

The Meaning of America

[The following excerpts are from an address by Herbert Hoover at West Branch on his 74th birthday, Aug. 10, 1948. — THE EDITOR.]

I am glad to have your invitation to come again to this Iowa village where I was born. Here I spent the first ten years of my boyhood. My parents and grandparents came to this village in the covered wagon — pioneers in this community. They lie buried over the hill. They broke the prairie into homes of independent living. They worshipped God; they did their duty to their neighbors. They toiled to bring to their children greater comfort, better education and to open to them wider opportunity than had been theirs. . . .

Among these recollections was that of a great lady who first taught me in school and remained my friend during her whole long and useful life — Mrs. Mollie Carran. It was from her that I first heard something about the word *American*. Many great writers and statesmen have attempted to express what we mean by that word. But there is an imponderable feeling within it which reaches to the soul of our people and defies measure.

America means far more than a continent bounded by two oceans. It is more than pride of military power, glory in war, or in victory. It means more than vast expanse of farms, of great

factories or mines, magnificent cities, or millions of automobiles and radios. It is more even than the traditions of the great tide westward from Europe which pioneered the conquest of a continent. It is more than our literature, our music, our poetry.

Perhaps without immodesty I can claim to have had some experience in what *America* means. I have lived many kinds of American life. After my early boyhood in this Iowa village, I lived as the ward of a country doctor in Oregon. I lived among those to whom hard work was the price of existence. The open opportunities of America opened out to me the public schools. They carried me to the professional training of an American university. I began by working with my own hands for my daily bread. I have tasted the despair of fruitless search for a job. I know the kindly encouragement of a humble boarding-house keeper. I know now that at that time there was an economic depression either coming or going. But nobody told me of it. So I did not have the modern worry of what the Federal Government would do about it.

I have conducted the administration of great industries with their problems of production and the well-being of their employees. I have seen America in contrast with many nations and races. My profession took me into many foreign lands under many kinds of government. I have worked with their great spiritual leaders and their great states-

men. I have worked in governments of free men, of tyrannies, of Socialists, and of Communists. I have met with princes, kings, despots, and desperadoes.

I have seen the squalor of Asia, the frozen class barriers of Europe. I was not a tourist. I was associated in their working lives and problems. I had to deal with their social systems and their governments. And outstanding everywhere to these great masses of people there was a hallowed word — "America." To them, it was the hope of the world.

My every frequent homecoming was a reaffirmation of the glory of America. Each time my soul was washed by the relief from grinding poverty of other nations, by the greater kindness and frankness which comes from acceptance of equality and the wide-open opportunity to all who want a chance. It is more than that. It is a land of self-respect born alone of free men.

In later years I participated on behalf of America in a great war. I saw untold misery and revolution. I have seen liberty die and tyranny rise. I have seen human slavery again on the march. I have been repeatedly placed by my countrymen where I had need to deal with the hurricanes of social and economic destruction which have swept the world. I have seen bitter famine and the worst misery that the brutality of war can produce. I have had every honor to which any man could

aspire. There is no place on the whole earth except here in America where all the sons of man could have this chance in life. I recount all this in order that, in Quaker terms, I can give my own testimony.

The meaning of our word "America" flows from one pure spring. The soul of our America is its freedom of mind and spirit in man. Here alone are the open windows through which pours the sunshine of the human spirit. Here alone is human dignity not a dream, but an accomplishment.

Perhaps another etching of another meaning of America lies in this community. It was largely settled by Quakers over ninety years ago. This small religious sect in England had declared that certain freedoms of man came from the Creator and not from the state 150 years before the Declaration of Independence. They spent much time in British stocks and jails for this first outburst of faith in the dignity of the individual man.

They first came in refuge to New England. But the Puritans cut off their ears by way of disapproval of their religious individualism. Then came the great refuge which William Penn secured for them. From New England and Pennsylvania some of the ancestors of this community, before the Revolution, migrated first to Maryland, and, after a generation, to the Piedmont of North Carolina. Then early in the last century slavery began to encroach upon them. Most of that community

— 5,000 of them — organized a concerted trek to Ohio and Indiana. This time they were seeking freedom from that great stain on human liberty. Again after a generation they hitched their covered wagons and settled on these prairies.

Everywhere along these treks there sprang up homes and farms. But more vital was the Meeting House with its deep roots in religious faith, its tolerance and devotion to liberty of the individual. And in those people there was the will to serve their community and their country. Even this village was a station on the Underground through which Negroes were aided to the freedom of Canada. Sons of this community were in the then Red Cross of the Civil War. And despite their peace loving faith, many of their sons were enrolled in the Union Army to battle for free men.

That imbedded individualism, that self-reliance, that sense of service, and above all those moral and spiritual foundations were not confined to the Quakers. They were but one atom in the mighty tide of these qualities of many larger religious bodies which make up the intangible of the word *America*.

At the time our ancestors were proclaiming that the Creator had endowed all mankind with rights of freedom as the child of God, with a free will, there was being proclaimed by Hegel and later by Karl Marx a satanic philosophy of agnosticism — that the rights of man came from the state. The

greatness of America today comes from one philosophy, the despair of Europe from the other.

There are today fuzzy-minded people in our country who would compromise on these fundamental concepts. They scoff at these tested qualities of men. They never have understood and never will understand what *America* means. They explain that these qualities were good while there was a continent to conquer, and a nation to build. They say that time has passed. No doubt the land frontier has passed. But the frontiers of science are barely opening. This new land with all its high promise can not and will not be conquered except by men inspired from the concepts of free spirit. It is those moral and spiritual qualities in free men which fulfill the meaning of the word *America*. And with them will come centuries of further greatness to our country.

HERBERT HOOVER