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ARTICLE V.

PERILS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.¹

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"Where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov. xxix. 18).
(R. V. "Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint.")

WE pay highest honor to the men who made and saved us a nation by using their anniversaries in considering the present welfare of that which they gave us. Between the birth-days of Lincoln and Washington to-day we are encompassed with those influences which prompt us so to do. When, in addition, we regard the condition of the world at large at this present moment, we feel more impelled to devote this sacred hour to national interests. No doubt many of us have said during these trying times: "I wonder what Washington or Lincoln would say or do if he were back in his place with us." They were both men of great vision and, therefore, the Nation of their times did not perish. The Nation to-day is not without vision. It is not the spirit of despair or even depression of faith that prompts our theme. We believe that to-day our Nation on the whole is sound of mind and heart, swayed more by ideals than mercenary interests. It desires to know and defend the right and justice, and it would not be unresponsive to calls upon its patriotism involving fortune and life if convinced of the merit of the call. The good people in it far outnumber the bad. There are more wise than

¹A sermon preached in Westminster Pulpit, Sunday, February 13, 1916.

foolish ones even in Congress. The standards of commercial morals were never higher. We say so much to relieve us of the charge of pessimism. We speak with utmost hope and confidence that American Democracy, if still an experiment, will be a success, but we believe this not because it is an easy success, free from great dangers and possibility of disappointing our hopes.

It is possible for our Nation to miserably fail; to lose its manhood rather than improve it; to lower its womanhood rather than elevate it; to impair the integrity of its home and social life rather than to preserve it; to become a wanton, gross, sensual, cowardly, godless people. There are forces already at work, and very strong, which, if not checked, would make all this a terrible reality.

American Democracy will not drift toward higher things. It is not a pretty canoe floating on the river Success to the Sea of Glory. This is a world of peril; those who treat it otherwise, whether for their own souls or that of the Nation, are not wise. Perhaps the greatest danger of all to our people is that they may ridicule the idea that there is any danger for them. When a nation reaches that point of faith in itself it is on the brink. There are two parts to our theme, one under the name American, and the other that of Democracy. There are perils to it as a democracy; there are dangers also peculiar to it as an American Democracy.

I.

1. A danger to any democracy is *false leadership*. A democracy to the eye of a politician is like a gold mine to a prospector, something rich to be exploited and appropriated. The touching element in the story of past democracies has been their hunger for a leader who would not betray them.

There is something pathetic in the confidence which a people reposes in leaders whom they believe to be honest and unselfish. Such democracies in the past have finally been betrayed by their leaders and so ended. And yet it must be remembered that it is they who make those leaders. If their life is pure and strong and righteous, out of that soil will spring character in the shape of true men. Washington was the natural product of a God-fearing and righteous human society, and Lincoln likewise. Such men are the flowering of the life of the people. Weeds grow when the soil is impoverished. Enrich the soil, sow good seed, and you have wheat and corn. Democracy is a plot of ground that is being continually sown with the tares of false doctrines and theories of life. False teachings of government and liberty and rights are sent broadcast. To offset them it must be enriched with wisdom and power to think and act. Otherwise it breeds its own sons for their undoing; its leaders become its self-inflicted punishment for a false social life.

2. The second peril of all democracies is the other extreme from that already named. It is *the intimidation of leaders by the people*. The notions and opinions of people in the mass are subject to violent change. The individual may plan for a term of years if left to his own wisdom. The danger of the mass is that it does not think in terms of years: it is impatient, near-sighted, changeable. The leader who to-day opposes its demands does the unpopular thing, commits political suicide. The people must have their way. They pass judgment in a day over matters which statesmen would hesitate to decide after months of reflection. There is nothing so fearful as a great populace swayed by an impulse or passion. It demands instant action; it cannot wait for investigations and judicial procedure. Washington and Lincoln were tor-

tured by it in their day. Multitudes condemned McKinley for waiting to investigate the sinking of the *Maine* before declaring war. President Wilson, if yielding to much popular passion, would long since have ceased inquiries and waiting for vexatious delays in correspondence and involved us in war. The same people who to-day sing, "Hosanna to him who cometh in the Name of the Lord," to-morrow, because he does contrary to their tastes, cry, "Crucify him!" Democracy for that reason has always been injured by its own intimidation of its leaders, who have been compelled to surrender their better judgment for popular applause and to retain office.

