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The Voice of America - What shall it say?, 1949.



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THE VOICE OF AMERICA - WHAT SHALL IT SAY

WRHS Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

May 23, 1949





We have been concerned in recent years, since our world has been swept by the propaganda of aggressive, alien and hostile doctrines, with the task of insuring that our own message should reach the world, the message of America - the Voice of America. So many iron curtains have been set up, impenetrable walls of censorship, whose purpose is to isolate and quarantine peoples against true knowledge, true facts, accurate news and information, and our world has been so consistently in the midst of what has come to be known as the cold war that we have found it highly desirable that the voice of democracy, the voice of America, should be heard, should perhaps penetrate this seemingly impenetrable wall. Dictatorships and all subversive ideologies have long ago recognized the importance of propaganda. In fact, they have made it their chief weapon for the confounding and the disrupting of democratic societies. By means of it they resort to all forms of distortion and outright fabrications to keep their people not alone from not knowing the truth, but from believing in that which is not the truth; to keep the corrective truth from reaching their people.

Democracy, in its struggle for survival in a hostile world - and this world is hostile to democracy - it has been recognized, must not be naive. It must not rely on its inherent truth automatically to work for it, automatically to be recognized and acknowledged and depended. Things do not work that way in this world in which we live, in this propaganda-ridden world. It is important for democracy, if it is to survive, to recapture the initiative to pass over from the defensive to the offensive, to become crusading for its convictions, to speak up in thundering accents that will be heard round the world.

For we believe that the Voice of America has much more to tell mankind of good tidings, of hope, freedom, human dignity and well-being than the voices of dictatorship and the voice of the Soviet Union or of Stalin or of Franco. We believe that the Voice of America has more of the authority of achievement back of it, of



promises made good, of a present satisfying way of life, as well as of a history of a century and a half of the glorious achievement of a free people. I say that the Voice of America has more to tell of than that of any other system upon earth. But the Voice of America can tell to mankind the story of a revolution made good, of a free society established and unified out of a hundred races and peoples, out of a continent subdued to the service and the nourishment of a mighty nation, of a standard of living for the masses of people unmatched anywhere in the world and any time in human history, of free institutions and free labor and of popular sovereignty and of widespread education, and of manifold institutions of social security and of human progress in the fields of science and art and culture and the ways of peace.

The Voice of America need not mute or attenuate its tones when it speaks to the world of its basic constitution, of its Bill of Rights, of its Declaration of Independence, and of all the luminous scriptures of its democratic life. And the Voice of America may also speak of its wars - the wars of America - which are not always the proudest records of a people. Even the stories of American wars can be broadcast to humanity, for in the main they have been wars not for conquest, not of aggression, but almost exclusively wars of liberation. Our Revolutionary for self-liberation; our Civil War for the liberation of slaves; the two World Wars for the self-determination of peoples and for the destruction of the enemies of civilization - of Fascism and Naziism. And when the Voice of America speaks of these things, the world is inclined to listen attentively for this Voice is the voice of the most powerful nation on earth. Here today is the center of the world, and it is likely to remain the center of the world throughout this century and perhaps for a long time thereafter. The world is turning to America for economic aid to save it from economic collapse. And the world has also begun to turn to America for political leadership even though this political leadership here and there is only grudgingly acknowledged.



We have now consciously abandoned our isolation - isolationism which was a political doctrine in this country as recently as two decades ago. We have come to realize now that it is impossible now for us to keep away from entangling alliances, that we cannot stay out of any international conflict because we are too powerful to stay out. We have consciously abandoned our isolationism in recent days through the large-scale plan which we projected for the economic rehabilitation of the world, of Europe particularly, through the Marshall Plan, and now we have regionally organized half the world through an Atlantic Pact in which we are the prime factor in order to protect the world against war. Ours today is, therefore, a conscious leadership of mankind. This leadership is not always clearly thought out and is not always independent, but we have become aware that we are today leading the world, that we are destined of necessity if not out of volition to lead the world economically and politically. Therefore, I say that the world is inclined to listen when America speaks, and the Voice of America, therefore, must be a very responsible voice because of the tremendous authority which it has in the world today and because of its great potentialities for good or for evil.

