

WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY
COMMUNITY ANALYSIS SECTION

AN ACCIDENT OF HISTORY

Assembly Center

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An address in connection with the presentation of High School diplomas to 143 students from twenty-three High Schools at the Fresno Japanese Assembly Center, June 19, 1942 by Dr. Hubert Phillips -- Fresno State College

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We are making History tonight. This is the first Commencement of its kind ever held in the United States. But making history is not new to you, for whether you know it or not, you have been making history the past few weeks in that you are the first American citizens who, as a group, have had your liberty restrained, and your usual routine of life interrupted, without formal charges of crime or disorder being made against you. It is a thrilling experience to make history, if one can keep his perspective; if one can see things in the large; if one can distinguish between real causes and pretexts that are advanced as causes; and above all, if one can control his emotions and think calmly and coolly.

Had things continued in their normal course all of you who will receive diplomas here tonight would have graduated in twenty-three different classes in twenty-three different communities of this state. In that case you would have been shown all the honors and dignities that the other members of your class received. Many of you would have received special honors because of your fine scholarship record. You will receive those scholarship honors, along with your diplomas tonight.

No group of people in this country knows you as well as your teachers know you, and I am very happy to be able to say to you that with your teachers you enjoy an enviable reputation. You have established a reputation for the exercise of self discipline, for unfailing courtesy and for hard, painstaking, scholastic work. For the first two traits mentioned you do not deserve too much credit, for they are the by-product of the homes from which you have come, and are characteristics of the people from which you descended. But for your scholarship you deserve great credit, for many of you live in the environment of one language, while carrying on your school work in another tongue, a fact of no mean quality.

There is another quality of yours about which your former teachers have no doubt, and that is your fundamental loyalty to the United States of America. This is a quality which cannot be seen, and cannot be measured by definite, precise and objective standards. It is not assured by loud protestations of loyalty, or by public flag waving. Personally, I am always a little suspicious of the depth of the patriotism

of the man who announces from the house top how loyal he is. Like love and affection, kindness and truthfulness, loyalty makes itself known in quiet ways to those ~~one~~ associates intimately with. No other group of Americans has associated so intimately with you as have your teachers. Consequently no other groups know you so well, and I repeat they believe in you, they have confidence that you are Americans in the real sense of the word.

What do we mean when we say one is an American? An American is not necessarily a Caucasian, for several million are of Negro descent, while others are Indians, and a hundred thousand, including you graduates, are of Oriental ancestry. There have always been those in this country who would limit citizenship to members of the dominant racial group, but Section one of the Fifteenth Amendment stands in their way. With the development of the science of Anthropology the word "race" used in that amendment has greatly changed in meaning, but the fact remains that in considering the guarantee of citizenship contained in the Fifteenth Amendment, the question of race, however defined, does not enter into consideration.

Neither can an American be defined as one who professes the prevailing religion of this country--the Christian faith. An American may be a Jew, a Buddhist, a Mohammedan, or he may even be an avowed atheist. Again there are some who would like to have the term American include only Christians, but the First Amendment to the Constitution stands in their way.

Moreover an American does not even have to speak the prevailing language of the country, although, of course, to be a good citizen he ought to do so. In earlier days of much simpler naturalization procedure tens of thousands of persons were naturalized who spoke various European languages, but who could not speak English; while by the Act of 1924 all Indians were made citizens despite the fact that thousands of the older ones could speak nothing *but* the tribal dialect.

From all that has been said is it not evident that Americanism is something beyond and above qualities and attitudes that are easily recognizable, such as one's color, one's cast of countenance, or one's professed faith? Is it not just as evident that being an American implies the possession of certain qualities and attitudes that are far more intangible; that are subjective rather than objective; that are spiritual rather than physical?

What then is an American? First of all, he is an ideal that has never yet been realized. The men and women who settled at Plymouth and at Massachusetts Bay, and later the framers of the Constitution had certain things in mind, certain ideals of human relationship, ~~that~~ they hoped would in time characterize this country. It was to be a land of opportunity for

all. In it there were to be no privileged classes, or privileged individuals, except as an individual earned privileges by his contribution to the general welfare. It was to be a land, not only of equal opportunity, but also of equal rights. That is what Thomas Jefferson meant when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal." So I would put down as the first mark of an American that he freely grants to every other individual among his fellow citizens every right he claims for himself.

In the next place an American, if he is true to the genius of this country, is a cosmopolitan in his attitudes toward varying racial and national characteristics and customs, other than those of his own ancestors. He cannot be a narrow nationalist or racialist. Moreover he will never fall into the error of thinking that there are any gradations of citizenship in this republic. He will understand that with the acquiring of citizenship, either by birth or naturalization, all differences disappear, and each new citizen becomes clothed with all the dignities and rights of every other citizen regardless of origin or race. To take any other position is to subscribe to Hitler's philosophy of a Herrenvolk, a master race--an idea incompatible with the fundamental concept of Democracy and utterly repugnant to a true American.

Finally, an American is loyal to the fundamental concepts of democratic government. One's ancestors may have come from one of the most despotic governments in the world, but in the past that has not been considered proof that love for the old way of life continued and was passed on to the children. We have absorbed millions of people who have fled from tyranny and despotism and no one has questioned the loyalty of the children of those people. So, while it is true that your ancestors came from a despotic government compared to our own, those who know you best have no doubt about your loyalty to the ideals and institutions of this land.

