National defense and public speaking

Glenn N. Merry

To cite this article: Glenn N. Merry (1918) National defense and public speaking, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 4:1, 53-60, DOI: [10.1080/00335631809360646](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335631809360646)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335631809360646>

Published online: 05 Jun 2009.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 9

View related articles [↗](#)

NATIONAL DEFENSE AND PUBLIC SPEAKING¹

GLENN N. MERRY

University of Iowa, Chairman of the Iowa National Council of Defense
Speakers' Bureau

THE people of Pompeii realized the presence of Vesuvius. They knew from the occasional mutterings that terror might some day engulf the land. But they made little preparation nor would they allow themselves to anticipate the truth. We have known intellectual Germany. We have known of "blood and iron" Prussianism. But the truth we have minimized and evaded. The mutterings of militarism we could not believe in, and we have continued to pronounce peace orations declaring that the commercial interests of the nations were too complicated to permit another great war and that even if one should break down these barriers for a time the war could not possibly continue for more than six months. Fine perorations have proclaimed the coronation of the Christ of the Andes over all the World with the reign of "Peace on Earth, good will toward men." No one of us would retract what he has said in his peace speeches, but all of us will agree that only the good will toward men remains. The volcano has broken forth and the blackest of barbarities have been rained down upon armed and unarmed humanity. Like the civilization of Pompeii ours was taken unawares; but unlike it, we shall not be engulfed.

For many months the United States attempted neutrality. But in the face of aggression heaped upon aggression and insult upon insult, we were finally forced to abandon our neutrality. To some few this may have seemed undesirable but to the great bulk of American people the declaration of war came none too soon. However, I do not believe that all the patriotic people of America understand even yet the full significance of the facts that forced us into the conflict. These Americans are loyal and caught by the enthusiasm of the crowd are doing their bit and some their best. But I have met the inquiry in many forms during the last three months: never in public, of course, but in the privacy of

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the National Association of Teachers of Speech in Chicago, December 27, 1917.

confidential conversation: why have we transgressed that pristine injunction—have “entangling alliances with none!” and not required Europe to settle its own problems; why did we not prohibit Americans from traveling the seas near the war zone: why did we send our troops abroad when our country was not threatened with invasion? I think all speakers on most all occasions should deal with these doubts. Let interrogation meet interrogation. Is not some of Europe’s trouble our own trouble? We no longer are a child nation isolated from Europe by three months of sea travel. Liverpool is no farther today from New York than San Francisco. Proof to this audience of our many interests bound up in the cause of the allies is unnecessary. We are a grown nation, a powerful factor in peace or in war with world interests and mature responsibilities. Like Gareth’s mother our timid and uncertain friends admonished,

“Stay, my son! Ye are yet more boy than man.”

But all America may well reply in that response Gareth made to his mother,

“Man am I grown, a man’s work must I do.

Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King—Else, wherefore born?” *

I think most Americans have abstained from pleasure trips near the war zone since the submarine campaign has been rife. But what shall we reply to those whose business demanded such travel? Does citizenship in the United States mean no protection? Must I crouch hidden in my domestic harbor unprotected by my flag because a bully is parading the streetway of the seas? How vividly the impossibility of the situation was brought home to us by Mr. Hoy of this city, when, after the death of his mother and sister enroute to England on the *Laconia*, he cabled President Wilson, last February:

“I am an American citizen, representing the Sullivan Machinery Co., of Chicago, living abroad not as an expatriate but for the promotion of American trade.

I love the flag, believing in its significance.

(* This usage was suggested by a speech I heard delivered in Des Moines December 15, 1917, by President Charles W. Flint of Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa.)

My beloved mother and sister, passengers of the *Laconia*, have been foully murdered on the high seas.

As an American citizen, outraged—and as such fully within my rights—as an American son and brother, bereaved, I call upon the government to preserve its citizen's self-respect and save others of my countrymen from such deep grief as I now feel.

I am of military age, ready to fight.

If my country can use me against these brutal assassins I am at its call.

If it stultifies my manhood and my nation's by remaining passive under outrage, I shall seek a man's chance under another flag.*

From the day of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the war with Germany was inevitable. It is better to join our troops with those who have so long been fighting our common battle than to allow a compromise tolerant of the perpetual menace to the future peace of the world of a rule which calls sacred treaties "scraps of paper," which declares there "is no international law," and which knows no human decency.

