

# Indifference to Our History

Condensation of Address

By JUSTICE ROBERT H. JACKSON, U. S. Supreme Court

While the daily conduct of the war is not within the special competence of lawyers and judges, the factors that have slowed the democratic response to the challenge of war is something with which we may usefully concern ourselves.

To me the indifference toward American history revealed by *The New York Times* survey of our schools and colleges seems an ominous symptom of waning vigor of American democracy. The survey was summarized in the issue of the *Times* of June 22, 1942, as follows:

A nation-wide survey, conducted by *The New York Times*, shows that 82 per cent of the institutions of higher learning in the United States do not require the study of United States history for the undergraduate degree. \* \* \*

Seventy-two per cent of the colleges and universities do not require United States history for admission. \* \* \* As a result, the survey revealed, many students go through high school, college and then to a professional or graduate institution without having explored courses in the history of their country.

Less than 10 per cent of the total undergraduate body was enrolled in United States history classes during the Spring semester just ended. Only 8 per cent of the freshmen class took courses in United States history, although 30 per cent was enrolled in European or world history courses.

This apathy of our intellectuals toward the dramatic struggle on this continent to work out a formula that would reconcile individual freedom with effective government may tend to confirm the Nazi taunt that the fires of democratic enthusiasms are burned out; that democracy is supported by a formal loyalty without virile inward conviction; that our real first concern is not for our ideals but for



"The time is ripe for a renaissance"

our material profits and prosperity.

History is to a people what memory is to an individual. It calls to the aid of present judgment the accumulations of past experience. As lawyers know, the institutions, customs, and policies of the present can be understood or appraised only by examination of their historical origins. Our Federal Government is an intricate and somewhat rigid mechanism for the diffusion of responsibility through the separation of powers. The task of governance can be made almost im-

possible under such a system without public understanding of its divisions and limitations of public power and patience with its indirections and complications.

Historical teaching to those relatively few youths who have the opportunities of formal education is the more important because our population includes so many older aliens and foreign-born citizens who have little opportunity to learn the tradition and romance of American free government, though often they strive more earnestly to comprehend our institutions than do native-born citizens.

We have heard a good deal about the restlessness and disaffection of youth and its tendency to take up with alien ideologies. That is not surprising if the most advantaged and influential class of youth in America sets the example of indifference to the epic of democracy.

I have little patience with the attitude of some educators that young people must not be compelled to study subjects that they do not choose, and that they have not elected to take American history. It is a weird idea that the valuation of a

study can competently be made by those who have not yet pursued it and who have also as yet no experience in trying to live without it. We should insist that our children learn something of history so that demagogues may not cheat them of their hard-won liberties just as we insist that they learn something of arithmetic so that sharpers may not shortchange them of their hard-won dollars.

This anarchistic theory of education is an outcropping of the vicious doctrine that any restraint, compulsion, or discipline is inconsistent with democracy. Of the four freedoms set forth by President Roosevelt as objectives in the present world struggle, two of them definitely require a closer, rather than a more relaxed, social and industrial control. Freedom from want and freedom from fear of aggression depend upon a better organization and planning of our collective effort and a consequent restriction of the area in which an anarchic individualism may resort to anti-social practices. Under present world conditions to contend that democracy must submit to no discipline amounts to contending that it must submit to destruction.

There is, of course, more to the problem revealed by the *Times* survey than can be met by a mere requirement that colleges teach the history and philosophy of democracy. We should not censure educators until we have taken account of their difficulties. We would not want educational curricula subjected to political control or manipulation nor schools and colleges made agencies for indoctrinating youth with the propaganda of any class or party. Yet the substance of American history is earlier phases of the very conflicts that cause so much heat about domestic policy today.

Moreover, there is danger of introducing a self-serving and shallow nationalism that belittles the accomplishments of other peoples and misrepresents their efforts and struggles. It is in all candor a serious question whether adult public opinion is sufficiently instructed in history and in its methods to stand for the truthful and accurate teaching which sound scholarship demands. The difficulties on this score would not be with youth who, I think, resents the sugar-coating that is too often given to our history and the tendency to idealize our purposes and characters. This kind of history-writing has spoiled many

first-class men by making them into second-class gods.

But I feel particularly concerned about the absence of backgrounds of sound historical information in our citizenship when we attack post-war problems. Impersonal and inevitable forces bring about in war many trends which history teaches us to fear. The extent to which our institutions survive the impact of war depends on the continuity of our tradition in the minds of the people even while we temporarily depart from it in practice. Any agency of government, however soundly grounded in the written Constitution, may fall into disuse and impotence if the contemporary generation loses interest or faith in it.

Consider one of the most cherished devices of the forefathers who framed our Constitution—the electoral college. It has never been overthrown or formally abandoned. It has simply dried up and fossilized until by common consent it discharges no independent discretionary or deliberate function and merely goes through the formality of recording an election which has already taken place.

To advocate a greater emphasis on history is not to advocate a slavish deference to the past. We ourselves are writing chapters of American history as important as any that our forefathers have written, and our new ventures cannot always follow old patterns. But it is prudent to know when one is leaving a beaten path so that he may rely on other guidance.

A rebirth of interest in the American experience and philosophy of self-government should be the answer to Nazi goading. It was such a period of revival that brought forth our Constitution. Never before or since did leaders of men so search human annals as did the framers of the Constitution. They did it to learn what structures would assure enduring and effective government and what safeguards would most likely keep it free. Public interest was never so widely or so long sustained in a subject so difficult as during the debates over ratification. That intellectual momentum lasted well towards a century. But of late we have come more and more to take for granted the permanence and invulnerability of our institutions. The time is ripe for a renaissance which will put new conviction in the minds and new strength in the hands of free men.