

# MASONS UNDER ATTACK

Presented by Worshipful Bro. Edwin L. Vardiman

William O. Ware Lodge of Research - October 13, 1984

At the first impression, the title of my talk tonight may shock you. After all, why should an organization which stands only for good, for brotherhood, for individual freedom of thought, and acknowledgment of a supreme being, among other worthwhile objectives, be considered an enemy of any individual or political state? However, we are all aware of instances where the Masonic Lodge has come under attack of totalitarian organizations and governments. The Communists have always opposed the Masonic Lodge and have outlawed the Masonic Fraternity in every land they control. Of recent memory, General Franco and his fascist government in Spain had an undying hatred of the Masonic Lodge. Franco lost no opportunity to blame many of his disappointments on and reverses on a "Freemason plot." Also, let us not overlook that when the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Hitler gave Hermann Goering the specific task of destroying the Masonic organization in that Country. I'm sure you have heard of how many of our persecuted German Brethren resorted to wearing the forget-me-not flower instead of the traditional square and compasses to attempt to maintain their Brotherhood without suffering imprisonment or death from the dreaded Gestapo.

Going back further in history, we find the fanatical attempts of the Popes in Rome to stamp out the Masons which resulted in the torture and death of many good and true men. In 1738 Pope Clement XII issued his famous papal bull, or edict, against Freemasons. In that declaration, the Roman Pontiff said, in effect, that since the Masons took an oath to keep secrets, the Fraternity became suspect as being a threat to the peace of the state and the safety of the soul. It then proceeded to order all bishops and priests to punish the Freemasons "with all the penalties which they deserve as people greatly suspect of heresy...." The Inquisition followed the Pope's instructions enthusiastically and many acts of torture and persecution were carried out in Italy, Spain and the other Catholic controlled countries. Nevertheless, Masonry continued to flourish, and so in 1751 another edict was issued by Pope Benedict XIV which renewed and enforced the bull which had been published by Clement. Thus, another round of torture and death was unleashed on the Fraternity.

The Popes and the Catholic hierarchy were not the only clergy that viewed Masonry as a threat and something to be stamped out as a noxious weed. In 1745, the

Council of Berne, Switzerland issued a decree prohibiting, under the severest penalties, the assemblages of Freemasons. In 1757, the Synod of Sterling, in Scotland, adopted a resolution debarring all adhering Freemasons from the ordinances of the Presbyterian religion; and to show that fanaticism can be found in all cultures and countries, in 1748 the Divan at Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) caused a Masonic Lodge to be demolished, its jewels and furniture seized, and its members arrested.

Of course, you say, those unfortunate things happened long ago, in faraway lands, under authoritarian governments controlled by religious zealots. Such a thing couldn't happen here, in the good old U. S. A. ... land of the free and home of the brave ... the land where many of the Craft played an important role in the foundation of our system of free government, and in defense of the new Republic. True enough, but I'm sure most you have heard of the William Morgan affair. This incident led to a strong anti-Masonic sentiment which swept through a large part of the American population, caused great upheaval and distress in the Lodge, and led to the establishment of a political party whose platform was animosity for the Fraternity, and whose purpose was to put down the Masonic Institution as subversive of good government.

To better understand how this organized opposition to Masonry came about right here in our own land, let me first quickly review the strange case of William Morgan. Morgan has an obscure history as a Mason, with there being no record of when or where he was raised a Master Mason. However, there are records which show he was active in Lodge activities in New York State in 1825. In that year, a decision was made by New York Masons to start a Royal Arch Chapter in Batavia, New York, and Morgan was active in this effort. For reasons unknown, Morgan's name was struck from the roll and thus started a strange history. Whether being dropped from the Chapter caused him to develop his anti-Masonic sentiments, or if he just needed money, no one will ever know, but within a year Morgan was attempting to find a publisher for a book he had written, an expose of Freemasonry.

When knowledge of Morgan's intentions regarding the book became known, there was great displeasure by many members of the Lodge, and several attempts were made to stop its publication. Morgan had entered into an agreement with a printer named Miller who was to publish the book. However, strange and disturbing things began to happen. Not one, but two fires broke out in Miller's printshop. Miller claimed the fires were set by Masons. The Masons said Miller set the fires himself to get publicity. Miller was arrested on other charges which were later dismissed, and then suddenly Morgan was arrested and put in jail on theft charges.

Now the plot thickens. Morgan was released from jail on September 12, 1826. Outside the jail was a carriage that Morgan entered, whether willingly or unwillingly, no one knows. Morgan's whereabouts were later tracked to Fort Niagara, New York a week later, but after that he disappeared from the face of the earth.

