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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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What is Permanent in American Life?, 1937.

WRHS  
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES 491  
WHAT IS PERMANENT IN AMERICAN LIFE?

The third of a series of lectures on the general theme  
"Things Permanent."

By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, November 21, 1937

When we spoke of what is permanent in character and in civilization we spoke with a certain degree of confidence, because there is a great deal of case material upon which to base conclusions. Each has a long history back of it. There was rich data available, for America is, relatively speaking, a recent phenomenon. One is hardly justified on the basis of our knowledge of the past to prophecy what is likely to be permanent in American life in the future. One can only reflect upon those things which the founders of this country wished to see perpetuated, on those values which they regarded as the warp and woof of American destiny. One can observe how these desirable values have worked themselves out in the history of America's one hundred fifty years. That is not an inconsiderable period of time. One can also survey the forces which promise to protect or which threaten to destroy these values.

At the outset, let me make this observation which I believe is important - that there was something different, something unique in the establishment of this democracy in a Republic which we call the United States of America. Its history is unlike the history of any other people. It is a distinctly new phenomenon. Its very origin, the very nature of its composition is something different and those who in their discussions like to make analogies - one people or another, one nation or another - ought to bear in mind this decisive fact. The United States of America, this country, was born in revolution - the first great democratic revolution in the Western World. The principles of the Declaration of Independence which ushered in revolution, were not unknown as academic subjects for discussion among poets, philosophers, scholars. But never

have they been used as actual foundations upon which a State was built. That was a unique, a startlingly new thing in the world. Furthermore no government up to that time in the Western hemisphere was established upon a constitution, a legal document which defined what government might do and at the same time what government cannot do.

And no sovereign independent State had been established before that time which was composed out of so large a number of sovereign independent States. The world knew of empires which were fashioned out of conquest, war and coalesced external pressure. But such a voluntary fusion of sovereign states brought together from within - that, too, was a unique thing in the political history of mankind. And again, no nation up to that time was ever fashioned out of so many different nationalities, religions, as the United States. And it is this unique make-up, this unique history that has given to this country a unique tradition.

America is most American when it remains true to this unique tradition and it is least American when it slips back into ~~back~~ the ruts of the Old World traditions, the Old World complex of ideas and conventions from which our founding fathers sought to emancipate themselves in this new country.

What may therefore be said to be permanent things in American life? What are the values which all the great leaders of this country wanted to see permanent in American life?

First of all, I believe that it is the importance of the individual, the dignity of the common man. Walt Whitman more than any other American poet taught the genius of American democracy.

He was in Literature what Jefferson and Lincoln were in Politics and Statesmanship. Walt Whitman, in his great poem "Chants Democratic" says:

"Underneath all are individuals  
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals!  
The American compact is altogether with individuals,  
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals,  
The whole theory of the universe is directed to one single  
individual -- namely, to You."

The age-old struggle which had been going on for centuries - the struggle on the part of the individual to escape the trap of the restricted life which the accident of birth, for example, forces on you, the desperate struggle to destroy the fatal handicaps of class and cast, the struggle of the individual to be free, to live his own life, to fulfil himself to the utmost as a fully emancipated human being - this yearning in the human race for centuries denied, frustrated, inhibited, received in the New World its consummation, its vindication. Here for the first time every man became a sovereign because every man became equal before the law. This constitution raised every individual to the maximum of independence and sovereignty possible in an organized society and it did that by levelling all men to one discipline of impartial law. All speech privileges appertaining to bureaucracy in the Old World were outlawed here and around these sovereign rights of the individual, around the newly declared integrity of the individual, the Constitution built its forces to safeguard the inalienable rights of man. It denied the government the right to restrict, to encroach upon the sovereign independence of the individual.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

And Again:

"The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

You don't realize today - you can't realize today what a revolutionary document that was. This is permanent in American life. When that is destroyed, when the safeguards are removed, these inalienable rights denied, denies freedom, discriminates against citizens because of religion or race - when governments begin to encroach upon these American principles, America ceases to America. It sinks back on the rocks of the Old World.

The second thing permanent in American life is the idea of government by consent and not by constraint, government by persuasion and not by force, government from within and not from without. Tolerance to this principle is necessary and tremendously ~~xxx~~ significant in our times. What does this mean - government by consent or by constraint? All progress must be achieved through consent, persuasion, from within and not through constraint, compulsion in the land?