I read this month a distinction between the two civilizations. On the front page of a Chicago paper was the headline, "American soldier assaults a French woman." At first I was appalled. Is such war after all, I reflected. But I read further and thanked God for what I read when the paragraph said, "He was immediately tried by court martial and shot at sunrise."

We must win this war; the responsibility is on us to preserve the ideals that have been challenged as it was upon those of '76 or '61. And we shall win or sacrifice our all. I have lived to see this determination demonstrated and I believe it. My students have not been allowed to declaim the last paragraph of Patrick Henry's great speech. I have not believed the average student's range of emotions should prostitute that noble sentiment which weighed in the balances Liberty and death. It was declaimed in my class this fall with deepest fervor and shortly there was a vacant chair; the speaker was numbered among those of the cantonments.

What part can we play in the program of voluntary centralization? I say first that all of our deliberations at this meeting should and will be seriously and solemnly earnest. There is not

(*London, February 27, 1917. Austin Y. Hoy.)

one of us here that has made the trip without considerable sacrifice; sacrifice of time involving the postponement or neglect, possibly, of important duties, as well as sacrifice of money. And we are patriotic in the degree that to each one of us this sacrifice proves to be an economy. Profiteering and treason have been called twin Iscariots. How shall we classify useless ideas, narrow hobbies, and talk for talk's sake in this convention or elsewhere? I do not see my brother, you do not see your brother or son this vacation time because the government seeks to reduce congestion in transportation. Some organizations like the American Bar Association, I am told, have postponed their annual gatherings one year to accord with this policy of the government. I believe a duty rests upon us to justify, as I feel sure we shall justify, this meeting. For we realize as possibly we have realized never before the necessity of continuing our public schools, colleges, and universities. May we not leave this association better teachers because of the definiteness of our deliberations and the inspiration of this impelling motive? May we not define the practicable and drop the inexpedient for the war time year that is ahead of us; for the times call the teacher who can teach to the duties of the classroom and the research professor to the revelations of the laboratory with the stern command, "Produce, produce!"

But to those who have the preference there is a call to service outside the classroom that is not less important where we may justify as well as put into practice the principles we have stood for in public speaking. The public is not yet awakened to its full responsibility in the war, especially in the rural districts and parts of our large cities peopled with foreigners. I know from first hand information that there is much along these lines of patriotic education yet to be done in my own state and I am not willing to admit that there is less in any other state. The nation has responded wonderfully to the calls that have been made upon it. But statistics show that only the few rather than the many in numerous instances have shouldered this responsibility. The day will likely come when every man and woman must give of money, time, or life. Charles Edward Russell of the Root Commission to Russia said to a group of us here in Chicago a few days ago that the soldier in the trenches is a paramount necessity;

but that back of him must be a united national mind inspired and moved by a common purpose. To the public speakers of America he emphasized that the charge was given to accomplish this in no small degree, that we have a great opportunity and with it a solemn responsibility. History verifies his words. It was a Phillipic that warned Greece of her greatest foe. It was the spoken truth that purged another great civilization of its Catiline. Webster's reply to Hayne probably deferred the Civil War thirty years. A youth's speech in Faneuil Hall aroused Boston to its recreant citizens. It was a speech, yes, a precious bit of literature, delivered on the battle field of Gettysburg that clarified the issues and set forth in phrases breathing the life of hope to the peoples of the world, for "government of the *people*, *by* the people, *for* the people shall not perish from the earth." For years we have been teaching this eloquence from the lips of men who moulded the life of their day and generations. And now in the present hour again it is the spoken word of our President that gives us our shibboleth, "Make the world safe for Democracy." Our part as speakers will be less conspicuous, no doubt, but it will serve the collective ideal, none the less.

I hope your experience was not my experience last spring when the presidents of our respective institutions requested each department head to state what his department could contribute that they might in turn offer to the government for national defense. When my letter came, I was perplexed, I was stumped. We had been talking so much in America and had done so little that I replied after considerable reflection. "My job is to teach people to talk. I think we have had enough talking, that it is time to do something. I am therefore able to offer nothing." My vision was indeed small. My experience with others at the Speakers' Training Camp at Chautauqua Lake during the first week in July demonstrated this clearly. There we saw the splendid service a member of this Association had rendered as a specialist. We became acquainted with the Four Minute Men Movement, speakers for the government in motion picture theaters. A nation-wide campaign for carrying the gospel of patriotism was initiated. I returned to my state to work and have been busy ever since.

