

Neutrality and War (Delivered October 13, 1939)

Tonight, I speak again to the people of this country who are opposed to the United States entering the war which is now going on in Europe. We are faced with the need of deciding on a policy of American neutrality. The future of our nation and of our civilization rests upon the wisdom and foresight we use. Much as peace is to be desired, we should realize that behind a successful policy of neutrality must stand a policy of war. It is essential to define clearly those principles and circumstances for which a nation will fight. Let us give no one the impression that America's love for peace means that she is afraid of war, or that we are not fully capable and willing to defend all that is vital to us. National life and influence depend upon national strength, both in character and in arms. A neutrality built on pacifism alone will eventually fail.

Before we can intelligently enact regulations for the control of our armaments, our credit, and our ships, we must draw a sharp dividing line between neutrality and war; there must be no gradual encroachment on the defenses of our nation. Up to this line we may adjust our affairs to gain the advantages of peace, but beyond it must lie all the armed might of America, coiled in readiness to spring if once this bond is cut. Let us make clear to all countries where this line lies. It must be both within our intent and our capabilities. There must be no question of trading or bluff in this hemisphere. Let us give no promises we cannot keep - make no meaningless assurances to an Ethiopia, a Czechoslovakia, or a Poland. The policy we decide upon should be clear cut as our shorelines, and as easily defended as our continent.

This western hemisphere is our domain. It is our right to trade freely within it. From Alaska to Labrador, for the Hawaiian Islands to Bermuda, from Canada to South America, we must allow no invading army to set foot. These are the outposts of the United States. They form the essential outline of our geographical defense. We must be ready to wage war with all the resources of our nation if they are ever seriously threatened. Their defense is the mission of our army, our navy, and our air corps - the minimum requirement of our military strength. Around these places

should lie our line between neutrality and war. Let there be no compromise about our right to defend or trade within this area. If it is challenged by any nation, the answer must be war. Our policy of neutrality should have this as its foundation.

We must protect our sister American nations from foreign invasion, both for their welfare and our own. But, in turn, they have a duty to us. They should not place us in the position of having to defend them in America while they engage in wars abroad. Can we rightfully permit any country in America to give bases to foreign warships, or to send its army abroad to fight while it remains secure in our protection at home? We desire the utmost friendship with the people of Canada. If their country is ever attacked, our Navy will be defending their seas, our soldiers will fight on their battlefields, our fliers will die in their skies. But have they the right to draw this hemisphere into a European war simply because they prefer the Crown of England to American independence?

Sooner or later we must demand the freedom of this continent and its surrounding islands from the dictates of European power. America history clearly indicates this need. As long as European powers maintain their influence in our hemisphere, we are likely to find ourselves involved in their troubles. And they will lose no opportunity to involve us.

Our Congress is now assembled to decide upon the best policy for this country to maintain during the war which is going on in Europe. The legislation under discussion involves three major issues - the embargo of arms, the restriction of shipping, and the allowance of credit. The action we take in regard to these issues will be an important indication to ourselves, and to the nation of Europe, whether or not we are likely to enter the conflict eventually as we did in the last war. The entire world is watching us. The action we take in America may either stop or precipitate this war.

Let us take up these issues, one at a time, and examine them. First, the embargo of arms: It is argued that the repeal of this embargo would assist democracy in Europe, that it would let us make a profit for ourselves from the sale of munitions abroad, and, at the same time, help to build up our own arms industry.

I do not believe that repealing the arms embargo would assist democracy in Europe because I do not believe this is a war for democracy. This is a war over the balance of power in Europe - a war brought about by the desire for strength on the part of Germany and the fear of strength on the part of England and France. The more munitions the armies obtain, the longer the war goes on, and the more devastated Europe becomes, the less hope there is for democracy. That is a lesson we should have learned from our participation in the last war. If democratic principles had been applied in Europe after that war, if the "democracies" of Europe had been willing to make some sacrifice to help democracy in Europe while it was fighting for its life, if England and France had offered a hand to the struggling republic of Germany, there would be no war today.

If we repeal the arms embargo with the idea of assisting one of the warring sides to overcome the other, the why mislead ourselves by talk of neutrality? Those who advance this argument should admit openly that repeal is a step toward war. The next step would be the extension of credit, and the next step would be the sending of American troops.

