

*Amel  
Holidays  
Armistice Day*

1928  
ARMISTICE DAY ADDRESS  
of  
DAN SOWERS, National Director  
The Americanism Commission of The American Legion

1928

It is a happy privilege to bring to you on the tenth anniversary of the Armistice greetings on behalf of the National Organization of The American Legion. It seems a long way back from the peaceful quietude of this day to that time when your sons and our comrades marched in long, olive drab columns, swinging along through the drizzling French rain under heavy packs. Some of them headed for graves where they still lie beneath their little white crosses.

I can see them now, the pack straps cutting cruelly into their shoulders, their feet aching inside their hob-nailed shoes, and the cold rain running in little rivulets from their caps down their backs, marching on into a racking night, up to a wild, red dawn. These men were used to discomforts; they knew what hardships were and bore them with fortitude. There was no hope of personal reward ahead of these men; they were extending their full strength for you and for me, for America and mankind.

Back there in those days when it seemed as if the whole world had gone mad, it often happened that through a rain of fire and bullets, soldiers had to carry messages from one post of command to another. There was no way to get these messages through except by runners, and the man who undertook such a mission raced with death as his companion.

Some of these runners got through safely and delivered their messages; others never got through, and there were some who crawled on over the awful battlefield and delivered their message with dying lips, but all went.

On a certain day when our troops crossed the Ourcq, a terrible machine gun fire opened up and it was necessary to send an important message from a certain company to the battalion post of command across the field. The danger was great, but the matter was imperative. The officer in charge hated to order any man to go, he knew what it meant, but the message must be delivered.

"Send for Private Treptow," he called after much hesitation. Treptow came and saluted. The message and orders were given him.

"You understand you are to connect with the battalion commander across 'No Man's Land'?"

"I do sir."

"You know the importance of the message and the great risk you run and you are not afraid?"

"I shall not fail," was the answer.

Treptow saluted, left and looked over the field. Not so far to go, -- a matter of a few minutes, if not detected by snipers or halted by machine gun fire.

"Here goes," he said to those around him and started. There were others to follow with the same message if he failed.

He began his race against death. On he went, hiding as best he could behind whatever cover the field afforded; dropping into pits when there were any; running boldly across the open, he moved here and there, now up and now down. He had been seen and there was a very fury of machine fire turned loose at him.

He ran, a prayer on his lips for his loved ones at home, and for the safety of the men dependent upon the delivery of his message. A bullet tore through his clothes and made a jagged wound in his side, but he ran on; another one and he was faint from loss of blood and exertion of the race. He was half way over. He was running now with whatever spark of life there was left in him. Just as he was nearing his goal a German sniper took aim and a deadly bullet crashed through the body of this brave boy.

He fell and lay quite still. He thought for a moment of those across the sea, those here at home, then all was dark. He was dead.

When the battle was over and the body was recovered, in Private Treptow's pocket was a diary, on the first page of which he had written these words:

"America shall win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost as though the whole issue of the struggle depended on me alone. My pledge."

And to this he had signed his name.

This is the vision of courage and individual responsibility each one of us owe this America today. It was of such stuff your armies in war were made and it is that same sort of metal that carries them forward in peace time service today.

Ten years ago, when the enemy had capitulated, General Pershing, speaking through general orders to the two million men the nation had sent him and whom he was returning back to civilian life, said:

"Sustained by your high ideals and inspired by the most heroic part you have played, you will carry back to our people the proud consciousness of a new Americanism, born of sacrifice."

That was ten years ago. Today, a decade later, we of the World War examine ourselves to see whether or not we have justified the confidence of our great commander-in-chief. And as we take stock of what we have done it is also well for every man and every woman of this generation to give in their own hearts an account of their stewardship of the rights, principles and domain preserved to all of us by the blood of our compatriots.

It is the duty of us who live to review these past ten years of peace and see if we have been worthy of our American heritage.

Have we whom God in His mercy saw fit to spare, kept faith with those whose souls He took back from the field of battle? What have we done these ten years to preserve and perpetuate the idealism for which these men died? Have we accepted our individual responsibility to our community, to our state and to the nation? Have we taken care of our disabled comrades? Have we looked after the dependents of those who went West? Have we taught and preached throughout the land, our love of country? Have we striven to make social and economic conditions of our people better? Have we tried to raise the standards of living and make education more universal? Have we cherished and defended our Constitutional form of government? Have we done our civic duty by taking part in governmental affairs? Have we interested ourselves in the welfare of our boys and girls, to whom we must pass on our heritage tomorrow? At heart are we good Americans; are we worthy of this right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness retained for us by the blood of the boys you sent away in 1918?