Anti-Masonic groups were quick to come forward to claim that Morgan had been killed by the Masons because he was going to expose their secrets. The Freemasons, who admitted to being in Morgan's company from Batavia to Fort Niagara, claimed that Morgan had accepted a sum of money in return for leaving New York, never to return, and resettling in the Canadian wilderness. In reality, no one knows what really happened to William Morgan, but his disappearance had a much greater impact than the mere treachery of a disloyal erstwhile Brother, and his possible demise at the hands of an outraged group of Masonic Lodge members.

The Morgan affair, as it became known, gave rise to the appearance of America's first national third party. The anti-Masonic feeling grew rapidly after the news of Morgan's disappearance became known, and thus illustrated the animosity that had laid dormant for many years following the Revolution. Some believed the Masonic Fraternity was too powerful, had too many friends in high place, and couldn't be trusted to exist with secrets in a free and open society. Many were sincere, I suppose, but I'm sure many others were afflicted with the green eyes of jealousy.

Be that as it may, in January 1827 an anti-Masonic convention was held in Seneca, New York and within a month eleven more such conventions were held. An anti-Masonic newspaper was started in Albany, New York, and anti-Masonic feeling spread like a malignancy. Between 1827 and 1835, the number of Lodges in New York dropped from 127 to only 41. Every Lodge in Vermont surrendered its charter, and the anti-Masonic feeling was evident even to the western frontier, from Michigan to Tennessee.

The organization, rise and later fall of the Anti-Masonic party is too long to be detailed in this paper. However, suffice it to say that in 1831, in Baltimore, Maryland, the Anti-Masonic party nominated William Wirt, a Virginia lawyer, for President of the United States. He, of course, was not elected, but he won seven electoral votes and enough of the popular vote from Brother Henry Clay to allow the re-election of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency in 1832. It is ironic that Andrew Jackson was also a faithful Brother in the Lodge and often went on records against the anti-Masonic hysteria.

By the mid-1830s, the Anti-Masonic party began to fall apart due to internal differences on domestic as well as foreign issues. By 1840, the single-issue party had

exhausted itself and its sole issue, and was slowly absorbed into the larger and more broadly based Whig party. Thus, ended as a political force, the narrow-minded, but vicious, effort to disband the Masonic Lodge in this country.

How could such a thing happen? What were the conditions that caused the Morgan affair to grow to such proportions and prominence instead of being relegated to a puzzling footnote in history? Many historians believe that the reason for the Morgan affair taking the turn that it did lay, in fact, that at this point in American history there were not two strong, contending political parties. The Federalist party of Washington and Adams was moribund and in its death throes. The party of Thomas Jefferson (confusingly known as the Republican-Democrat) had been in power for many years and, while divided, had not yet split into two opposing factions. Thus, there was no political organization available to many young, ambitious men who wanted an "issue" for developing their own political futures. Here, suddenly, was a popular issue, ready-made for the opportunists to develop their political base and to oppose the politicians so long in power.

Was this anti-Masonic movement just happenstance? Was it just the result of a temporary power vacuum in American politics? Let's sincerely hope this was true, and the we, and all other free Americans, never have to fear for our lives and property because of the ignorant hate of a fanatical group. Our laws, so long as they are upheld by the majority of the citizenry, contain safeguards to protect us and our ideals from the extremism of others who would deprive us of our freedom of speech and right of assembly. Can we thus relax, trust that our beloved Fraternity is safe for all time, and bravely face the future? No, my Brethren, for we as members of the Masonic Lodge, and the Lodge itself, face a much greater and even more insidious threat. That threat, in my opinion, is apathy, which is dull indifference to the difficulties in which the Lodge finds itself today, the indifference to what the teachings of Masonry can mean to each of us in our daily lives, and the neglect of the ideals of the Brethren who have traveled this way before us.

The Brethren who suffered under the Inquisition, those who were ostracized after the notoriety of the Morgan affair, those who were tortured and killed by the minions of Hitler and Franco, all of this sacrifice will have been in vain. The dedication of those Brothers and the heritage of faithful service in believing persevering in the face of all odds, can and will be lost if we, the present members, are not faithful to this heritage and trust.

This is the challenge! This is the reality that we must face: not physical pain, not loss of friends and fortune, but the knowledge that we must overcome the apathy and

indifference of our modern day and remain true to the ideals and fidelity of those who have gone before. Let us pray for divine guidance and strength that we will be found faithful, so help us God.