The ~~xxxx~~<sup>Old</sup> world was accustomed to enforced government. The Old World is accustomed to impose regimes, good or evil, upon the people. In that sense, Fascism, Nazism and Communism definitely

are Old World products. They seek to impose a regime, on their people. Of course every one thinks its government is best. They seek to impose by dictatorship from above. That runs counter to the principle values of American people.

Our Constitution begins with a preamble and the preamble begins with these significant words: "We the people of the United States do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America." We not they! In our Declaration we find: "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed", - of all the governed, not of a class within, but of all the governed.

And it is the American tradition, my friends, this principle of government by consent, which is an end in itself, which must not be sacrificed for some immediate gain, even if a whole Kingdom of economic justice were offered to the American people. Upon the sacrifice of our liberties, the whole Kingdom with all its glories must be rejected. It is better slow in freedom than swift in slavery!

Franklin K. Lane, one of the members of President Roosevelt's Cabinet ~~xxx~~ wrote in one of his lovely letters so full of wisdom and understanding:

"This land is truly a land of promise because it may be a land of fulfilment. It shows the way by which without murder and robbery and class hatred and the burning up of what has been, men may go right on making experiments, and failing, making others abd failing, and learning something all the time.

"So, I'm for America, because, if nationalization of

of either, or both, appeals to us as something that will right manifest wrongs, we can try that solution. And to cry quits on the best that civilization has done, because all that is wished for may not be realized or realizable today, is to lose perspective and balance, and jump out of the window because the stairs go round and round."

This second thing which is permanent in American life is not only part of American idealism but also part of practical American sagacity. American genius excels in the pragmatic. For example, our scientific contributions have been in the field of applied rather than in the abstract. Our geniuses in this field have been the Edisons, Bells Wright Brothers rather than the Darwins, Curies and Einsteins.

American genius is not out to vindicate some abstract theory of government or some philosophy of history. It seeks to achieve practically, through trial and error, step by step, a happier way of living for a larger number of people. It believes that this very flexible instrumentality of a free and democratic government within constitutional guaranties and limitations is the handiest and best way to achieve this desired goal.

I think that the third permanent value in American life is its quality of broad generous good humor, tolerance. We are a composite people - Nordic, Latin, Slav and Hebrew. All had a hand in the discovery, exploration, settlement and development of this country. This is a nation made up entirely of immigrants, and all peoples and all races have contributed to the material and spiritual growth of this country.

Many religious groups make up the mosaic of America. We have religious freedom and religious tolerance. Those who first settled Massachusetts came here to worship in this country as their consciences dictated. When they and those who followed them became religiously intolerant, rebels arose who were driven into exile. These exiles established other colonies.

Despite occasional lapses there has been a sustained tendency toward good will, cooperation between these groups, creeds, races. So much so that some have come to speak of America as the melting pot in the world, the great crucible which melts all people into one nationality, dissolving all their particularisms. I do not know to what extent this myth of the melting pot should be credited.

What is important is that it has been possible for two or three centuries for numbers of peoples, races, to exist without serious friction among them. And then there is the tradition of America for an asylum for political exiles. America is the mother of exiles. That has been a golden thread which runs through the whole tapestry of American experience.

Now this spacious, generous tolerance, this outreaching for a new human brotherhood based not on blood or creed or race but upon spirit, upon common human loyalty - that too in my judgment is something permanent in American life. When that is gone, the spirit will have departed from the American people.

Lastly, I regard the idea of opportunity as something permanent in American life, a free and open continent and a free government gave our people a sense of limitless opportunity. All

the sluices of human energy were opened wide and men rushed forth to conquer. Tolerance swept over the whole country. American life became free, audacious, enterprising. The myth "from the log-cabin to the white-house" is not a myth at all. And "from bootblack or messenger-boy to the president of a corporation or the head of a bank" - that, too, was not a myth but a fact.

It was like a volcano pouring out its lava. Never has the world seen such an heroic outburst of unleashed human energy as in the last hundred years or more as from this country. The increasing wealth of the country made possible by numerous and amazing inventions which wealth also percolated down to the masses, gave to the masses a standard of living unknown in any part of the world, in all history. That, too, has been part of the great American tradition - to produce wealth and to share wealth as a prelude to ~~the~~ the good life. And when this element vanishes from American life, when in place of this, when these elements are eliminated, when the masses come to feel that they are condemned to a fixed economic existence, to recurrent unemployment and permanent insecurity, then the spirit of America will also vanish and in its place will come the spirit of the Old World - sour, resentful discontent. Then revolt will set in.

