

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Address at Arlington Cemetery

JOSEPH B. FORAKER

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On May 30, 1905, Senator Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio delivered the annual Memorial Day address at Arlington National Cemetery. Foraker (1846–1917) had fought in the Civil War as a member of the 89th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, where he eventually rose to the rank of brevet captain. As a veteran and a political leader, he uses this speech to marvel at the progress made by the United States since the war, progress that would have been unattainable without the sacrifices of the Union dead. It is useful to compare his remarks, made from a greater distance, with those of Garfield 38 years earlier, made while memories of the war were still fresh.

What does Foraker regard as the “great work” of the heroes of the Civil War? What is the relation between the “moral question” and the “legal question” about which the two sides differed? Why does he emphasize, as Garfield did not, the moral purpose of the war and its meaning for the outcome? Why does Foraker celebrate the growth of the power of the federal government? How, according to Foraker, has the Civil War led to American greatness? What, finally, is the larger purpose of celebrating Memorial Day?

Fellow Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This day belongs to our soldier dead; not of one war, but of all our wars; and particularly here, in this cemetery, where on these shafts and stones we read names that illumine so many periods of our history.

But while it belongs to all who have at any time or place upheld the flag on land or on sea, yet it had its origin in the sorrow and gratitude that filled the heart of the Nation, as it emerged from the Civil War, stricken with grief, but crowned with glorious triumph.

For these reasons it is no disparagement of others to speak here to-day chiefly of that conflict; its character and results.

We have reached the time when this can be done dispassionately.

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As the traveler sailing away from the land sees the shore, the trees, the houses, and the hills receding, blending and disappearing until only the mountain peaks are longer visible, so have the details and minor features of that great struggle blended and faded out of sight, leaving, as we look back to it across the forty years that have since elapsed, only those strong and commanding facts that have taken permanent places in history.

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We no longer see regiments, brigades, divisions, corps, or even separate armies, but only one mighty and invincible host, wearing the blue and relentlessly pressing on and on, and ever onward, through success and adversity alike, from battlefield to battlefield, until, with waving flags, flashing sabres and gleaming bayonets, they marched home flushed with final victory.

It would be interesting and inspiring to recall that time and review in detail those days of sacrifice, of hardship, of battle, of death, of heroism, of patriotic devotion, of thrilling triumph; and here in this presence there comes an almost irresistible impulse to do so. But all that would be only repeating familiar history.

I shall, therefore, say but little in an abstract way of our heroes and their deeds of daring, that I may speak more fully of their great work.

As we behold the people of this land to-day all at peace, all prosperous, all happy, all imbued with love for our flag and our Government, it seems almost incredible that so recently we should or could have been distracted and brought to the very brink of destruction by one of the most ruthless wars of modern times.

It seems so strange and unnatural that we instinctively inquire, what was it all about? And what has happened that those who were at fatal war with each other should so soon become friends and be bound together in common interest and common aspirations.

It is unnecessary to trace the development or discuss the respective merits of the differences that made our country sectional and almost destroyed it. It is sufficient to recall the fact that, plainly stated, we had two questions about which we differed. One a moral question, and the other a legal question; one slavery, and the other secession; one appealing to the conscience and the other to the Constitution.

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Both demanded settlement, but we strove to confine the war to the settlement of only one. Even Abraham Lincoln said he would save the Union with slavery if he could; without slavery if he must.

But on that basis we did not make much progress. So long as the war meant no more than whether a State had a right under the Constitution to secede from the Union and thus break up and destroy it, we did not get along very well.

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Manassas, Balls Bluff, and other defeats and humiliations, one after another, overtook us, with only enough of success and victory interspersed to keep us from becoming utterly discouraged and abandoning the field.

Finally Lincoln saw, as in due time most men saw, that if the Union armies were to be successful the Union cause must be based on something broader and more important than a cold legal proposition, important as that might be and was.

