

# FROM THALES TO WASHINGTON

By FRANCIS FRANKLIN

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT in his recent message on the State of the Union pointed to the parallel between the problems confronting the United Nations today and those confronting the United States at the close of the Revolutionary War, when threats arose from various separatist movements.

During that war, the United States constituted a mere military alliance. Because of the many conflicts among the states, Washington and other leaders realized that full coalition war by all the states was impossible without a perspective of lasting national union. No leader in America manifested more political astuteness than did George Washington in his insistence on this program. No military leader ever showed keener understanding of the deep connection between war and politics. For this reason he deserves, far more than most students have ever realized, his title of "Father of his Country." As a result of the growing demand for a perspective of lasting national union, the draft of a permanent Confederation was drawn up early in the war. The articles of Confederation served as a rallying program for unity throughout the war, even though they were not adopted until 1781. Before that time, compromises had to be made for the sake of unity. The main difficulty was the unequal ownership of western land by the states, mainly the huge domain claimed by Virginia, which extended to the Great Lakes. Not until the democratic forces put forward the demand for the cession of that western land to the United States—with sufficient strength to make that cession inevitable—did the little states agree to ratify the Articles of Confederation.

The Confederation was a step forward, but it was not enough. Effective programs involving compromises are never secured all at once. The Confederation was not a national state. Each of the thirteen states remained "sovereign and independent." The danger of reconquest by Britain or of dismemberment by Spain continued. Secessionist movements were organized by Spain in Kentucky and Tennessee. Therefore, from 1781 to 1789 demands were made for a new constitution providing for a strong national government. The earliest demands were made most strongly

by anti-democratic merchants. They demanded the destruction of the existing state governments, which were all democratic. The democratic forces, therefore, inevitably rallied around a program of states rights. The result was that no national government could be erected until a new compromise was achieved. That compromise, worked out in the Constitutional Convention, was *federalism*. The states agreed to surrender certain necessary and specified powers to a national government, while retaining all others. The result was, not the destruction of the thirteen states, but their incorporation into a *federal* union under a *federal* government. As Thomas Jefferson expressed it, the states remained as the bulwarks of republicanism at home, while the general government became the sheet anchor of our freedom abroad.

This great compromise to effect a national union for the sake of the mutual safety of each of the federating states can serve as an example of how nations today, in spite of numerous differences, can unite in a lasting coalition for common aims.

History also affords examples of tragic failures to unite, and it is instructive to contemplate the fruits of failure as well as of success. At the dawn of European history the ancient Greek states, marvelously advanced for their day, failed to achieve such unity as the United States established at the dawn of the modern period of history. We can learn equally from the ancient failure of Greece and the modern success of America.

When the first Greek states commenced their heroic war for survival against Persian despotism, Thales, the father of philosophy, is said to have proposed a federal union of all the Greek states of Ionia. During the great war of liberation against Persia waged by the states of the European peninsula, which we now call Greece proper, a military alliance was formed. The priceless heritage of democracy which Greece left to the world was then being created; and democracy in Athens and elsewhere grew and consolidated its gains right in the midst of this great war for freedom. The greatest art of Athens, including the glorious tragic drama, were the fruits of that inspiring war for democracy.

If there was slavery in Greece, so was there slavery (even though in a weaker form) in America in 1776 and afterwards. Greek democracy at its peak was far more radical than that in any single American southern state in 1789. In the democratic states of Greece, there was universal suffrage for all freemen (including propertyless workers, of whom there were many), pay for performance of civil rights, such as attendance at the assembly and jury service, heavy income taxes on the rich, public works projects, free theaters maintained at state expense through taxation on the rich, and occasional redivisions of land. Slavery was attacked, though not abolished; women's rights were championed; and socialistic programs (of a Utopian variety, though not of the reactionary Platonic type) were aired. Old Thales' program for a federal union of Greek states continued to be voiced.

Had such a federal union of Greek states, many of them democratic, been formed, a *national democratic Greek state* would undoubtedly have arisen in the fifth century before Christ. Such a democratic national state could have been invincible before the armies of Macedonia and Rome, as the Greek Confederation had been before Persia. The priceless heritage of Greek democracy, science, art, and philosophy might then have continued to grow with an unbroken tradition. *But it was not formed.* Instead, war broke out between the Greek states, taking the form of civil war within each state. Weakened by internal strife, Greece fell victim to Alexander the Great, then to Rome. Democracy, natural science, and independent philosophy were snuffed out as growing, dynamic forces for over *two thousand* years.

THE reason for Greece's failure to achieve a national democratic federal republic is not hard to find. The achievement of democracy was uneven. In no single Greek state did the democracy abolish slavery. The result was that Greek commerce did not advance, as did mercantilism in modern history, to the point where there could be established the true capitalist mode of production, modern industry based on wage labor. Slavery remained as the basic (though

not the only) mode of production. Side by side with the radical democracies flourished despotic reactionary states like Sparta (which has left us no artistic, literary, or scientific heritage of any importance). It was impossible for Athens and Sparta to unite. In fact, practically all the aristocratic families of Athens were united in treasonable support of Sparta, which launched a war for the extermination of Athenian democracy. The bitter enemy of democracy, the Athenian Aristophanes, openly called for negotiated peace with the enemy of his state in his violently reactionary comedies. Finally, traitors surrendered Athens to Spartan armies, who inaugurated the quisling regime of the Thirty Tyrants, which, however, was subsequently overthrown. Fundamentally, it was *slavery* which prevented the national unification of Greek democracy, for even in the democratic states it was the *slaveholders* who formed the Spartan fifth column. It was their disruption which in the end lost for all Greece its independence and brought its great philosophy to an inglorious end in pessimistic mysticism.

