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978-1-107-69938-0 - American Opinion and the War
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AMERICAN OPINION & THE WAR

TO be invited to give the Rede Lecture is, I imagine, a disconcerting experience even for a member of a race which is notoriously difficult to disconcert. There should be no question therefore of its effect upon an American. Not only the names of one's distinguished predecessors on this platform but the platform, and the place itself, loom large across the Atlantic. There are certain doors through which a man cannot pass without measuring himself humbly against the door-post, and the doors of Oxford and of Cambridge are of this kind. The time is long past when American writers thought of themselves as provincials of the world of English letters. For better or for worse, there will never be another Henry James. But neither, I think, will the time ever come when American writers can return to the great English foundations of our common English culture without humility. English is more than a tongue: more than a literature. English is a life also, and a life we are at once proud and humble to share—not with you, the living, only, but with those also who were here before you in these famous cities.

To attempt to speak of these things as it is fitting men should speak of them is to accept a heavy burden and a responsibility no one who loves the English tongue would wish to bear. I am not altogether unhappy therefore that

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the times in which we live, and the particular circumstances of my visit to England, have made it impossible for me to undertake the task your invitation would have put upon me in an ordinary year. It is impossible, in the circumstances of the changing war, to think or speak of things which do not change. We feel, all of us, like messengers in a tragic play—messengers whose only endurable task is to see, and to report what we have seen. The heroes of the piece and the devoted victims will deliver, when the time arrives, the appropriate speeches, but for ourselves there is this duty only: to communicate in honesty and in simplicity the things that we have seen. 'That which I have myself seen', as Bernal Diaz put it, 'and the fighting...'.

It is this duty—for so I conceive it—I wish to perform here this afternoon. What I have seen is the reaction of my country to seven months of war. And what I wish to speak of is the state of mind and heart of my country—the thinking of my country about our common experience and the meaning of that thinking as I understand it. More precisely, what I wish to speak of is the discussion in the United States of the purpose of the war, and the two sides taken in debate upon that subject, and why these sides are taken.

You in England, I suppose, have long since passed this point in your discussions with each other. You have spoken to each other at great length and over many months of the purposes for which you mean to fight and you have come, doubtless, to your own conclusions. But you must

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understand that we in my country have never faced this question until now: that we have been, indeed, unable until now to face it. It is not difficult, I think, to understand the reason. Down to the time when the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor, our talk of war was talk, not of affirmative purpose, but defence. Our only question was the question whether we should fight at all. The debate among us was debate upon the issue whether it was true we also were in danger—whether we too would be attacked and must prepare. That the United States should make a war affirmatively and of its own motion to accomplish some end or purpose of its own was in no one's mind. Even those who saw most clearly what fascism was, and who hated it most bitterly, and were most determined to destroy it, had nothing to say in those months of any choice or purpose we might offer to ourselves. The only choice we were called on then to make was the choice our enemies presented to us—the choice to fight while we still could—while we had friends to help us—or else to fight too late.

If there were some who saw at that time—who had seen indeed from the beginning of the fascist invasion of Spain and the Japanese invasion of China—that fascism was actually no more than a belated rear-guard gathering of the forces free men had always attacked before, and must now attack again, and that the true offensive in this war was therefore ours, they were not heard. No one of responsibility in our country nor, I think, in yours, called upon his fellow-citizens to attack the fascists first and to

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carry through, against the old reaction, the democratic revolution which reaction once again had challenged. The only hope, even of the most belligerent democrats, was the hope that their fellow-citizens might resist in time. We were the peaceful powers and these others were the aggressors. We were those who stood and they were those who struck. They were the attackers, we were the attacked. The attacked do not consider for what purpose they propose to fight. They consider only how and where and when they will defend themselves.

So that it was not possible for us to consider as a nation through those months the purposes for which we ought to fight. It was not possible for us to propose to ourselves the ends or objects which our military effort as a people should attain. Had any American suggested to his fellow-citizens in 1938 or 1939 or even 1940 that we of our own motion should attack the declared enemies of democracy and freedom in order to destroy them and to establish once and for all a free and decent world in which democracy could live and thrive and ripen, he would have found no listeners. We had no stomach then for the establishment of new worlds.

But all this was in no way peculiar to us. No other democratic nation would have turned to war of its own volition in those years, or attempted any alteration of the world which only violence could accomplish. With us as with you the great body of the people desired only peace and the one question in their minds was the question whether peace must be secured by fighting or could be

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had without. With us no more than with any other democratic nation did the people will the war. Indeed, with us, the fighting of the war was even less of our election than it was with you, for even at the moment when we found ourselves at war we had not willed it. The choice was made against us by our enemies. We were attacked while still at peace and our determination to resist was fixed and hardened after our resistance had been made.

Other democratic nations so far shaped their purpose to make war as to declare their purpose when they had no choice but fight. With us the declaration followed on a war already made. Certain determinations there had been—determinations requiring the great courage of a great leader—the determination to make our factories and goods available to those who had already been attacked and were resisting—the determination to assist by every method short of war those who like ourselves believed in human decency and freedom—the determination to take action for our own defence in spite of threats abroad and menaces at home. But though our position was clear both to our friends and to our enemies, it was not we, at the final moment, who determined on our action, nor did we consider then or for many months thereafter where our action ought to lead.

