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The Address of the President - American Science

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THE ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

AMERICAN SCIENCE

NICHOLAS KNIGHT

A year has gone since as an organization we met at Iowa City, and now we find ourselves face to face with the program and responsibilities as well as the festivities of our thirty-fifth annual meeting. As always it has been a year of losses of scientific men from the state, but we have gained others, and as we survey the field, it has proved a year of progress and achievement. The Iowa Academy of Science retains its prestige among sister organizations, and possibly has added to the laurels it already had won.

This is a wonderful period in human history—this time of re-construction in which we find ourselves living and doing the work of our hands and brains. A writer in one of the popular magazines has declared that when the sun set on the thirty-first of July, 1914, it went down on the world as men knew it up to that time, and when it rose on the first day of August, 1914, it rose on an entirely new world, with new problems and new duties and new responsibilities. That was a remarkable period, the four years, three months and ten and a half days of the titanic conflict. Great progress was made not only in the means and instruments of destroying human life, but also in the arts and sciences and in the methods of conserving and prolonging human existence.

The period of the war had to come to an end. Who of us here assembled can ever forget that memorable morning in November when we were aroused from our slumbers by the ringing of the joy bells and the blowing of the whistles, and we exclaimed as we congratulated each other in the home or met upon the street "the armistice has been signed; the years, months and days of the cruelest, bloodiest and most needless war in the history of the human race have come to an end"?

But that sentiment was only a partial truth. The joy bells did mark the end of the great conflict, but they likewise ushered in the new era, the time of re-construction, more important and wonderful, fraught with more serious problems, and with greater difficulties and responsibilities, yea with greater privileges, than even

the time of the great war itself. It is in this age that we must live and move and have our being.

The world at large and more particularly Europe, is staggering from the effect of the cruel blows it received in the World War, and we have come to realize that recovery can not be rapid, but will require a generation or two, and possibly even a longer time.

Where will the world's bright young men and women, fired with a lofty ambition to succeed in life, seek an education in the next decades? Egypt, Greece, Rome, France, the Florentine Republic, England, and lastly Germany, have each had their day as the center or metropolis of the world's intellectual life. And quite likely Germany surpassed them all in pushing forward the frontiers in almost every field of knowledge. Reliable statistics have shown that for some decades prior to the fated August 1, 1914, fifty-five per cent of all the advanced or productive scholarship was confined within the borders of the German Empire; while all the rest of the world—the United States, England, Belgium, France, Japan, Italy and all the others had to be content with the remaining forty-five per cent.

But Germany is bleeding and prostrate from the long and terrible war. Many of her brightest and most promising scientific men and productive scholars made the supreme sacrifice on the field of battle. Her finances are in ruins. We had occasion to send a dollar and a half to Heidelberg last week. Ordinarily six marks would have been purchased but now it requires ninety-one marks to equal the American money. Belgium has made rapid progress in reconstruction, but yesterday as we paid a bill in Antwerp, only seven and a half American cents could purchase a Belgian franc. Germany in common with the other nations ruined by the war must engage in a fierce struggle for existence to ward off under-nourishment and starvation, and history shows that under such circumstances, there is small opportunity to consider the productive scholarship that adds to the world's knowledge. For possible decades in the future the children will continue under-nourished and many will be deprived of even the rudiments of an education.

The countless millions of dollars worth of high explosives that were used in the war can be produced only by the free use of nitric and sulphuric acids. Of course we all understand that nitric acid in the form of nitrates is an important fertilizing material, of which vegetation has been deprived; and sulphuric acid is required to

render phosphate rock soluble and available for the growing plants. The soil, accordingly, is also suffering from starvation and will not produce the usual crops. Here is an opportunity for the co-operation of scientists in restoring the land to normal conditions.

Among the civilized nations we are almost the only one to escape with our material resources unimpaired. Indeed, in some lines, we have almost the only raw materials that escaped destruction in the war. Shall the American people rise to the occasion and realize our great responsibility and our matchless opportunity in the matter of advanced learning and productive scholarship?

Material wealth is an important factor, but it is only one element that makes possible productive scholarship on a vast scale. Will American public sentiment sustain the scholar, as in a measure he must withdraw from the public view, and spend his best years in his library or laboratory? Long years of training are imperative to develop the scholar who can achieve enduring results.

In Germany before the war, the man who had earned the doctor of philosophy degree had hardly made a beginning. With a meager compensation he must serve the department head long years as assistant. When promoted to the rank of PRIVAT DO-CENT his salary, if possible, was still smaller. But he had ample opportunity to study and investigate under the stimulating influence of the great teacher. If he was successful, in the course of the years, he would attain the rank of extraordinary professor, and after a time, and no longer young, he might attain the goal of his ambition, and himself become the head of the department with the proud title of professor.

German society and the Imperial German government would applaud the man who would choose such a career. He would be patted on the back and those high in authority would say to him, "well done good and faithful servant." Society would erect to his memory a monument of as fine and pure a marble, and it would pierce the blue as high as any ever erected to distinguished statesmen, generals or admirals.

We would grow impatient under the prolonged period of training and would demand more immediate results. And yet since the war, there has been a change in the public sentiment in the United States. There has been a keener appreciation of science and the people are more alive to its wonderful possibilities. More of our citizenship realize as never before the value of training and education, especially the kind that educates. The people are in a plastic, receptive mood, as they understand that the war was won not so

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much by brute force, as was the case in former wars, but was won by brains, one set of nations striving to outdo and surpass the others by the sheer force of intellect.

In these reconstruction days the Iowa Academy of Science has an important mission to perform. We delight to think of it as an organization making its contribution to knowledge, encouraging its members to build up the waste places in Iowa science, and doing our part in every possible relation.

We have come together in this our thirty-fifth annual gathering, bringing with us some of the precious sheaves of truth we have garnered during the year. The meeting may not be as large as the one last year at Iowa City but it should be one of inspiration to all, and as we separate let us face the future with renewed courage, with a stronger determination to continue even more actively in our various fields of endeavor. Our number of specially trained should increase, and the work we do should be sufficient in quantity and of that high quality that will give us a good standing among other learned societies. We have our own part in making our nation a world power in the field of productive scholarship.