

## **“On a Note of Triumph” (May 8, 1945)**

**Added to the National Registry: 2022**

**Essay by Christopher Husted (guest post)\***



The declaration of Allied victory in Europe on 8 May 1945 was, among many other things great and small, a slightly late birthday present for Norman Corwin, who began his 35th year of life five days before. Anticipation of the war’s end had loomed for some time, and the occasion proved as momentous to his career as it was a relief to him personally. Unlike any other American, CBS commissioned him to create an hour-long essay for radio that would be broadcast nationally the day the declaration was made. Called “On a Note of Triumph,” it coalesced his progressive views of contemporary concerns, the wartime aims of his country, and his finely-honed style, into a powerful meditation on the Allied victory... and that victory’s implications.

“On a Note of Triumph” has enjoyed a singular significance both in Corwin’s output and in the history of broadcast radio since its enthusiastically-received first performance. While it cast a long shadow for Corwin, it also grew from the shadows cast by several earlier works where he dealt with similar themes in the steady evolution of his style as a writer and director. The most important of these earlier works--“We Hold These Truths”--took its title from the opening words of the Declaration of Independence. Planned through governmental sponsorship for simultaneous broadcast on all four major radio networks, it commemorated the 150th anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights on 15 December 1941.

In turn, both essays owe their form and tone to “Between Americans,” one of a series of 26 consecutive episodes of the CBS series “Columbia Workshop” written and directed by Corwin. Aired first on 6 July 1941, it grappled with American ideals and society in a kaleidoscopic array of dramatic vignettes tied together by eloquent commentary from one or more narrators. Ironically enough, it was revived for broadcast as an episode of the “Gulf Screen Guild Theatre” the following December 7th by Orson Welles--who would be the principal narrator of “We Hold These Truths” eight days later. The night of Welles’s performance--which differed significantly in tone from the first broadcast--Corwin, traveling to Los Angeles on the Super Chief with

the script of “We Hold These Truths,” was still not finished. “Between Americans” became the first complete item from the regularly-scheduled programming for a day dominated by news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, which had happened just hours before. Deeply conscious of the urgency that was now attached to so wide-reaching a platform as the essay would enjoy, Corwin worked furiously with an all-star cast and composer Bernard Herrmann in a mixture of anxiety and enthusiasm to get the show on the air.

Greeted as a phenomenal success, the Crossley Rating Service estimated “We Hold These Truths” was heard by an audience of 63 million. It has thusly remained the most widely-heard non-news radio broadcast in US history. It also firmly established Norman Corwin as a unique observer of the United States, and of the world, through the ongoing crisis of the Second World War. He worked industriously at his craft at CBS through the duration of the conflict. Projects included a series of field reporting in the late summer of 1942 from the United Kingdom—“An American in England”—and an anthology series called “Columbia Presents Corwin.” The anthology included several experiments with essay form that approached the concerns of the war from new points of view, but in a form similar to “We Hold These Truths.” In “Untitled,” a series of vignettes of reminiscent testimony from significant people in the life of a soldier killed in action. These accounts are woven together by an unnamed narrator who finally joins the testimony when he reveals he is that slain soldier. In “Whitman,” Corwin draws generously--and directly--on the poetry of Walt Whitman in a striking demonstration of the enduring relevance of that poet’s vision in the face of a world war; the essay is triply memorable for the spectacular performance of Charles Laughton as Whitman and for Bernard Herrmann’s evocative incidental music. Finally, there is the novel verse essay “There Will Be Time Later,” in which Corwin reacts with eloquent outrage at the growing calls of frustrated impatience with the home-front sacrifices of the war effort while vicious combat continued in the European and Pacific theaters.

By the late summer of 1944, allied victory looked more and more assured--enough that thought could turn now to how that victory would play out on the home front. In August, Douglas Coulter, Vice President of Programming at CBS, approached Corwin with the idea of a special essay program for the Allied victory, and urged him to conclude “Columbia Presents Corwin” at once to focus his energies on developing this new project so it would be ready for immediate broadcast when victory came. It was clearly aimed at reprising “We Hold These Truths.” Corwin complied, and struggled, at first, for a new angle after having spent nearly three years energetically exploring war-related concerns. Despite a brief break when the “Battle of the Bulge” threatened to extend the duration of the war significantly, Corwin persisted with the project, completing it in late January 1945. Once again he asked that Bernard Herrmann write the incidental music, a task the composer undertook after returning from Hollywood, where he had just finished incidental music for his fifth film project, “Hangover Square.”

The solution Corwin arrived at was a brilliant one. After a rousing congratulation to the troops after their hard-won victory, vignettes of prayer offerings in churches, and of celebrations around the country, prepare the ground for Corwin’s deeper aim. He poses a series of questions asked by unnamed soldiers (“Who did we beat?” “How much did it cost?” “What have we learned out of this war?” “Is it gonna happen again?”). He then weaves a complex web of commentary and vignettes around these questions. Eloquent laments for the immense suffering the war effort

exacted drive his appeals that a lasting peace be painstakingly wrought from the ashes of the conflict. He then engineers a charismatic closure by recalling the prayers examined near the beginning with a prayer of his own, urging God to “post proofs that brotherhood is not so wild a dream as those who profit by postponing it pretend.” Though some of the essay’s style and devices may strike modern listeners as dated, it is rife with memorable commentary that is eerily relevant to current concerns--so much so that it richly rewards hearing today.

The estate of Norman Corwin is honored that the 8 May 1945 broadcast of “On a Note of Triumph” becomes a title in the National Recording Registry in time to mark both the 77th Anniversary of V-E Day, and the writer-producer-director’s 111th birthday, the latter of which falls on the day this essay is being written. It is especially appropriate that this broadcast now joins its pair, “We Hold These Truths,” which was listed with the Registry in 2004.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.