The president of a republic as compared with the sovereign of a monarchy is as one whose house is on the crater of *Vesuvius* as compared with one whose palace is on *Gibraltar*. A nation needs a consistent policy as a business house requires some one who can look beyond the year, and plan consistently. But democracies do not naturally plan for years. They ask for immediate results. It is an unpleasant truth that we people need often to be saved from ourselves, from Philip drunk to Philip sober. Happy is that republic whose life is so sound that it begets men to lead it who are the people's devoted servants, but not its whipped slaves and sycophants, fawning for its favor. A democracy is not necessarily a strong, wise, and successful thing merely because it is a democracy. The people can be, ought to be, majestic. The voice of the people may be as the voice of God (*vox populi, vox Dei*), but it often has crucified its best friends, and burned at the stake of its popular misjudgments those who were brave enough and loved it enough to resist its passions and oppose its impulsive decrees. We speak now not of our own, but of democracy in the abstract, or as it may become anywhere if it lacks vision,

and so is devoid of the fundamental qualities of intelligence, education, self-control, and the character which can come only through obedience to primary law. So much for our subject, which is simply Democracy, without any national modifications. Let us turn to the qualifying term, — to the word American.

II.

What are the perils of the Democracy which is American, peculiar to it by virtue of its individual peculiarities? And again let it be borne in mind that the confession of perils does not constitute a judgment against it or an affront to it. It does not indicate a lack of love for it or faith in it, but a desire to honor it and save it to its better self and higher destiny. If we did not believe in it as the best thing in the world we would not consider it worth while to spend an hour in the House of God talking about it and invoking His blessing upon it. If it were ever so imperfect, we would still prefer it to an otherwise perfect government but which was autocratic and not "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

1. One of the evident perils of American Democracy is the peril of *its self-confidence* based upon its past record. Most of our past is highly creditable. The Nation has generally been right in its final decisions, though often groping. But that past has been possible because its people were, in the main, of the same type, an unit in their conception of justice and right and the virtues which are essential to any people. They had education, moral training, and religious inspiration. They were lovers of the simple life and the domestic virtues, a God-fearing Nation. The restraints gained by the recognition of the Bible, even to its reading in the public schools,

the sanctity of the Sabbath, and the teachings of moral precepts in season and out of season, made this Nation what it was, a people capable of governing itself fairly even while under the heaviest strain. Those conditions seem likely to be changed, if not so already. The state neither teaches nor permits religious and ethical instruction to the young in its institutions. The decrees of some of its officials practically make it illegal to mention the name of God in a public institution.

We are not any more a homogeneous people either in religion or in our ideals of right and wrong. We are a mass of people with conflicting origin and principles, trying our best to live together in peace and work out some kind of national life which shall be absolutely neutral on the fundamental subjects which first produced this Nation. Because our old democracy succeeded is no pledge that the present very different one will succeed. It can fail.

2. The second peril to the American Democracy is plainly by virtue of *the lavish Providence* which has endowed it so richly, the peril of materialism. The world has mastered hitherto most other dangers and been ruined by this same power, but never on so great a scale has a democracy been let loose in so rich a domain as ours. When the country was poor, it was humble, simple, devout. It is now very rich. It beckons with wands of gold the eyes of all its children to come and get. Former generations among us spent time in discussing principles of government, debating in the town halls matters of state. Men of the stature of statesmen were developed in the simple hamlets by the exercise of argument on public questions and religious doctrines. The American people have not made deep and serious thinking a pursuit in the last quarter of a century as they did before that. It has

