

AMERICA IN A WORLD AT WAR

Commencement Address

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Only one subject is open to a speaker who faces the graduates of 1941 if he hopes to relate his discussion to the existing world. International events of incredible speed and scope have created a situation that will control the pattern of your personal and professional lives to an extent none of us heretofore has considered possible. Individual desires and plans will be shaped by the sweep of external forces whose very existence most of us would have denied as recently as 18 months ago.

A spokesman for my own or the preceding generation stands convicted of effrontery if he fails to make humble apology to the men and women of tomorrow's responsibilities for the state of affairs to which they are about to be introduced. It would be more appropriate, I think, to line up the oldsters and compel them to listen while some clear-eyed youth pronounced calm judgment on their misdeeds. For it is the sons and daughters who must pay in blood and tears for the ignorance and fumbling ineptitude of past generations.

Today I want to consider the present position and the future course of the United States in a world at war. They more than any other factors will dominate our behavior as individuals and as a whole in the years ahead. I can only try to throw a flashlight over bits of the scene, hoping that the momentary and sketchy illumination may help clear rather than confuse your thinking about it.

In spite of overwhelming contemporary evidence to the contrary, we like to think of man on this globe as the master of his destiny; as able to shape to his desired end the physical, economic and social machine he has created. If he is not or if he cannot hope to become that, then he is as helpless under the drive of external forces as the

toad under a harrow, to which the late Henry C. Wallace once likened him.

Perhaps he is the one and may some day become the other; perhaps man may emerge as a rational being at some remote time after fire and tribulation have forged out a new sense of values in human relationships. But it is fundamental error to think of him today as motivated by reason or logic. He is not.

Yet the whole history of human aspiration points toward that ideal in spite of repeated disillusionment. Without hope of progress toward its attainment the whole educational process becomes pointless because then what we have been pleased to call civilization is doomed to destruction under the wheels of the irrational monster man has created.

Let us then start from the premise that the ultimate goal of a rational world still is living and valid. If our tiny efforts are to contribute toward its realization, it is first essential that we try to see the world as it is and not as we would like it to be and perhaps thought it was.

Up to a year ago we in the United States were certain of many things that weren't true. We lived in a make-believe world comforted by illusions we thought were realities. We thought, for example, that a nation which minded its own business and respected the rights of its neighbors would be left free to work out its destiny in its own sphere. Our actions proved that we considered peace among men the normal state of affairs. These made up the keystone of our thinking on international matters. That keystone has dissolved before the horror that swallowed the peace-loving Scandinavian democracies and the well-ordered life of the Low Countries; that has overwhelmed France, and swept over China,

the Balkans, Greece and the Mediterranean.

A new rule in international affairs is being demonstrated today over three-quarters of the earth. It is the rule of military power in which nothing else counts. The demonstration hasn't ended yet. It is still spreading. There is no limit to its growth except restraint imposed by fear of greater power.

Wealth and resources and population alone do not constitute power in the sense I am talking about. Unless they are organized into effective military power, they are more likely to serve instead as bait tempting to aggression. A nation may possess mountains of gold, millions of acres of factories and millions of manpower; it may lead the world in its productive genius, and still be weak and flabby by the standards of the rule now current over the most of the world. These resources can be organized into power; until then they are negligible factors in the equation except as they constitute an open invitation to some modern Attila to come and get it.

Let us pause for a moment to review some pages from our past which demonstrate our misunderstanding of the world we lived in.

We idealized our last European adventure, so costly in lives, wealth and the economic aftermath, as the war "to end wars" and "to make the world safe for democracy." After the armistice we behaved as if we believed the war had in fact accomplished those very ends finally and without any future care or responsibility for us.

One year before the Peace Conference met at Versailles President Wilson had presented to Congress and published to the world "A Statement of the War Aims and Peace Terms of the United States," summarizing them in the famous fourteen points. No loftier statement

of the ideal in international relationships has been uttered by a responsible statesman in the history of the world. The trouble was that our partners in that military enterprise never evidenced the slightest intention of transforming them into the realities of post-war settlement. Their essentials were completely disregarded in the so-called peace that emerged. For a decade we as a nation did little or nothing of practical value to promote them.

To be sure, there were abundant defects in the Treaty of Versailles and the set-up adopted for the League of Nations to justify American suspicions and distrust. As they stood their provisions were certain to cause trouble. The question is, essentially, what might have been evolved from the League's imperfect start had it been given whole-hearted cooperation and the will to make it work.

We turned our back on Europe and its unsettled problems at the very time when by staying in and resolutely working to ameliorate galling conditions we might have made Hitler impossible. I do not say that this would have been the result; I merely state the opinion that the course of history might have been changed if we had first stood resolutely for the peace principles our war president had stated, and thereafter had worked steadfastly through the League of Nations and the World Court to make them living instruments for the correction of conditions which, unattended, meant explosion.