It is therefore of supreme importance to give to American life a sense of economic well-being, a sense of economic security so that the note of hope which was so characteristic in American life, of promise and not despair.

These four things are the graces which God bestowed on America. The common man was raised in dignity; a government established in freedom; man was exalted in a new ~~xxxxxx~~ covenant of spiritual brotherhood; life was made bright with the promise of opportunity.

I do not mean to say, of course, that American life is perfect. That would be a foolish thing to say. There is much in our life which is formless, crude, ruthless. Our cities are great but they are plan-less. Our wealth is immense, but it is not properly distributed. Our machines are gigantic, but may crush the individual. There is a danger of standardization and cultural regimentation, of people being victimized. Our political ideals are high but our politics and our politicians ~~xxx~~ so often fail to measure up to them. There are forces of reaction at work hoping to undermine our free institutions. There is widespread lawlessness and crime in our midst.

But there is, because of these graces, because of these values which we hope are permanent in American life - there is an amazing recuperative power of regeneration, self-reverence, self-improvement and reformation in American life.

Back in 1820, an Englishman had this to say about America:

"In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? What have they done in mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets? Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy, and sell, and torture?"

This was written in 1820. And to most of these questions you can answer - yes. The world reads American books. The world looks upon American paintings and statues. The world already owes much to the

American physicians, chemists and inventors. The world uses American products of all kinds. Our slavery has been abolished. And all because in American life there are these graces which made it possible for us to correct deficiencies, to make straight that which is crooked, to progress, to experiment. There are deficiencies, shortcomings. And they are many. If we preserve the golden boon of these gifts, these permanent values, we shall reawaken anew.

There is nothing within human possibility that this great nation of ours cannot do if it sets its mind to do it through the instrumentalities which are permanent things in American life. When we set out to that which should be done, not through these instrumentalities - the rights of the individual, government by consent, tolerance, opportunity for all - but through Old World methods of class struggle, class hatred, destruction of constitutional guaranties and dictatorships - we shall destroy, in the process, all that which was loveliest in American life.

ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE, ANSEL ROAD AND EAST 105TH STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 21, 1937.

### WHAT IS PERMANENT IN AMERICAN LIFE?

One cannot prophecy as to what is likely to be permanent in American life. One can only reflect upon those things which the founders of this nation wished to see perpetuated, the values which they regarded as of the very warp and woof of American destiny. Among those first and foremost is the importance of the individual, the dignity of the common man, the millennial struggle of the individual to escape the trap of a restricted life into which the accident of birth may have put him, to destroy his fatal handicaps of class and cast, and to be free to express himself fully as a fully<sup>er</sup> franchised individual, found in America its consummation and triumph. The Constitution of the United States raised all men to maximum independence and sovereignty by levelling all men to the discipline of one impartial law. And around the newly established integrity of the individual the Constitution built numerous ~~xxx~~ defenses to safeguard his inalienable rights and to keep the state or the majority within the state from ever again dominating and victimizing him.

The second permanent value in American life is the idea of government by consent and not by constraint, by persuasion and not by force, from within and not from without. The Old World is accustomed through centuries of "enforced" government to impose progress on its people from above. Fascism, Nazism and Communism are characteristic products of the Old World. The American tradition is that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This principle is an end in itself not to be sacrificed for some immediate economic advantage. Better slow in freedom than swept in slavery. Even if the whole Kingdom of economic justice were to be had at once but at the cost of the sacrifice of liberties, it must be rejected.

This is part not only of American idealism but of practical American sagacity. America excels in the pragmatic. In government we are not out to vindicate any abstract theory or any philosophy of history. We seek to achieve practically, and ~~step~~ step by step, a happier and more prosperous way of life for our people and we believe that the flexible instrumentalities of a free and democratic government within constitutional guarantees and limitations is the handiest and most effective instrument to achieve it.

A generous spacious tolerance is another permanent value in American life. This people is made up entirely of immigrants. It is a composite people. Nordics, Latins, Slavs and Hebrews had a hand in the discovery, exploration, ~~initial~~ settlement and development of this country. Many religious groups make up the mosaic which is America. In spite of occasional lapses into bigotry and intolerance, there has been a sustained trend towards good will and cooperation. There has been an outreaching for a new human brotherhood based not on blood or creed but spirit and common human loyalties. When ~~this~~ this vanishes from American life, its spirit will have departed.