Today, let us examine our individual consciences and see if we have become peace time slackers or whether we are contributing something to America and mankind that will make the nation and the world a little better because we were spared to live.

Before the World War, we of this generation had come to take our country for granted and our liberty as a matter of course, like the moon, the sun and the unfailing air which we breathe. This was not so with those generations that hewed their homes out of the American wilderness, nor was it so with the generation which conceived and founded this Government, dedicating it to the proposition that all men are created free and equal. Nor was it so with that generation which fought a Civil War to determine whether or not a nation so conceived and so dedicated could long endure. We of the easy spring of 1917 were like the idle sons of some rich man, the inheritors of some great estate which could only be appreciated by one whose toil, labor and sacrifice had amassed.

But in less than two years' time, we had earned a right to that estate and ten years ago today when the curtain was rung down upon the most tragic event in the history of the world, when that last shot was fired, when that awful stillness came over forest and field soaked with the blood of countless thousands, we had even added to our estate. But our service to that estate had not ended. Our stewardship had just begun.

After that first Armistice Day, the American soldier realized that he had duties and obligations ahead of him. He felt that that same spirit of purpose, that same unity of action, that same lofty idealism which had carried him to victory in arms must be preserved and taken back into civilian life. He felt there was a duty to perform in teaching and preaching a greater love for America, for its ideals and for its institutions. He must come home and take care of those whose loved ones had died in France.

It was such thoughts and purposes as this inculcated in the mind and the heart of the American soldier that prompted the organization of The American Legion and dedicated its efforts to the Service of America in peace.

It was quite natural for the Legion to first turn its attention to the salvaging of war's most pitiful by-product, the human wreckage. There must be care of the wounded and the disabled; there must be care for the dead comrade's widow and orphans, and to this duty The American Legion gave its tireless energy. No one can say that The American Legion has been derelict in its duty in this direction.

As the years have gone by, we reached our estate of active citizenship. We have matured from the youngsters that we were during the war days and we are now in that part of our lives when the responsibilities of citizenship are heavy upon us.

We of the Legion take those responsibilities as a personal and individual matter. It isn't a case of let the organization do it. Each member feels it is his personal duty.

This was never better illustrated than in the Legion's emergency relief work in the great Mississippi flood, the California disaster, in various coal mine explosions, the New England flood and more recently in the terrible Florida hurricane.

Up from these death laden masses of helplessness came the manpower of The American Legion, accepting the challenge of disaster and meeting it with that swift, skilled efficiency born of war time experience and training.

No one who was not in the Legion's rescue work in Florida can realize the individual service those magnificent Legionnaires performed. I saw Howard Rowton, the Legion Adjutant of the Florida Department at the National Convention in San Antonio in October. He had been on active duty in the storm area about Lake Okechobee and was still weary and hollow-eyed, still suffering from the depressing sights of thousands of rotting corpses that were recovered from the Everglades.

"The horrors of the storm will live with me always," he said. "No words can describe the grim reality of the catastrophe," he declared. "No pen can paint the awfulness of the odors of decomposing bodies, bloated and distorted as they came from the swamps to be piled on funeral pyres.

"Of course, I am partial to the Legion," he said, "but when I see men that are real men do the work those Legionnaires of Florida did, day after day, without pay and without praise, I cannot refrain from telling you about it. Those men were not called into action. They did not wait for that. They felt the individual responsibility and acted promptly, and for days and nights without sleep, without food, they stood in cold water to their waists, fishing out the dead, that the living might not suffer from epidemics."

It is this sort of thing that is building a glorious tradition for The American Legion and our hearts beat with pride for this sort of service and for these sacrifices in the same manner as they did for those who served at Chateau Thierry and on the Marne and in the Argonne.