been more and more difficult to secure the best talent of our homes for the work of the church or state. It is no wonder that, seeing what there is in the markets of this world to give comfort and pleasure to life, the desire to secure the money with which to pay the price has become the supreme passion of our people. A large portion of our Democracy has ceased to be religious so far as we can judge by any outward relation to the worship of God or sacrifice for His cause. Pleasure is a larger word than duty among us to-day; it was the reverse in the last century. We do not mean by this to say that our Democracy has been entirely enslaved by materialism, but that such is its danger, a danger which has already made such ravages as to make those tremble who look to the years that are coming and ask where are the men and women to be found who will make good their fathers' places or their mothers' places in preserving the principles which make for righteousness and exemplify the virtues by which alone the first century of this Republic was made possible. We might, if time allowed, brighten this darksome suggestion by indicating much that makes us confident that it is only a peril which will master very many, to be sure, but which will not be an engulfing flood to destroy a nation. The sentiments prevailing on the current war show that American Democracy, while held elsewhere to be a slave of Mammon and grossly given over to selfish indulgence, is the most idealistic people under the sun. As a whole its judgments of the merits of this war have not been made on the basis of its own self-interests; it has desired only to understand and pass righteous judgment as to its cause and those guilty of it. This does not mean that there are not many who are more concerned with its commercial significance. But such only emphasize the idealism that still survives in America and

which should redeem us from the reproach of being as yet in total bondage to the flesh and blind to the paramount things of life.

3. A third peril to the American Democracy is that *sense of security* which comes from its isolation between the oceans and from which spring a number of blessings and an equal number of dangers. It is by no means sure, in the light of present events, that we have no outside dangers to fear, though we have had every reason for such a belief until now. How far this possibility demands physical preparedness is a matter to be met wisely and calmly; it is not our theme nor is this the hour. The confidence of a nation, however, that it has no outside foes to prepare for, requires a strong people to prevent the loss of some cardinal virtues. Assured peace may not always prove an unmixed blessing. There are certain elements of character which we hold to be necessary in any people, and we ask ourselves what there is in our midst or around us which will develop and preserve them. No people can be great who are not courageous, nor can be courageous until they do something which requires it. This is an old-fashioned virtue and often put to bad uses, but it is better put to a bad use than it is to have no courage, for what is the use of staying alive after one has become a coward? As moral bravery is vastly higher than physical, we ask what have we that will keep our people truly courageous without war? There must be something to call it out.

While we have no doubt that our people would spring to arms as a whole if the urgent call came, unhappily necessity or otherwise has made this war period to have such an influence in this country by virtue of the much desired neutrality as to endanger our national spirit and weaken some of it. We as individuals have endured in silence spectacles in this war

which have violated every sense of justice or humanity or truth, and with the best of motives to save the larger purposes. We have not been cowards, to be sure, but we have acted just as a coward would under the same circumstances: we have said nothing; we have not wished to offend by crying out our righteous indignation; and to suppress our noblest instincts when outraged tends to make cowards. Some of us have become such. We, for the sake of the ultimate benefits, have hushed our natural instincts to avoid giving offense in scores of cases which are in absolute violation of all the principles for which this country stands. The question is, however good and wise the intent may be, whether such suppression of the nobler instincts and the higher elements of our nature does not make us to some degree a nation of opportunists; whether we can ever regain that buoyancy and spontaneity of moral energy which we have had to suppress.

A symptom of it, that this is so, occurred in our National Senate last week. Not by our own choice, but by a seeming act of Providence, the Philippines were flung into our arms for development and ultimate, though necessarily very distant, self-government. There is no brighter episode in our national history than what, up to a recent date, we have done for these islands in the Pacific. Education has been spread abroad by an army of our best teachers, with every promise of a civilization there that would be a glory to this country. Fears that it may become a menace and involve us in the necessity of its defense caused the Senate to vote, by the deciding vote of the Vice-President, that we throw back practically at once into the hands of that but partially developed people, most of whom are still in the barbaric stage, the burden of self-government, and so obliterate the last vestige of all the

sacrifice of men and money which we have expended, the only apparent reason being that we are afraid we shall be involved in unpleasantness if we continue to hold them until they are ready to govern themselves. It is a cowardly and unrighteous act, a stigma on our Senate and Nation.

