The Hero's Personality[1]

(Speech delivered at an evening event held at the Liceo de Hombres in San Bernardo, in commemoration of the 55th anniversary of the Naval Battle of Iquique. May 21, 1934)

I am not going to speak of heroes in general, but rather of the immortal hero of Iquique, Arturo Prat.

For us Chileans, the immense figure of our country's greatest sailor—and one of the greatest in the world—is well known.

However, despite this, we have never taken the time to analyze the hero's personality.

We know general outlines of his life.

Humble, calm, gentle, quiet, and unassuming, so to speak, the immortal figure of Iquique did not have the appearance of a hero.

A fine soldier, discipline was his guiding principle. As a cadet, he knew how to be obedient and remain calm in the face of the commands of his superiors. When he was a commander, he knew how to ensure that his subordinates fulfilled their duties.

It is said that one day he was forced to punish a junior officer who had behaved disrespectfully toward one of his superiors. Some time later, the subordinate approached him, asking him to commute the punishment because he was remorseful.

"It's all right," Prat replied, "that you regret it, but I would be ashamed to ask for a reduced punishment when I know I deserve it."

And, instead of forgiving him, he doubled the punishment.

Above all else, he imposed upon himself an almost religious respect for duty. He never failed to fulfill it, and he never allowed others to fail to do so.

[1] Speech titled by Patricio Aylwin himself, as stated in the original text.

Meticulous like no other, he always examined his conscience to correct any actions that he felt were wrong.

He risked his life several times in the line of duty.

While he was second-in-command of the Esmeralda, a violent storm broke out.

Prat, who was teaching at the Naval Academy at the time, rushed to the ship immediately. It seemed impossible to board. The sea was raging, and the waves crashed against the boats, capsizing them. The wind blew furiously. Everything pointed to the inevitable sinking of the old corvette. But Prat, scrupulous in his duty and facing death, set out in a boat with four brave sailors and, after a long time—which seemed like days to the astonished onlookers—managed to reach his ship.

And the Esmeralda, skillfully guided by its officers, ran aground on the beach instead of sinking with its entire crew.

A model son, the illustrious sailor always remembered with affection those who had given him life.

A faithful husband and loving father, Prat never forgot that he was leaving behind his beloved wife and his dear children. And in moments of anguish, as he fought on the deck of the Huáscar, sword in hand, he carried in the breast pocket of his jacket, close to his heart, the portrait of those loved ones he would never see again.

Reverent toward religion, he always kept close to his heart—as a Chilean sailor—the sacred image of the Protector of this land's arms, Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

But above all these virtues, patriotism reigned supreme in his courageous spirit.

And so, on May 21, 1879, on that historic date, he encouraged his crew with these words:

"Boys, the battle is unequal. Our flag has never been lowered before the enemy, and I hope this will not be the occasion to do so. As long as I live, this flag will fly in its place, and when I die, my officers will know how to fulfill their duty."

In these solemn words, he states that he will die before seeing the flag of his beloved homeland surrendered, and he believes that his officers will fulfill this sacred duty just as he would.

He fought with determination and bravery, and when, already defeated, the Esmeralda was hit by the Huáscar, he boarded the enemy ship and died for his country, defending that sacred duty he had imposed upon himself.

Few nations have heroes of Prat's stature.

In the chronicles of the sea, which recount so many acts of heroism, he is no less great than Nelson, the greatest of English sailors.

The words with which both men encouraged their crew as they entered battle constitute, for all sailors, the code of honor, duty, and glory.

"England expects that every man will do his duty," the English admiral told his crew.

"This flag has never been lowered," the Chilean captain told his crew, "and this is no time to do so."

Prat is the equal of Nelson. Without hesitation, he boarded the enemy ship and died fighting bravely.

Our hero, a worthy son of the lands of Arauco, possessed the courage of Galvarino and Caupolicán.

Chile is, with good reason, proud of its heroes. And for that reason, the immortal figure of Arturo Prat will live on forever in the hearts of all Chileans.

Patricio Aylwin A.