The Voice of America will be a voice of true guidance, of construction leadership if, in the first place, it will speak at all times, not of itself only or for itself only, but if it will speak of world cooperation and world organization and world leadership. We abandoned the League of Nations and so destroyed it after the first World War. In our awareness of our great power, our incomparable might in the world today, let us not proceed to do what we did after the first World War. Let us not abandon or side-step and so destroy the second great attempt which has been made by the nations of the world for international organization for peace, the United Nations. Let us bear in mind this simple truth which is often hidden from our eyes that no piled up armaments and no stocks of atomic bombs are in themselves sufficient to make us permanently secure or to make the world permanently at peace, and let us bear in mind also that no regional pact can ever be a substitute for world organization.



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It is of one world that the Voice of America has always spoken, except in moments where it lost the vision, in moments of temporary aberration.

I should like to quote a sentence or two from that great American who brilliantly re-stated for our people the American doctrine of the one world, Wendell Wilkie. At the end of the last war he wrote, referring to the first World War:

Not a single plane had flown across the Atlantic. Today the ocean is a mere ribbon with airplanes making regular scheduled flights. The Pacific is only a slightly wider ribbon in the ocean of the air, and Europe and Asia are at our doorstep.

America must choose one of three courses after this war: narrow nationalism, which inevitably means the ultimate loss of our own liberty; international imperialism, which means the sacrifice of some other nation's liberty; or the creation of a world in which there shall be an equality of opportunity for every race and every nation. I am convinced the American people will choose, by overwhelming majority, the last of these courses. To make this choice effective, we must win not only the war but also the peace, and we must start winning it now.

To win this peace three things seem to me necessary - first, we must plan now for peace on a world basis; second, the world must be free politically and economically, for nations and for men that peace may exist in it; third, America must play an active, constructive part in freeing it and keeping its peace.

When I say that peace must be planned on a world basis (wrote Mr. Wendell Wilkie), I mean quite literally that it must embrace the earth. Continents and oceans are plainly only parts of a whole, seen, as I have been them, from the air. England and America are parts, Russia and China, Egypt, Syria and Turkey, Iraq and Iran are also parts. And it is inescapable that there can be no peace for any part of the world unless the foundations of peace are made secure throughout all parts of the world.

This reads like a truism. We are inclined to give immediate assent to it, but it is one of those dynamic truisms which, when applied, have a way of disrupting our conventional thinking, our conventional habits of reaction to world situations. It's a truism which makes necessary a revolution in our thinking and in our relations to the rest of the world. For this is the Voice of America and this is the voice to which the world will listen.



The Voice of America should speak at all times in international affairs and councils and conferences for freedom and liberty for peoples. Within the last few weeks a concerted effort was made through a vast network of propaganda to make odorous the malodorous regime of Franco in Spain, to persuade the United States to resume diplomatic relationships with Franco's Spain and to persuade the United States to use its great influence within the United Nations to persuade that great international body to alter its decision of three years ago when the General Assembly of the United Nations recommended to nations that they withdraw their ambassadors from Franco's Spain, from that regime which was established primarily with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini, which this regime which destroyed a free republican government in Spain, with this regime which to this day is dictatorial in extreme, denying freedom to its people - freedom of worship, freedom of the spoken word - and which to this day keeps tens of thousands of political opponents incarcerated in its filthy dungeons.

Fortunately for America, the Voice of America was not raised in behalf of this retreat from freedom, was not raised in behalf of this movement of reaction now going on in the world. The Voice of America refused to approve of Franco, and the free world was heartened by that act. It will not be the Voice of America speaking if we join hands with every reactionary regime in the world, ostensibly in order to be able to fight communism effectively. We will lose our great appeal to the peoples of the world and our great significance to civilization. When America tells the world of its efforts to establish more and more basic human rights, then the world is gladdened and enheartened. When it speaks of the efforts which are being made to serve and to safeguard the dignity and the worth of the individual in this country, then it is an enkindling message for mankind; when it speaks of the freedoms - the Four Freedoms - and of the equality before the law of American citizens, and of equality of opportunity, and of how government agencies and institutions are used to achieve these ends, and the world is strengthened. But when the Voice of America



must speak apologetically or when the voices of other foreign and hostile peoples speak for us of conditions in our country - of discrimination and of inequality and of segregation and of bigotry and of evidences of intolerance and of the suppression of free speech or of how free speech is used to incite group against group and class against class, when the Voice of America has to tell of the poll tax and of the Jim Crow laws and of lynching, then something goes out of that voice, something of the hope and of the inspiration and of the lift. When the Voice has to speak of opposition to civil rights legislation in the Congress of the United States or opposition to fair employment practice laws in our States, then the Voice disheartens the peoples of the world. When the Voice of America can tell of a Levi Jackson, a colored boy, chosen unanimously to be the captain of the football team of Yale University and invited to join six select fraternities on the campus of Yale, then that Voice speaks triumphantly. It is a voice of promise and hope and encouragement to the world, that what is wrong can be righted, that what is imperfect can be and is being perfected, that America is on the march towards the realization of its great objectives of human equality and human brotherhood.