You who are graduating tonight are Americans in the very best sense of that word, so I believe, and so your teachers believe, and now as loyal citizens you are having a hard experience. You are caught in an accident of history. That may be exciting, but it is not pleasant. It will not be news to you, if I say that some of the suspicion against you grows out of the fact that the government of Japan does not recognize the process of changing loyalties which is called expatriation, and consequently makes a claim upon every Japanese who has ever left Japan, and upon his children wheresoever they are born. Hence the dual citizenship of which we hear so much, but of which most of you have never been conscious.

At the time of the American Revolution all countries took the same position that Japan takes now; namely, that no one could expatriate himself except with the express consent

of the ruling monarch. We as a new nation, wanting people to come here from other lands, insisted that when one came and took the oath of allegiance, the new loyalty supplanted the old. But other nations did not agree. England, for example, would not recognize the principle we insisted upon and so we fought the War of 1812 with her largely over the very question. The nations of Europe gradually came to recognize the principle of expatriation, although Imperial Germany was very slow in doing so, and before she did there were cases of naturalized American citizens who had returned to Germany for a visit, being forced to serve the term in the German army, which they had avoided by coming to this country. And in those cases, by the way, there was nothing this country could do except to protest which got exactly nowhere. Finally the Imperial German government by treaty gave up her perpetual claim upon all Germans, but the idea has been revived by Hitler and Mussolini and will become operative again should racial fascism triumph. So Japan, in taking the position she does regarding citizenship of descendents of emigrants from her shores, is simply on historical throwback standing exactly where England stood on that question one hundred thirty years ago. But it is that time lag in policies that has caught you graduates in its net, although all of you are of the second or third generation.

any. I always warn my students, and caution myself, against calling my historical movement inevitable, for that is oft-times too easy an explanation for an otherwise explainable fact. But your situation is one that can almost be called inevitable; that is, given certain other preceding factors. One of those factors is the one just mentioned regarding dual citizenship. Another is that in looks, in cast of countenance, you are like the people of Japan who are now our enemies. We might note in passing, however, that not one American in ten thousand could tell by looks a Japanese enemy from a Chinese ally. Still a third factor is that the majority of you, and your parents, lived in a rather narrow territorial area so located that if an invasion or attack were made by Japan, it would be delivered in that very area. Now I think it is perfectly obvious why nine-tenths of the Japanese in the United States lived in the Pacific Coast states. The same reason has caused Boston to be Irish and Eastern Pennsylvania to be German ever since the immigration waves of a hundred or more years ago brought immigrants from Ireland and Germany to those sections. But some cannot be convinced but what the concentration of Japanese of the first and second generations in the Pacific Coast states was a deliberate plan, and that your parents were just waiting to welcome the invader. That this idea is, in the opinion of many of us, absurd does not change the fact that it is believed by many people and that that belief has helped formulate the policies which have resulted in your being here in this assembly center. So it seems to me it was practically inevitable, in case of war between the United States

and Japan, that you, American citizens, would be penalized for something over which you had no control. That is what I meant when I said earlier in this address that you are victims of an accident of history.

Now that it has happened, what are you going to do about it? It seems to me you have just two alternatives. One is that you can be resentful, bitter, and finally, cynical; all of which will do you no good, and will not help you one bit. The other is to be as understanding, as calm and as long suffering as possible and to try and see the whole question not from the point of view of your own individual discomfort, but from the point of view of what was best for your fellow graduates, your parents, and every person of Japanese ancestry, citizen or non citizen. Also keep constantly in mind that all nations in time of war are often forced to adopt policies and take actions that are contrary to established practices, inconsistent with announced ideals and unpleasant for those who have to carry out the policies.

The most fundamental violation of the constitutional rights of citizens in this country was by the most democratic president this country ever had, Abraham Lincoln, when in 1863 he suspended the writ of habeas corpus. English speaking people had fought for hundreds of years for that guarantee against arbitrary governmental power, but Lincoln by executive order swept that guarantee aside because he saw no other way of insuring the successful prosecution of the Civil War. Lincoln preferred that history record that he had violated the constitutional rights of some American citizens than that it could accuse him of permitting rebellion to overthrow the government. History has cleared his name and supported his action. Today we know that no greater believer in the rights of the common man ever lived, and certainly no American president more than he believed in men as men regardless of race and nationality.

Wars cause suffering, destroy homes, separate families and leave deep wounds, but the permanent effect of these things, which we wish we might avoid, would be much less poignant, much less severe, much less painful, if we could all rise to the height of the philosophy expressed by Lincoln in his second Inaugural, "...With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in..." In our case that work is to make the America of our dreams come true. You will have a part in that. It is very possible that your experiences of today, hard and unpleasant as they are, may enable you in the days of peace ahead to make a contribution to the future of this country that otherwise you never

could have made, for the America of the future must be more just, more fair, more tolerant than ever before. Let us all dedicate ourselves to that end. In closing let me say again that your former teachers believe in you, in your loyalty, in your ideals, and in the contribution you can make to the America of the future, and we stand ready to welcome you back to the high school, the college and the university, and to the ordinary pursuits of civilian life.