

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Armistice Day Address

OMAR N. BRADLEY

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Known as the “GI’s General” for his modest demeanor, Omar N. Bradley (1893–1981) served as commander of the Twelfth US Army Group during World War II, leading nearly a million soldiers as part of the build up for the Normandy invasion. Following the conclusion of the war, in 1949, he became the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Harry S. Truman, and in 1950 he was promoted to general of the Army, becoming the fifth (and, as of yet, last) person to serve as a five-star general in the US Army. In this speech, delivered on November 10, 1948, before the Boston Chamber of Commerce, Bradley commemorates the end of World War II and describes the nation’s future challenges.

A mere three years after World War II ended with the complete surrender of the Axis powers, the world remained a very dangerous place, owing primarily to Soviet expansionism and the new presence of nuclear weapons. How do these circumstances change the way General Bradley thinks about Armistice Day? What does he mean by saying that, in World War I, “we won a war and lost a peace”? How does he suggest that the United States avoid repeating that disastrous mistake? What, according to Bradley, are the obligations of the United States toward international aggression? Toward keeping the peace in an age of nuclear weapons? How should a powerful but peace-loving nation like ours deal with nations or terrorist organizations—like the Soviet Union then or al Qaeda now—that threaten the peace? How do we find ethical guidance in an age of weapons of mass destruction?

Tomorrow is our day of conscience.

For although it is a monument to victory, it is also a symbol of failure. Just as it honors the dead, so must it humble the living.

Armistice Day is a constant reminder that we won a war and lost a peace.

It is both a tribute and an indictment. A tribute to the men who died that their neighbors might live without fear of aggression. An indictment of those who lived and forfeited their chance for peace.

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Therefore, while Armistice Day is a day for pride, it is for pride in the achievements of others—humility in our own.

Neither remorse nor logic can hide the fact that our armistice ended in failure. Not until the armistice myth exploded in the blast of a Stuka* bomb did we learn that the winning of wars does not in itself make peace. And not until Pearl Harbor did we learn that non-involvement in peace means certain involvement in war.

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We paid grievously for those faults of the past in deaths, disaster, and dollars.

It was a penalty we knowingly chose to risk. We made the choice when we defaulted on our task in creating and safeguarding a peace.

Now new weapons have made the risk of war a suicidal hazard. Any nation which does not exert its vigour, wealth, and armed strength in the avoidance of conflict before it strikes, shall endanger its survival. It is no longer possible to shield ourselves with arms alone against the ordeal of attack. For modern war visits destruction on the victor and the vanquished alike. Our only complete assurance of surviving World War III is to halt it before it starts.

For that reason we clearly have no choice but to face the challenge of these strained times. To ignore the danger of aggression is simply to invite it. It must never again be said of the American people: Once more we won a war; once more we lost a peace. If we do we shall doom our children to a struggle that may take their lives.

Armed forces can wage wars but they cannot make peace. For there is a wide chasm between war and peace—a chasm that can only be bridged by good will, discussion, compromise, and agreement. In 1945, while still bleeding from the wounds of aggression, the nations of this world met in San Francisco to build that span from war to peace.† For three years—first hopefully, then guardedly, now fearfully—free nations have labored to complete that bridge. Yet again and again they have been obstructed by a nation whose ambitions thrive best on tension, whose leaders are scornful of peace except on their own impossible terms.

* *A German dive bomber of World War II*

† *The San Francisco Conference, formally the United Nations Conference on International Organization (April 25–June 26, 1945), which established the United Nations*

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The unity with which we started that structure [the United Nations] has been riddled by fear and suspicion. In place of agreement we are wrangling dangerously over the body of that very nation whose aggression had caused us to seek each other as allies and friends.

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Only three years after our soldiers first clasped hands over the Elbe, this great wartime ally has spurned friendship with recrimination, it has clenched its fists and skulked in conspiracy behind its secretive borders.

As a result today we are neither at peace nor war. Instead we are engaged in this contest of tension, seeking agreement with those who disdain it, rearming, and struggling for peace.

Time can be for or against us.

It can be for us if diligence in our search for agreement equals the vigilance with which we prepare for a storm.

It can be against us if disillusionment weakens our faith in discussion—or if our vigilance corrodes while we wait.

Disillusionment is always the enemy of peace. And today—as after World War I—disillusionment can come from expecting too much, too easily, too soon. In our impatience we must never forget that fundamental differences have divided this world; they allow no swift, no cheap, no easy solutions.

While as a prudent people we must prepare ourselves to encounter what we may be unable to prevent, we nevertheless must never surrender ourselves to the certainty of that encounter.