Our first response to the attack upon us was the natural response of angry and indignant men. I may be excused perhaps for saying that it was the response of men of courage also. In the face of a considerable defeatist propaganda in sections of the press and the open demand of at

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least one politician that the fleet should be returned for the defence of their own shores, the American people were almost unanimous in their demand for an offensive war—a war carried to their enemies. They are still unanimous in that opinion. But though the temper of the country changed from defensive to offensive within a few days—perhaps even within a few hours—of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the attitude of the country toward the war itself did not change. It was still the enemy's war—the fascist's war—a war made *by* them *upon* us. We were determined to win that war. We were determined to chastise those who had made the war against us: to defeat them so effectively and so finally that they would regret what they had done to the end of their history—if any history were left them. We were determined in short to turn their war against its authors. But we were not yet ready to take it for ourselves—to turn it into an instrument of our own purpose for the accomplishment of our own ends as freedom-loving men and women.

It was understandable I think—understandable in terms of your own experience in your country as well as ours in ours—that we were not ready. For one thing the mere shock of the actual encounter itself engrossed us at the beginning: there was too much to be done too quickly to give us time for anything but what lay just ahead. For another, we had our new-found unity to think of. On December 7th we were all of one mind about the war and so long as the war remained a war against the Japanese who had tricked us and the Nazis who had set them to

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it—so long as it was merely a war *against* our enemies and not a war for some positive purpose of our own—we would continue to think of it with one mind. All men will agree upon resistance to a common danger, but all men will not agree—and it is the tragedy of human history that they will not—upon the winning of a common hope. Unity, in the months immediately following Pearl Harbor, seemed to most Americans the most important thing the country could attain. The divisions of the year before had been acrimonious and bitter, and though they were for the most part personal divisions—divisions created by a handful of men and women who put their personal animosity to the President above their duty to their country—everyone in every party wished to see them healed. There was therefore a truce of several months' duration to all discussions of the causes and the meaning of the war—a truce adopted by common consent and resting upon a common appreciation of the seriousness of the country's situation. Those who had foreseen the inevitability of American resistance held their tongues, and those who had believed and said that the war was a European war which need never touch the American people accepted the final verdict of events.

That this undeclared truce served a useful and creative purpose most Americans will, I think, admit. Those who had not agreed before, and could scarcely be expected to agree explicitly now, were able to meet each other in a common necessity for action, and the greater part of the pre-war minority were joined again with the vast majority

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of the people who had supported the President's policy long before history had made the wisdom of his policy irrefutably clear. But though the truce upon discussion of the meaning and the purpose of the war served useful ends, it had also its increasingly apparent disadvantages. It silenced questions which could not be silenced. Not the partisans of the old dispute but people everywhere throughout the country were beginning to think what no one wished to say. For what actually were we fighting? Were we fighting a war to accomplish something or only a war to prevent something? Were we fighting a war to prevent defeat or a war to accomplish victory; and if the latter, what kind of victory? What would the world be like when the war ended? Would it be a world like the world at the end of the last war or a different world and, if so, in what way different and how did we propose to bring about the difference? The questions asked themselves and were not answered. And gradually, as the pressure of the asking grew, men in the government like men outside it came to understand that unity of the nation could only be secured not by silencing these questions but by answering them—that they must be answered—that the people had a right to have them answered.

It is this that constitutes the change in American opinion of which I wish to speak to you. The visible evidence of change is the response of leaders of the American government to the questioning and searching of the people. It is evidence which has come, I think, to your notice in this country. Over the course of the last few weeks a number

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of members of the government in Washington have spoken, as though with one mind and by preconceived plan, of the purposes for which the war is fought. Not only the Vice-President but our Ambassador here and the Under-Secretary of State, Mr Welles, and the Assistant Secretary, Mr Acheson, and Mr Milo Perkins of the Board of Economic Warfare, have spoken in one way or another of the world we mean to establish when the war is done—the world we, with our allies of the democratic powers, mean to build—the century, as Mr Wallace puts it, of the common man. These speeches moreover have not only been given: they have been received. They have been read and listened to and discussed. And they have been discussed for the most part with an enthusiasm and an excitement which is quite astonishing.

That the American people have expressed, in their reaction to these speeches and in other ways, an altered and a far more positive attitude toward the war, seems to me unarguable. It is difficult to measure popular opinion in any quantitative sense. Certainly the so-called 'opinion polls' now employed on both sides of the Atlantic are not instruments of precision, nor is the space given by the press to the discussion of any particular issue an infallible measure of the public interest. Newspaper publishers have been known in our country—I cannot speak of course for yours—to consult their private preferences in arriving at their estimates of public interest, and even, it is said, to attempt to excite a public interest where no interest had previously been shown—or else to starve with silence an

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interest they deplore. Nevertheless both press coverage and opinion polls are indicative to some extent, and in so far as they are indicative their testimony is all to one effect. Mr Wallace's Free World Dinner speech, ignored at first by the greater part of the press, was belatedly driven into the columns of the principal papers by the sheer weight of private concern—an unusual phenomenon in any country—and Mr Sumner Welles's speech on the same subject was reported promptly in an unusually emphatic manner. As for the polls, obvious as the limitations of the method are, the evidence they supply is even more impressive. A very large majority of the American people—perhaps as many as three-quarters or four-fifths—were apparently willing, a little while ago, to answer Yes to the proposition that their country should undertake to establish the Four Freedoms of the President 'everywhere in the world'. A more searching question as to ways and means would doubtless have discouraged some of those who answered Yes so readily, but the heavy majority in support of the general proposition is proof at least of the extent of active interest.

These moreover are not the only evidences of the public interest nor are they indeed the most convincing. It is, after all, by the talk of individuals and by the activities of small groups that the attitudes of populations are really judged, and judgments of this character in America to-day correspond closely to the evidence of the papers and the polls. It would be misleading to present the American people as wholly given over to discussion of the problems

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