

FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

By HENRY M. WRISTON, President, Brown University

This is the first of a series of guest editorials written by prominent Americans on questions of vital importance to all citizens in these critical times.—Ed.

THERE is no question that the public is concerned about the future of democracy. My thesis is that its fate depends upon an abiding faith in ourselves, a sane approach to life and its realities, a renewed determination to make our form of government more effective.

Representing as it does, and as by its very nature it must, an ideal rather than a status, any description of the current position of democracy is always disheartening. The practices of democracy are never fully in accord with its professions, because as practices improve, the ideal leaps yet further ahead. The eyes of democracy must always be fixed forward on some distant goal.

You can go back and find men wringing their hands over the end of democracy as early as the days of Thomas Jefferson, and you can find them wringing their hands ever since. A reasonable knowledge of history and a modicum of humor will remind us that, acute as the crisis is today, there have been many others, if not of equal intensity, nonetheless of great intensity. Critics of democracy have proceeded upon the fallacious assumption that specific failures were due to inherent weaknesses in the democratic process, rather than ineffective instrumentalities or leadership. They have measured the achievements of democracy against utopian perfection instead of standards applicable to a real world.

Any idea such as defense, which implies a fixed position or a static program, is always wholly inapplicable to democracy. Consequently, attempts to defend democracy are certain to fail. Defensive thought about democracy, translated into action, takes forms which limit freedom and supplant justice with safety as an ideal. Once set safety rather than freedom as the goal, then democracy itself is destroyed; the foundations are gone. In short, once democracy is put upon the defensive it is lost; only when it emphasizes its positive aspects, such as freedom and justice, can it possibly live.

Democracy will not be strengthened by mouthing slogans about it, but only by doing those things which make democracy credible and real. Men say we must make democracy work. That is an absurdity. Democracy is an idea. The word is but an abstract term



Henry M. Wriston

Born in Laramie, Wyoming, Dr. Wriston has reversed the old Greeley formula of "Go West, young man." His first major teaching job was in the Ripon College, in Wisconsin, and after several forays in Eastern educational circles, he became president of Lawrence College, at Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1925. He remained there 12 years, then accepted an invitation to become president of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Aggressive, dynamic, and with an attractive personality, Dr. Wriston imparts an inspirational character to the written and spoken word.

which stands as the symbol of an idea. A word, a symbol cannot work. Only men can work. If we would support democracy, we must lay aside arguments and fears and learn to outwork the totalitarians. We must make sacrifices or be sacrificed, and the rewards of voluntary sacrifice are great. We must justify freedom by the use we make of it.

We can work effectively only when our labor represents a great affirmation of the reality and the significance of the ideas and the ideals which activate us. It is high time to cease carping about the weaknesses and the shortcomings and the failures of democracy, and with penitent hearts recognize that they stem from our own lack of faith and courage and industry and devotion to a superb ideal. If democracy is to regain the triumphant note characteristic of the American tradition, that victory will be the reflection of acts of faith on the part of people who still believe in the individual, in his infinite worth, in the infinite riches that come from his self-expression.