A Civic Charge

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United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit
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[Editor's Note: The far-vision of Judge Treanor is nowhere more cogently expressed than in this Civic Charge delivered to the graduating class of Purdue University in June, 1934.]

To the members of the graduating class of 1934 of Purdue University I commend a stimulating thought of that great American, Woodrow Wilson. It was in the year 1912, when he was expressing the wish that he might have been born twenty years later in order to have twenty more years of what he called "this exhilarating century," that he uttered this challenge:

"This is no century for the man who looks over his shoulder; it is no century for the man who has no stomach for facts that change even while he tries to digest them; a century in which America is to prove once more whether she has any right to claim leadership in the world of originative politics and originative economic effort. This is a century just as worth living in as was the eighteenth, better worth living in than the nineteenth."

To you who wear today the insignia of your achievement in academic and professional scholarship is granted the privilege for which Woodrow Wilson wished, and more. It is yours to have, not twenty years of your declining life, but your whole lifetime, within this "exhilarating century," and to face, young and trained and eager, its never more swiftly-changing facts.

If you would look over your shoulder to the vanished glories of the past, let it be only to glimpse the vision and courage of those eighteenth-century leaders who gave us our republic. Theirs was a daring experiment in democratically organized society on a scale unprecedented in all history. And nothing less than originative powers and adventurous courage equal to theirs will suffice to secure us a future worthy of the past, a future which must be yet more glorious.

Since their time we have held to the conviction that in the free institutions of their conception and planning we have had the most fitting instruments for the realization of the high ideal of democratically organized society; that is, an
opportunity for each person to make the most of his capacities as an individual human being, to be truly free in his spiritual and intellectual life as well as in his political and economic life.

You enter into the active life of your state and nation at a time when the obvious failure of democratic government to solve its political and economic problems has given apparent justification to those who question the validity of democratic institutions, and when those who believe in their validity are acutely conscious of this failure and of the resulting threats to our institutions and the democratic ideal.

I submit to your attention the three threats which I consider most dangerous and most pressing. They are:

(1) War
(2) Periods of economic stress and suffering
(3) Corruption and inefficiency in the conduct of public affairs, accompanied, if not caused, by indifference of citizens.

It is scarcely necessary for me to remind you of the immediate loss which results from war's destruction of life and wealth, or of the burdens of social unease and debt which it bequeaths to succeeding generations, but I ask you to be mindful also of the threats to democratic institutions which exist in a military power created to meet the exigency of war, and to consider the conflict between the accepted ethical and moral standards of democracy and the ethical and moral standards required by the objective of war.

Economic stress, no less than war, puts terrific strain upon democratic processes of government, and economic crises precipitate the adoption of policies antagonistic to democratic ideals.

The essential need of the present and future is governmental machinery which shall in orderly democratic process, honestly and wisely foreplanned, avert the catastrophes of war and economic distress.

The leaders of Fascism believe that a democratically organized society is inexorably doomed by the incapacity of the mass of the people for political intelligence and civic virtue. Popular government in their opinion must fail because citizens cannot cope intelligently with public problems which depend for solution upon their judgment; furthermore, popular government must be corrupt and inefficient as long as its functioning depends upon officials selected by the gen-
eral citizenship of the state. They prefer to rest their ideal state upon a despotic economic and political regimentation.

Regardless of our opinion of the theory or practice of Fascism, we cannot shut out eyes to its challenge. If Fascism is sound, then the old order remains; the world and its states will again be ruled by despots and the destinies of its peoples decided by wars, and our democracy is merely a phase of the age-old cycle of political change, a temporary pause between anarchy and despotism.

If, however, our conception of the ideal political society is sound, if our confidence in the capacity of the people for political wisdom and civic virtue is justified, then we may confidently go forward in our efforts to remove the obstacles which hinder progress toward our ideal state, an ideal which can become a reality only by the evolution of a social order democratically functioning in its political and economic aspects.

I would like to assure you, much of the evidence appearing to the contrary, that this century, one third gone, has already seen definite progress in this direction. The next move rests with the men and women of your generation. You will determine whether the people of the world can learn to think in terms of peace and substitute the sanctions of reason for the threat of force in international relations. You will determine whether your generation can solve our nation's critical problems without losing the conceded advantages of democratic processes and institutions. The challenge is to you to restore and to elevate America's leadership in "originative politics and originative economic effort."

May I express my personal good will for you, and at the same time my strongest desire for the public good in the wish that you will arise to the demands of this challenge, and that you will find in meeting them such relish and such gratification that, like Woodrow Wilson, you will feel that you can not have enough of this "exhilarating century."