

The Nature of Patriotism

August 27, 1952

**Adlai Stevenson II's Address to the American Legion Convention,
Madison Square Garden, New York City**

Excerpt:

“There are men among use who use ‘patriotism’ as a club for attacking other Americans. What can we say for the self-styled patriot who thinks that a Negro, a Jew, a Catholic, or a Japanese-American is less an American than he? That betrays the deepest article of our faith, the belief in individual liberty and equality which has always been the heart and soul of the American idea.”

Background:

Stevenson faced an extremely tough audience before the American Legion. His Republican opponent, retired Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, served as the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe. “Ike” was a bona fide war hero who, after the war, became first supreme commander of NATO. In comparison, a self-deprecating Stevenson noted that his own unremarkable military career consisted of a stint as an “apprentice seaman in a naval training unit.”

Stevenson, to his credit, did not pander to these veterans and their special interests. “If we were all to claim a special reward for our service, beyond that to which specific disability of sacrifice has created a just claim, who would be left to pay the bill?” he asked the Legionnaires. “After all, we are Americans first and veterans second, and the best maximum for any administration is still Jefferson’s; ‘Equal rights for all, special privileges for none.’”

Although never mentioned by name, the anti-communist witch hunts of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy figured prominently in Stevenson’s vigorous defense of free speech.

At the same time, Stevenson was careful to acknowledge the “healthy apprehension” many Americans held about the “communist menace” within America. “Communism is abhorrent,” he said. “It is strangulation of the individual; it is death for the soul.”

Yet he cautioned the gathered veterans the danger of denying fellow Americans the constitutional right to hold unpopular ideas. “Too often sinister threats to the Bill of Rights, to freedom of the mind, are concealed under the patriotic cloak of anti-communism,” he said.

FULL TEXT of August 27, 1952 address to the American Legion Convention:

I have attended altogether too many conventions not to know how you are all beginning to feel here on the afternoon of your third day. You work hard at Legion business, and then devote the balance of your time to the museums, art galleries, concerts and other cultural monuments of New York. And, of course, you have to listen to speeches too! I console myself with the thought that this punishment, while cruel, is not unusual.

I have no claim, as many of you do, to the honored title of old soldier. Nor have I risen to high rank in the armed services. The fact that a great General and I are competing candidates for the Presidency will not diminish my warm respect for his military achievements. Nor will that respect keep me from using every honest effort to defeat him in November!

My own military career was brief. It was also lowly. An apprentice seaman in a naval training unit was not, as some of you may also recall, exactly a powerful command position in World War One. My experience thus provided me with a very special view—what could be called a worm’s-eye view—of the service. In 1918 I doubt if there was anything more wormlike than an apprentice seaman. I must add, though, that from a very topside job in the Navy Department during the frenzy of the last war I sometimes had nostalgic recollections of apprentice seamanship when someone else had to make all the decisions.

After the first war, many Americans lost sight of the fact that only the strong can be free. Many mistook an ominous lull for permanent peace. In those days the American Legion knew, however, that he who is not prepared today is less so tomorrow, and that only a society which could fight for survival would survive.

The Legion’s fight to awaken America to the need for military preparedness is now largely won. We have made great advances in understanding the problem of national security in the modern world. We no longer think in terms of American resources alone. For the most part, we now understand the need for a great international system of security, and we have taken the lead in building it.

We have joined our strength with that of others—and we have done so in self-protection. We seek no dominion over any other nation—and the whole free world knows it! If there are those behind the Iron Curtain who don’t know it, it is because their masters don’t want them to know it.

I am not sure that, historically, there has been another powerful nation that has been trusted as the United States is trusted today. It is something new under the sun when the

proudest nations on earth have not only accepted American leadership in the common defense effort, but have also welcomed our troops and bases on their territory. Ports the world around are open to American warships by day or night. Our airmen are stationed in the most distant lands.

Yet all is not perfect. There are still vital interests which we and our allies are not militarily prepared to defend.

Some of us are reluctant to admit that security cannot be won cheaply by some clever diplomatic maneuver or by propaganda.

We have not yet really faced up to the problem of defending our cities against the rapidly growing threat of Soviet air power. There is, for example, a great shortage of volunteers for our civil defense ground observation corps.

And many only partly understand or are loath to acknowledge that the costs of waging the cold war are but a fraction of the costs of hot war.

So there remain important tasks for us. I believe in a strong national defense, and I believe that we must press forward to improve our position and not waver or hesitate in this interval when the scales are so precariously balanced. While I think it is true that today the fight for preparedness is going well, there are other and even more difficult tasks that we dare not neglect.

The United States has very large power in the world today. And the partner of power—the corollary—is responsibility. It is our high task to use our power with a sure hand and a steady touch—with the self-restraint that goes with confident strength. The purpose of our power must never be lost in the fact of our power—and the purpose, I take it, is the promotion of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

We talk a great deal about patriotism. What do we mean by patriotism in the context of our times? I venture to suggest that what we mean is a sense of national responsibility which will enable America to remain master of her power—to walk with it in serenity and wisdom, with self-respect and the respect to all mankind; a patriotism that puts country ahead of self; a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime. The dedication of a lifetime—these are words that are easy to utter, but this is a mighty assignment. For it is often easier to fight for principles than to live up to them.

Patriotism, I have said, means putting country before self. This is no abstract phrase, and unhappily, we find some things in American life today of which we cannot be proud.

Consider the groups who seek to identify their special interests with the general welfare. I find it sobering to think that their pressures might one day be focused on me. I have resisted them before and I hope the Almighty will give me the strength to do so again and again. And I should tell your—my fellow Legionnaires—as I would tell all other

organized groups, that I intend to resist pressures from veterans, too, if I think their demands are excessive or in conflict with the public interest, which must always be the paramount interest.

