
Liberty's Anniversary

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Published in *The Twentieth Century* [New York], July 4, 1895.

Copy in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 9, pg. 218.

Reprinted as "In Prison: Fourth of July Reflections Upon the Advance of Despotism"
in *The Railway Times*, vol. 2, no. 14 (July 15, 1895), pg. 1.

Sitting in Woodstock Jail, behind prison bars, and permitting my fancy to have free rein, what more natural that to contemplate the resounding acclamations of a great nation celebrating the anniversary of the birthday of Liberty? What more natural than to commune with the dead, who, when living, in the spirit of heroism expanded to the full stature of patriots and dared all things, battles, wounds, imprisonment, confiscation, and death, to secure liberty for themselves and their posterity.

But in the midst of such ardent admiration of the men who wrested the scepter from England's proud monarch and secured for the American people the priceless boon of liberty, I am compelled to ponder present conditions and ask myself, "What remains of the liberty thus secured for the American people? Why celebrate the 'birthday' of American liberty when Liberty itself lies cold and stiff and dead, stabbed to death by nine gowned and ermined men, who, if they have any mission connected with the affairs of the American people, it is to forever stand guard over their constitutional and unalienable rights."

It has been regarded as a patriotic duty for Americans, on the 4th of July, to apostrophize Liberty and to select from the vocabularies of all languages eulogistic words to describe its value and its glory, and when words failed to express those essential attributes of liberty which made life itself an inferior blessing, bonfires have blazed, cannons have belched their thunder, banners have waved, drums have throbbed, and bugle blasts have called the people to assemble and rejoice together over God's inscrutable decree in bestowing upon Americans blessings denied to all other peoples, kindreds, and tongues since time began. Nor do I doubt that on this anniversary

such exhibitions will be repeated, but it will be a hollow mockery. The stage will be gorgeous with scenery for the play of liberty, but liberty will be absent — only its ghost will appear, only its “canonized bones” will be present; only its skeleton jaws will move to tell American slaves that the supreme “funeral directors” have buried it in a potter’s field without so much as a slab to mark its resting place.

And yet the farce will proceed and orators will be found to bombard the air to convince the people that in the nation’s grand march across the continent and in its physical achievements, the *ultima thule* of its destiny has been reached. If liberty is referred to at all, it will be to emphasize the plutocratic doctrine that a government of the people, by the people, and for the people and constitutional guarantees of liberty are as so many vagaries and that a strong, centralized government is what the Fathers designed should be established upon the ruins of the Republic, and that the Constitution itself, ceasing to be a guarantee of the liberties of the people, should be eventually so construed that one man, robed, crowned, and sceptered as a judge, combining the characteristics of caitiff and satrap, could, as whim might influence him, strike down every constitutional right of the citizen and send him to prison.

I am familiar with the often quoted maxim:

“No man e’er felt the halter drawn
With good opinion of the law.”

It has been said of every martyr from the first time that a thumb-screw was ever applied by the inquisition. It was said of every victim broken upon the wheels, disjointed upon the rack, or burned at the stake. It has been a handy excuse for tyrants in all ages and is as current now as when the beasts of bigotry first lapped the innocent blood of their victims.

I know with what gusto corporations and their ermined sycophants and all their brood of degenerate creatures regard the imprisonment of the officers of the American Railway Union, and yet it is not law, nor the administration of law that called forth our protest, but the abrogation of all laws and the substitution of ironclad despotism. Innocent men, untainted by crime, we appealed to the courts ad to the Constitution for protection, for guaranteed rights. We appealed as American citizens to the Supreme Court of the nation. As well might we have appealed to so many man-eating tigers in an Afri-

can jungle. Our destiny was imprisonment, and it tells the story of the final triumph of Russian methods of government in the United States of America. For my associates and myself I may say:

Of all the work my hand hath wrought
 Beneath the sky,
Save a place in kindly human thought,
 No gain have I.¹

And yet, when, on the morning of the 4th of July, the effulgent glories of the sun gild my cell and when his softer evening rays invite to meditation, my thoughts must turn upon conditions which give the lie direct to the old-time American boast of liberty and independence. The law of injunction, a despotic decree, is the death knell of liberty as once enjoyed by the American people. That myself and associates in prison happen to be the victims of the unspeakable outrage in no regard emphasizes my abhorrence and detestation of the traitorous grasp of power by which the atrocious crime against the liberties of the people was perpetrated. I would have demanded for the most brutal, base-born, and red-handed criminal a trial by an impartial jury, under due forms of law, and would have punished him only by the fiat of a verdict legally obtained, but in the case of myself and associates, we behold American citizens, charged with no crime, and without indictment or trial branded as criminals and sent, like galley slaves, to prison by one man who arrogating to himself the authority of lawmaker, judge, and jury, plays the role of Tsar and sends whom he will to prison, as the Russian despot sends men to Siberia, to prison or to death, as it suits his caprice.

The question may be prudently asked: What remains worth saving of the liberties of Americans? I answer — the Ballot. It is a powerful weapon if the American people can be persuaded to unify and wield it in defense of their rights and their liberties. True it is that the people have slept while their enemies, “working like gravity,” have stolen the most valued jewel from their crown of sovereignty. Can it be recovered, or is it entirely lost? It required eight years of a bloody, cruel, and devastating war to secure it, and thousands of brave souls perished in the patriotic conflict. If the anniversary of the 4th of July is devoted to arousing the American people to a realization of their great misfortune, if they will resolve to regain their liberties by renew-

¹ Stanza from “My Soul and I” (1846) by **John Greenleaf Whittier** (1807-1892).

ing he pledge of the Fathers to perish or conquer, then Woods and Woodstock Jail may stand in the future monumental infamies, from which the people may go forth as did the revolutionary heroes from the infamous edicts of King George to regain their lost liberties — and all along the lines of the hosts of the common people, the victims of plutocracy and their corrupt agencies, should resound again the battle cry that was heard from Lexington to Yorktown: ***“Give me liberty or give me death!”***

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
Second Edition. First edition was March 2017.