

Address delivered by

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When, two months ago, President Shuster invited me to address the 1952 graduates of Hunter College, neither he nor I had any notion that intervening events would bring to this rostrum today not only the Assistant United States Commissioner for Higher Education, but also the president-elect of City College. Now that I appear in this double guise, I believe it to be a happy augury for the future that my first public appearance after last Monday's action by the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York should be under the friendly auspices of a future colleague and on the campus of a sister institution--not a rival, but a member of the same educational family. Furthermore, this setting may give a slight added weight to what I shall say today, for I am not only addressing the graduates of Hunter College in the class of 1952; I am also addressing myself and them to the future of higher education as it may be carried on by the City of New York.

Now, as any motorist knows, when he is about to leave the curb and enter the stream of traffic, a glance into the rear view mirror is useful. So, today, as the speaker and the members of this class are about to launch new ventures, I propose that we take a look into history, as a means of getting our bearings.

I look back about 2500 years, to a moment when two giants of civilization faced one another in glowering distrust and plunged into 28 years of war. I turn to Athens and Sparta in the final third of the 5th century B.C. If there are some present who think this is going a bit far with the rear-view look, I invite them to reserve judgment for a few minutes, and see whether there are not some fairly important lessons to be learned for our day from this backward look into history.

I

Look first at Sparta. She was the perfect prototype of the totalitarian State. Every boy was taught to steal, to fight, to obey. From tender youth onward, he lived in a barracks with other boys, learning these virtues of Spartan life. When he entered adulthood, he might take a wife--commonly at night and by force. He seldom appeared in public with her, lest he be labelled effeminate. It was Spartan custom to use the braver warriors and healthier wives, regardless of marriage ties, to breed a "superior fighting stock." When he was not at the wars, a Spartan adult spent most of his time at his club--a permanent military camp. He never ate at home--that was for women and little boys. At his club he shared coarse, simple fare at a common table. Each member of the club contributed provisions in turn, from his own farm.

The land was divided into equal portions among all Spartan citizens, each holding calculated to produce 70 bushels of grain for the master and 12 for his wife. Any balance of the year's produce was retained by the Helot who tilled the soil.

The only time a Spartan dressed well and bathed and combed himself, aside from festival days, was when he prepared for battle. With his hair and beard oiled and combed to stand out frighteningly, the Spartan marched in solemn exultation to battle, singing.

Sparta was the original garrison state.

In government, also, Sparta showed the way for a Hitler or a Stalin. Twenty men, called Senators, made all decisions. At intervals the people were called to ratify the rulings of the Senate. At these public assemblies, no citizen could discuss the merits of the Senate decisions. He could only vote: yes or no. And if the majority ever voted contrary to the Senate, then three Ephors were trotted out to reverse the people and uphold the Senate. Sparta was a dictatorship.

Spartans were forbidden to travel abroad, for fear they might get new ideas. Likewise, all strangers were forbidden entrance. As Plutarch put it, "Strange words must be admitted with strange people; these novelties produce new thoughts; and on these follow views and feelings whose discordant character destroys the harmony of the state." Sparta had the original iron curtain.

Finally, the whole Spartan society rested on violence and exploitation. No Spartan adult ever labored: work was for women and Helots, not for free men. Helots, in their turn, were forbidden to keep arms, were bound to the land (but could be dispossessed at will by a master). They were no more free to move about or seek new employment than is a farmer or an industrial worker in the Soviet Union. A Spartan youth was judged to have become a man only when he had successfully ambushed a Helot in the fields. For Helots, Sparta was a vast forced labor camp. The perfect Spartan, then, was a robot; with a tyrant's passions, a soldier's discipline, and a slave-owner's morality. Sparta put all her hopes in military power. She was a strong and respected adversary; but she had few friends.

II

And Athens? If history did not record the fact, it would be difficult to believe that two cities in the same country and culture could be as different as were Athens and Sparta.

The Athenian boy was taught -- not to fight, lie, kill, and obey -- but to think, to argue, to inquire, to appreciate, and above all to be pellucidly honest. A Spartan lived in one dirty shirt for a whole year (to prove he was tough), and Sparta laid great emphasis on military training. Athenian contempt for such matters was shown in these lines from Aristophanes in which the chorus of old men recall:

How for all his loud fire-eating
The old Spartan got his beating,
And in sorry plight retreating
 Left his spear and shield with me.
Then with only his poor shirt on,
And who knows what years of dirt on,
All betowzled and besmeared
With a bristling bush or beard,
 Slunk away and left us free.