Let me suggest, incidentally, that we are rapidly becoming a nation of veterans. If we were all to claim a special reward for our service, beyond that to which specific disability of sacrifice has created a just claim, who would be left to pay the bill? After all, we are Americans first and veterans second, and the best maxim for any administration is still Jefferson's: "Equal rights for all, special privileges for none."

True patriotism, it seems to me, is based on tolerance and a large measure of humility.

There are men among us who use "patriotism" as a club for attacking other Americans. What can we say for the self-styled patriot who thinks that a Negro, a Jew, a Catholic, or a Japanese-American is less an American than he? That betrays the deepest article of our faith, the belief in individual liberty and equality which has always been the heart and soul of the American idea.

What can we say for the man who proclaims himself a patriot—and then for political or personal reasons attacks the patriotism of faithful public servants? I give you, as a shocking example, the attacks which have been made on the loyalty and the motives of our great wartime Chief of Staff, General Marshall. To me this is the type of "patriotism" which is, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, "the last refuge of scoundrels."

The anatomy of patriotism is complex. But surely intolerance and public irresponsibility cannot be cloaked in the shining armor of rectitude and righteousness. Nor can the denial of the right to hold ideas that are different—the freedom of man to think as he pleases. To strike freedom of the mind with the fist of patriotism is an old and ugly subtlety.

And the freedom of the mind, my friends, has served America well. The vigor of our political life, our capacity for change, our cultural, scientific and industrial achievements, all derive from free inquiry, from the free mind—from the imagination, resourcefulness and daring of men who are not afraid of new ideas. Most all of us favor free enterprise for business. Let us also favor free enterprise for the mind. For, in the last analysis, we would fight to the death to protect it. Why is it, then, that we are sometimes slow to detect, or are indifferent to, the dangers that beset it?

Many of the threats to our cherished freedoms in these anxious, troubled times arise, it seems to me, from a healthy apprehension about the communist menace within our country. Communism is abhorrent. It is strangulation of the individual; it is death for the soul. Americans who have surrendered to this misbegotten idol have surrendered their right to our trust. And there can be no secure place for them in our public life.

Yet, as I have said before, we must take care not to burn down the barn to kill the rats. All of us, and especially patriotic organizations of enormous influence like the American

Legion, must be vigilant in protecting our birthright from its too zealous friends while protecting it from its evil enemies.

The tragedy of our day is the climate of fear in which we live, and fear breeds repression. Too often sinister threats to the Bill of Rights, to freedom of the mind, are concealed under the patriotic cloak of anti-communism.

I could add, from my own experience, that it is never necessary to call a man a communist to make political capital. Those of us who have undertaken to practice the ancient but imperfect art of government will always make enough mistakes to keep our critics well supplied with standard ammunition. There is no need for poison gas.

Another feature of our current scene that I think invites a similar restraint is the recurrent attacks in some communities upon our public schools.

There is no justification for indiscriminate attacks on our schools, and the sincere, devoted, and by no means overpaid teachers who labor in them. If there are any communist teachers, of course they should be excluded, but the task is not one for self-appointed thought police or ill-informed censors. As a practical matter, we do not stop communist activity in this way. What we do is give the communists material with which to defame us. And we also stifle the initiative of teachers and depreciate the prestige of the teaching profession which should be as honorable and esteemed as any among us.

Let me now, in my concluding words, inquire with you how we may affirm our patriotism in the troubled yet hopeful years that are ahead.

The central concern of the American Legion—the ideal which holds it together—the vitality which animates it—is patriotism. And those voices which we have heard most clearly and which are best remembered in our public life have always had the accent of patriotism.

It was always accounted a virtue in a man to love his country. With us it is now something more than a virtue. It is a necessity, a condition of survival. When an American says that he loves his country, he means not only that he loves the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains, and the sea. He means that he loves an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a man can draw the breath of self-respect.

Men who have offered their lives for their country know that patriotism is not the fear of something; it is the love of something. Patriotism with us is not the hatred of Russia; it is the love of this Republic and of the ideal of liberty of man and mind in which it was born, and to which this Republic is dedicated.

With this patriotism—patriotism in its large and wholesome meaning—America can master its power and turn it to the noble cause of peace. We can maintain military power

without militarism; political power without oppression; and moral power without compulsion or complacency.

The road we travel is long, but at the end lies the grail of peace. And in the valley of peace we see the faint outlines of a new world, fertile and strong. It is odd that one of the keys to abundance should have been handed to civilization on a platter of destruction. But the power of the atom to work evil gives only the merest hint of its power for good.

I believe that man stands on the eve of his greatest day. I know, too, that that day is not a gift but a prize; that we shall not reach it until we have won it.

Legionnaires are united by memories of war. Therefore, no group is more devoted to peace. I say to you now that there is work to be done, that the difficulties and dangers that beset our path at home and abroad are incalculable. There is sweat and sacrifice; there is much of patience and quite persistence in our horoscope. Perhaps the goal is not even for us to see in our lifetime.

But we are embarked on a great adventure. Let us proclaim our faith in the future of man. Of good heart and good cheer, faithful to ourselves and our traditions, we can lift the cause of freedom, the cause of free men, so high no power on earth can tear it down. We can pluck this flower, safety, from this nettle, danger. Living, speaking, like men—like Americans—we can lead the way to our rendezvous in a happy, peaceful world.

Thank you—and forgive me for imposing on you for so long.

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the “American Legion”?
2. What is Stevenson referring to when he comments on the personal attacks on General Marshall?
3. Why did Stevenson view communism as a threat to individual liberty and freedom of thought?
4. What were Stevenson’s thoughts regarding harnessing the atom?
5. Why would freedom of ideas help cultivate the atom’s “power of good”?

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