

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Freedom and Its Obligations

CALVIN COOLIDGE

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*On May 30, 1924, President Calvin Coolidge (1872–1933) offered this reflection on the meaning of Memorial Day at Arlington’s annual commemorations. By then, the Civil War had largely faded from living memory and the scars of another war, World War I, were quite fresh. Coolidge took the opportunity of distance from the Civil War to draw larger meaning from the observance of Memorial Day. We see here another example of how changing historical circumstances lead people to find different lessons in the same historical past.*

*Coolidge sees the Civil War as but an instance in an age-old conflict. What is that conflict? To which side of that conflict does Coolidge offer most support? Why does he emphasize the need for national unity, a strong national government, and the duty of each citizen “to remember that he must be first of all an American”? What, according to Coolidge, is the connection between the American Union and the goal of peace? What does he see as the meaning of Memorial Day today? How, according to this speech, can Americans continue to honor the men who died in the Civil War? Do you agree?*

We meet again upon this hallowed ground to commemorate those who played their part in a particular outbreak of an age old conflict. Many men have many theories about the struggle that went on from 1861 to 1865. Some say it had for its purpose the abolition of slavery. President Lincoln did not so consider it. There were those in the South who would have been willing to wage war for its continuation, but I very much doubt if the South as a whole could have been persuaded to take up arms for that purpose. There were those in the North who would have been willing to wage war for its abolition, but the North as a whole could not have been persuaded to take up arms for that purpose. President Lincoln made it perfectly clear that his effort was to save the Union, with slavery if he could save it that way; without slavery if he could save it that way. But he would save the Union. The South stood for the principle of the sovereignty of the States. The North stood for the principle of the supremacy of the Union.

This was an age old conflict. At its foundation lies the question of how can the Government govern and the people be free? How can organized society make and enforce laws and the individual remain independent? There is no short sighted answer to

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these inquiries. Whatever may have been the ambiguity in the Federal Constitution, of course the Union had to be supreme within its sphere or cease to be a Union. It was also certain and obvious that each State had to be sovereign within its sphere or cease to be a State. It is equally clear that a government must govern, must prescribe and enforce laws within its sphere or cease to be a government. Moreover, the individual must be independent and free within his own sphere or cease to be an individual. The fundamental question was then, is now, and always will be through what adjustments, by what actions, these principles may be applied.

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It needs but very little consideration to reach the conclusion that all of these terms are relative, not absolute, in their application to the affairs of this earth. There is no absolute and complete sovereignty for a State, nor absolute and complete independence and freedom for an individual. It happened in 1861 that the States of the North and the South were so fully agreed among themselves that they were able to combine against each other. But supposing each State of the Union should undertake to make its own decisions upon all questions, and that all held divergent views. If such a condition were carried to its logical conclusion, each would come into conflict with all the others, and a condition would arise which could only result in mutual destruction. It is evident that this would be the antithesis of State sovereignty. Or suppose that each individual in the assertion of his own independence and freedom undertook to act in entire disregard of the rights of others. The end would be likewise mutual destruction, and no one would be independent and no one would be free. Yet these are conflicts which have gone on ever since the organization of society into government, and they are going on now. To my mind this was fundamental of [*sic*] the conflict which broke out in 1861.

The thirteen Colonies were not unaware of the difficulties which these problems presented. We shall find a great deal of wisdom in the method by which they dealt with them. When they were finally separated from Great Britain, the allegiance of their citizens was not to the Nation for there was none. It was to the States. For the conduct of the war there had been a voluntary confederacy loosely constructed and practically impotent. Continuing after peace was made, when the common peril which had been its chief motive no longer existed, it grew weaker and weaker. Each of the States could have insisted on an entirely separate and independent existence, having full authority over both their internal and external affairs, sovereign in every way. But such sovereignty would have been a vain and empty thing. It would have been unsupported by adequate resources either of property or population, without a real national spirit, ready to fall prey to foreign intrigue or foreign conquest. That kind of sovereignty meant but little. It had no substance

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in it. The people and their leaders naturally sought for a larger, more inspiring ideal. They realized that while to be a citizen of a State meant something, it meant a great deal more if that State were a part of a national union. The establishment of a Federal Constitution giving power and authority to create a real National Government did not in the end mean a detriment, but rather an increment to the sovereignty of the several States. Under the Constitution there was brought into being a new relationship, which did not detract from but added to the power and the position of each State. It is true that they surrendered the privilege of performing certain acts for themselves, like the regulation of commerce and the maintenance of foreign relations, but in becoming a part of the Union they received more than they gave.

