

Christianity and Crisis

A Bi-Weekly Journal of Christian Opinion

Volume III, No. 3

MARCH 8, 1943

\$1.50 per year; 10 cents per copy

Afterthoughts on the Farewell Address

IT has been remarked that since the Hebrew people are not alone in perceiving a divine ordering in their history, every religiously disposed and historically minded people should have an Old Testament of their own in addition to that of the Scriptures. If American history were recorded in an American Old Testament, George Washington would be the hero of it. His name is venerated beyond that of any of the other founders of the Republic. His character is one of its most treasured inheritances. His counsels are still influential in determining its policies, and they are ingrained so deeply in the American tradition that at every critical period they must be restudied and applied anew to new situations.

Today a new factor in the situation is our growing recognition of the extent to which we share our hero with the world. Like Alfred the Great of England, whom he resembled in character, Washington has become an international possession and a symbol of liberty and integration not only in our own but in many other lands. Simon Bolivar was inspired by his example to become the liberator of states in South America; Thomas Masaryk, to lay the foundations of Czechoslovakia; his memory is honored by General Jan Smuts in South Africa; school children in western China are told his story. Thomas Paine's contemporary tribute to him has been justified in the light of aftertimes: he is "hero, patriot, sage,

Friend of all climes, and pride of every age!"

This being the case, it is necessary to reread Washington's Farewell Address in the light of historical developments. It has often been used as a text for isolationism, but never properly so used. Washington was the farthest possible removed from an isolationist. If he had been one, there can be little doubt but that the United States of America would not now exist, but instead a Balkanized North America. Washington belonged to no party, but he was heart and soul a federalist and a man of integrative personality. He presided at the Consti-

tutional Convention which brought the Republic into being, and the famous toast to the Constitution, "Here's a hoop to the barrel!" was sometimes addressed to him personally.

"Armies won battles when he spoke,
And out of Chaos came the state."

And so the Farewell Address must be read not as a fundamentalist reads the Bible, but in the light of Washington's character and personality, and interpreted thereby. "Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?" The question was addressed in 1796 to the nation at a time when its population was less than that of Belgium or the Netherlands today, when the revenues of its government were \$4,000,000, when it was not industrialized, when its means of communication were rudimentary, when its newly established independence and unity were still precarious possessions. Today this same nation is politically the mightiest power on earth, and as a military power is potentially the most formidable. Its responsibilities are those which accompany power, and if Washington were alive today, what we know of his character indicates that he would again as a federalist seek to use this power to end international anarchy and establish world organization. It indicates also that as a political realist he would perceive and use the possibilities of organization latent in the concept of the United Nations which already comprise half the population of the globe.

It is fortunate not only for the promise of military victory but also for that of eventual world organization that Russia and China are already among the great powers contending against the chaos into which the Axis aggressions have plunged the world. In New York City Washington's birthday was selected as the date for a dinner in honor of the Russian Army, and the list of patrons includes many names which do not incur the suspicions of the Dies

Committee. Already there is recognition of the fact that Russian endurance, fortitude and sacrifice have spared us the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives of young Americans and perhaps even preserved for us our national existence. To ignore the claim of Russia to a place in the Council of the United Nations would be as unrealistic as it would be ungrateful.

The case with China is much the same, and traditional friendship gives sustaining strength to it. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek has founded China's New Life Movement on four principles derived from the Chinese classics and vitalized by the Christian religion: *Li*, meaning proper human relations—the "good neighbor" policy; *I*, meaning social justice; *Liên*, meaning honesty; and *Chih* (tsě), meaning self respect. We are engaged with China and with Russia in a global war against forces which are inimical to *Li*, or proper human relations, in every particular. For political as well as for moral reasons, we should cultivate *Li*, which is another name for the spirit of brotherhood.

Reread from this viewpoint, perennial wisdom is still to be found in Washington's Farewell Address. It was not a report to Congress or an address on the

state of the nation. It was a declaration that he would not be a candidate for re-election, and a deprecation of the "spirit of party"—partisan spirit—from which he had himself suffered so grievously during his second administration. Now that he has become for all the world

"A nobleness to try for,
A name to live and die for,"

it is well to remember that there was a time when he was "that man" to his political opponents. He was accused of incompetence, and of overweening personal ambition. He was nick-named "the Step-Father of his country." He was even suspected of having embezzled public funds, he, who had served during the war without compensation. In a private letter he remarked with bitterness that he had been assailed "in terms so exaggerated and indecent as could scarcely be applied to a Nero." His Farewell Address is really a plea for *Li*, for courtesy and kindness in human relations. If it can now assist in exorcising the "spirit of party," it will help Americans to make belated reparation for injuries once suffered by George Washington.

H. C. R.