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The World Crisis and English-Speaking Democracies

By Mr. Lionel M. Gelber

Mr. Gelber:—Mr. Chairman, gentlemen, in this hour of perplexity in international affairs we are prone to cast our minds back and ask why we are in our present plight. We seem to be on the defensive. We seem to be outplayed at every point, and I think it is very important that we ask ourselves why we find ourselves in this situation. Now, sir, my thesis is a very simple one. Since 1919 we of the English-speaking peoples have been indulging in short term expedients rather than in long term policies. We really have had no clear concept of our world position; and because we have had no clear conception of the basis on which our position rests, others inimical to us, who have clear objectives seem to be gaining more power at our expense.

I propose to divide my talk into three parts—first to discuss the British failure to have a clear conception of the position, second the American failure, and third the possibility of a common Anglo-American policy that might save us yet.

I must qualify my statement that the British had no clear conception, because in the idea of collective security there was some sort of a long range policy, but I am perfectly satisfied that that policy was never stressed as it should have been by the English people, and now that it lies shattered by the hammer blows of German diplomacy we wonder why it failed. The reason the British had no real idea of collective security is simple. They looked upon it as an automatic mechanism which would regulate the affairs of the world, without any idea of what was really necessary

to maintain the British position. I quite understand why they thus looked to international collective security to maintain their concept of the situation: it was because they believed that the sense of reasonableness that was ingrown in themselves resided in others as well. So they were really lulled into a false sense of security, and new dangers that arose were not seen until too late. One felt that failure to realize new dangers during the Manchurian Crisis and the Ethiopian Crisis, and it was only after Munich that they wakened to the fact that their position had been undermined.

Another thing has become apparent during these last few years, something that I might attribute to defending vague ideas of collective security. It is that the British have not only failed to have a clear conception of the situation in terms of the post war system of international relations, but they have also failed to return to their traditional forms of foreign policy. The real fault was the failure of the British people, in the years through which we have just passed, collective security having broken down, to return to their historic policy of the balance of power, by which they had maintained their position in Europe.

I know that in this country the policy of the balance of power is regarded as an insidious and an evil thing. I have never taken that view, so let us stop for a moment to consider what it really was. Surely it meant that Great Britain would not only prevent any interference with the free passage of the Narrow seas, but that the Low Countries would be protected by her, and that she would resist the attempt of any one nation to dominate Europe. Only in that way did that little island maintain her independence and lay the foundations of the new world order.

Let us take a twentieth century example: when Lansdowne and Gray, the great pre-war foreign secretaries of Britain were compelled to move from the side of Germany to that of the previously more hostile France and Russia, not only by Anglo-German naval rivalry, but by the overweening military pretentions of Germany on the continent of Europe itself. Indeed over the centuries there was no other way for Britain to build democracy at home and allow our free society in America to develop and flourish un-

molested. If the balance of power in Europe had not been maintained there would not have been that universal instrument of world order symbolized by the British Navy.

Now, if the balance of power has shifted disadvantageously from the British point of view, why has it been allowed to do so? Let us remember Baldwin's pledge that in air power no continental nation within striking distance would be allowed superior to Great Britain. Failure to maintain that pledge rendered the humiliation, for so we must all regard it, of Munich inevitable. Now, on the seas, the Royal Navy is still supreme. On the Continent the French army is also. But the air system is a terrible one, and I feel the British people have failed to adjust themselves to the strength of that weapon in time, and because of that we get this disastrous shift in the balance of power.

Make no mistake, I speak as one who loves Britain and the British people very deeply. We all appreciate what her greatness has meant to the world, especially now when others seek to supplant her, but I think it is a paradox in these times that in terms of the most conservative traditions of British foreign policy, Mr. Baldwin, Ramsay Macdonald and Mr. Chamberlain have been revolutionaries, because in their time there has been the greatest diplomatic swing to the disadvantage of Great Britain, a swing that has undone all the work of their predecessors for centuries.

During the past fortnight there has been a great change in Chamberlain, one of which I think we all approve, but if his new policy has been good for the past few weeks, why would the same policy not have been good in the years past when there was yet time?

Mr. Chamberlain has said that he intends to carry his new policy through—to promote a new balance of power in Europe. I suggest that if he fails Britain's supremacy may be the price that will be paid for the fall of the Czech bastion. For with Germany rid of her eastern danger, and Bismarck's haunting dread of a war on two fronts ended Germany would be able to concentrate on the west instead of having, as in 1914, to divert half her forces to the Eastern front.

Now the chief fault of British statesmen in having failed to realize the British position is not that they have

let down China, Ethiopia, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia and the rest but that they have let down Great Britain herself.

There is, of course, a very real reason for this. Mr. Chamberlain's strength has been in the economic field, and his success has been great in restoring the confidence of British industry and finance, and in getting a difficult economic position stabilized. But statesmen interested in economics and finance are not the sort of people who can go in for a bold, spirited foreign policy which might have cut off these crises in their beginnings. That may have been penny wise and pound foolish, for such a policy would have given that greater measure of security with which prosperity would have come too. But at any rate it was a human and understandable miscalculation.

