

Freemasonry ~ The Sleeping Giant

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M.W. Brother Kidwell presented this challenging paper as the Keynote Address at the Conference of Grand Masters of Masons in North America on February 22, 1982 – the 250th Anniversary of George Washington's birth. M.S.A. is pleased that M.W. Brother Kidwell allowed us to use it as a Short Talk Bulletin.

FREEMASONRY: THE SLEEPING GIANT! What a challenging topic to introduce! It brings to mind the familiar story of Rip Van Winkle who slept so long he failed to make his contribution to the world. When he awakened, he found himself out of touch, and he was unable to accommodate to the changes which had taken place while he slept. Is Freemasonry sleeping while the world is going by? Is Freemasonry an escape into an unreal world of dreams? Or is Freemasonry an active and vital force in the shaping of the future?

When we are asked, "What is Freemasonry?," we respond with a description of our ancient and honorable fraternity. To the layman, according to Webster, the word freemasonry has become an uncapitalized noun meaning "a natural or instinctive fellowship or sympathy." Fellowship is defined as "a company of equals or friends sharing a community of interest, activity, feeling, or experience." Sympathy is defined as "united or harmony in action or effect . " Thus, Freemasonry in its derived definition becomes: "A natural community of equals, bound by shared experiences and interests, and united in action."

Certainly at one point in our nation's history, Freemasonry was not sleeping. Though proportionally no greater in number than today, the community of Masons did indeed display unity in action, and they did indeed produce a harmony in effect. Our Founding Fathers took pains to create a republic which would protect America not only from tyranny of foreign governments, but also from any proposed domination by their own government. They agreed that "The best government is the least government." The primary cement binding these men together was the desire for freedom and justice. The War for Independence grew out of negotiations for restoration of usurped rights, rights which had been granted to the citizens of the British Empire since the time of Magna Carta. When the negotiations were unproductive, the cry of "Taxation without representation" may well have led St. John's Lodge to exchange the apron for the tomahawk and sweeten the waters of Boston Harbor with good English tea.

There is some evidence that the colonial lodges were made up of an elite group. George Washington is said to have paid fees amounting to about \$20 for his degrees, a fee that was far beyond the aspirations of many less affluent men. But there is also evidence indicating that Masonry was active on the frontiers. Members of the Order made themselves known to their Brethren and probably accomplished a good deal of informal recruiting and initiating of good men who were also dedicated to preserving peace and harmony.

These informal "tavern lodges" provided the only Masonic communication available outside the established population centers. Thus, there were many unsung Masonic heroes working for the preservation of a way of life that had already become precious to them. These men instinctively knew what sort of foundation had to be laid if this land was to survive. They were inspired with the realization that Masonry is morality in action, and that their obligations at the altar of Freemasonry were sacred promises that required appropriate action. They were committed to a pursuit of excellence embodied in the teaching of the Fraternity.

The urge for casting off bonds of oppression, for seeking equal rights for all, and for demanding the intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom of the individual has always characterized Masons, not only in this country but in others. Witness the great Masons around the world – Benito Juarez in Mexico, Simon Bolivar in South America, Jose Rizal in the Philippine Islands, for example. Wherever the need for reasserting the doctrine of right and freedom has emerged, Masons have taken a leading role in the quest for intellectual and moral liberty.

From the scattered Masonic lodges and congregations of sojourning Masons in our own 13 colonies, the influence of Masonic principles made itself heard through our Declaration of Independence, our Articles of Confederation, and our Constitution with its Bill of Rights. Many of these names are familiar to all – George Washington, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, Edmund Randolph – a list of these leaders would constitute an Honor Roll of Freemasonry, and it would include a great portion of our Founding Fathers. Such an Honor Roll must also include Masons who contributed in a less public manner, such as Brother de Montesquier who, as early as 1748, wrote of the necessity for three branches of government and a system of checks and balances between these branches.

Of course, no listing of honored Masons of colonial times would be complete without paying special tribute to our own Worshipful Brother George Washington. Not only was he an outstanding Mason at the time and a universal choice to become General Grand Master of the Grand Lodges of the country, but he also served as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, Chairman of the Constitutional Convention, and first President of our new Nation. The principles which he encouraged and were directly responsible for the development of our Republic. We are proud to honor him today on the 250th anniversary of his birth.