It is always interesting to speculate on what might have been if this, that or the other thing had been done otherwise. It would also be pointless were it not for the clear application of its lessons to the critical decisions that confront this nation today.

No event in history stands isolated from those which precede and

follow it. Each occurrence is a link in a chain which reaches far back to man's horizon and stretches endlessly into the future. The reasons why this nation abandoned participation in and chose isolation from European affairs in 1920 are many and complex. There was, of course, underlying weariness of war, a reaction which had us saying "never again" and believing the pledge could be kept. But in spite of that, I believe our national course would have been wholly different had Woodrow Wilson possessed qualities of political leadership that matched his nobility of purpose.

For example, if Woodrow Wilson had followed the urgings of some of his closest advisors in choosing his four associates on the American mission to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, our active participation in the League of Nations and World Court would probably have been assured. Whether our participation would have changed substantially the course of subsequent events is a matter for conjecture. It is inconceivable that the course could have been worse, either for the world or for us.

I heard two men who were intimately associated with President Wilson through the war and to the end of his term of office discuss this question freely in a small group one night a little over a year ago. They agreed that when the senators who led the fight against the League and the Court started the attack they hadn't the slightest hope of the success they finally achieved. Both of these advisors to President Wilson had urged him to choose ex-president William Howard Taft and Elihu Root to be members of the five-man American commission to the Peace Conference. Taft and Root had for years been staunch advocates of international cooperation for peace; they were preeminently the leaders of the Republican party. Their appointment and real

participation in the peace congress would have averted the almost solid Republican opposition that followed. But the president chose associates who were with one inconspicuous exception members of his own, the Democratic party, and who without exception were subservient to his will.

About midway between the close of that world war and the first open military act by Germany that ushered in the present one, the United States took the lead in another international maneuver that was noble in its ideals, however unrealistic in relation to the rising European dilemma.

An eminent contemporary authority wrote: "The year 1928 saw more practical progress toward the elimination of war as a factor in international relations than had ever before been made." In August the Kellogg-Briand Peace Treaty calling for the renunciation of war was signed at Paris by fifteen world powers. These high contracting parties solemnly declared "in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another." In January of the following year the United States Senate ratified the peace pact by a vote of 85 to 1. In July the treaty was proclaimed at Paris with 62 nations as adherents. Today, twelve years afterward, fully half of those nations have been engulfed in war, and many others are on the verge.

Storm clouds in Europe loomed on the horizon when the World Economic Conference convened in London in the summer of 1933. Historians of the future will have to appraise our part in its failure; we are still too close to it. I believe the verdict will point to it as another evidence of our unreadiness to assume the full weight of our responsibility as a world power.

Throughout the years our spokesmen have talked one way about international cooperation and have acted in another. We shrink from taking a hand in dealing with conditions that have made cooperation impossible to attain.

The United States has again taken sides in a world-wide war. Let me make it clear that I can no more answer questions as to how far our participation will go than you can. I cannot say dogmatically any more than you can whether our part in the war will continue to be economic and financial as now; whether our navy will be engaged, and if so, when and where; or whether our part in it will become far greater than these. Forces wholly outside the United States may make or modify the answers anyone can give you today.

But insofar as the steps this nation takes are results of deliberate, choice, the people ought to understand them and intend their consequences. The country-wide debate that is now going on will help us to understand, and I am grateful we still live in a country where free debate is possible. Sooner or later we will have reached a decision or taken a step which will sharply limit the field of debate. Some very important persons in it have reached the conclusion that we have already passed that point. I hope they are wrong.

We would be better able to meet our responsibilities today if we had listened to some of the critics when they spoke out years ago -- to Lindbergh when he warned the world of Germany's power in the air; to Mitchell when he criticized our own weakness in the same element; and to Hugh Johnson when he urged modernization and mechanization of the army as a number one public works project in the early days of P.W.A. and C.W.A.

There are differences as well as many similarities in the world situation today compared with that 24 years ago. For one thing, the nature of war has changed. Modern war is incredible in its speed, range, destructivity, malignancy and totality. It is important to dwell on that last word. We in the United States haven't yet grasped its meaning. Total war as the dictators practice it subordinates every interest and consideration to the one end of complete victory over present and potential enemies of their regime. That is the compact and deadly purpose against which we aligned ourselves when we assumed the role of arsenal for the forces that resist the Axis. Yet even now, one year after we started to mobilize our resources for defense, sacrifices are still in the conversational stage. As individuals and as groups we want our privileges and immunities untouched. We have accepted a grim challenge but as a nation we haven't yet geared to meet it.

