

The Bravest Man I Ever Met  
by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.  
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Last December, 2000 Americans gathered at New York's Hotel Astor to celebrate the 80th birthday of Norman Thomas. I could not be present because I had to go to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. But before I enplaned for Norway, I taped the following message to be sent to America's foremost Socialist:

*I can think of no man who has done more than you to inspire the vision of a society free of injustice and exploitation. While some would adjust to the status quo, you urged struggle. While some would corrupt struggle with violence or undemocratic perversions, you have stood firmly for the integrity of ends and means. Your example has ennobled and dignified the fight for freedom, and all that we hear of the Great Society seems only an echo of your prophetic eloquence. Your pursuit of racial and economic democracy at home, and of sanity and peace in the world, has been awesome in scope. It is with deep admiration and indebtedness that I carry the inspiration of your life to Oslo.*

Truly, the life of Norman Thomas has been one of deep commitment to the betterment of all humanity. In 1928, the year before I was born, he waged the first of six campaigns as the Socialist Party's candidate for President of the United States. A decade earlier, as a preacher, he fought gallantly, if unsuccessfully, against American involvement in World War I. Both then and now he has raised aloft the banner of civil liberties, civil rights, labor's right to organize, and has played a significant role in so many diverse areas of activity that newspapers all over the land have termed him "America's conscience."

There are those who call Norman Thomas a failure because he has never been elected to office. One of his severest critics is Thomas himself. When asked what he had accomplished in his life, the white-haired Socialist leader replied:

*I suppose it is an achievement to live to my age and feel that one has kept the faith, or tried to. It is an achievement to have had a part, even if it was a minor part, in some of the things that have been accomplished in the field of civil liberty, in the field of better race relations, and the rest of it. It is something of an achievement, I think, to keep the idea of socialism before a rather indifferent or even hostile public. That's the kind of achievement that I would have to my credit, if any. As the world counts achievement, I have not got much.*

But the world disagrees. The Washington Post, echoed by scores of other newspapers, called Thomas "among the most influential individuals in 20th century politics" and added: "We join great numbers of his fellow Americans in congratulating the country on having him as a leader at large."

During our historic March on Washington in the summer of 1963, when 250,000 Negro and white Americans joined together in an outpouring of fellowship and brotherly cooperation for a world of freedom and

equality, a little Negro boy listened at the Washington Monument to an eloquent orator.

- Turning to his father, he asked: “Who is that man?”
- Came the inevitable answer: “That's Norman Thomas. He was for us before any other white folks were.”

His concern for racial equality flows naturally from his heritage. His father and both grandparents were Presbyterian ministers. His maternal grandfather Stephen Mattoon was not only an abolitionist but went south to Charlotte, North Carolina after the Civil War and became the founder and first president of a college for Negroes, then named Biddle College, but now called Johnson C. Smith University. Emma Mattoon, Norman's mother, was a girl of about 12 when the family moved to Charlotte. She remembered vividly how the other white girls in the area ostracized her and her sister because their father, a Northerner, taught “niggers.”

Thomas, of course, was actively opposed to racial discrimination. In 1921, when he edited a pacifist magazine, *The World Tomorrow*, he wrote (and this perhaps indicates how far we are from those days):

*Northern industrial centers may seem by comparison desirable to the southern Negroes who emigrate to them. But they are very poor sort of earthly paradise, as The World Tomorrow can testify. This thought has been brought home to the magazine by an experience of its own. We are obliged to move to new offices at 108 Lexington Avenue, New York City, and the reason is this – but the owners of the building demanded of us signature of a lease forbidding the employment of any Negro. We should have refused such a demand on principle, but in addition we are proud of the fact that one of the most faithful of our office staff is a Negro woman. That her race should be discriminated against in more than one office building in New York City [is] a practical denial of the fundamental principles of brotherhood and Christianity.*

And in 1933, when labor, farm, unemployed, Socialist and liberal groups joined together in a New Continental Congress in Washington, D.C., to lobby for a decent deal for America's depressed millions, Thomas was instrumental in dealing a blow to Jim Crow. Most of the New York delegates were originally housed in the Cairo Hotel. In his book [Norman Thomas: A Biography](#) (Norton), Harry Fleischman relates that when the hotel barred Floria Pinkney, a Negro delegate, hundreds of the delegates marched to the hotel in the body, canceled their reservations, and demanded return of the money they had paid in advance. Thomas was their spokesman. When the hotel refused to return the money, Thomas arranged with lawyers to bring suit, whereupon the hotel agreed to return the money.

