

## **“We Hold These Truths” (December 15, 1941)**

**Added to the National Registry: 2004**

**Essay by Mary Ann Watson (guest post)\***



*Norman Corwin*

*“We Hold These Truths” (Bill of Rights Special) aired December 15, 1941 and was written, produced and directed by Norman Corwin. It was commissioned to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Bill of Rights. The hour-long broadcast was carried by CBS, NBC-Red, NBC-Blue, and the Mutual Broadcasting network, eight days after the attack on Pearl Harbor.*

William B. Lewis, the vice-president of programming at the CBS radio network, who had hired Norman Corwin, in 1938, left his post at CBS to join the war effort by working in the Office of Facts and Figures (later to become the Office of War Information). The Office of Facts and Figures planned to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the American Bill of Rights in December 1941. Lewis urged the planning committee to use radio in the effort.

With the support of President Franklin Roosevelt, Lewis proposed a monumental broadcast to be aired on all the major radio networks in prime time. Lewis thought of the one man to handle the task to create the show to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution on December 15, 1941 was Norman Corwin. Corwin, already recognized as radio’s greatest writer, was flattered by the faith of his former boss, but freshly exhausted after the completion his series “Twenty Six by Corwin”; he was reluctant to take on the enormous project. Lewis persisted.

On November 17, 1941 Corwin went to Washington D.C. to meet with Lewis. During a lengthy discussion about the proposed broadcast, Corwin learned of the President’s direct involvement and the possibility that Roosevelt himself would conclude the program with a brief presentation. The scope and importance of the project became apparent. With the deadline only 26 days away, Corwin began his work.

He headed to the Library of Congress and searched through files pertaining to the Bill of Rights. He found the evolution of the first ten amendments a complicated and often fragmentary story. Corwin was granted special permission to work in the Library past closing time. He searched through countless cross-references and pored over volumes of history in the cold library until the early hours of the morning. When he finally went home to sleep, he awoke with a sore throat and was ill for the following three days.

At Corwin's request, Bernard Herrmann was commissioned to compose the broadcast's score. But when he arrived in Washington to confer with Corwin, the script was only half finished. In early December, the script was three-quarters complete and Corwin had to depart for Hollywood, where the production would take place. The remainder of the script would have to be written on the train to the West Coast.

Aboard the *Twentieth Century Limited*, Corwin closeted himself in a compartment to complete his script, pecking away at his portable typewriter. Corwin envisioned the actor Jimmy Stewart as his narrator. Negotiations were underway to get the movie star, who had joined the U.S. Army Air Corps eight months earlier, to get leave to appear on the program.

Along the journey West, Corwin sent telegrams to other performers on his "wish list"—including Marjorie Main, Edward Arnold, and Orson Welles. All accepted and waived their fees.

On Sunday, December 7, Corwin connected with the *Chief* in Chicago. In the afternoon, after working alone, he summoned the porter with the hopes of renting a portable radio to hear a broadcast of his play "Between Americans" scheduled for that evening. The porter informed him there were no radios available because the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor

Corwin telephoned William Lewis at the next stop to see if the Bill of Rights show was still on, but the phone lines to Washington were all busy so he sent a telegram. Lewis responded that it was "even of greater importance now." Corwin now had the awesome responsibility of representing his country at war. "We Hold These Truths" was now more than a simple commemorative piece.

Corwin arrived in Los Angeles on December 9th. He worked through the night in his hotel suite, not even stopping for a blackout drill in preparation for worst-case scenarios on the homeland. The evening of Friday, December 12th was the first day of rehearsal for the stellar cast. When Jimmy Stewart completed his final speech of the play, spontaneous applause erupted. "It wasn't until then," Corwin said, "that I really felt I had something."

The dramatic, multi-voiced, all-star program included appearances by Stewart, Main, and Arnold along with Lionel Barrymore, Bob Burns, Walter Huston, and Edward G. Robinson.

The technical logistics of the program were complicated. They involved origination from three cities. The main program coming from Hollywood, followed by a live remote from the White House, and concluding with the playing of the national anthem in New York.

The day of the broadcast, the dress rehearsal was near perfection. Corwin was elated but worried—familiar with the theatrical tradition that a fine dress rehearsal forecast a bad show. The live production was not as flawless as the dress rehearsal, but there were no major flubs.

The day after the broadcast, congratulations and accolades poured in. “We Hold These Truths,” celebrating and elucidating the meaning of freedom, stiffened the resolve of a country being asked to sacrifice so much to preserve it.

The Crossley rating service indicated that approximately 63 million listeners heard the historic four-network broadcast. The show won the George F. Peabody Medal and was inducted into the National Archives’ National Recording Registry for preservation in 2004.

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*Note: The primary source of this essay is “Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years” by R. LeRoy Bannerman (The University of Alabama Press, 1986). Also, Norman Corwin’s “One World Flight: The Lost Journal of Radio’s Greatest Writer,” edited by Michael C. Keith and Mary Ann Watson (NY: Continuum Publishing, 2009) and the website [www.normancorwin.com](http://www.normancorwin.com)*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.