As individuals we haven't actually realized the terrific speed of world events. It may give us perspective to look back at the situation at the time of the last Grinnell Commencement. The Nazis had struck the Low Countries and were deep in France. Chamberlain had just resigned. But few of you would have believed it if you had been told then that within a week Pétain would be asking Hitler for peace; or more incredible still, that one year later France would be tottering on the brink of outright war against England.

Events moved swiftly in the last year. They will be no less swift and far-reaching in the year ahead. Before some of us reach our homes, new and important chapters may have been written.

The question of what our national course should be in the months ahead is complex and difficult even to discuss. On certain phases there

is general agreement. Our national safety requires the maximum use of our productive power to turn out modern machines for air, sea, and land warfare at the swiftest possible rate. Machines, not men, are winning the battles of this war. We may differ as to when and where and to what purpose these machines shall be put to use; we can no longer differ in the judgment that our place in a war-mad world requires us to make them and to learn how to use them.

As a nation we have already committed ourselves on the next point, arming and supplying England. Nothing short of producing the maximum armament England can use, and in the least possible time, can meet our obligation here.

We approach the field of controversy when we consider how far we shall go to insure delivery to England of the goods and armament we make for her. Though the debate still rages, we might as well recognize that for all practical purposes the decision has been made. Our government will try to see that the airplanes, the tanks, the guns and the ammunition made for England reach their destination. That this means some use of the Navy is certain; that it will lead sooner or later to armed clashes on the sea is scarcely less so. That is how close we are to a shooting war.

It is conceivable that we might go that far and no further in our involvement. The day when clean-cut declaration was a necessary prelude to war came to an end with Spain. It is conceivable that warships of the United States might fight it out with German U-boats or airplanes in keeping sea lanes open to England, without leading to formal all-out war. But it is scarcely in keeping with our national temperament or history that the involvement would go that far and no further.

Much as I would like to think otherwise, I doubt if there is for the United States any such thing as a partial war. Step tends to follow step with the inevitability of fate. But before the procession takes on that inevitability, the grim responsibilities attendant upon our re-entry in European war should be comprehended and accepted.

To face the prospect that successive generations of American youth must join in wars separated by irresponsible periods of withdrawal and aloofness on our part offers a hopeless and purposeless future. I see little point in throwing this nation's weight into a struggle to restore the status quo ante bellum in Europe when it was that condition which has produced one Hitler and in future would produce another.

Presumably there are alternatives. One of them, the reversal of our present course by withdrawal into isolation, I will discuss in a moment. The other, which is the course I believe should have been followed after the previous World War, requires that if and as we move toward more active participation in the present world conflict, we do so recognizing that we are assuming a perpetual responsibility, along with other nations, to work out a world order based on international justice and maintained by international cooperation.

The premise is frequently stated that England is fighting civilization's battle and ours; that if Hitler is not stopped now with England's aid we shall have to face him later alone or succumb in this hemisphere. Against this the contrary view is urged that the present struggle is another of the never-ending series of wars over balance of power in Europe; that we are not called on to underwrite the British Empire at the risk of our own national existence; and that America behind her oceans and properly armed is immune from Nazi attack.

Between these extremes lie every shade of intermediate opinion. It is easy to take and defend a position on emotional grounds - far easier than to reach a decision by reasoning or logic. If we are concerned only with national self-interest, the validity of our choice depends more on what Hitler intends now or will do in the future than on any positively known quantity. If the Nazi ambition would be satisfied by the defeat of England and the reorganization of Europe and North Africa in a new order, our national future and our way of life at home might be insured by such a degree of armament as would compel his respect. Throughout its history the United States has existed in the world along with emperors, czars and dictators.

But on the other hand, if this is a world revolution whose instigators will not be stopped until the whole world is in their order unless a superior force defeats them, then it clearly is necessary for the United States, historically committed to keep this hemisphere free from Europe's imperial ambitions, to choose an alignment that confronts Hitler with the maximum opposing force. Obviously that is impossible without the British Empire and the British Navy.

No problem more momentous has confronted our government in the history of the United States. It can judge Hitler's intentions and future course only by projecting the trend established by his campaigns up to date. That trend offers but poor support to those who believe we are economically, politically, or, in a military sense immune on the Western Hemisphere.

We must recognize that our national course is never determined by one grand decision which steers us out of heavy storms into a harbor where all is serenity and light. On the contrary, it is a procession of

relatively small decisions that commits us irrevocably this way or that. And no easy path can possibly be found.

The central purpose of my talk here today is to express the conviction that the United States must have a foreign policy which is recognized and understood, and must make its conduct conform to that policy. I am unable to see that any standard of consistent purpose has governed our international behavior during my life-time. We have shuttled back and forth between desperate involvement and irresponsible detachment. That just doesn't make sense. It is not only the rest of the world that is puzzled; we have baffled and confused ourselves.

