1931

Amer. Holidays Armistice Day

Armistice Night Address
from
Washington, D. C.
by
Henry L. Stevens, Jr., National Commander, The American Legion

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Past National Commander O'Neil, men and women of The American Legion and its Auxiliary, ladies and gentlemen.

Great emotions have surged through the breast of the people of America today as they approached this the 13th mile post on the roadway of peace and understanding. The scars of war have been in the healing and today children laugh and talk and play that were not born when the last shot was fired beyond the Marne. The day is one of national significance to every American because in it is incorporated a day of remembrance, a day of pride - of achievement, and a day of Thanksgiving.

We are thinking today of those immortal dead who so gallantly and generously poured out the sweet red wine of their youth and gave up all that was in life for the sake of the things that were to be. The staggering host of dead who, if laid head of one to the feet of another, would make a sacred carpet over which an angel might tread for a distance of 50 miles without touching the ground, and as we sit here tonight we can look back over thirteen years great in the up-building of a noble country. In this time of fruitful construction are the years of the World War and desolation, a catyclism of destruction, yet to us as citizens of an empire that in resurrected strength once more faces the eyes of the world, those blackened and blasted years of war are the most precious in all our history. And this is not merely because the armed forces of our country, with their noble dead, left immortal testimony of their bravery on every battlefield of that war, not merely because they widely magnified history's brief catalog of heroism, and at Soisson, St. Mihiel, Flanders, Belleau Woods, the Argonne and the rest gave to death their beautiful youth as red banded trophies of their courage, not merely because in all those tremendous conflicts you crowded love and loyalty into moments of glory and joyfully stormed at all the thousand doors that lead to death. It is because of the supreme spirit in which you made the sacrifice that is given to man to make. After all the centuries of civilization, the effort of learning to teach the self-conservation of life, the value of self-realization, the sharp calculation that personal ambition makes, there emerges in your example once more the epic paradox "He that saveth his life shall lose it" but he that loses his life in great service shall save it.

The unforgetting affection of the world is reserved for those who careless of fame or self-agrandizement have thrown themselves at the feet of a great cause; a Regulus, a Wolfe, a Pershing, a Woodrow Wilson, a Christ; for men who give their lives for a scrap of paper if that paper means freedom; for a murmured prayer if that prayer means truth; for a flower if that flower means love; for a trifle of a flag if that flag means home.

The states and the nation that sent you away to war a mother of sorrows, welcomes your presence upon earth today, a mother of exceeding great joy. To her you will never be grayhaired old men, but her own immortal boys, ever young and ever fair. To her the holy twilight of your lives will shade not into the darkness of the night of forgetfulness but will lighten into the eternal youth and beauty of the stars of appreciative remembrance.

This nation is proud of the achievements of its own. Proud of the blood of our forefathers who blazed the trail to the setting sun, overcame obstacles and builded here a nation rich in accomplishment, material and otherwise.

As we sit snugly and comfortably in our millions of homes tonight we know and are glad that today is one of thanksgiving. Grateful to God that we were spared to return can bring back to the citizens of our land the lessons we learned at such a bloody price, the lesson of lack of training, of unpreparedness, of ignorance of munitions. Those lessons which America paid for in terms of the lives of its youth. Yonder in the cemeteries of Suresnes, Boney, Romaine, and the rest are memorials of these things which time will not efface. Let us write them into our hearts and minds lest we who do not see them day by day may not forget. I sound the warning now in this strenuous time asking only adequacy in force on both land and sea.

If out of our war experiences we are convinced it is wrong that this great powerful nation should ever again shove millions of its youth inadequately armed and inadequately officered into the maws of modern warfare, who has a better right to ask a hearing?

At the coming session of Congress a serious, if not a final and fatal test of national defense for the United States of America is certain to occur. Plans have already been laid to slash our Navy to a point where the fleet in 1933 will be at the lowest ebb of combat efficiency since pre-war days. Already far below the power of the British Navy, and instead of building up to the provisions of the London Treaty as it was hoped would be done when that Treaty was written, the United States first arm of defense, if the present purpose of the administration is carried out, will be reduced to many degrees less than that of the Japanese, who are today on the verge of war.

In contrast with the recommendations of the National Defense Committee of the Legion, adopted unanimously by the national convention in Detroit, that construction of naval vessels will do much to relieve unemployment conditions in America, as 80 percent of construction represents labor, the reduction program now decreed will throw 4,000 trained navy men into the list of the enforced idle.

There is no group on the face of the earth more earnest in its desire to maintain the peace of the world, and particularly the peace of our own country, than the men of our organization who have experienced the horrors of war. We believe there is sound reasoning for peace in the limitation of armaments, if it is done on a basis of equality of power. History has shown us the fallacy of any other program. World War experience taught us that battles are prolonged, that hostilities are lengthened and peace delayed by unpreparedness, by lack of munitions and by confusion caused by lack of training.

Our country has progressed from the old policy of putting reliance in a military emergency upon improvised means and methods and today our far-reaching plans for mobilization shows our ability to move our man power with reasonable efficiency within three to five months. Strange as it may seem, however, we still are as handicapped in the production of munitions as we were in the spring of 1917. The World War proved that consumption of munitions in a modern war between major powers taxes to the utmost the industrial forces of the nations involved.

From one and one-half years are required for manufacturing plants, not accustomed to making munitions, to attain quantity production. Private manufacturers must be relied upon for 96 percent of the munitions required. The demand for a supply of arms to meet requirements of our mobilization plans would bring chaos in the event of a great emergency. The only practical solution is the peace time preparedness training of private manufacturers in the specialized production methods and processes involved. It is impractical to maintain in time of peace a war reserve of munitions sufficient to last through a major conflict. Our present war reserve would not last until adequate additional munitions could be obtained.

The strength of our army, as well as our navy, is below the minimum that is consistent with national safety, and The American Legion earnestly recommends a program of expansion of the air forces of the United States until they are on a par with other nations before our government participates in any further disarmament conferences.

With this day in the passing will you not take with you until next year at this time the message of common sense from those who are governed by practical knowledge of human kind and in this day of peace for which we are so grateful remember that although

The drums have ceased their muffled beat
The measured tread of marching feet
Echoes its last refrain
The cannon's roar, the trumpets blare
No longer pierce the pain-racked air
For peace and silence reign.

The cobalt skies have turned to blue
The poppies glint with morning dew
Upon the desert strand;
Where shot and shell once burst the sod
Where death and horror grimly trod,
A peasant tills the land.

And in a lone secluded spot
There blooms a sweet forget-me-not
Upon a warriors grave
Where myriads of crosses white
Keep silent vigil through the night,-
Memorials of the brave:

In calm repose they slumber on,
Awaiting that resplendent dawn
When angels' reveille
Will place them on the honor roll
Of heaven's vast immortal scroll.-
Heroes eternally!

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November 11, 1931.