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The same thing applies to the individual in organized society. When each citizen submits himself to the authority of law he does not thereby decrease his independence or freedom, but rather increases it. By recognizing that he is a part of a larger body which is banded together for a common purpose, he becomes more than an individual, he rises to a new dignity of citizenship. Instead of finding himself restricted and confined by rendering obedience to public law, he finds himself protected and defended and in the exercise of increased and increasing rights. It is true that as civilization becomes more complex it is necessary to surrender more and more of the freedom of action and live more and more according to the rule of public regulation, but it is also true that the rewards and the privileges which come to a member of organized society increase in a still greater proportion. Primitive life has its freedom and its attraction, but the observance of the restrictions of modern civilization enhances the privileges of living a thousand fold.

Perhaps I have said enough to indicate the great advantages that accrue to all of us by the support and maintenance of our Government, the continuation of the functions of legislation, the administration of justice, and the execution of the laws. There can be no substitute for these, no securing of greater freedom by their downfall and failure, but only disorganization, suffering and want, and final destruction. All that we have of rights accrue from the Government under which we live.

In these days little need exists for extolling the blessings of our Federal Union. Its benefits are known and recognized by all its citizens who are worthy of serious attention. No one thinks now of attempting to destroy the Union by armed force. No one seriously considers withdrawing from it. But it is not enough that it should be free from attack, it must be approved and supported by a national spirit. Our prime allegiance must be to the

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whole country. A sentiment of sectionalism is not harmless because it is unarmed. Resistance to the righteous authority of Federal law is not innocent because it is not accompanied by secession. We need a more definite realization that all of our country must stand or fall together, and that it is the duty of the Government to promote the welfare of each part and the duty of the citizen to remember that he must be first of all an American.

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Only one conclusion appears to me possible. We shall not promote our welfare by a narrow and shortsighted policy. We can gain nothing by any destruction of government or society. That action which in the long run is for the advantage of the individual, as it is for the support of our Union, is best summed up in a single word; renunciation. It is only by surrendering a certain amount of our liberty, only by taking on new duties and assuming new obligations, that we make that progress which we characterize as civilization. It is only in like manner that the citizens and the States can maintain our Federal Union and become partakers of its glory. That is the answer to every herald of discontent and to every preacher of destruction. While this is understood, American institutions and the American Union are secure.

This principle can not be too definitely or emphatically proclaimed. American citizenship is a high estate. He who holds it is the peer of kings. It has been secured only by untold toil and effort. It will be maintained by no other method. It demands the best that men and women have to give. But it likewise awards to its partakers the best that there is on earth. To attempt to turn it into a thing of ease and inaction would be only to debase it. To cease to struggle and toil and sacrifice for it is not only to cease to be worthy of it but is to start a retreat toward barbarism. No matter what others may say, no matter what others may do, this is the stand that those must maintain who are worthy to be called Americans.

But that great struggle was carried on by those whom this day is set apart to commemorate, not only for the preservation of the Union. The authority of the Federal Government had been resisted by armed force. They were also striving to restore peace. It must be remembered that our Republic was organized to avoid and discourage war, and to promote and establish peace. It is the leading characteristic of our national holidays that they are days of peace. The ways of our people are the ways of peace. They naturally seek ways to make peace more secure.

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It is not to be inferred that it would be anything less than courting national disaster to leave our country barren of defense. Human nature is a very constant quality. While there is justification for hoping and believing that we are moving toward perfection, it would be idle and absurd to assume that we have already reached it. We can not disregard history. There have been and will be domestic disorders. There have been and will be tendencies of one nation to encroach on another. I believe in the maintenance of an Army and Navy, not for aggression but for defense. Security and order are our most valuable possessions. They are cheap at any price. But I am opposed to every kind of military aggrandizement and to all forms of competitive armament. The ideal would be for nations to become parties to mutual covenants limiting their military establishments, and making it obvious that they are not maintained to menace each other. This ideal should be made practical as fast as possible.