And, lastly, the motif of opportunity. An open continent and a free government gave to our people a sense of limitless opportunity. All the sluices of human energy were opened wide and ~~man~~ <sup>men</sup> ~~rushed~~ forth to conquer. American life has been bold, free, turbulent and audacious. The increasing wealth of the nation made possible through the amazing inventions and the ~~xx~~ technological progress of the last century, which wealth was percolated down to the masses so that they attained an economic level heretofore unknown anywhere on earth also made American life as full of hope as its ~~xxxxxx~~ flag was full of stars. To produce wealth and to share wealth as a prelude to the better life - this has been a permanent feature of the American tradition and when this element is eliminated, when the masses come to feel that they are condemned to a fixed economic existence, to recurrent unemployment and *permanent*

insecurity, the spirit which is America will vanish and in its place will come the spirit of the Old World - sour, resentful ~~dark~~ discontent venting itself in movements of revolt.



1. When we speak of Character & Lust we could say what is present in them with a fair degree of confidence. For we had rather extensive case material upon which to base our conclusions. There is a long history to look, and rich <sup>unimpaired</sup> data available. But human life is, relatively speaking, a recent phenomenon. One is hardly warranted in prophesying on the basis of past experience what is likely to be present in human life in the future. One can only reflect upon those things which those who founded this nation wished to perpetuate, what they regarded as the very essence of American life, the warp & woof of American destiny. One can then observe how these desiderata of American life have worked themselves out in practice thus more than 150 years - a not inconsiderable period of time. One can also survey the forces which threaten to conserve or which threaten to destroy them in future.

2. At the outset, let it be stated, that there was something definitely different, decidedly unique about the establishment of this nation in a Republic - called the U.S. of America. - Its birth was unlike the birth of any nation which preceded it. It was a distinctly "new" phenomenon in the political history of the world. From its very origin & by the very nature of its composition it was, & has continued to be a "different". Those who in their discussions like to draw analogies between nations ought not to overlook this significant fact. The U.S. was born in Revolt - the first great democratic revolt in the history of West. World. The primitives, the black & Ind. - had not been unknown to a matter of academic interest & discussion to philosophers & scholars - but had never been actually set down as the foundation stones of a real society. And an actual society. No govt. up to that time <sup>actually</sup> had a written constitution which clearly defined the powers of govt, their duties & functions, & which simultaneously defined what govt could not do - by way of setting up a bill of rights.

No sovereign <sup>Fed.</sup> Govt had ever been set up which was composed  
of so many, independent sovereign states - a voluntary union, & not  
an empire forged in war, conquest, and a union imposed from  
above, but a union effected from within. No nation, not an  
empire, was ever fashioned out of so many different nationalities and  
religions, as the U.S. was from its very inception. Its unique make-  
up, & unique pol. as well as econ. history - an empire continued  
in which to grow & expand - have given to Am. life a unique  
frankness - & a unique character.

Amer. is most true when it is true to its dissimilarity  
with the Old World, to its dissimilarity to Old World traditions. It  
is best true when it slips into the ancient mists of a world  
~~where~~ <sup>from</sup> whose communities and complexes it struggled to ~~escape~~  
emancipate itself.

3. What was sought to make permanent in the new nation?

The importance of the individual: The dignity of the Common Man.

Walt Whitman (Intro. "Charles Whitman")

The deep, centuries-old struggle of the nation to emerge from the  
fatalistic ~~darkness~~ <sup>chains</sup> of restricted life with which the accident  
of birth may have put him - to destroy the fatal handicaps & class  
and caste - to be free, <sup>sovereign</sup> to live & express himself fully as a fully  
franchised individual, <sup>to work out his destiny as he chooses</sup> & <sup>some of</sup> its consummate triumph in the  
establishment of the Amer. Govt. Here, for first time, every man  
became a King, because all men were equal before the law!

The Constitution raised all men to maximum ind. sovereignty  
by leveling all men to the discipline of <sup>an</sup> impartial law.  
Special privileges <sup>appertaining</sup> belonging to certain classes in the Old World  
be. of birth, or heredity, or religion were here outlawed. ~~all~~

For these special privileges, while exalted some, degraded others.

And around the integrity, the Indian were builded defenses -

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances"

And again Article IX

"The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

- Education - Socialism -

This is Permanent. When it is destroyed - Amer. is destroyed

When these safeguards are destroyed - then inalienable right destroyed - and a govt. is set up which violates then pre-constituted domains - denies freedom etc - discriminates against citizens because of religion or race - it will no longer be America.

