
The Limit of Endurance

by Eugene V. Debs

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Everything has its limits except space and eternity, provided, they can be called things. The mind and all of its wonderful faculties: thought, imagination, hope, fear, and aspirations, all operate within certain boundaries. It may be said that time should be included with space and eternity — perhaps so; it is not essential since we absolutely know nothing of either. True, for convenience we divide and subdivide time and space, but eternity is beyond our grasp and we let it alone. And time and space, though we talk about seconds and centuries, of inches and miles, we find as we proceed that all limits vanish and we turn our attention to things which have limits, and determine as best we may, what their limits are. Life has its limits, our years are numbered — three score and ten is the limit,¹ millions fall short of it, a few go beyond it. The luxuries of wealth have their limit, the privations of poverty have their limit. Human joys and human sorrows have their boundaries. Crime and cruelty, virtue and vice operate within certain restrictions fixed by human depravity, or human probity, regardless of any particular form of government. In a despotism the autocrat determines limits, in a democracy the people exercise that power; in either case it is human will power not divine power, and being human power that prescribes limits it becomes possible for human power to change the limits, broaden or contract them.

As to the limit of human endurance, history is full of examples, in reading which the mind either expands with rapturous delight, or evinces unutterable scorn and detestation. Slavery is an old time institution. What were the conditions before the flood we are not advised, but as human slavery includes the sum total of human depravity, we do not doubt that the giants, for there were giants we are told in those

¹ Allusion to *Psalms* 90, verse 10: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

far away times, subjugated those of less power and brought about that condition of wickedness which prompted the Creator to declare He would annihilate the race; the limit of sin had been reached as also the limit of Jehovah's patience, but his wrath was modified to the extent of saving one man and his family, Noah, all others were drowned as if they had been so many rats.² Again we find, according to the record that divine as certainly as human endurance, has its limits, as, for instance, the cruelties inflicted upon the Israelites in Egypt.³ These cruelties became so continuous and flagitious that in the councils of the Almighty that vengeance took the place of patience. The grievance committees of the oppressed Israelites were repulsed by Pharaoh, a la Pullman, until all heaven cried "shame!" just as all the Pullman employee pointed their fingers at Pharaoh Pullman and held him up to the scorn of all workmen of America whose chicken hearts and white livers had not taken refuge in their boots. Outside of heaven there was no sympathy for the Israelites when Moses ordered the strike, and in dealing with it, God, who was first, last, and all the time on the side of Moses, the great labor agitator, did not consider in the slightest degree the inconvenience His methods would bring upon the innocent people of Egypt. To subdue Pharaoh the people suffered every plague, and there were nine of them fell upon the people with the same terrific force that they fell upon Pharaoh. It was Jehovah's way of managing a strike, and as the strike proceeded Jehovah's wrath burned with a fiercer fury, until, to bring Pharaoh to terms, the first born in every family of the Egyptians was slain in a night, then while all Egypt was wrapt in mourning, while every family was wailing, while the embalmers were at work making a mummy in every Egyptian home, the limit of endurance was reached and Pharaoh consented to let the enslaved Egyptians go, and suspend brickmaking for a time; but he had no sooner consented than he relented and followed the fugitives and met his Red Sea defeat. Ultimate limits of divine and human patience had been reached and the right won a victory.

Since that epoch in the history of labor, numberless Pharaohs have arisen to oppress, rob and degrade the world's toilers and put to the test human endurance, and in millions of instances the limit has been reached and the victims of oppression have gone down to death, unknelt, uncoffined, unshrouded, and unsung; and still the Phar-

² Allusion to *Genesis*, chapters 6-8.

³ This and the following alludes to *Exodus*, chapters 7-15, *passim*.

ahs and the Pullmans and the corporations and the courts and the armies are driving men to the uttermost limits of endurance. In doing this the pulpit comes to the rescue and recites Paul's direction to Titus "to be subject to principalities and powers," and "obey magistrates,"⁴ which, had it been followed by the patriots of '76, there would have been no Declaration of Independence, there would have been no great American republic, a new nation would not have been born, and

The flag of the free heart's only home⁵

would never have waved over

The land of the free and the home of the brave.⁶

We would have remained the subjects of King George and would never have known the inspiring thrill of manhood sovereignty. But the limits of human endurance had been reached, and Patrick Henry condensed it all into a sentence when he said: "Give me liberty, or give me death."⁷ Then the patriots of the colonies struck for liberty, regardless of inconveniences, sacrifices death and desolation. Property was destroyed, the laws of England were set at defiance and after an eight year struggle victory perched upon the standard of Washington. King George and his armies were driven away a price was set upon Washington's head, there was treason in his camps, but France looking on, said liberty is a good thing, the cause of Washington is just and from sheer *sympathy* joined in the strike and helped to win a victory. Indeed without such sympathy the struggling continental armies might have gone down in defeat. And yet, thousands of workingmen whose vital interests are involved, under the leadership of a Tory press, declaim against sympathy as if it were a crime. The question arises: Will the time ever come in America when the toiling masses will declare that decreased wages and consequent poverty and degradation have reached the furthestmost limits of endurance? Already

⁴ Reference to *Titus*, chapter 3, verse 1: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work."

⁵ From "To the American Flag" (1819), by **Joseph Rodman Drake** (1795-1820).

⁶ From "The Star-Spangled Banner" (1814), by **Francis Scott Key** (1779-1843).

⁷ **Patrick Henry** (1736-1799) made the famous utterance in a speech to the 2nd Virginia Convention in March 1775.

such conditions have been reached by multiplied thousands, and other thousands are yearly being drawn down to death in the maelstrom of corporate greed. Here and there they appeal to their fellow toilers as fate bears them on towards the verge of the vortex, for help, for sympathy, telling them they too are approaching by steady steps to the engulfing whirlpool, but a hireling press and armies of degenerate men tell them their fears are groundless and their protests criminal, and other thousands of their fellow toilers, eating the crumbs which fall from rich men's tables, moral and mental deformities, rattle their chains and chuckle as they see men straggle, as they hear them protest, and by forces they cannot withstand [are held] to silence.

Men talk of hard times, of commercial, financial, and industrial demoralization, and while they talk and scheme, the corporations rob their victims and the limit of human endurance is reached, and trouble begins. The toilers are ostracized, the rich only have influence, they pursue their victims to the uttermost limits of endurance and when they turn upon their pursuers the government brings out its judicial and its military machines, injunctions cover the land like shrouds, marshals swarm like bee in June, troops shoot and stab, the innocent and the guilty pour out their life blood, and the proclamation goes forth "Quiet reigns." The government for the corporation, of the corporation, and by the corporation triumphs; the government for, of, and by the people, ceases to be — no, not that exactly — "Freedom's battle once begun stands numberless defeats."⁸ The champions of the poor may be imprisoned, perish in dungeons, starved and exiled until their bones fill all the valleys, but at last the genius of liberty shall breathe upon the dry bones, and as in the prophet's vision the world shall see rise up an army, greater than all standing armies of potentates and plutocrats, an army equipped with moral and with physical power that shall bear down and sweep away all opposition and win a victory for labor the fruition of which shall last until the sun is cold.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁸ Apparently Debs's own adage adapted from *The Giaour* (1813), by **George Gordon Byron** (1788-1824): "*For Freedom's battle once begun, / Bequeathed by bleeding sire to son, / Though baffled oft is ever won.*"

