


1946

UA3/2/4 Armistice Day

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Armistice Day, especially in the light of present world conditions, seems a suitable time to talk about Democracy, how it came to us, through what sacrifices, and what are its fundamental virtues. To understand it we need to remember the long struggle against dictators through which it became our possession. In England the struggle resulted in the Magna Charta, Petition of Rights, and the Bill of Rights. The protective provisions in our Constitution are the result of this ancient struggle as it was continued here between the colonists and the crown; and some of the protective clauses are identical with those in these English documents. Immigrants to America came chiefly seeking social, economic and religious freedom. Living under the restrictions which surrounded him, the ordinary European of the time thought of America as a heaven on earth.

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The development during the colonial period was steadily toward increased Democracy. Jefferson expressed their philosophy in the Declaration of Independence when he said that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. Their determination to protect themselves against would-be dictators was embodied in the Bill of Rights. I have no patience with the argument sometimes advanced that Democracy is inefficient and that there is something new and fine about the present dictatorships. There is nothing new in their devastating march, or in the removal of Poles from their homes and their replacement with Germans, or in the restriction of religious freedom, or in the persecution of Jews, or in the refusal to let men say what they think. Democracy has its failures because Democracies are run by men; but in this Democracy of ours the individual citizen has been able to attend the church of his choice, criticize the government without fear, to engage in research and then to declare his findings, to sleep at night without any knock on the door bringing the numbing fear of government spies or of a firing squad.

Our American Democracy embodies the forward march of freedom for years. What happens here is of inestimable importance for the future. It may well be as voiced by Washington and Webster that on the success of our experiment hangs the last hope for democratic government. If it has imperfections in it, then let us have faith that the American genius is such that they can be remedied through democratic processes without the surrender of our individual liberties for which our fathers died. For the preservation of Democracy three things at least are essential: First, a will to preserve Democracy

based on a knowledge by each citizen of what Democracy means to him in the way of personal liberty and of the sacrifice by which it became his possession. Second, unselfishness or the willingness of individuals and groups to give up personal advantage for the general good. Third, Courageous faith--the willingness to make sacrifices in order that the freedom which has been won for us by those who preceded us may be handed down to those who shall come after us.