Our fathers of the Revolution commenced their struggle merely to redress grievances and enlarged their purpose to include and secure independence only when more than a year after Lexington and Concord they learned the necessity for a more inspiring cause.

In the same manner we learned and progressed. Not until after Antietam¹ did the Nation see, appreciate and rise to its opportunity. Then it was the war for the preservation

¹ For a superb account of the battle of Antietam and its significance, which also spells out what Foraker is claiming here, see Bruce Catton, "Crisis at the Antietam," (American Heritage 9, no. 5 [1958], www.americanheritage.com/content/crisis-antietam). The victory enabled Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation from a position of strength, rather than weakness. The Proclamation, says Catton,

finally determined that the Civil War was not merely a war for reunion but also a war to end human slavery; turned it from a family scrap into an incalculable struggle for human freedom . . . It harnessed to the Union cause the basic dreams and aspirations of the [human] race, and nailed to the American flagpole the charter of human rights. Everything in American history—and within reason, in world history would be different after this. The bloody showdown in the cornfield and along the sunken lane and over the little stone bridge that spanned the narrow Antietam had enabled the nation to take a decisive step forward along the road to destiny. . . . Out of it came reunion and freedom, neither one fully attained even a century later, but each one riveted into the American consciousness in a way time cannot undo.

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of the Union was placed on a basis that appealed to the moral sentiment of the people by the declaration that the bond should go free, thus striking at the root of all our differences and making it possible to conquer a lasting peace and establish a durable Union. From that moment the Union cause had a new strength and the Union soldier a new life. He marched with a firmer tread and held his musket with a more determined grasp. He felt that he was on God's side of the great contest, and that if he should be called upon to make the highest sacrifice it would at least not be made in vain.

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It was a long, hard struggle. It cost hundreds of thousands of lives and hundreds of millions of treasure. It filled the land with mourning and piled up colossal burdens of debt, not only to creditors who took our securities, but to the pensioners who constitute the Nation's roll of honor.

It was a tremendous price to pay, greater than any language can adequately portray; but so too was the reward that followed.

When the smoke of battle cleared away it could be seen that not only was slavery gone forever, but that some things had been settled that it was of transcendent importance to have settled. In the first place, it was made plain that there was a right and a wrong side to the great controversy that had been so long in progress, and that the right side had triumphed and been vindicated. And that is as true to-day, and will be forever, as it was then. The fact that those who fought against the Government fought bravely and gallantly, and believed that they were right, does not change the fact that they were nevertheless in the wrong, and that their defeat was a blessing from them as well as for us and all concerned.

It was also settled that American heroism and valor were the same no matter under which flag displayed, for neither side could justly charge the other with any lack of these high qualities of vigorous manhood; and in this fact, that cost us so much at that time, was another blessing; for since then there has been profound mutual respect, where before there was so much lack of it as to make impossible any true feeling of real homogeneity.

What America is and hopes to be dates from the fight along Antietam Creek. The fight cost an enormous number of lives, and inflicted pain and disability on many thousands more; but in the infinite economy of the advance of the human race it may have been worth what it cost.



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It furthermore settled for all time to come that this is a Nation, not only in the sense that the Constitution is our supreme law, binding the States together in perpetual union, but also in the sense that our Government is invested with all the powers that properly belong to sovereignty.

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If nothing more had been accomplished the victory would have been worth more than all it cost, but its value is to be measured, not alone by what it secured, but also by what it prevented.

Defeat of the Union cause would have meant, not only two governments, but general disintegration, with corresponding sacrifice of that power, prosperity, prestige and greatness that a common country, a common flag, a common interest and a common destiny have brought us.

We know what the terms of peace were as Grant dictated them; but who can tell what they would have been had they been prescribed by Lee?

Where would he have run the boundary lines? How many States would have gone with the Southern Confederacy? and who would have stayed the spread of slavery? How many States would have remained to constitute the Union, if any at all? And how long would it have been until other secessions would have occurred? Who would have assumed the burdens of the public debt, and whose soldiers would have been pensioned? and who would have paid that obligation?