When, on the other hand, the Voice of America speaks of a Thomas W. Gibbs, elected to a fraternity at Amherst College and as a result of which, as a result of the election of this colored boy to a fraternity, the Inter-Fraternity Council decided to drop this chapter from its national council, then something of a dead, leaden weight, something of a melancholy note, something of a dirge enters into the Voice.

So, when we ask of the Voice of America - what shall it say, it is clear what we want it to say at all times. We want it to ring out clear and unmistakable for all that is basically decent and fine and promising in American life. We like to think of the Voice speaking of the noblest in American life even as we like to think of our flag symbolizing the loveliest hopes of mankind.



During the war an American author, Russell W. Davenport, wrote a prose-poem called "My Country". I read from that poem some lines. This is what he would like the American flag to symbolize to mankind; this is what we would like to have the American Voice speak to mankind.

My country loves the lovers of her flag:  
The strong, oracular emblem of her will -  
The spangled cloth of peace - the bloody rag  
Above embattled gulch and smoking hill,  
Like freedom nailed in pain against the sky!  
O flag, most beautiful, most versatile  
Of all the banners men have lifted high,  
Bright promise which the winds articulate,  
Great seal of freedom, raised to certify  
That man is fit to love and liberate!  
Spread over us the shadow of your bars,  
Projected from the authors of our state,  
The red for courage like the heart of Mars,  
The white between the red for liberty;  
And shed the light of multiplying stars  
Out of the blue, majestic mystery  
Of union under God, across the earth -  
The blue of Heaven, which is loyalty.  
Whatever we are worth, this flag is worth.  
Whatever we may dare to dream, or do,  
We live in it, as it in us, from birth:  
Our will is cast in red and white and blue.  
Let us not make of it, for bargainers,  
A rich and unregenerate parvenu  
Among the empires and their connoisseurs;  
But as a universal sign to man,  
Raise it above the states and ministers  
To show that freedom, called American,  
Is carried for all peoples in our trust.  
My flag is bound by no meridian:  
Its realm is transcendental and august.  
It represents the hand of God within  
All creatures of the water and dust.  
All nations made my flag - the Pole, the Finn,  
The English and the Irish and the Swede;  
The Czech, who found in it his origin,  
The flowing French, who helped to build its creed:  
All nations, north and south, the light, the dark,  
Are in this flag and cannot now secede;  
Nor yet can we, the guardians of the spark,  
Be ray their freedom in our own behalf.  
Unless we free those lands this flag will mark  
America as freedom's cenotaph,  
Where faith for all the world was lost, and hope  
Was hauled at dusk forlornly down the staff.  
It is not ours: we cannot bound its scope!  
What we have borrowed we must now return



To live in earth's revolving envelope  
Which wings surmount and slow propellers churn:  
We must pass back the fire they passed to us,  
That it may freshen and forever burn:  
To those who live among the hideous  
Ruins of fear, revenge, and phobia,  
Haunting their fallen hopes - cadaverous,  
Bereft, and lonely for America -  
Along the northern sear, or on the Rhone,  
Or down the sad, Majestic Vltava.  
O priceless Flag! Immense and sacred loan  
From Heaven, which the earth cannot confine!  
Raises first upon the Ranger's staff, and flown  
Above the muskets of the Brandywine:  
Bright shred of Gettysburg and Belleau Wood,  
Spirit of Tarawa and Kwajalein:  
Symbol of struggle pitched in brotherhood,  
And many sovereigns held in unity:  
Old Glory! Guard the hopeful and the good,  
And lead us onward, unconfusedly,  
That in our freedom others may be free!

This is a beautiful vision of America. This is the symbol of the flag which those who died to keep it untarnished held before their eyes in the last moments of their lives. This is the vision which you are gathered here this morning to rededicate yourselves to - the living and the dead of America are pledged through trial, through error, through disillusionment, through frustration, incessantly to press on to the distant goal, the glorious goal, first visioned by the founders of this republic, the goal to which the Washingtons and the Jeffersons, the Franklins and the Jacksons, the Lincolns, the Wilsons and the Roosevelts moved towards, each in his own way, each with his own brand of sacrifice and consecration. It is to that goal that we are all pledged to repledge ourselves on Memorial Day to move. May God help us and guide us in our forward march. Amen.