4. Govt. by consent and not by constraint  
" by persuasion " " " free.  
" from within " " from within with art.

Hence proper whether pol. or econ. to be achieved thru education and the deevol. apparatus and not thru class dictatorship & force.

The old world, accustomed to centuries of "enforced" government & autocracy - ~~often~~ frequently slips back to the old technique of "imposing" proper on people - from above - Fasc. & Com. are both charac. products of the old world. - trying to appropriate what U.S. has given to masses - ~~confused~~ ~~confused~~ ~~confused~~

Our Const. <sup>franchised</sup> WE, the people, of the U.S. -- do ordain + establish  
this Const. of the U.S. of Amer.

"Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just  
powers from the consent of the governed."

And it is the Amer. tradition that ~~it is for~~ <sup>this</sup> principle  
is an end in itself - not to be sacrificed for some immediate  
econ. advantage. Even if the whole Kingdom Econ. justice  
were to be had at the cost of the sacrifice of their liberties  
- it must be rejected. Better slow in freedom than fast  
in slavery!

Franklin K. Lane (Inst) ✓

5. This is part of practical Amer. reality as well as its idealism.  
Amer. excels in the pragmatic. Its re. contributions have  
been more in the field of applied rather than abstract, ~~speculative~~  
science. Our representation in this field are the Edison, the Bell,  
the Wright Bros. rather than Plankton, Röntgen, Curies & Rutherford.  
And so in philos - William James and in Education - John  
Dewey.

- or some philosophy of history  
We are not to vindicate no abstract theory in govt. &  
we seek to achieve practically the ideal recess, step by step  
a happier more prosperous <sup>way of</sup> life for the present number of our people.  
and we believe that the flexible instrument of free ordain. govt.  
under constitutional parameters - is the most handy instrument  
to achieve it.

- a people all made up of immigrants - 30 m.  
6. Tolerance. ① A composite people. Nordic, Latin, Slav & others - discover - explore - settle & developed it. All contributed to its material and spiritual growth. All served it in peace & in war.  
② Many religious groups. make up its Mosaic.  
From earliest Colonial days the struggle for rel. freedom <sup>the right of private judgment in matters of conscience</sup> began.  
The colony of Mass - Pilgrims  
The colony of R.I. Roger Williams - fled - established 1636.

In spite of occasional lapses into bigotry - sustained tendency has been towards good-will - & cooperation.

③ Trend towards melting & amalgamation of races & peoples here quite natural. This has given rise to legend of Amer. as the Melting Pot - the great crucible which melts all peoples into one nationality, dissolving all their particularities. This is doubtful - and not necessary. There can be unity even in cultural pluralism. But certainly it has lived with all other groups - without friction.

④ Asylum for pol. refugees - for oppressed & persecuted.  
(Justice Bryant.) "Mother of Exiles"

<sup>good-humored</sup>  
This generous, spacious tolerance, this out-reaching for a new human brotherhood, based not on blood, or race or creed, but spirit & common human loyalties - permanent. When it is gone - the spirit will have departed from America.

## 7. Opportunity

An open continent and a free port gave to our people a sense of limitless opportunity. And the sluices of human energy were opened wide - and man rushed forth to conquer! Amer. life was surcharged with <sup>boundless energy</sup> adventurousness. It was bold, free, daring & like a volcano pouring out its lava.



There is much that is formless, crude & ruthless in our life.

Our cities are great - but plan-less.

Our machines are giants, but may crush the individual. There is  
the danger of standards of culture & representation.

Our wealth is great, but not properly distributed.

Our pol. ideals are high - but our politics & our politicians so  
often fail to measure up to them.

There are forces, reactions at work hoping to understand our  
free institutions

There is widespread lawlessness, crime.

10. But - there is, we believe, in Jewry, then "Jews" an  
amazing power of regeneration, upliftment and  
reformation in our life.

(In 1920 - Jute)



1. When we speak - confidence - case material - long history  
rich, universal data available.

But Am. life, is, relatively speaking, a recent phenomenon.

One is hardly justified in prophesying, on basis

One can only reflect - founded - perpetuated - essential  
warp & woof of Am. destiny

One can observe - disintegrate - world has out - 150

" " survey forces

2. At the outset - defin. different - decidedly unique in the  
establish. of this kind in a Repub. called U.S.A.

Its history unlike .. a distinctly "new" phenomenon.