Where the strength of Sparta lay in her garrison, the strength of Athens lay in her freedom--freedom of ideas, freedom of commerce, freedom in government, freedom in culture and the arts. As late as the time of Paul of Tarsus, Athenians gathered on Mars Hill to hear "some new thing." Athens welcomed the prophets of new ideas. Moreover, it paid: she also welcomed the profits of increasing commerce.

To protect her maritime trade, Athens built a navy. Athenian three-tiered oarsmen could see their triremes slashing through the waves in almost any weather. Athens used her great navy to free numerous cities from tyrants and pirates, binding her allies to her with the golden chains of gratitude. Just before the wars began, when the great Pericles delivered his famous funeral oration in 433 B.C., Athens rightly enjoyed the title of "The Great Liberator." She was the center of an empire of friends.

Then came the war with Sparta, emptying the national treasury and bankrupting the treasury of the Doric League through which her allies supported the Athenian navy. So, Athens increased the levy in an effort to raise revenue. All she got was larger unpaid balances, and increasing friction leading to distrust, and finally to disaffection. By the end of the war, Athens, the Great Liberator, had become a self-confessed Robber-Empire, sending her navy out to prey upon the very cities she had once freed. It was one final over-extension of greed which dispatched the navy to the then farthest extremities of the commercial world; and at Syracuse, the pride and power of Athens was beached and sunk.

More importantly, something happened to the inner spirit of Athens. With the passing of Pericles, the old ideals no longer ruled. Expediency replaced moral issues in making decisions of state. Take an example. Receiving a plea from her one faithful land ally, Plataea, for aid against the besieging Spartans, the Athenian leaders proudly responded that Plataea was to stand firm. Athens would help. Plataea stood; but Athens did not help. She was too busy converting her former allies into colonies, and squeezing them for tribute, to be bothered over the plight of a little city over the mountain. When, after two years, the starving remnants of the Plataean garrison surrendered, they were put to the sword as a salutary example to others who might still think that Athenian ideals were to be trusted. Something new had entered into the marrow of Athens. Ideals no longer stirred men's courage, and the pledged word was worthless.

Take one more instance! There was a strange interlude in the 28 years of warring, during which Athens and Sparta signed a mutual defense pact. But Spartans set the precedent for others like them--they honored the pact only as long as it was expedient to do so. Yet, when Sparta broke her word, what could Athens say? She, too, had abandoned principle for expediency. The city in which there was no more righteousness was incapable of righteous indignation. Honor no longer awakened loyalty, and morale faltered for want of morality.

It was, then, almost inevitable that Athens should at length yield the military victory. But long before that happened, she had already lost the only battles that count. She had lost her own integrity. The principal cause of the downfall of Athens lay in the creeping dry rot and moral erosion which ate away the fibre of integrity. The eager search for Goodness, Truth, Beauty, Knowledge was supplanted by greed and chicanery.

The cause of the ailment was an inner sickness. Military defeat merely put the seal of force on a Spartan triumph which had been clearly indicated in the long retreat of Athens away from high principle and down the road of expediency. At length the long walls of Athens were levelled--those walls which had been hastily erected by quarrying the temples and monuments of the city, an act of cultural self-mutilation symbolical of the inner decay of the spirit of the city. And the Spartan garrison stood on the Acropolis, looking out over the ruins of a culture they were powerless to reconstruct, or even to appreciate. Yet, long before the Spartans encamped on the Acropolis, the glory that was Greece was dead. Dead by suicide of the spirit.

Why? Because, deep in her own heart, Athens never did believe in the democracy she professed. She made a great show of the outward forms of freedom, and, for her day, seemed to be a great democracy. But neither the slaves nor the foreigners enjoyed the fruits of freedom in Athens; and in my judgment the verdict of history is clear: Those who refuse to live by the faith they profess finally lose the faith itself. And with belief in democracy gone, the empty shell of pretense collapses. A tongue-in-cheek democracy is an easy pushover for subversion or aggression.

III

Look now to 1952 A.D. As in 431 B.C., totalitarianism and democracy confront one another in evident distrust. Will we learn from Athens and Sparta before all of Greece is lost?

For my part, I have little doubt that the modern totalitarian forces mean business. The spread of Russian imperialism, with its ruthless disregard for the welfare of the individual, its cynical misuse of great ideals like "democracy" and "freedom," its heavy-handed clanging of the Iron Curtain, its expansionist lust for more territory and wider empire, its pitiless liquidation of all opposition, its reliance upon brute strength instead of the verdict of reason, its resort to armed conquest to gain immoral ends, and its use of deceit and lies to promote a gigantic conspiracy of terror and sabotage -- the spread of Russian imperialism is, in my judgment, the most serious threat to civilization since the days of Genghis Khan. Once again, Sparta threatens Athens.