WHAT Greece failed to accomplish in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the United States of America did accomplish in 1789. In the United States, for the first time in all history, the old Greek dream of a national democratic federal state was realized. What a long gap lay between! That our forefathers were not unconscious that, despite the vastly different historical circumstances, they were in a sense picking up the threads of history where they had been severed in antiquity is proved by the fact that all the democratic intellectual leaders of the American Revolution were deep students of Greek history and Greek politics. It was no accident that from the time of the Renaissance on, the modern bourgeoisie went to school to the Greeks. Before James Madison left for the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia, he carefully prepared notes on the constitutions of Greek states and on their Confederations, and he used them in his role of "Father of the American Constitution."

Why did America succeed when Greece, with all its artistic and intellectual glory, had failed? Even though in America the ancient Greek curse of slavery was revived, its revival occurred in an age when in general not only slavery, but also serfdom, was definitely

on the way out in the face of the rise of modern industry. The American states established unity whereas the Greek states fell into war amongst themselves. And this unity was made possible by the fact that in America democracy was established in *each* of the thirteen states. There was no Sparta in America. Furthermore, slavery was not universal in the American states. It was abolished in every state north of Maryland and Delaware either during or immediately after the Revolution. Thus there was no strong united party of slaveholder reaction functioning throughout all the American states like that represented by Aristophanes in Athens. That democracy was the only basis for American union was proved by the crushing defeat suffered by all anti-democratic proposals for a monarchic or oligarchical national state.

The preservation of the American Union was not automatically guaranteed by the adoption of the federal Constitution. For years thereafter, an oligarchical party in sympathy with Britain, America's major foe, calling itself with brazen hypocrisy the "Federalist" Party, threatened the disruption of the Union. That disaster was averted by the triumph of the Democratic Party under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson. The oligarchs ("Federalists") then launched desperate conspiracies under Aaron Burr to dismember the Union, and finally attempted to betray the Union to the foreign foe during the War of 1812. But the democracy triumphed.

No sooner had the oligarchical foes of national union in the North been defeated than a slaveholder party from the South began even more seriously to undermine the Union. This party finally succeeded in securing temporary dismemberment of the democratic national Union, plunging the country into a "war between the states" which became simultaneously a civil war within each state.

The tragedy of ancient Greece threatened to repeat itself in America. So long as slavery existed, no lasting democratic federal Union was possible. In its war to crush the slaveholder rebellion, the United States government carried out, however, one of the most amazing acts in history. It crushed the rebellion by organizing and leading a revolution against the rebels. People generally think of revolutions as insurrections against organized government. This has been true under despotic monarchist or oligarchical governments, but not so in the history

of the United States. The only revolution in our history since the formation of the government of the United States was carried out, with organized, conscious support from the people, by the government of the United States.

THERE were timid souls among the democrats in America in 1789 who did not believe a national democratic federal government could succeed. They were too impressed by the past. They were students of Greek history who learned by rote. They cried, "It failed in Greece. It never has succeeded. It cannot succeed in America now." But the bold leaders like Washington, Jefferson and Madison did not believe that "There is nothing new under the sun." They grasped the new features in American life, boldly went ahead, and accomplished the unprecedented. Our whole history proves the correctness of their realistic vision, and makes the cynics and the timid souls appear ludicrous as we read their heavy pronouncements, based on "worldly experience," today.

Our problem today is not to establish a democratic national union. That aim we have accomplished, though this remains a problem for China, for India, for many other lands—even for Greece, now at this late date. Our aim is to *preserve* our national union. Victory over Persia did not assure Greek democracy salvation from Macedonia and Rome. Neither does our military victory alone now guarantee our survival should we permit a new fascist war of conquest a generation hence. The well known preparations of fascists for a third world war—schemes now being made—prove that the preservation of our national existence in the future cannot be guaranteed without a world coalition of nations, the continuance of the United Nations in lasting form, to prevent new fascist aggression. The United States will need the United Nations in the postwar world as much as Athens needed, but did not have, a Greek federation in the fourth century before Christ, as much as Massachusetts, New York or Virginia needed the United States in 1776, in 1789, in 1812, and (including Virginia) in 1861. Without the United Nations, our country might a generation hence suffer a fate worse than that of ancient Athens. With such a coalition, America and all other nations can go forward to new achievements of prosperity and reach new heights of science, art and philosophy.

(Continued on page 21)

Byrd political machine of Virginia says thumbs down . . . but the student body says thumbs up." That the president and trustees eventually won the immediate battle for faculty supervision does not mean the students lost. By their stubborn defense of their democratic rights the students of William and Mary have made the next victory of poll tax reaction less certain.

## Lessons from Sparta

*(Continued from page 8)*

As was true both in Greece and America of a national union, no world organization can today be achieved except on the basis of democracy. As slav-

ery was the curse which prevented the preservation of Greek independence and democracy and which had to be abolished by force of arms in order to preserve American democracy, so the complete extermination of fascism, the most barbarous restoration of slavery in the modern world, and everything giving rise to fascism is the prerequisite for any lasting world organization.

We need to drive home the lesson that there *are* new things under the sun. The contrast between ancient Greece and modern America sharply reveals this. Greece achieved new things in antiquity. The roots of modern history lie

in ancient Greece. But America created still more new things. The whole history of America is a chronicle of accomplishing the unprecedented. Our miracles of production and military prowess now are proving that this pioneering American spirit is not dead. We are now pioneering on a world scale. As America picked up threads broken in ancient Greece, the United Nations are now picking up all the threads severed throughout all the long years of man's tragic history. We have today the opportunity to join those threads to form a new and unbroken tradition of human progress.