From its very origin - nature of composition ... different

Those who in their discussion - analogies ..

U.S. born in Revolution - first great dem. Rev.

Principles of Idealism - not unknown -

No govt, up to that time, ~~as~~ in East. Hem; Constitution

No sovereign govt - composed of so many - not an Empire

No nation harbored so many diff. nationalities - creeds

Its unique make-up striking - gives it - unique tradition

America is most American - dissimilarity - dissimilarity

3. The Importance of the Individual - Dignity of Common Man  
(Intro W.W.)

The desperate, centuries-old struggle - escape trap  
destroy the fatal handicaps

to be free, "sui generis", to know, to express,  
to work out his destiny as he chooses  
found consummation - triumph

Here, for first time, every man a King - equal before law  
Constitution raised all men - leveling - discipline

Special privileges appertaining -

And around the Union d. - bulwarked defenses

(Just) Constitution.

This is permanent - when it is destroyed -  
safeguards - pre-empted.

4. Govt - Consent - constraint  
persuasion - force  
within - without

Here Progress - pol. & econ. - Education -  
Old world - "enforced" - imposing - Tax. Rem.,

In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? What have they done in mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets? Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy, and sell, and torture?

Sydney Smith, Review of Seybert's  
Annals of the United States.  
Edinburgh Review, Jan., 1820



There's freedom at thy gates and rest  
For Earth's down-trodden and oppressed,  
A shelter for the hunted head,  
For the starved laborer toil and bread.

Bryant, Oh Mother of a Mighty Race

~~Asylum of the oppressed of every nation.~~

~~Unknown~~, Democratic Platform, 1856

D. 8.

Underneath all are individuals,  
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals!  
The American compact is altogether with individuals,  
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals,  
The whole theory of the universe is directed to one single  
individual--namely, to You.

Walt Whitman - Chants Democratic

..... This land is truly a land of promise because it may be a land of fulfilment. It shows the way by which without murder and robbery and class hatred and the burning up of what has been, men may go right on making experiments, and failing, making others and failing, and learning something all the time.

So, I'm for America, because, if nationalization of land and industry are wise experiments to make, no one can stop us from making them, if partial nationalization of either, or both, appeals to us as something that will right manifest wrongs, we can try that solution. And to cry quits on the best that civilization has done, because all that is wished for may not be realized or realizable today, is to lose perspective and balance, and jump out the window because the stairs go round and round.

Franklin K. Lane

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By  
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At  
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Sunday morning, November 21, 1937

When we spoke of what is permanent in character and in civilization we spoke with a certain degree of confidence, because there is a great deal of case material upon which to base conclusions. Each has a long history back of it. There was rich data available, for America is, relatively speaking, a recent phenomenon. One is hardly justified on the basis of our knowledge of the past to prophecy what is likely to be permanent in American life in the future. One can only reflect upon those things which the founders of this country wished to see perpetuated, on those values which they regarded as the warp and woof of American destiny. One can observe how these desirable values have worked themselves out in the history of America's one hundred fifty years. That is not an inconsiderable period of time. One can also survey the forces which promise to protect or which threaten to destroy these values.

At the outset, let me make this observation which I believe is important - that there was something different, something unique in the establishment of this democracy in a Republic which we call the United States of America. Its history is unlike the history of any other people. It is a distinctly new phenomenon. Its very origin, the very nature of its composition is something different and those who in their discussions like to make analogies - one people or another, one nation or another - ought to bear in mind this decisive fact. The United States of America, this country, ✓ was born in revolution - the first great democratic revolution in the Western World. The principles of the Declaration of Independence which ushered in revolution, were not unknown as academic subjects for discussion among poets, philosophers, scholars. But never

have they been used as actual foundations upon which a State was built. That was a unique, a startlingly new thing in the world. Furthermore no government up to that time in the Western hemisphere was established upon a constitution, a legal document which defined what government might do and at the same time what government cannot do.

And no sovereign independent State had been established before that time which was composed out of so large a number of sovereign independent States. The world knew of empires which were fashioned out of conquest, war and coalesced external pressure. But such a voluntary fusion of sovereign states brought together from within - that, too, was a unique thing in the political history of mankind. And again, no nation up to that time was ever fashioned out of so many different nationalities, religions, as the United States. And it is this unique make-up, this unique history that has given to this country a unique tradition.