To those who argue that we could make a profit and build up our own industry by selling munitions abroad, I reply that we in America have not yet reached a point where we wish to capitalize on the destruction and death of war. I do not believe that the material welfare of this country needs, or that our spiritual welfare could withstand, such a policy. If our industry depends upon commerce of arms for its strength, then our industrial system should be changed.

It is impossible for me to understand how America can contribute to civilization and humanity by sending offensive instruments of destruction to European battlefields. This would not only implicate us in the war, but it would make us partly responsible for its devastation. The fallacy of helping to defend a political ideology, even though it be somewhat similar to our own, was clearly demonstrated to us in the last war. Through our help that war was won, but neither the democracy nor the justice for which we fought grew in the peace that followed our victory.

Our bond with Europe is a bond of race and not of political ideology. We had to fight a European army to establish democracy in this country. It is the European race we must preserve; political progress will follow. Racial strength is vital - politics, a luxury. If the white race is ever seriously threatened, it may then be time for us to take our part in its protection, to fight side by side with the English, French, and Germans, but not with one against the other for our mutual destruction.

Let us not dissipate our strength, or help Europe to dissipate hers, in these wars of politics and possession. For the benefit of western civilization, we should continue our embargo on offensive armaments. As far as purely defensive arms are concerned, I, for one, am in favor of supply European countries with as much as we can spare of the material that falls within this category. There are technicians who will argue that offensive and defensive arms cannot be separated completely. That is true, but it is no more difficult to make a list of defensive weapons than it is to separate munitions of war from semi-manufactured articles, and we are faced with that problem today. No one says that we should sell opium because it is difficult to make a list of narcotics. I would as soon see our country traffic in opium as in bombs. There are certain borderline cases, but there are plenty of clear-cut examples: for instance, the bombing plane and the anti-aircraft cannon. I do not want to see American bombers dropping bombs which will kill and mutilate European children, even if they are not flown by American pilots. But I am perfectly willing to see American anti-aircraft guns shooting American shells at invading bombers over any European country. And I believe that most of you who are listening tonight will agree with me.

The second major issue for which we must create a policy concerns the restrictions to be placed on our shipping. Naval blockades have long been accepted as an element of warfare. They began on the surface of the sea, followed the submarine beneath it, and now reach up into the sky with aircraft. The laws and customs which were developed during the surface era were not satisfactory to the submarine. Now, aircraft bring up new and unknown factors for consideration. It is simple enough for a battleship to identify the merchantman she captures. It is a more difficult problem for a submarine if that merchantman may carry cannon; it is safer to fire a torpedo than to come up

and ask. For bombing planes flying at high altitudes and through conditions of poor visibility, identification of a surface vessel will be more difficult still.

In modern naval blockades and warfare, torpedoes will be fired and bombs dropped on probabilities rather than on certainties of identification. The only safe course for neutral shipping at this time is to stay away from the warring countries and dangerous waters of Europe.

The third issue to be decided relates to the extension of credit. Here again we may draw from our experience in the last war. After that war was over, we found ourselves in the position of having financed a large portion of the expenditures of European countries. And when the time came to pay us back, these countries simply refused to do so. They not only refused to pay the wartime loans we made, but they refused to pay back what we loaned them after the war was over. As is so frequently the case, we found that loaning money eventually created animosity instead of gratitude. European countries felt insulted when we asked to be repaid. They called us "Uncle Shylock." They were horror struck at the idea of turning over to us any of their islands in America to compensate for their debts, or for our help in winning their war. They seized all the German colonies and carved up Europe to suit their fancy. These were the "fruits of war." They took our money and they took our soldiers. But there was not the offer of one Caribbean island in return for the debts they "could not afford to pay."

The extension of credit to a belligerent country is a long step toward war, and it would leave us close to the edge. If American industry loans money to a belligerent country, many interests will feel that it is more important for that country to win than for our own to avoid the war. It is unfortunate but true that there are interest in America who would rather lose American lives than their own dollars. We should give them no opportunity.

I believe that we should adopt as our program of American neutrality - as our contribution to western civilization - the following policy:

1. An embargo on offensive weapons and munitions.
2. The unrestricted sale of purely defensive armaments.

3. The prohibition of American shipping from the belligerent countries of Europe and their danger zones.
4. The refusal of credit to belligerent nations or their agents.

Whether or not this program is adopted depends upon the support of those of us who believe in it. The United States is a democracy. The policy of our country is still controlled by our people. It is time for us to take action. There has never been a greater test for the democratic principle of government.

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