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Our Nation has associated itself with other great powers for the purpose of promoting peace in the regions of the Pacific Ocean. It has steadily refused to accept the covenant of the League of Nations, but long before that was thought of, before the opening of the present century, we were foremost in promoting the calling of a conference at The Hague to provide for a tribunal of arbitration for the settlement of international disputes. We have made many treaties on that basis with other nations.

But we have an opportunity before us to reassert our desire and to lend the force of our example for the peaceful adjudication of differences between nations. Such action would be in entire harmony with the policy which we have long advocated. I do not look upon it as a certain guaranty against war, but it would be a method of disposing of troublesome questions, an accumulation of which leads to irritating conditions and results in mutually hostile sentiments. More than a year ago President Harding proposed that the Senate should authorize our adherence to the protocol of the Permanent Court of International Justice, with certain conditions. His suggestion has already had my approval. On that I stand. I should not oppose other reservations, but any material changes which would not probably receive the consent of the many other nations would be impracticable. We can not take a step in advance of this kind without assuming certain obligations. Here again if we receive anything we must surrender something. We may as well face the question candidly, and if we are willing to assume these new duties in exchange for the benefits which would accrue to us, let us say so. If we are not willing, let us say that. We can accomplish nothing by taking a doubtful or ambiguous position. We are not going to be able to avoid meeting the world and bearing our part of the burdens of the world. We must meet those burdens and overcome them or they will meet

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us and overcome us. For my part I desire my country to meet them without evasion and without fear in an upright, downright, square, American way.

While there are those who think we would be exposed to peril by adhering to this court, I am unable to attach great weight to their arguments. Whatever differences, whatever perils exist for us in the world, will come anyway, whether we oppose or support the court. I am one of those who believe we would be safer and that we would be meeting our duties better by supporting it and making every possible use of it. I feel confident that such action would make a greater America, that it would be productive of a higher and finer national spirit, and of a more complete national life.

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It is these two thoughts of union and peace which appear to me to be especially appropriate for our consideration on this day. Like all else in human experience, they are not things which can be set apart and have an independent existence. They exist by reason of the concrete actions of men and women. It is the men and women whose actions between 1861 and 1865 gave us union and peace that we are met here this day to commemorate. When we seek for the chief characteristic of those actions, we come back to the word which I have already uttered; renunciation. They gave up ease and home and safety and braved every impending danger and mortal peril that they might accomplish these ends. They thereby became in this Republic a body of citizens set apart and marked for every honor so long as our Nation shall endure. Here on this wooded eminence, overlooking the Capital of the country for which they fought, many of them repose, officers of high rank and privates mingling in a common dust, holding the common veneration of a grateful people. The heroes of other wars lie with them, and in a place of great preeminence lies one whose identity is unknown, save that he was a soldier of this Republic who fought that its ideals, its institutions, its liberties, might be perpetuated among men. A grateful country holds all these services as her most priceless heritage, to be cherished forevermore.

We can testify to these opinions, not by our words but by our actions. Our country can not exist on the renunciation of the heroic souls of the past. Public service, from the action of the humblest voter to the most exalted office, can not be made a mere matter of hire and salary. The supporters of our institutions must be inspired by a more dominant motive than a conviction that their actions are going to be profitable. We can not lower our standards to what we think will pay, but we must raise them to what we think is right. It is only in that direction that we shall find true patriotism. It is only by that method that we can maintain the rights of the individual, the sovereignty of the States, the integrity of

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the Union, the permanency of peace, and the welfare of mankind. You soldiers of the Republic enrolled under her banner that through your sacrifices there might be an atonement for the evils of your day. That is the standard of citizenship for all time. It is the requirement which must be met by those who hold public place. That must be the ideal of those who are worthy to share in the glory which you have given to the name of America, the ideal of those who hold fellowship with Washington and Lincoln.

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