America is most American when it remains true to this unique tradition and it is least American when it slips back into ~~that~~ the ruts of the Old World traditions, the Old World complex of ideas and conventions from which our founding fathers sought to emancipate themselves in this new country.

What may therefore be said to be permanent things in American life? What are the values which all the great leaders of this country wanted to see permanent in American life?

First of all, I believe that it is the importance of the individual, the dignity of the common man. Walt Whitman more than any other American poet taught the genius of American democracy.

He was in Literature what Jefferson and Lincoln were in Politics and Statesmanship. Walt Whitman, in his great poem "Chants Democratic" says:

"Underneath all are individuals  
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals!  
The American compact is altogether with individuals,  
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals,  
The whole theory of the universe is directed to one single  
individual -- namely, to You."

The age-old struggle which had been going on for centuries - the struggle on the part of the individual to escape the trap of the restricted life which the accident of birth, for example, forces on you, the desperate struggle to destroy the fatal handicaps of class and cast, the struggle of the individual to be free, to live his own life, to fulfil himself to the utmost as a fully emancipated human being - this yearning in the human race for centuries denied, frustrated, inhibited, received in the New World its consummation, its vindication. Here for the first time every man became a sovereign because every man became equal before the law. This constitution raised every individual to the maximum of independence and sovereignty possible in an organized society and it did that by levelling all men to one discipline of impartial law. All speech privileges appertaining to bureaucracy in the Old World were outlawed here and around these sovereign rights of the individual, around the newly declared integrity of the individual, the Constitution built its fences to safeguard the inalienable rights of man. It denied the government the right to restrict, to encroach upon the sovereign independence of the individual.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

And Again:

"The enumeration in the Constituion of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

You don't realize today - you can't realize today what a revolutionary document that was. This is permanent in American life. When that is destroyed, when the safeguards are removed, these inalienable rights denied, denies freedom, discriminates against citizens because of religion or race - when governments begin to encroach upon these American principles, America ceases to America. It sinks back on the rocks of the Old World.

The second thing permanent in American life is the idea of government by consent and not by constraint, government by persuasion and not by force, government from within and not from without. Tolerance to this principle is necessary and tremendously ~~■~~ significant in our times. What does this mean - government by consent or by constraint? All progress must be achieved through consent, persuasion, from within and not through constraint, compulsion in the land?

The ~~■~~<sup>Old</sup>/world was accustomed to enforced government. The Old World is accustomed to impose regimes, good or evil, upon the people. In that sense, Fascism, Nazism and Communism definitely

are Old World products. They seek to impose a regime, on their people. Of course every one thinks its government is best. They seek to impose by dictatorship from above. That runs counter to the principle values of American people.

Our Constitution begins with a preamble and the preamble begins with these significant words: "We the people of the United States do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America." We not they! In our Declaration we find: "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed", - of all the governed, not of a class within, but of all the governed.

And it is the American tradition, my friends, this principle of government by consent, which is an end in itself, which must not be sacrificed for some immediate gain, even if a whole Kingdom of economic justice were offered to the American people. Upon the sacrifice of our liberties, the whole Kingdom with all its glories must be rejected. It is better slow in freedom than swift in slavery!

Franklin K. Lane, one of the members of President Roosevelt's Cabinet ~~who~~ wrote in one of his lovely letters so full of wisdom and understanding:

"This land is truly a land of promise because it may be a land of fulfilment. It shows the way by which without murder and robbery and class hatred and the burning up of what has been, men may go right on making experiments, and failing, making others abd failing, and learning something all the time.

"So, I'm for America, because, if nationalization of

of either, or both, appeals to us as something that will right manifest wrongs, we can try that solution. And to cry quits on the best that civilization has done, because all that is wished for may not be realized or realizable today, is to lose perspective and balance, and jump out of the window because the stairs go round and round."

This second thing which is permanent in American life is not only part of American idealism but also part of practical American sagacity. American genius excels in the pragmatic. For example, our scientific contributions have been in the field of applied rather than in the abstract. Our geniuses in this field have been the Edisons, Bells Wright Brothers rather than the Darwins, Curies and Einsteins.

American genius is not out to vindicate some abstract theory of government or some philosophy of history. It seeks to achieve practically, through trial and error, step by step, a happier way of living for a larger number of people. It believes that this very flexible instrumentality of a free and democratic government within constitutional guaranties and limitations is the handiest and best way to achieve this desired goal.

