

"Nationalism and Americanism"

Speech by Warren G. Harding, Senator from Ohio and Republican candidate for President, 1920.

As you read...

WARREN HARDING

Warren G. Harding was elected as the twenty-ninth President of the United States in 1920, winning sixty percent of the popular vote — a higher percentage than any candidate to that point in history. During his presidential campaign, Harding developed a reputation for being an effective public speaker.

In this speech, Harding discussed one of the central political issues of his day, *isolationism*.

Americans were divided over whether and when the United States should become involved in global affairs. Some believed that America should intervene in international conflicts, as they had during World War I, and these people urged the government to join the League of Nations, which was an earlier version of the United Nations. Others looked at the destruction and loss of life caused by the Great War and believed that the U.S. should not participate in the affairs of the rest of the world. Instead, they believed that Americans should remain neutral and isolated from the world (hence “isolationism”) and focus on domestic problems — problems at home, within the United States.

Many isolationists felt that the push for greater involvement in European conflicts came from immigrants who had ties to the Old World. This was only one motivating factor, though, and others pushed to intervene in Europe, Asia, and central America to secure American business interests in these regions.

In this speech, Harding addressed the issue of American involvement overseas and spoke specifically about the relationship of immigrants to their home countries abroad.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Did Harding believe that the attachment of an immigrant to his or her homeland was a negative thing? Why or why not?
2. Did Harding believe that immigrants could be American citizens and retain attachment to their homeland? Why did he feel this way?
3. From this speech, can you tell whether Harding favored isolationism or involvement in world affairs?

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Figure 1. Warren G. Harding was elected president in 1920 by a record margin in the popular vote.

Transcript

My countrymen, the pioneers to whom I have alluded, these stalwart makers of America, could have no conception of our present day attainment. Hamilton, who conceived, and Washington, who sponsored, little dreamed of either a development or a solution like ours of today. But they were right in fundamentals. They knew what was faith, and preached security. One may doubt if either of them, if any of the founders, would wish America to hold aloof from the world. But there has come to us lately a new realization of the menace to our America in European entanglements which emphasizes the prudence of Washington, though he could little have dreamed the thought which is in my mind.

When I sat on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and listened to American delegations appealing in behalf of kinsman or old home folks across the seas, I caught the aspirations of nationality, and the perfectly natural sympathy among kindred in this republic. But I little realized then how we might rend the concord of American citizenship in our seeking to solve Old World problems. There have come to me, not at all unbecomingly, the expressed anxieties of Americans foreign born who are asking our country's future attitude on territorial awards in the adjustment of peace. They are Americans all, but they have a proper and a natural interest in the fortunes of kinsfolk and native lands. One cannot blame them. If our land is to settle the envies, rivalries, jealousies, and hatreds of all civilization, these adopted sons of the Republic want the settlement favorable to the land from which they came¹.

The misfortune is not alone that it rends the concord of nations. The greater pity is that it rends the concord of our citizenship at home. It's folly to think of blending Greek and Bulgar, Italian and Slovak², or making any of them rejoicingly American, when the land of adoption sits in judgement on the land from which he came. We need to be rescued from divisionary and fruitless pursuit of peace through super government. I do not want Americans of foreign birth making their party alignments on what we mean to do for some nation in the old world. We want them to be Republican because of what we mean to do for the United States of America. Our call is for unison, not rivaling sympathies. Our need is concord, not the antipathies of long inheritance.

Surely no one stops to think where the great world experiment was leading. Frankly, no one could know. We're only learning now. It would be a sorry day for this republic if we allowed our activities in seeking for peace in the Old World to blind us to the essentials of peace at home. We want a free America again. We want America free at home, and free in the world. We want to silence the outcry of nation against nation, in the fullness of understanding. And we wish to silence the cry of class against class, and stifle the party appeal to class, so that we may ensure tranquility in our own freedom. If I could choose but one, I had rather have industrial and social peace at home, than command the international peace of all the world.

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Notes

1. As part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and parts of Germany were broken up into smaller countries. Often the new boundaries were drawn to support the interest of European powers and did not reflect the wishes and desires of the local population.
2. These regions and countries were part of the Central Powers, who were defeated by the Allies in World War I.

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