How will Athens respond? Certainly not by copying the Spartan pattern. What, then, is democracy's hope in this hour?

Our first hope lies in the demonstrated fact that the Spartan notion cannot permanently triumph in the affairs of men. To be sure, it has recurrently risen to power in history, and has at times managed to overrun and destroy an Athens, a Rome, or a Western Europe. It is unquestionably necessary in our day to defend democracy with arms -- with ships, tanks, planes, bazookas, bombs, and the life blood of free men. The Russian bear pauses or shifts his course only in the face of superior strength. For many years to come, the Free World faces the necessity of maintaining armed strength at hitherto unthought of levels.

But modern Sparta, like her prototype, carries within herself the malady for which there is no medicine. As George F. Kennan puts it:

"There can be no genuine stability in any system which is based on the evil and weaknesses in man's nature--which attempts to live by man's degradation, feeding like a vulture on his anxieties, his capacities for hatred, his susceptibility to error, and his vulnerability to psychological manipulation. Such a system can represent no more than the particular frustrations and bitternesses of the generation of men who created it, and the cold terror of those who have been weak enough or unwise enough to become its agents."

The instability of evil is our assurance of the moral order. Therein lies our first hope. But it is a negative hope.

We do not put our final faith in warfare. We remember that war is a destructive process, in itself achieving no positive aim. It leaves victors and losers worse off than when it began, farther from the goals they had in mind. Not war, but peace, is our aim. If, in spite of everything we can do, war is forced upon us by the aggressor, this time we shall have the moral courage to remember that the real struggle lies beneath and beyond the military conflict; that victory at arms will merely give us the chance later to create a world of freedom and democracy. Survival of the Free World is not enough: the world which survives must be free. And in the end, the struggle for freedom will be determined only in part, and only negatively, in military terms. Primarily, the decision will be made in terms which are economic, political, psychological, and ethical--most importantly ethical. In the long years of uneasy tension which are before us, with our military force we seek to avert war; and with our civilian arm we maintain the essentials of civilian democracy.

Our second, and greater, hope lies in the positive belief that modern Athens will live by her ideals. That this hope is not entirely vain is shown by the fact that we reject expediency and stand on principle, in Korea. Unlike ancient Athens in her failure to defend Plataea, the Free World today pours blood and treasure into the fight to defend the victims of modern aggression. Athens still remembers principles; expediency has not replaced ideals.

Another example of our positive hope is our stubborn determination to retain the civilian character and control of American life. Unfortunately, we must maintain a garrison; we shall do it without becoming a Garrison State. We are refusing, and we shall continue to refuse, to become totalitarian or militaristic in a bootless effort to outdo totalitarianism on its own terms. If faith is demonstrated in works, then modern Athens may still be said to have a vigorous and firm belief in democracy.

Or, again, we take great hope in the fact that all over the Nation there is an increasing concern with the way in which racial and religious discriminations undermine the integrity of a democratic people. We shall not permit this Nation to be weakened because its foundations rest on exploitation or inequality. Much remains to be done in achieving full equality and freedom for all; but it is precisely in our obligation to live up to our ideals that our final hope lies. Firm adherence to an ethical heritage is our anchor against the temptations of expediency; and conscience is continually challenged by the discrepancies between profession and practice. This is good.

We do not hold that democracy, as we now know it, is perfect. Yet, imperfect as it is, we know that democracy is earth's fairest hope today. The partial freedoms of the Free World are better than the compulsions of the Slave World. We have our democracy, imperfect as it is. It is ours to see that its hopes are more nearly fulfilled.

IV

This is where the job of Hunter College and City College and all the other great institutions of higher education comes to sharp focus. Above all, in these days, the task of the college is to strengthen the faith of men and women in democracy; and to do so by enabling them to acquire that faith through practice. It is ours to keep alight the hope of a less imperfect democracy, working continuously to put more fully into effect the great ideas of equality, opportunity, and freedom. With bitterness toward none and with appreciation of all, it is ours to address ourselves to the needs and aspirations of each individual person, to fan the spark of divinity smouldering within each until it becomes a living flame of pure purpose.

Let this day of Commencement be a day of dedication and of great hope — a day of dedication of self to the common good, so that in clear conscience the members of the **class of 1952** may stand in their own integrity, strong for the right — and because of such dedication, a day of great hope for the future of our beloved democracy. And let this hope be greeted by no cynicism or mental reservation, for it is in the power of great and compelling ideals that we move forward.

He whom a dream hath possessed
Treads the impalpable marches.
From the dust of the day's long road
He leaps to a laughing star.
And the vision of worlds that fall
He views from eternal arches;
And rides God's battle fields
In a flashing and golden car.