

The "Spirit of Liberty" Speech

Judge Learned Hand

Presented in 1944 during "I AM an American Day"

We have gathered here to affirm a faith, a faith in a common purpose, a common conviction, a common devotion.

Some of us have chosen America as the land of our adoption; the rest have come from those who did the same. For this reason we have some right to consider ourselves a picked group, a group of those who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land. What was the object that nerved us, or those who went before us, to this choice?

We sought liberty - freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves. This then we sought; this we now believe that we are by way of winning. What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there, it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few - as we have learned to our sorrow.

What then is the spirit of liberty?

I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten - that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side-by-side with the greatest. And now in that spirit, that spirit of an American which has never been, and which may never be - nay, which never will be except as the conscience and courage of Americans create it - yet in the spirit of America which lies hidden in some form in the aspirations of us all; in the spirit of that America for which our young men are at this moment fighting and dying; in that spirit of liberty and of America so prosperous, and safe, and contented, we shall have failed to grasp its meaning, and shall have been truant to its promise, except as we strive to make it a signal, a beacon, a standard to which the best hopes of mankind will ever turn; In confidence that you share that belief, I now ask you to raise you hand and repeat with me this pledge:

I pledge allegiance to the flag and to the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands--One nation, Indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

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