We might quite rationally choose a course of isolation and national self-sufficiency and, by paying the heavy price it would exact, hope with reason to avoid external wars. Or, having become involved as we were in 1917 and 1918, we might rationally recognize and assume our world responsibility as a great power and work with other nations toward a just and safe world order. There is something to be said for either course; notwithstanding individual preferences most of us would be willing to conform and play our part in either. But there is no defense or explanation for the nation that tries to follow both of them, either alternately or at the same time. We cannot do both without disaster, without loss of respect abroad and of hope at home.

For many reasons, including the very practical one that, intending to keep out of external wars, we tend to get in them, I favor open-eyed recognition of our place as a world power and full acceptance of the responsibility that goes with it. If 1917, and again 1940 and 1941 teach us anything, it is that we cannot, or we will not, stay aloof from a conflict which engages the rest of the world. We were in the last war

but out of the peace. If we get in this one - and we are in it to a degree today - then I say, let's accept the consequences and stay with it, doing our share to clean up the mess, so that your sons will not have to take up arms, as mine are doing today, in a deadly struggle not of their making. I choose this because I believe it is the course best lighted with hope for the future.

The dimensions of the world have shrunk. It is impossible for any nation to avoid the impact of the present struggle. The conditions that confront us are not to our liking and they are not of our choosing. We can only face them with the determination to back with national unity the leaders who bear the heavy burdens of responsibility. We can cement that unity with understanding, and if we are fortunate, we may profit from lessons which the past and present have spread plainly before us.

Now just a word on a different theme. I recognize the existing danger that America may again be in war. That danger could have been averted, or its extent vastly lessened, if we had seen and recognized the rise of the rule of force when it appeared. We failed to see it, and our danger is the greater today because that is so.

This is a war of machines, not of men. We have incomparably greater resources for the production of machines than any probable combination of opposing nations. It will be inexcusable - stupidly, criminally inexcusable - if commitments are made that will send American boys into action before they are equipped with machine striking power superior to that of the enemy they may have to face. A moment ago I said that, after one year of what we have bombastically called "all-out" preparation for war, no privileges or immunities of any group have been molested.

I should have excepted the boys and young men who have been taken from schools and civilian life to army camps where for the most part they are getting the old-style non-mechanized army training. They have made real sacrifices.

A year has passed since the National Defense Advisory Commission was created, the first of the series of emergency organizations formed to help speed the defense effort. During most of that year the government seriously underestimated future requirements; rosy stories of abundant steel and aluminum and power and nitrogen capacity were given and accepted as each interest sought to prevent expanded capacity that might weaken its control over post-war markets. Shortages now admittedly threaten defense production. Labor and industrial management fought and continue to fight to increase relative advantages one over the other while production of essential defense materials suffers as a consequence.

The President of the United States on May 27 proclaimed an unlimited national emergency. I hope that means at last the complete subordination of other interests to the one end of defense production. I hope, and the nation has the right to expect, that military action on our part, if it has to come, will be taken only when we command machines superior in number and striking power to those of the opposing forces. There can be no excuse if we, the greatest industrial power on earth, fail in this.

No matter how temperate a speaker strives to be, the fact that he can only deal with a limited subject to the exclusion of everything else imparts a certain distortion and over-emphasis to what he does say. Probably there is too much of pessimism and gloom in what I have said

to you. I am aware that I have spoken as though there is a finality to ~~the~~ events of today and tomorrow which in fact they do not possess. Even as we contemplate the things we like least, we need to be reminded of the eternal truth: "And this, too, shall pass away."

After all, men and women have remarkable capacity to adjust themselves to harsh handling and to extract their quota of happiness even through periods of storm and stress. Grinnell is lovely in the spring. Beauty and happiness surrounded us here, and beauty and happiness will be found in the unpredictable years to come.

There is no finality in Hitler or in the order he proclaims. The startling events of 1940 and 1941 may signify the triumph of destructive forces which will usher in another dark age over much of the earth. Or they may mark a painful stage in the process of social evolution whose end lies in another direction from the trend we think we see. I prefer to believe that the latter, not the former, is true.

Even though their realization seems farther off now than when they were written twenty years ago, I still find truth as well as hope in these words of H. G. Wells:

"Yet in the background of the consciousness of the world, waiting as the silence and moonlight wait above the flares and shouts, the hurdy-gurdys and quarrels of a village fair, is the knowledge that all mankind is one brotherhood, that God is the universal and impartial Father of mankind, and that only in that universal service can mankind find peace, or peace be found for the troubles of the individual soul."

We can still thrill to those words without closing our eyes to today's actualities. In our small way we can still work toward the ideal they express. We cannot agree that international anarchy is inevitable and final for the world, we who have shared here the heritage of Macy

and Payne, of Norris and Steiner, and their illustrious associates
and successors in the College of Grinnell.

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