

ADDRESS BY UNITED STATES SENATOR WAYNE MORSE OF OREGON

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MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

It is fitting that we should gather at this great national shrine of human rights and rededicate ourselves to the principle that there should be no discrimination in our democracy because of race, color, sex, or creed. Would that every American could come frequently to this memorial spot on the banks of the Potomac and renew his faith in the principles of individual liberty and of representative government which are epitomized in the spirit of the great emancipator who, seemingly alive but in the silence of stone, looks down upon us.

We assemble today at one of the cathedrals of American democracy conscious, I am sure, of the fact that that there are still wide gaps between the universal truths of man's responsibility to man, so simply stated in the teachings of Lincoln carved into the granite walls of this memorial, and our practice as a people toward one another. We cannot come within the spiritual and patriotic atmosphere of this historic edifice without being reverently moved by the realization that Lincoln saw democracy as Christianity put to practice. Too frequently in our national life we limit our devotion to great spiritual and political truths to special occasions but fail to practice them in our day to day actions. In this critical hour in the history of our Nation and of the world we dare not run the risk of paying lip service only to equality of justice and opportunity under law in these United States. Faith in democracy is deserved because it is the only system of government of which I know that is predicated upon the proposition that all men are created free and equal. It is the only system of government of which I know that recognizes in principle the dignity of the individual as being above the dictates of the state.

No police state, Fascist or Communist, can match the guarantees of individual liberty, human rights, and justice by law of our democracy. True it is we have yet to eliminate all political, social, and economic injustice from the workings of our democracy. Nevertheless, we have succeeded in protecting the rights and advancing the opportunities of the individual in his pursuit of happiness far beyond that of any other nation or people in all history.

We must not, and cannot afford to, rest, even momentarily, upon our accomplishments because there is still much to be done if we are to make democracy work in carrying its full potentialities for human happiness through self-government. We, as individuals, must never forget that we are individual parts of our Government. In a very true sense we, the people, are the Government. The great majority of the American people have it within their power to determine the trends and policies of our Government by exercising the most precious right which free men can enjoy in a democracy – the right of a free ballot.

I am one who seeks to extend that freedom to all Americans irrespective of the color of their skin or the district in which they live. I maintain that such a freedom should be considered a Federal right under our Constitution beyond the trespass of any class or race consciousness.

Likewise, I believe that if we are to square our democratic principles with our political and economic actions, we must remember that bigotry and democracy cannot be reconciled. Intolerance toward minority groups and the Declaration of Independence are not compatible. Economic determination in employment practices, a form of economic slavery, outrages the Emancipation Proclamation. Lynch law repudiates the Constitution and its precious Bill of Rights.

If we as a people are to be true to our action to the principles of representative government so vital to the preservation of our political liberties, then we must insist that our elected representatives exercise an honest independence of judgment on the merits of issues as they find them, irrespective of the terrific pressures which selfish groups may bring to bear upon them. As Lincoln said: "No one who has sworn to support the Constitution can conscientiously vote for what he understands to be an unconstitutional measure, however expedient he may think it; but one may and ought to vote against a measure which he deems constitutional if, at the time, he deems it inexpedient."

Lincoln was right. There are days when men in office must be willing to put to a test that principle of representative government, having confidence in the fact that once the majority comes to understand the basis for opposition to bad legislation, they will approve, rather than disapprove, refusal to follow a temporary majority.

In closing I would say that if we lovers of democracy are to perpetuate it we must never forget that its ability to protect and advance human rights depends in no small measure upon lawmakers following a course of legislative action which seeks to protect the economic weak from the exploitation of the economic strong and accomplishes it within the framework of our private-property economy and in accordance with our Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

Source: Wayne Morse Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.