We ask, therefore, again, What is there in our situation that can keep our Democracy up to the proper standard of a virile people? If we could safely dismiss all thought of perils of war with outside nations, it would be a pity that it were so if there were no other ways by which to keep alive that vital spark that has made the heroisms of the past. But there is no such necessity. We do not believe with General Bernhardt and his staff that war is necessary for such a purpose, though it is the easiest method. We abhor the doctrine with indignation. To do right always, under all conditions, requires the highest courage. To deal justly and honestly in the world, to take the course of self-sacrifice for the larger good, requires courage in officeholders and in people. If we do the right as God gives us to see the right, we shall have use for all the courage we can muster.

4. Again, what is there that *shall keep alive in the American Democracy*, where it is in great danger beyond that of any other nation on earth, *the element of self-sacrifice and the self-control which it involves?* It is our very good or ill fortune that robs us of the necessity for it, and makes it harder for us to resist. Is there such a thing as great character in men and women without the element of some self-denial and act of self-control? And can a nation succeed where the individual fails? Horrible as are the cruelties of war, they have their compensating side in the spirit of self-sacrifice and mastery of self which they call out. But two years ago the peasantry of Europe were living small, inconse-

quential lives, grubbing for their bread and their mug of beer ; to-day they have risen to the dimension of heroes. They have stepped out of their narrow selves, have forgotten self, have given their life away. They can never be the same again. Those who survive will be greater than they were before. They have laid down their life and they will take it again a hundredfold.

It almost frightens us to think how in this great country of ours there seems to be no necessity that compels such a sacrifice of self. The Nation itself makes but light demands upon us ; and even those light demands, mostly in the form of taxes that would make the citizens of other nations smile, we are tempted to complain of and to evade. So great is the temptation, therefore, to think of self, since there is nothing else that demands our serious attention, that we may safely say that no nation has ever had such a danger of becoming effeminate as has ours. The very fact that some at least would secure peace at any price and any terms, in order to avoid the expense and especially the horrors of bloodshed, is a symptom of a very insidious disease. A people not effeminate will always put justice first and peace second. A people that has become degenerate through the lack of the need of self-sacrifice for a great cause will put peace first and justice second.

This Democracy of ours must impose upon itself some great moral tasks which will require acts of self-abnegation if it would save itself to the robust and virile democracy which it has hitherto been. But so long as there are wrongs to set right, and poverty to be relieved, and social conditions to ameliorate, and justice to be established, will there be a demand upon our good citizenship for the sacrifice of self-comfort and convenience that they may do these things. You have

money to give, you can sacrifice it for the cause of your country. You have strength to give to the weak. You have voices and wisdom, you can speak for the truth bravely against the voices of error and destruction. You have children, train them to serve the world's needs. You can sacrifice the life of ease and congenial pleasures and give your country of yourselves for the elevation of its political life and the higher standards of its industrial pursuits. And then, when we have laid upon our country's altar that sacrifice of love which it needs and has a right to demand, there will still be abundant occasion to offer yet again upon the altar of our common humanity, the brotherhood of man and the Kingdom of God on earth, for across many seas we shall hear the Macedonian cry: "Come over and help us!" Do it for the sake of the nations who are in darkness, for the peoples who have not the knowledge of your Gospel and of Him who made Himself poor that you might be rich. And do it for your own sakes that you may not shrivel to nothing in the enjoyment of your abundance. The need of self-sacrifice shall never cease so long as there is one habitation on earth that has not the light which we enjoy and knows not the truth which has set us free.