What indemnity would the South have exacted? and what kind of guarantees would she have imposed for the safety of her institutions and the preservation of her domination?

There is no end to the reasonable speculation that may be fairly indulged as to the ruinous consequences that would have followed if the result had been reversed.

In one sense such speculation may be idle, but not until we thus attempt to conjecture can we form any measure of the debt of gratitude we owe to the brave men whom we are here to honor.

But they accomplished more still; as already indicated, they not only prevented all the disasters suggested, and achieved for us the blessings of an indissoluble Union and

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universal freedom, but they freed us from the paralysis of the doctrines of States rights and strict construction, by which the power of the Federal Government was minimized to the point of helplessness to even save our national life, and gave it in turn that vitality, vigor and scope which belong to full national sovereignty. They made a reality of the belief in that respect of Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall, for, since Appomattox, what they taught has been fundamental truth, and we have been developing our constitutional powers until at last all recognize that our Government is as completely sovereign as any other, and that what others can do we can do, for we are equal in the family of nations to the strongest and the greatest.

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Thus it was that we were able to intervene in Cuba and take there all the steps necessary to establish an independent government for another people; and by the same token we had the power, when necessity seemed to call for its exercise, to acquire our insular possessions, and, without incorporating them into the Union, hold them as dependencies to be governed by forms and laws and institutions suited to their conditions and requirements.² The time was when the power to build the national road from Maryland to Ohio was challenged, but to-day no one doubts our power to construct a great international highway uniting the oceans and accommodating the commerce of the world.

And so might be specified a great chapter of achievements, both at home and abroad, of which all Americans are justly proud, for which it was denied that our Government had the requisite power until after these men fought and won.

With the Union preserved, slavery abolished, the Constitution amended, our finances rehabilitated, and this national idea fully developed and firmly established, our country entered upon a career of such unprecedented growth of strength and wealth and achievement that the spirit of sectionalism and the animosities of war have been literally drowned out by the ever-rising flood of a common pride in the greatness of a common country. . . .

It is no exaggeration, but only the sober truth, to say that we were never so strong, never so prosperous, never so contented, never so respected, never so powerful to do good in the world, and never doing so much good, either at home or abroad, as we are to-

² Here, Foraker refers to the Treaty of Paris of 1898, which ended the Spanish-American War and resulted in Spain surrendering control of Cuba and ceding Puerto Rico, parts of the West Indies, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States.

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day. And great as is the present, greater by far, exceeding all power of description, is the career that lies before us.

The men of other wars showed bravery, heroism and capacity for great deeds, and all added glory to our flag, honor to our name and renown to our arms, but no men since our independence was established have done so much for the American people as the men of the Union Army. They were mere boys, most of them yet in their teens, and all of the more than two millions who were enlisted, except less than 50,000, were under twenty-five years of age. But, measured by their work and its far-reaching consequences, they belong among the truly great men of history.

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Through good report and bad, victory and defeat, summer and winter, sunshine and storm, they unflinchingly and uncomplainingly met every requirement of the great task that fell upon them. No hardship was too severe for them to undergo, no loss was too heavy for them to bear, no sacrifice to comfort, or blood, or life was too great for them to make. They laid all unsparingly upon their country's altar, and behold the result—this mighty Nation, so full of honour and so full of promise. Only the shortcomings of ourselves, or of those who are to come after us can bring their work to naught. Our presence here to-day is our pledge that it shall not fail through fault of ours, for we have come, not only to strew flowers on their graves, recount their deeds, extol their virtues, and pay tribute to their memory, but also that we may study the lessons they taught, and by these sacred and beautiful ceremonies consecrate ourselves anew to the great duty of perpetuating what they preserved. May God give us wisdom and courage to do our duty as well as they did theirs. If so, the Union they saved and the institutions they perfected will endure for long ages to come, and with passing years bear ever-increasing blessings to humanity.