom in any form unless we are willing to impose upon ourselves the discipline of freedom, whether in domestic or in foreign affairs.

But when conceived as a dynamic whole, and elaborated, I believe these principles can provide us with at least a working definition of what we mean when we talk about making men free.

Americans want freedom, and until recently they have had a wonderful technique for achieving it. This is the technique of practical idealism. The greatest American men of action have been men with ideals. And the greatest American idealists have been doers. That is what it means to be an American.

We of our time have failed to make this combination, so indispensable to freedom: And we have failed to make it because we have lost the golden key to an understanding of what America is. We have tried to be "practical," to seek only our own rewards, to be like other nations.

But America is not just a nation. America is everywhere.

SECRETARY OF WAR STIMSON

By EDWARD T. FOLLIARD and WILLIAM COSTELLO

AFTER Henry L. Stimson was appointed Secretary of War, a Washington columnist wrote: "He obviously is not the person to put driving force into a rearmament program or to reorganize the Army. He is not new blood. He is an old symbol." The columnist expressed a popular opinion at that crucial time, mid-summer 1940, when Germans were goosestepping proudly under the Arc de Triomphe; when Britain stood alone; and when the United States had an army of only 200,000. The appointments of the two old-line Republicans, Stimson and Frank Knox, to the War and Navy Cabinet posts respectively were taken as political expedients — moves by President Roosevelt toward a third term.

Four years later you can still get an argument in Washington over the President's motive in appointing Stimson, but you will have greater difficulty in getting an argument over his wisdom in choosing him for the job. For somewhat to New Deal Washington's surprise, Stimson — seventy-six years old and still a Republican — has

emerged as a great Secretary of War — a notable figure in Cabinet history.

He is probably the hardest worker in his department and the most thorough. An officer laid a report on his desk one day. Stimson riffled through it, and as the officer lingered, the Secretary asked: "Is there anything else?"

"I thought perhaps you'd like to initial it," the officer explained, "so I can move it along."

"Do you mean you expect me to sign this without having read it?" Stimson asked, sternly. The officer, telling the story later, declared: "I got the hell out of there — fast."

Civilian aids in the War Department assure you: "Secretary Stimson never interferes with the Army, but in the War Department he's boss. Make no mistake about that."

On the other hand, professional soldiers assert, "The Army is subordinate to the civilian Secretary, but this is General Marshall's Army. He built it. Make no mistake about that."

This is not double-talk. Both can be right, even though when you try

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