America we know is the greatest nation today that has ever existed upon the face of this earth. We know that it stands head and shoulders above other nations of the world in its progress and in its conception of human rights. Yet we realize that our national life is not yet the ultimate of desire. We know that with the changes of time, the change of customs, the progress of science, there must come political changes. Yet what change may come, what progress and advancement must be made in governmental affairs must not come over the ruins of the things that have made America great, but rather through hard, patient toil and careful study, building upon that which we have that is sound and good and replacing here and there bits of our governmental structure which appears to be faulty. There is only one way in which this can be done. That is for every citizen to inform himself upon public questions, upon proposed governmental changes, and upon the integrity of the men in whose hands these matters are entrusted and then go to the polls at election times and cast an honest and intelligent ballot.

This past year the ten-thousand Posts of the Legion have given a great deal of their time to awaken the civic consciousness of our people to the point where they would do their duty as citizens and take a part in the affairs of their Government. We have been more than gratified with the results attained and will work harder than ever in the future to keep alive interest in affairs of state.

In order to have an intelligent people, we must have an educated people. The Legion is interested in education and that interest lies in its desire to arouse within all the people of this country a keener sense of the needs and problems of education. For this reason, eight years ago, the Legion instituted American Education Week, which we observe Armistice Week. The movement is today sponsored by the National Education Association and supported by every patriotic organization in the country. It has become a permanent institution because it deals with fundamental problems that appeal to all the people.

When the World War came, this nation shot out a swift, all-embracing hand to grasp from city and farm, mountain and valley, a vast army of four million men. The nation got the men mobilized then in great army cantonments, equipped them, trained them, and then to the amazement of the Government, found that one man in every squad of eight could neither read orders nor understand them when delivered.

What that illiteracy cost the nation in blood and money through retardation of training and costly blunders and ignorance, can never be estimated. Suffice to say that the cost was sufficiently impressive to send a million veterans (members of The American Legion) back to their homes with the unified cry upon their lips, "America must accept the full responsibility of educating every man, woman and child in the nation if our country is to maintain an honorable place among the enlightened nations of the world."

James Madison once said, "A popular government without popular information or means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

The stamping out of illiteracy is indeed important for there is no better weapon with which to combat the efforts of the Communist than education. The Communist today is not so much interested in the mature man and woman as he is in the boy and the girl. He comes to them well groomed, well educated and oftentimes in the form of a likeable personality and frequently a person of means, sometimes inherited, sometimes from the treasure of a foreign country, but never earned, and in a subtle way first begins to break down in the mind of the child a respect for home, then respect for religion; after which he teaches disrespect for America and American institutions. As much as we hate to admit it these forces exist. They had a candidate for President on the ballot of thirty-two states, a candidate who is preaching the overthrow of our Government, a candidate at the head of a party which would emasculate our people and place us upon a parity with Soviet Russia. This so-called political party first started its work with violence and bloodshed, acts that were treasonable and punishable by the courts, but today seeks the protection of the very Constitution it would destroy, in preaching its infamous doctrines. These men have the right to free speech, a right which they criminally abuse; yet which is held inviolate for them.

Their moral support comes from a group of self-styled intelligentsia who have been educated and who have grown fat upon the plenty and opportunity of America, but like ungrateful curs now jeer and ridicule and sneer the patriotic citizen whose feeling of gratitude causes him to express a love of country and who takes a stand in defense of American institutions.

The American Legion, and other organizations and individuals, must continually crusade along the lines of education and enlightenment so that every boy and every girl within this country may have an opportunity to judge properly between the slowly developed and soundly tested principles of this great democracy and the misleading, impractical and fanatical theories of Communism.

We of the Legion are, of course, interested vitally in the education of our boys. We are interested in their development of character.

During this past year The American Legion sponsored a national baseball competition for boys under seventeen. The Legion was not prompted to carry on this program because of its interest in baseball as such, but it considered baseball a good, wholesome game of sufficient attraction to interest the American boy and implant in his character those elements of good sportsmanship which are fundamentals of good citizenship.