Thomas also worked hand-in-hand with our most illustrious Negro labor leader, A. Philip Randolph, in speaking at organizing meetings of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, in fighting for permanent Federal Fair Employment Practices executive orders and laws, and in helping to abolish discrimination in the nation's armed forces

But his concern for civil rights is only one facet of Thomas's life that has aroused my admiration and that of many of his fellow Americans, black and white. Describing the Socialist leader's career, Dr. John Haynes Holmes

recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
Until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness,  
And the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.  
Upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, have I set watchmen,  
Who shall never hold their peace, day and night,  
Go through, go through the gates;  
Prepare ye the way of the people.*

The role of watchman on the tower has never been an easy calling. Who stands upon the wall stands alone. And a man's arms can weary of lifting a standard for the people. There is no rest in it, nor worldly success, nor choice. Yet his courageous championship of exhausted sharecroppers in the South, of persecuted Japanese Americans in World War II, of conscientious objectors in federal prisons, of exploited hospital workers in northern settings, of Mississippi Negroes fighting for the right to vote, his lifelong campaign for economic and social democracy, and his unceasing drive for the maximum international cooperation for peace with justice have endeared him to millions around the globe. He has proved that there is something truly glorious human being forever engaged in the pursuit of justice and equality. He is one of the bravest men I ever met.

“So long as Norman Thomas is alive and capable of standing before a public forum,” stated dramatist Morton Wishengrad, “those who are alienated and excluded are not entirely mute. One man articulate in the service of so many. It is beyond socialism, beyond political system, and beyond economic doctrine.”

The overriding passion of Thomas's life has been the pursuit of peace – not the deadly apathy of appeasement or submission to tyranny but the insistence that the resolution of differences must be transferred from the dreadful realm of military force to economic and ideological conflict and, ultimately, international long and cooperation. He has put that philosophy practically – maximum isolation from war, maximum cooperation for peace.

His quest for peace started during World War I when he came to the conviction that Christianity and war were in complete opposition, that “you cannot conquer war by war, cast out Satan by Satan, or do the enormous evil of war that good may come.” Thomas was so passionate speaker even then that his intense convictions drew forth strong responses from his audiences.

After a talk in February 1917 at Wesleyan University's Y.M.C.A., its President, Fred Stevens, who had been in the U.S. Army for six years, was much impressed by Thomas's remarks. He was scheduled to address the entire student body at a University preparedness rally. The chairman arose and said: “Wesleyan is fortunate in having an Army officer in its midst who has agreed to drill our volunteers and teach them military tactics. I give you Fred Stevens.” Stevens got up and told his startled audience: “I'm sorry, fellows. I can't do it. I heard Norman

Thomas last night. I'm a pacifist now.”

Through that war, and between wars, and into the next war, Thomas proclaimed that ethical imperative: Thou shalt not kill. When it was popular to do so and when it was dangerous to do so, he kept insisting that war is an evil that men can make – and that only men can cure.

This message the dynamic Socialist leader has taken to his country and to the world in every form that human energy and eloquence allow. A score of books that have reached people all over the world reveals some of their content in their titles:

- Is Conscience the Crime?;
- War – No Profit, No Glory, No Need;
- Appeal to the Nations;
- The Prerequisites For Peace.

It [has] been the basis for rallying the American people in times of crisis in organizations from the American Union against Militarism at the time of World War I to the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and Turn toward Peace today (two organizations in which I am happy to work with him).

Peace has been the theme of countless hundreds of broadcasts over radio and, later, TV networks over a period of 40 years. Peace has been included in conferences on the economic and other practical aspects of universal disarmament under effective international inspection, which have drawn Senators and scholars as well as representatives of voluntary agencies. The search for peace has taken Thomas across the American continent year after year, speaking to small groups and large. And peace has taken him across the world to conferences with leaders of nations and with the prototype of that international fellowship of free men whose vision he has helped to create.

Thomas, a Presbyterian minister, found his interest in socialism stimulated by the antiwar declaration of the Socialist Party in 1917. He wrote Morris Hillquit, one of the declaration's authors, to offer help in Hillquit's New York mayoralty campaign:

*The hope for the future lies in a new social and economic order which demands the abolition of the capitalist system. War itself is only the most horrible and dramatic of the many evil fruits of our present organized system of exploitation and the philosophy of life which exalts competition instead of cooperation.*

When Thomas joined the Socialist Party in 1918, it was with certain reservations:

*Perhaps to certain members of the Party my socialism would not be of the most orthodox variety. As you know I have a profound fear of the undue exaltation of the State and the profound faith that the new world we desire must depend upon freedom and fellowship rather than upon any sort of coercion whatsoever. I am interested in political parties only to the extent in which they may be serviceable in advancing certain ideals and in winning liberty for men and women.*

Even before becoming a Socialist, Thomas displayed a lack of orthodoxy in nonconformity when he coupled his support of women's suffrage with an expressed doubt that women would vote any more wisely than men. While maintaining that women had just as much right to be wrong as men, Thomas annoyed those suffragettes who argued passionately, "When women get the vote, war will be ended for all time."

In the dark days before the New Deal, when the open shop prevailed and unions were weak and poor, the Socialist leader was a familiar figure to workers in scores of strikes. Thomas could be found, noted David Dubinsky, President of the Ladies International Garment Workers' Union, "In each and every strike on the picket lines and in the hall meetings. We found him when we could not raise money to supply food, sandwiches, or literature for our strikers. We found him championing every battle for free speech, for free assemblage."