I think that the third permanent value in American life is its quality of broad generous ~~good humor~~, tolerance. We are a composite people - Nordic, Latin, Slav and Hebrew. All had a hand in the discovery, exploration, settlement and development of this country. This is a nation made up entirely of immigrants, and all peoples and all races have contributed to the material and spiritual growth of this country.

Many religious groups make up the mosaic of America. We have religious freedom and religious tolerance. Those who first settled Massachusetts came here to worship in this country as their consciences dictated. When they and those who followed them became religiously intolerant, rebels arose who were driven into exile. These exiles established other colonies.

Despite occasional lapses there has been a sustained tendency toward good will, cooperation between these groups, creeds, races. So much so that some have come to speak of America as the melting pot in the world, the great crucible which melts all people into one nationality, dissolving all their particularisms.

(I do not know to what extent this myth of the melting pot should be credited.

What is important is that it has been possible for two or three centuries for numbers of peoples, races, to exist without serious friction among them. And then there is the tradition of America for an asylum for political exiles. America is the mother of exiles. That has been a golden thread which runs through the whole tapestry of American experience.

Now this spacious, generous tolerance, this outreaching for a new human brotherhood based not on blood or creed or race but upon spirit, upon common human loyalty - that too in my judgment is something permanent in American life. When that is gone, the spirit will have departed from the American people.

Lastly, I regard the idea of opportunity as something permanent in American life, a free and open continent and a free government gave our people a sense of limitless opportunity. All

the sluices of human energy were opened wide and men rushed forth to conquer. Tolerance swept over the whole country. American life became free, audacious, enterprising. The myth "from the log-cabin to the white-house" is not a myth at all. And "from bootblack or messenger-boy to the president of a corporation or the head of a bank" - that, too, was not a myth but a fact.

It was like a volcano pouring out its lava. Never has the world seen such an heroic outburst of unleashed human energy as in the last hundred years or more as from this country. The increasing wealth of the country made possible by numerous and amazing inventions which wealth also percolated down to the masses, gave to the masses a standard of living unknown in any part of the world, in all history. That, too, has been part of the great American tradition - to produce wealth and to share wealth as a prelude to ~~the~~ the good life. And when this element vanishes from American life, when in place of this, when these elements are eliminated, when the masses come to feel that they are condemned to a fixed economic *forte* existence, to recurrent unemployment and permanent insecurity, then the spirit of America will also vanish and in its place will come the spirit of the Old World - sour, resentful discontent. Then revolt will set in.

It is therefore of supreme importance to give to American life a sense of economic well-being, a sense of economic security so that the note of hope which was so characteristic in American life, of promise and not despair.

These four things are the graces which God bestowed on America. The common man was raised in dignity; a government established in freedom; man was exalted in a new ~~EXXEXX~~ covenant of spiritual brotherhood; life was made bright with the promise of opportunity.

I do not mean to say, of course, that American life is perfect. That would be a foolish thing to say. There is much in our life which is formless, crude, ruthless. Our cities are great but they are plan-less. Our wealth is immense, but it is not properly distributed. Our machines are gigantic, but may crush the individual. There is a danger of standardization and cultural regimentation, of people being victimized. Our political ideals are high but our politics and our politicians ~~xxx~~ so often fail to measure up to them. There are forces of reaction at work hoping to undermine our free institutions. There is widespread lawlessness and crime in our midst.

But there is, because of these graces, because of these values which we hope are permanent in American life - there is an amazing recuperative power of regeneration, self-reverence, self-improvement and reformation in American life.

Back in 1820, an Englishman had this to say about America:

"In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to American physicians or surgeons? What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? What have they done in mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets? Finally, under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy, and sell, and torture?"

This was written in 1820. And to most of these questions you can answer - yes. The world reads American books. The world looks upon American paintings and statues. The world already owes much to the

American physicians, chemists and inventors. The world uses American products of all kinds. Our slavery has been abolished. And all because in American life there are these graces which made it possible for us to correct deficiencies, to make straight that which is crooked, to progress, to experiment. There are deficiencies, shortcomings. And they are many. If we preserve the golden boon of these gifts, these permanent values, we shall reawaken anew.

There is nothing within human possibility that this great nation of ours cannot do if it sets its mind to do it through the instrumentalities which are permanent things in American life. When we set out to that which should be done, not through these instrumentalities - the rights of the individual, government by consent, tolerance, opportunity for all - but through Old World methods of class struggle, class hatred, destruction of constitutional guaranties and dictatorships - we shall destroy, in the process, all that which was loveliest in American life.