This program was made possible through the financial aid of the National and American Leagues of Baseball who contributed \$50,000.00 to defray the expense of bringing the various state championship teams through Regional and Sectional Tournaments, up to a Boys' World Series, out of which came the national champions. Over 122,000 boys were out on the lots this year, learning how to meet competition fairly and squarely through the game of baseball and under the leadership of Legionnaires. In 1929 we will have a half million. These boys learned that in order to succeed they must obey rules; in later life they must also obey rules, which are more properly termed 'laws'. They learned out on the field that the game must be played fair and this lesson they will carry with them to manhood in the form of tolerance and respect for their fellowman's political and religious beliefs. They learned in these games that ultimate success does not hinge upon individual starrng, but upon the team work of all. They carry that into manhood under the name of 'co-operation'. They learned out there on the playing fields that they must be loyal to their team and to their leader. A lesson which will stick with them throughout their lives is "that loyalty is the basis of all sound organization". In their competitions time and again it was brought home to them that they must be game; even though the opposition at times might appear overwhelming, they must fight and play hard up until the last out in the last inning. The quality of gameness is something essential in every good citizen. The great weakness of the Communist is that he isn't game, he hasn't got the guts to face the competition of his fellowman. And then there is no better school of democracy than on the playing field. These boys accepted one another upon their teams not for the social or financial standing of one another's families; they didn't care whether their teammate was the son of the most prominent man of their town or whether he came from the most humble family in the community. The thing they were interested in was his skill and ability to play ball and his quality of playing fair, his loyalty, spirit of co-operation and his gameness. The good citizen knows this spirit of democracy and has learned it because he recognizes that there is only one standard by which we can judge human excellence, and that is merit.

Aside from the tremendous value of the lesson of good sportsmanship which these boys learned, many of them were enabled to travel to different parts of the country, a highly educational advantage for them. They were given wholesome recreation and their bodies were developed physically. In many communities where play facilities were not what they should be, this Junior Baseball Program awakened the civic authorities to their duty to provide playing places for their children.

I know of no activity in which we have ever engaged that has done more toward the development of a virile, strong, understanding boyhood, who on the morrow will have marched to that manhood that will control the destinies of this nation in the succeeding generations.

Strange as it may seem in the face of experiences of the past, we have here in America certain groups who would destroy in our boys the very thing this program endeavors to build; a group that is asking the American people to do away with any means for the defense of the nation in the event that it is attacked from without or within.

The American Legion has no patience with those well-meaning but misguided people who make strenuous effort to palsy the arm of America and deprive us of the small defense we now have. They shut their eyes to the history of our country and ignore all the experiences of the past.

The American Legion wants peace, yet we insist upon the maintenance of our national defense at strength sufficient to guarantee the security of the country from war until such time as war is definitely limited as a fact in the world. Because we demand that this nation does not allow itself to be lulled into that false sense of security which found us so unprepared in 1917, we are accused of being militaristic. No more false accusation was ever made, for God knows that if ever there was a group of men who sincerely want peace, peace with honor, it is the men of the Legion. They know war at its worst. Their contact with war was the sort that found it stripped of its glamour, shorn of its color, leaving nothing but the stark, grim, cruel realities; realities of mutilated bodies, terrible carnage, and poison gasses. Never again do we want to see the manpower of this country hurled into such an awful conflict because of a lack of preparation, or without such preparation as will give them an opportunity to immediately attain the maximum efficiency in the execution of the duty before them.

America is today the richest nation on earth. Our national wealth insofar as it can be computed has been estimated at nearly four hundred billions of dollars, a sum so vast that the human mind cannot comprehend it. With the most magnificent territorial empire on which the sun shines, with a temperate climate and material wealth far beyond that of any other nation, the United States of America is the richest prize of the ages, the greatest inheritance since time began. We should guard it jealously for as long as human nature remains as it is this prize will be ours only as the world knows we are ready and prepared to defend it.

So long as the nations of the earth are striving for trade and wealth and commercial advantage, so long as human nature remains substantially as it is, so long as world peace is in the making, it is our duty to assist by sound methods of our own determination in speeding the day when swords shall be beaten into plough-shares and spears into pruning hooks and nations shall learn war no more. In the meantime let us have a care and provide the necessary means to make sure that no harm comes to the temple of liberty our fathers have builded.

Government by all is entitled to the service of all, and in a national emergency that service should be rendered for a reasonable compensation. We believe that no citizen should be permitted to make vast profits out of the exigencies of our nation. In the event another great emergency arrives, we hope to prevent profiteering through the so-called Universal Draft Bill, which we are sponsoring. The purport of this bill is to commandeer capital and labor as well as manpower. The American Legion is very much of the opinion that should we be forced into another war, it should produce neither slackers nor profiteers, but that the resources of the nation in manpower, material and money should be contributed to the common cause with less thought to profit and more to loyal, devoted, consecrated and painstaking service to the Government. In other words, The American Legion sponsors a bill to take the profit out of war and thereby make the recurrence of war less probable.