5. And while there are other perils peculiar to our people we will stay but to indicate one more. A people is in direst peril when *there are forces at work within it to draw it down from the spiritual to make it merely secular and temporal.* This Nation had its birth in a great spiritual agony. It was a *principle* before it was a *nation*; it was a holy, spiritual vision before it became a constitution. The fire of that principle has never ceased entirely within it. It is what has made it singular among the nations just as the Jewish nation, in its day, was a peculiar people for the same reason. Both

nations had their Abraham and both nations followed the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire in their days in the wilderness. Most of our common talk to-day concerns the development of material and physical America. When a commission from the Orient visits us to study our greatness, we point them to the external things, and they go their way in many cases thinking that they have seen America because they have been shown its buildings, its wheel of industry, its tables of trade. The real America of years ago, and we trust this is true to-day for the most part, was found in the hearts and homes and sanctuaries of its people, and they were great because God was there. They invoked His presence, they sought His blessing even upon their frugal meal. As we wander through those paths in which they lived, we seem to hear amidst all the sounds of earthly things the rustling of an unseen garment, the hint of an Invisible Presence which touched the common tasks and rounds of life and the Nation's hopes with a sanctity that converted life itself into a sacrament and made God and man partners in a mighty business.

What shall take the place of the sense of a Living God in the heart of a nation? What will be equivalent in our Democracy, if it shall change, for the blessings that came to the older generations through reading their duties and the Nation's purpose in the light of God's plans? When evil shocks us, and vice seems invincible, and heart of flesh fails us, what will take the place of the waiting upon God and the prayers to His Throne among a people whose need will be as great, but who have no altar to which to repair and nothing but the human upon which they may call? Poverty, peril of foes, pestilence, famine,—these things keep alive in people their sense of dependence upon an Arm stronger than that of the flesh. But we are rich and not poor. We trust to the oceans'

defense and not to "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon." We fear no plague; there can be no famine. "He hath not dealt so with any nation." But how will that people deal with Him? That is the question that pleads for an answer. Can it be said of the proud and confident Democracy of which we are a part that its commerce is great and its halls of learning thronged and its gates are gates of gold, but its sanctuaries are forsaken, its children void of reverence, its people voiceless in worship and that God has left the paths where once He walked with the great Washington and where He stood when Lincoln fell at His feet and cast the burdens of State upon Him?

May it not be that the world catastrophe of the present has been permitted because it was the only way by which the peoples of this world could be saved from death unto life? And shall favored America alone pass through this period of agony without receiving, as other people are receiving so wonderfully, the purification which it brings? These other peoples, in the very darkness which envelops them, are being given of Heaven a vision with which they are seeing the things which are of value and which make for the glory of a nation. And can America catch their vision and so, in the golden bonds of self-restraint, turn her back upon the ways which lead to evil and, with her face toward the sun, perpetuate a democracy founded upon righteousness and perfected with all the blessings of God? Or must America, untaught by the fearful experiences of others, pass through her own baptism of fire? Must the ploughshares of God's wrath tear up the encrusted soil of her pride and lust? Must the flaming sword draw her precious blood and crumble her palaces and consume her cities as the only means by which the God of love can deliver her from her enemies which lie within her

own heart and save her to that better America whose destiny, we believe, was written in letters of gold in the council chamber of the Most High before the first musket shot rang out the call that sounded the dawn of her independence, or the Mayflower sailed away?

At such a solemn moment as this, contemplating all the possibilities of good and evil which ever contend for supremacy among men, we know of no better voice to which to give heed than that which speaks to us across the many centuries and which has as timely a message now as it had to the nation of old when Moses gave it to his beloved people ere he went forth from them to lie in the unknown grave on lonely Nebo's summit:—

“And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildest not, and houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten, and be full; then beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”

Let the word of this man of God sound to the depth and through the length and breadth of our great American Democracy to-day: “Lest we forget! Lest we forget!”