Before I was in kindergarten, America was in the throes of a desperate depression, with the Wall Street crash followed by the grim misery of rapidly growing mass unemployment. In the 1932 presidential campaign, Thomas, as the Socialist presidential nominee, called for socialization of the nation's major industries and natural resources, but his major stress was on immediate programs to ameliorate the tragic effects of the depression and to lead to economic recovery. The platform called for a \$10 billion federal program of public works and unemployment relief plus laws to acquire land, buildings, and equipment to put the unemployed to work producing food, fuel, clothing, and homes for their own use.

The platform also urged:

- Compulsory insurance against unemployment.
- Employment agencies free to the public.
- Old-age pensions for men and women 60 years old.
- Abolition of child labor.
- The six-hour day, five-day week with no wage reductions.
- Aid to farmers and homeowners against foreclosures of their mortgages.
- Health insurance and maternity insurance.
- Adequate minimum wage laws.

Neither the Republican nor Democratic platforms showed any comparable understanding of the nation's needs in a time of crisis. It is to Franklin D Roosevelt's credit that, when elected, he did not hesitate to use many of Thomas's planks to build his New Deal.

I have remarked upon Thomas's suspicion of orthodoxy, but in one respect he accepted orthodox Socialist views on race. The Socialist Party had no special plank on the problem of the Negro. It assumed that abolishing capitalism would automatically mean equality for the Negro. Thomas did not find out how inadequate this approach was until the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) came upon the scene. While in Birmingham, Alabama, on a speaking tour, Thomas was told by a white Socialist who was on W.P.A. that he had asked his fellow white workers if they would prefer getting \$5 a day if Negroes were paid the same wage, or only \$4 a day, with Negroes getting only \$3.50. Overwhelmingly, he told Thomas, [whites] preferred less money so long as it

was more than the Negroes were given! This failure to understand the deeply rooted psychological bases of racism contributed to the Socialist failure to win massive Negro support.

It is been my good fortune to work with Norman Thomas not only for world peace and for racial equality but for fair treatment of all of the world's minorities and for social justice everywhere. Several years ago, when the Soviet Union sentenced more than 120 persons – most of them Jews – to death for "economic" crimes, we joined with Dr. Linus Pauling, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, and Dr. William Ernest Hocking in initiating a petition signed by more than 200 prominent Americans urging the Soviet Union to abandon such a practice.

When the U.S.S.R. formally abolished the death penalty some years ago, it boasted that it “was leaving the capitalistic countries behind and was moving toward a more liberal, enlightened Communist society.” When the death penalty was invoked in the United States, particularly in the case of convicted Soviet spies, many anti-Communists, running the gamut from Pope Pius XII to Norman Thomas and myself, inveighed against such death sentences.

By reverting to capital punishment, the Khrushchev regime abandoned any propaganda advantages it had boasted. Boris Nikiforov, head of the Criminal Law Department of the U.S.S.R. Institute of Jurisprudence, attempted to whitewash the Soviet death penalty by claiming that state property is “sacred and inviolable” and deliver appropriates state property “encroaches on the basic principle of life of Soviet society.” To that argument, we joined former Sen. Herbert Lehman when he aptly replied: "Property rights are no less important in the private economy than in a Communist economy. But one of the chief glories of a sane society is that it places human rights and human life on a higher and more sacred plane than property rights." Incidentally, the "economic" crimes for which the Russians imposed the death penalty included currency speculation and black marketing. One man was doomed for running a private cosmetics business. Three others were condemned to death for selling low-grade apples at top prices.

One of Norman Thomas's most endearing qualities has been his ability to hate the sin but love the sinner. While recognizing that people are influenced by their economic and social backgrounds, he knows that they are often capable of rising above narrow self- or class-interest. He has often been critical of leaders in high places, but he is been scrupulous in giving credit where credit is due, a circumstance that has appealed to Presidents and hosts of other public officials. And, in a time when apathy and indifference have characterized much of mankind, one of his outstanding attributes has been his capacity for indignation at any injustice, which led Roger Baldwin to call Thomas “a civil liberties agency all by himself, with an acute sense of timing and publicity.”

Nor is Thomas a dissenter just for the sake of dissent. “The secret of a good life,” he once wrote, “is to have the right loyalties and to hold them in the right scale of values. The value of dissent and dissenters is to make us reappraise those values with supreme concern for the truth.... Rebellion per se is not a virtue. If it were, we would have some heroes on very low levels.”

At Thomas's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party, one of the greetings read:

*I understand the moment of truth has arrived and you are confessing another birthday. In your instance this should be easy because you remain eternally young of heart and young of spirit. As one of your older friends, I wish to join in wishing you not only a happy birthday but continued good health. Your life has been dedicated to the practice and ideals of democracy. It [has] also been a life of courage in the battle against all forms of totalitarianism. With equal vigor and determination you have challenged the evil forces both of fascism and communism – never flinching or retreating, always advocating the cause of freedom and social justice. America is a better land because of you, your life, your work, your deeds.*

Signing that greeting was Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. Other greetings came from present or former prime ministers, Supreme Court judges, Senators, Congressmen, and leaders of all of America's political parties. Yet America has never fully utilized Thomas's great abilities. He has been a marvelous unofficial ambassador-at-large to our friends in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Would it not make sense to make him our official representative to the United Nations?