For if we say there is no good in arguing with what must inevitably come, then we shall be left with no choice but to create a garrison state and empty our wealth into arms. The burden of long-term total preparedness for some indefinite but inevitable war could not help but crush the freedom we prize. It would leave the American people soft victims for bloodless aggression.

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Both the East and the West today deprecate war. Yet because of its threatening gestures, its espousal of chaos, its secretive tactics, and its habits of force—one nation has caused the rest of the world to fear that it might recklessly resort to force rather than be blocked in its greater ambitions.

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The American people have said both in their aid to Greece and in the reconstruction of Europe that any threat to freedom is a threat to our own lives. For we know that unless free peoples stand boldly and united against the forces of aggression, they may fall wretchedly, one by one, into the web of oppression.

It is fear of the brutal unprincipled use of force by reckless nations that might ignore the vast reserves of our defensive strength that has caused the American people to enlarge their air, naval, and ground arms.

Reluctant as we are to muster this costly strength, we must leave no chance for miscalculation in the mind of any aggressor.

Because in the United States it is the people who are sovereign, the government is theirs to speak their voice and to voice their will, truthfully and without distortion.

We, the American people, can stand cleanly before the entire world and say plainly to any State:

“This Government will not assail you.

“You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressor.”

Since the origin of the American people, their chief trait has been the hatred of war. And yet these American people are ready to take up their arms against aggression and destroy if need be by their might any nation which would violate the peace of the world.

There can be no compromise with aggression anywhere in the world. For aggression multiplies—in rapid succession—disregard for the rights of man. Freedom when threatened anywhere is at once threatened everywhere.

No more convincing an avowal of their peaceful intentions could have been made by the American people than by their offer to submit to United Nations the secret of the

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atom bomb. Our willingness to surrender this trump advantage that atomic energy might be used for the peaceful welfare of mankind splintered the lies of those word-warmakers that our atom had been teamed with the dollar for imperialistic gain.

Yet because we asked adequate guarantees and freedom of world-wide inspection by the community of nations itself, our offer was declined and the atom has been recruited into this present contest of nerves. To those people who contend that secrecy and medieval sovereignty are more precious than a system of atomic control, I can only reply that it is a cheap price to pay for peace.

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The atom bomb is far more than a military weapon. It may—as Bernard Baruch[‡] once said—contain the choice between the quick and the dead. We dare not forget that the advantage in atomic warfare lies with aggression and surprise. If we become engaged in an atom bomb race, we may simply lull ourselves to sleep behind an atomic stockpile. The way to win an atomic war is to make certain it never starts.

With the monstrous weapons man already has, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescents. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have many men of science; too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.

This is our twentieth century's claim to distinction and to progress.

In our concentration on the tactics of strength and resourcefulness which have been used in the contest for blockaded Berlin, we must not forget that we are also engaged in a long-range conflict of ideas. Democracy can withstand ideological attacks if democracy will provide earnestly and liberally for the welfare of its people. To defend democracy against attack, men must value freedom. And to value freedom they must benefit by it in happier and more secure lives for their wives and their children.

[‡] *Bernard Baruch (1870–1965), an American financier, philanthropist, and adviser to presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt*

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Throughout this period of tension in which we live, the American people must demonstrate conclusively to all other peoples of the world that democracy not only guarantees man's human freedom, but that it guarantees his economic dignity and progress as well. To practice freedom and make it work, we must cherish the individual, we must provide him the opportunities for reward and impress upon him the responsibilities a free man bears to the society in which he lives.

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The American people cannot abdicate in this present struggle and leave the problem to their armed forces. For this is not a test of combat strength but a contest of resolution. It is dependent less upon military strength and more upon human strength, faith, and fortitude among such citizens as you. If we are to combat communism, we cannot oppose it with anti-communism. We cannot fight something with nothing. More than ever before, we must alert our people—and people throughout the world—to the meaning of their freedom and stimulate in each of them an awareness of their own, their personal share in this struggle.

Good citizenship is the start of a working democracy. And good citizenship begins at home, in the ability of every American to provide a happy and wholesome life for his family. From such simple beginnings do we create better communities, better States, a better nation—and eventually, we hope, a better world.

To you in the greater community of New England much has been given in the heritage that began with Concord, and in the truths that have been left for you by your Lowells, your Emersons, your Holmes.

Out of so fortunate a spiritual start in the meaning and significance of freedom, you have constructed an industrial machine with which to nourish great faith in it.

If we will only believe in democracy, use it, and practice its precepts in the factory as well as the voting booth, we shall so strengthen ourselves that nothing can prevail against us—or against those who stand with us in like good faith.