Indicative of the future of our form of government were the words of Benjamin Franklin at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention. As he merged from the meeting room, he was asked what form of government we had. He replied: "A Republic, if you can keep it!"

And that is the question facing our nation today: Can we keep it?

Masons helped to form a nation based on human liberty. Those Masons were knowledgeable and concerned. They realized that the granting of any right implied a concurrent responsibility. Over the centuries we have shown a representation of Masonic Brothers in positions of eminence and authority in our government. However, we have never been able to match the numerical representation and power exercised by the 13 known Masons who signed the Constitution – 13 out of a total of 39 signers.

Documents and plans for government as masterfully drafted as our Constitution, however, do not make government; they only make government possible. Governments are made by people, people who are not limited to consideration of the monetary problems of the present but, instead, look to the heritage and tradition of the past and to the unlimited frontiers of the future. These people see the American Eagle, not as a scavenger and eater of carrion, but as a soaring symbol of the ideals of those who founded our country. Free governments are made by people who have the imagination to recognize the glory of the development of a nation, who have full knowledge of their rights as individuals and are ready and willing to devise effective means for the preservation of those rights.

If we as Masons want to assert greater prominence in the governance of our nation, we must first become knowledgeable. Good Masons are informed and responsible citizens who know the issues and are willing to stand up and make themselves heard on matters in accord with the proven principles of our Craft. Good Masons lead the people in exercising our right to vote on candidates and issues. But the key word is "knowledgeable." We need first to educate our youth and our candidates in terms of intellectual rights, individual and civic responsibilities, and moral conduct. We must make Masons in fact rather than Masons in name.

Our Brotherhood has the potential for wielding a great deal of power in our local and national affairs. To do so, we must also make ourselves known and respected among the people. We must let the public know the principles for which we stand and become attractively visible in our communities.

Our nation today needs the active support and participation of every Mason as it did when our Constitution was formed. While we can never hope to achieve the epoch-making accomplishments of our Brethren in George Washington's time, we must maintain the work which they accomplished. We must remember, too, that in honoring these Founding Fathers, we are truly honoring their adherence to their Masonic ideals and their dedication and zeal.

Today we need to revitalize those ideals and help America return to a new dedication. Many of our people have lost perspective and are viewing this era in terms of a leisure ethic rather a

work ethic; they are looking to government for solutions to all their problems rather than depending upon their own convictions and abilities. We are experiencing a decline in respect for law, for morality, for quality, even for truth as a guide to our actions. We are threatened both from without and from within, and once again it becomes the obligation of Masonry to take up our working tools and construct a bulwark of defense that will stand against any adversary.

The solution is within our grasp. We have the knowledge and the materials to shape the future of our Fraternity and to influence the future of the nation and of the world. The way we use our capabilities will determine our destiny. Masonry has always dedicated its efforts toward taking good men – one at a time – and making them better men. Then in periods of distress and social upheaval, these good men, imbued with the philosophy of our Craft, have stepped forward to lead the world back to the concept of liberty and justice. The founders of our country were that sort of men. George Washington, the Father of our Country, was one, as were a great many of those who stood with him when this nation had its precarious birth.

All of us are Masons, and thousands of our government leaders are Masons. If we have truly accepted our Masonic education and our Masonic obligations, we have only to unite our thoughts and actions to create a resurgence of those virtues on which our nation was founded. We need to apply our working tools in our collective pursuit of excellence to meet the problems that lie ahead and to be certain that moral virtue will prevail.

Never in the history of mankind is the inculcation and implementation of the principles and ideals of Masonry so important, and yet apathy, indifference, and complacency are common even within our own ranks. If Masonry is to continue to exist and to be effective, we must relinquish passive principles and become an aggressive vital force to this nation and among its people. Masonry, by its very origin, has no choice. It must be a living, breathing force. Masonry must act through a body of idealistic men applying Masonic principles to a way of life and bringing about the accomplishment of its goals. We must have Masons who will match in fortitude and courage those who faced the rack of the inquisition and the bitter cold of Valley Forge; Masons who are alert and faithful to their convictions and who are ready to struggle to win liberty again in each generation.

We owe this to our country; we owe this to our people and our way of life; we owe it to ourselves; and particularly, we owe it to the leaders of tomorrow. Let us reawaken the sleeping giant – the greatest force for mankind ever conceived in the minds of men. Let us, too, stand up and be counted.

STB - June 1982