

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Address on Flag Day

WOODROW WILSON

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In this address on June 14, 1916, two weeks after his presidential proclamation regarding Flag Day (see last selection), President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) celebrated the first national Flag Day at a ceremony held near the Washington Monument. Earlier in the day, he led a “Preparedness Parade” in which some 66,000 marchers took part.

What is the purpose of this speech? What, according to the speech, is the purpose of this Flag Day? What threats does Wilson seek to address? What sentiments and deeds does he seek to mobilize against them? What does Wilson now take to be the significance of the flag? How are the ideas and ideals he here associates with the flag connected to those about which he spoke a year earlier?

Mr. Secretary, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have not come here this afternoon with the purpose of delivering to you an elaborate address. It seems to me that the day is sufficiently eloquent already with the meaning which it should convey to us. The spectacle of the morning has been a very moving spectacle indeed—an almost unpremeditated outpouring of thousands of sober citizens to manifest their interest in the safety of the country and the sacredness of the flag which is its emblem.

I need not remind you how much sentiment has been poured out in honor of the flag of the United States. Sometimes we have been charged with being a very sentimental people, fond of expressing in general rhetorical phrases principles not sufficiently defined in action, and I dare say there have been times of happy and careless ease in this country when all that it has been necessary to do for the honor of the flag was to put our sentiments into poetic expressions, into the words that for the time being satisfied our hearts.

But this is not a day of sentiment. Sentiment is a propulsive power, but it does not propel in the way that is serviceable to the Nation, unless it have a definite purpose before it. This is not merely a day of sentiment. This is a day of purpose.

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It is an eloquent symbol of the unity of our history that upon this monument which commemorates the man who did most to establish the American Union we should have hoisted those stars that have so multiplied since his time, associated with those lines of red and white, which mean all that is pure in our purpose and all that is red in our blood in the service of a Nation whose history has been full of inspiration because of his example.

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But Washington was one of the least sentimental men that America has ever produced. The thing that thrills me about Washington is that he is impatient of any sentiment that has not got definite purpose in it. His letters run along the lines of action, not merely along the mere lines of sentiment, and the most inspiring times that this Nation has ever seen have been the times when sentiment had to be translated into action.

Apparently this Nation is again and again and again to be tested, and always tested in the same way. The last supreme test this nation went through was the test of the Civil War.

You know how deep that cut. You know what exigent issues of life were at issue in that struggle. You know how two great sections of this Union seemed to be moving in opposite directions, and for a long time it was questionable whether that flag represented any one united purpose in America. And you know how deep that struggle cut into the sentiments of this people and how there came a whole generation following that great struggle when men's hearts were bitter and sore and memories hurt as well as exalted, and how it seemed as if a rift had come in the hearts of the people of America.

And you know how that ended. While it seemed a tune of terror, it has turned out a proof of the validity of our hope. Where are now the divisions of sentiment which cut us asunder at the time of the Civil War? Did you not see the Blue and the Gray mingled this morning in the procession? Did not you see the sons of a subsequent generation walking together in happy comradeship? Was there any contradiction of feeling or division of sentiment evident there for a moment?

Nothing cuts so deep as a civil war, and yet all the wounds of that war have been healed not only, but the very passion of that war seems to have contributed to the strength of national feeling which now moves us as a single body politic.

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And yet again the test is applied, my fellow countrymen, a new sort of division of feeling has sprung up among us. You know that we are derived in our citizenship from every nation in the world. It is not singular that sentiment should be disturbed by what is going on the other side of the water, but while sentiment may be disturbed, loyalty ought not to be.

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I want to be scrupulously just, my fellow citizens, in assessing the circumstances of this day, and I am sure that you wish with me to deal out with an even hand the praise and the blame of this day of test.

I believe that the vast majority of those men whose lineage is directly derived from the nations now at war are just as loyal to the flag of the United States as any native citizen of this beloved land, but there are some men of that extraction who are not; and they, not only in past months, but at the present time, are doing their best to undermine the influence of the Government of the United States in the interest of matters which are foreign to us and which are not derived from the questions of our own politics.

There is disloyalty active in the United States, and it must be absolutely crushed. It proceeds from a minority, a very small minority, but a very active and subtle minority. It works underground, but it also shows its ugly head where we can see it; and there are those at this moment who are trying to levy a species of political blackmail, saying, "Do what we wish in the interest of foreign sentiment or we will wreak our vengeance at the polls."

That is the sort of thing against which the American Nation will turn with a might and triumph of sentiment which will teach these gentlemen once for all that loyalty to this flag is the first test of tolerance in the United States.

That is the lesson that I have come to remind you of on this day—no mere sentiment. It runs into your daily life and conversation. Are you going yourselves, individually and collectively, to see to it that no man is tolerated who does not do honor to that flag?

It is not a matter of force. It is not a matter, that is to say, of physical force. It is a matter of a greater force than that which is physical. It is a matter of spiritual force. It is to be achieved as we think, as we purpose, as we believe, and when the world finally learns that America is indivisible, then the world will learn how truly and profoundly great and powerful America is.

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I realize personally, my fellow citizens, the peculiar significance of the flag of the United States at this time, because there was a day not many years ago when, although I thought I knew what the flag stood for, it had not penetrated my whole consciousness as it has now.

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If you could have gone with me through the space of the last two years, and could have felt the subtle impact of intrigue and sedition and have realized with me that those to whom you have intrusted authority are trustees not only of the power, but of the very spirit and purpose of the United States, you would realize with me the solemnity with which I look upon the sublime symbol of our unity and power.

I want you to share that consciousness with me. I want you to realize that in what I am saying I am merely your spokesman, merely trying to interpret your thoughts, merely trying to put into inadequate words the purpose that is in your hearts. I regard this day as a day of rededication to all the ideals of the United States.

I took the liberty a few weeks ago to ask our fellow citizens all over the United States to gather together in celebration of this day, the anniversary of the adoption of our present flag as the emblem of the Nation. I had no legal right to declare it a holiday, I had no legal right to ask for the cessation of business, but when you read the papers tomorrow morning, I think you will see that authority was not necessary; that the people of the country were waiting for an opportunity to cease their ordinary business and gather together in united demonstration of their feeling as a Nation.

It was a very happy thought that led the committee of gentlemen who had charge of the demonstration of the forenoon to choose the 14th of June for the parade which most of us have witnessed. It is a tiresome thing, my fellow citizens, to stand for hours and see a parade go by, but I want to take you into this secret: It was not half as tiresome as the inauguration parade.

The inauguration parade is a very interesting thing, but it is painfully interesting to the man who is being inaugurated, because there then lie ahead of him the four years of responsibility whose horoscope cannot be cast by any man.

But to-day was interesting because the inauguration parade of the day of my inauguration is more than three years gone by. I have gone through deep waters with you in the meantime.

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This parade was not a demonstration in honor of any man. It was an outpouring of people to demonstrate a great national sentiment. I was not the object of it. I was one citizen among millions whose heart beat in unison with it.

I felt caught up and buoyed along by the great stream of human purpose which seemed to flow there in front of me by the stand by the White House, and I shall go away from this meeting, as I came away from that parade, with all the deepest purposes of my heart renewed, and as I see the winds lovingly unfold the beautiful lines of our great flag I shall seem to see a hand pointing the way of duty no matter how hard, no matter how long, which we shall tread while we vindicate the glory and honor of the United States.

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