The general defense of the nation is being built up by the government's officials. But closely allied to the government as an advisory board of citizens is the National Council of Defense. This is subdivided into state councils and each has its speaker's bureau. In many of our states, college and university professors are giving material assistances to these bureaus.

The campaign of public speaking under the auspices of the government is being carried on by two departments, the Speaking Division and the Four Minute Men, both supervised by the cabinet through the Committee on Public Information. Arthur E. Bestor, who for many years has been prominently identified with the Chautauqua Institution is in charge of the Speaking Division. His duty is to coördinate the speaking campaigns of the various state councils and to furnish speakers either of national influence and reputation or speakers who are specialists along certain lines for the interstate conferences and tours.

I have the following telegram, a message to the Association, which I have just received from Mr. Bestor.

The Government needs the service of the National Association of Public Speaking Teachers in attaining that universal education absolutely necessary for the winning of the war, for in a democracy fullness of information and intelligent participation by each citizen is essential and this can be effectively secured only through the spoken word.

ARTHUR E. BESTOR,
Director of Speaking Division
Committee on Public Information.

Of the Four Minute Men Division, William McCormick Blair of Chicago is director. This public speaking organization is as unique as it has been effective. The movement had its inception in this city in June, chiefly through the efforts of Mr. Donald Ryerson. It was very soon taken over by the Government and organized in every state. The number of Four Minute speakers enrolled up to last week exceeded 20,000. The movement is an ideal one. The motion picture managers of America to a man are back of the work and welcome the speakers who on their honor do not exceed the four minute time limit. Someone remarked to me in jest, recently, that if the war taught speakers to say something in four minutes and then stop it will not be in

vain. The possibilities of this movement are at once apparent. The audience is automatically provided. The theme is of universal interest. The speakers receive bi-monthly their topics from Washington together with bulletin of facts and information upon which the busy clerk, professional man, or other class of volunteer speaker can quickly assemble a speech. President Wilson has placed his most cordial support behind the Four Minute Men and last month sent them the following message:

May I not express my very real interest in the vigorous and intelligent work your organization is doing in connection with the Committee on Public Information? It is surely a matter worthy of sincere appreciation that a body of thoughtful citizens, with the hearty coöperation of the managers of moving picture theaters, are engaged in the presentation and discussion of the purposes and measures of these critical days.

Men and nations are at their worst or at their best in any great struggle. The spoken word may light the fires of passion and unreason or it may inspire to highest action and noblest sacrifice a nation of freemen. Upon you Four-Minute Men, who are charged with a special duty and enjoy a special privilege in the command of your audiences, will rest in a considerable degree, the task of arousing and informing the great body of our people so that when the record of these days is complete we shall read page for page with the deeds of army and navy the story of the unity, the spirit of sacrifice, the unceasing labors, the high courage of the men and women at home who held unbroken the inner lines. My best wishes and continuing interest are with you in your work as part of the reserve officer corps in a nation thrice armed because through your efforts it knows better the justice of its cause and the value of what it defends.

Cordially and sincerely yours,

WOODROW WILSON.

I believe that the public speaker has a definite service to perform in this great struggle as a part of the nation's defense. I believe that this association should, as it likely will, pass resolutions of loyalty and support and forward them to the National Council of Defense and the Speaking Division of the Government. I hope the Association will see fit to create a standing war committee through which we may assist in our organized capacity

to help in a small way to win this war, for surely we have a potential influence, else wherefore born? There is work which such a committee might do such as to criticize constructively the numerous speakers handbooks that are appearing now, or better to issue one ourselves in conjunction with some organization that could finance the project. I believe an accumulative bibliography of the best speeches delivered in this epoch of the world's development should be collected, classified for class use as argumentative, expository, or hortatory and persuasive, and printed in the *QUARTERLY JOURNAL*. There are other details which the time is too short to mention and ideas that you think of which ought to be referred to such a committee.

Shall we individually and collectively pledge our best to the one great duty before us in comparison with which all else is insignificant, the seeing of this job through? In the words of our Commander-in-chief:

"For us there is but one choice. We have made it. Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way in this day of high resolution, when every principle we hold dearest is to be vindicated and made secure for the salvation of the nations. We are ready to plead at the bar of history, and our flag shall wear a new luster. Once more we shall make good with our lives and fortunes the great faith to which we were born, and a new glory shall shine in the face of our people."