
Propaganda of Fear and Hysteria: Speech to the Harvard Liberal Club, Cambridge, MA — Jan. 12, 1920.

by Judge G.W. Anderson

Published in *LaFollette's Magazine* [Madison, WI], v. 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1920), pg. 3.

It is fit and proper for the Harvard Liberal Club — and for really liberal organizations of every kind — to consider and discuss freedom of speech and the other great guarantees of liberty. It is a depressing, almost appalling fact that as an aftermath of our “war to make the world safe for democracy,” real democracy now seems unsafe in America. It is increasingly clear that America’s loss of valuable lives and of money in this war was as nothing compared to her loss of moral, social, and political values.

I shall enter upon no accurate and detailed discussion of the constitutional limits of free speech. It may be desirable that a citizen, who is also a judge, should not allow his mind to crystallize on some of the finer shades of that question.

But I do now want to voice a protest against the prevailing propaganda of fear and hysteria which has led to most of the present agitation concerning limiting the freedom of speech, hitherto on practical grounds, exercised without much regard to constitutional or even proper legal limitations. We and our English brethren have been accustomed — and probably wisely, on grounds of expediency — to allow a freedom of speech plainly exceeding the constitutional limit. Now, most of the fear out of which perhaps dangerous limitations of this precious right are being advocated is, in my opinion, almost groundless. Many, perhaps most, of the agitators for the suppression of the so-called “Red menace” are, I observe, the same

individuals, or class of individuals, or class of forces, that in the years 1917 and 1918 were frightening the community to death about pro-German plots. I want to say something about pro-German plots and their danger to America.

I ought to know something about those plots. It was my duty to know as much as any man in New England could know. As United States Attorney from November 1914 to October 15, 1917, I was charged with a large responsibility as to protecting the community from pro-German plots. In October 1917, I went on the Interstate Commerce Commission and was, until the armistice, in intimate personal association with the Attorney General [Mitchell Palmer], and with the men charged with responsibility as to discovering, preventing, and punishing pro-German plots. What I now say I say entirely on my own responsibility; but I say it after exchanging views with many others having analogous responsibilities during this war period. If in fact the pro-German plots were no adequate basis for public fear, and for legislative and official activities against the right of individual and social liberty, it is quite possible that the “Red menace,” promoted in large part by the same notoriety-seeking individuals and newspapers, ought not to frighten us to death.

Now, I assert as my best judgment, grounded on the information that I can get, that more than 99 percent of the advertised and reported pro-German plots never existed. I

think it is time that publicity was given to this view. I doubt the Red menace having more basis in fact than the pro-German peril. I assert the significant fact that many of the same persons and newspapers that for two years were faking pro-German plots are now promoting "The Red Terror."

Let us stop being scared of our own shadow. It is a time for calmness, for critical and dispassionate search for truth, for facts. We are overfed with alarming rumors and wild imaginings. One aspirant for high office issues a pamphlet wildly inquiring whether "America is worth saving." It is, and it is fairly safe; even if he is not elected to the office to which he aspires. There will be no sunstrokes in Massachusetts this month. There will be no Red revolution this year.

I cannot say there will not be some bomb thrower. A fraction of 1 percent of the pro-German plots actually existed. There are Reds — probably there are dangerous Reds. But they are not half as dangerous as the prating pseudo-patriots who, under the guise of Americanism, are preaching murder, "shooting at sunrise," and to whom our church parlors and other public forums have hitherto been open.

President Hadley advocated some years ago

social ostracism as the punishment for anti-social money-getting. Personally, I doubt the desirability of dealing by law with the pseudo-patriot orators who would murder by shooting first and have trials afterwards. But I do seriously suggest that the social ostracism that President Hadley advocated as to anti-social money-getters should be applied by our churches, clubs and other public forums, to the hypocritical and noisy un-Americans who in this community for some years have, unchecked, been advocating crime and violence.

Real Americans, men who believe in law, order, liberty, toleration of others' views on political and religious subjects, are not given to advertising themselves and their patriotism. They have too much respect for Americanism and for patriotism to disgrace these fine words as they are being daily disgraced by those using them for personal or political notoriety, or even in some instances, as weapons in industrial conflicts.

The heresy-hunter has throughout history been one of the meanest of men. It is time that we had freedom of speech for the just contempt that every wholesome-minded citizen has and should have for the pretentious, noisy heresy-hunter of these hysterical times.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.