The American Legion is made up of those you trusted in the hour of your nation's greatest need with the very safety of the country itself. I ask of you today to continue that trust and cooperate with them in their efforts today with that same enthusiasm and spirit that you did a decade ago and I guarantee you they will keep faith and not violate your confidence.

General Pershing in his address at San Antonio last month said that America should be proud of the achievement of the Legion for its report of accomplishments sounded like a report of the progress of the Government itself.

I have tried briefly to tell you about some of our efforts during the past decade. We look confidently to greater and richer service during the next ten years. We have caught a vision of what we can do for our

country and in this spirit on this tenth anniversary of the Armistice we re-consecrate the Legion to the tomorrows of America. Somehow, we like to feel that when taps, the soldiers' requiem, has died away, when the firing squad has volleyed for the last Legionnaire, we will have reached into the future beyond the grave and laid an impress on the America that is to be. That somehow we will make America better for this Legion's existence, That is the dream and the yearning and the hope of the Legion in its serious hours. Proud of the nation's past, but interested in its throbbing present, remembering the price that has been paid to produce this country, we are pledging that we will carry on until the last of our number is gone and will then leave behind us children and children's children dedicated to the service of America.

We feel that in such service comes to us the reward that enables us to observe this anniversary and not blush that we survive.

In conclusion there is one picture I would leave with you. In France I knew a poilu by the name of Emile. He was one of those little, bow-legged fellows who had stood at Verdun in the face of the greatest mass attack of history and fought for his beloved France. He and his comrades sang "They shall not pass"; and the enemy did not pass. The price Emile paid for the privilege of defending his country was a terrible one, for when he was salvaged from the carnage of that great battle an arm was mangled, he had lost a leg and both eyes were gone. It was after Verdun that I had come to know him. He lived between my billet and the press censorship headquarters, where I was on duty, and in passing I would see him on his doorstep. We became acquainted; we would exchange banter and cigarettes. He was a cheerful little fellow, always had a smile, never a grievance. His magnificent fortitude challenged my most sincere admiration.

Then came the Armistice, and on that day when the people filled the streets with wild and tumultuous celebration, I saw Emile with a group of his comrades. I went over to him, slapped him on the back, and in my best French proclaimed "Finis la guerre, old top, finis la guerre." At the recognition of my voice, he turned and with his good hand clutched my arm. I looked down at him and I saw the face of a stranger. It was no longer the cheerful little fellow of the days before. All traces of patience and fortitude had vanished and what I saw was a pathetic little figure that had suddenly grown old, wounded, torn, mangled, blinded, and he said to me what I understood to be, "Yes, it is a glorious hour, but for me the war is all the days."

A little over a year ago I went back to France on the pilgrimage of the Legion to pay tribute to our comrades who remain there on French soil. I went back to the Neufchateau to see my little friend, but a merciful God had taken back his noble soul and his torn, blinded body was at rest out there on the slopes of the Vosges.

I didn't get just what Emile meant on that first Armistice Day at the time he spoke to me, but it wasn't long until I realized the significance of his statement.

To those of us who went away and came back strong and healthy and possibly in better physical condition than when we joined up with the colors, the war ended with the Armistice; likewise for those whose loved ones returned in the same full bloom of vigorous young manhood as when they went away. But, for that poor fellow whose body is torn by some wound, or poisoned by gas, or carrying the active scar of some disease contracted in the service, there will be no Armistice until the body finds its peaceful repose in the grave. Neither has there been an Armistice for that wife whose husband didn't come back or for that baby whose father paid the supreme sacrifice, or that mother who still awaits the coming of her boy. They still suffer, they still make the brave fight. And here upon this anniversary of the Armistice, we who survive, we for whom there is an Armistice, can best keep faith -- with those whose souls went back to their God from the fields of battle and those whose tortured bodies give them never-ending pain on hospital cots today and those who wander aimlessly around hospital wards and corridors with broken minds -- by putting into practice for the benefit of America and for mankind the idealism for which they gave their all.