This interpretation is one that will please neither Mr Chamberlain's friends nor his foes, but I have found that it does give a better understanding of the British position, and I cannot agree with those who look on Chamberlain as a deep dyed conspirator who betrayed his own country.

British statesmen are no better and no worse than those of any other country, but the trouble has been that they have so great a reputation for cleverness that American audiences do not realize that in the years of crisis they have not been clever enough. The domestic task Chamberlain was elected for in 1931, to restore British finances after the crash, he has done superlatively well, and it is a tragedy that a man whose flair is in the field of home affairs should have to cope with the immense international difficulties with which he is now faced.

If any comment is necessary as to the prospects of strong Anglo-American co-operation one might say that they are not nearly so remote as many people think. Whatever minor differences there may have been between the two nations the fundamental basis on which their friendship rests has not been changed. It has been an important point of British Naval strategy in the twentieth century to depend on a friendly United States fleet to take care of their common interests in the Caribbean and the western hemisphere generally. And just as Great Britain is dependent on the United States on this side of the Atlantic, so is the

United States elsewhere dependent on the supremacy of the British Navy for her own protection. Under the present intolerable conditions the interests of the English speaking nations must inevitably be bound up with each other. If Germany is ever able to destroy the balance of power in Europe, Great Britain would be overcome; her sea power would be finished, and America would be left to face alone a German and Japanese attack from two sides. Conversely, just as the survival of Great Britain is imperative for American interests, so also does Great Britain depend on American support to defend herself against the challenge that has come to her from across the North sea.

Caring, as we do, for the continuance of English speaking civilization, we all welcome the growing appreciation of these truths in the United States. Since 1919 Great Britain has not been sufficiently realistic. Neither has the United States. Both the English speaking peoples have failed to get a clear conception of the basis of their world positions. But even Americans failed to realize the effect of the Senate's rejection of the Anglo American treaty of guaranty to France in 1919 which took away her right to have any say in French foreign affairs. It was a mistake for Britain to withdraw at the same time, for the result was to launch France on her unhappy post-war policy. Loss of the joint authority which was the keystone of the post war Wilsonian System has, it is realized today, altered the fate of mankind.

The Senate rejection, moreover, left Britain with the idea of caprice in American diplomacy, the feeling that the Senate would turn down any agreements the British government might make with Washington. Britain therefore felt that she could not look to America for any help in the reordering of a chaotic and tumultuous world. The lamentable consequences of this I need not enter into now except to say that Neville Chamberlain need not have looked to Rome and Berlin so intently if he could have looked to Washington. The Americans have only themselves to blame.

Any way it was a pity that this should have been encountered by the son of Joseph Chamberlain, for his father was the most ardent advocate of Anglo-American understanding of his age. And Neville Chamberlain is noted for his filial piety.

Another episode was the failure in 1932 to achieve an Anglo-American understanding in the far east. This weakened the Pacific collective security system embodied in the Washington Treaties, and was a grave blow at the Covenant of the League of Nations.

The British position at that time was not sufficiently well understood on this side of the Atlantic. Britain went off the Gold Standard just when the Japanese entered Manchuria, and the British were very much occupied by the great shock to their financial stability. It was a time when very definite steps should have been taken, but it is perfectly intelligible that Britain should have felt it impossible to impose order in the far east, for it was a time when short views were being held.

I am bound to say, however, that Mr. Stimson's book does not make out a very effective case for the policy he then pursued. Protests without armaments, before the Singapore base was complete would only have imperilled Hong Kong, enraged Japan, and would not have helped China, and we do not know if the profoundly pacific peoples of Britain and America would have followed Sir John Simon and Mr. Stimson to the bitter end.

In short, gentlemen, for reasons that are perfectly understandable and intelligible, we, on both sides of the Atlantic, wanted to live a life of comfort, and failed to take a long range view. But I think the responsibility rests on all our shoulders.

One good thing, however, came out of Munich, and that was the awakening of the English speaking world to the necessity for re-determining their position in the world, for ascertaining the basis on which their power rests, and for finding out what they must do to maintain a fairly reasonable world.

The policy pursued by Mr. Roosevelt in these last weeks and months is a beacon of hope, just as is the change in Mr. Chamberlain's language and policy. Once we felt that all would be well if Germany could only achieve equality. Now we know that the excessively guilty consciences about the

treaty of Versailles have got us into an appalling muddle of sentiment and ignorance, for the remedy is worse than the disease. Germany understands not equality but superiority. If the balance of power in Europe is destroyed it will affect both sides of the Atlantic. Two can be equal, but only one can be supreme, and if someone must be supreme let us see to it that it is the English speaking peoples lest civilization perish off the face of the earth.

The bases of Anglo-American co-operation are clear. Our positions in the world rest on power—on our joint power. It is too bad that we did not re-discover this sooner. The common English speaking task must be to restore together the kind of international which rested in the nineteenth century on the British Navy. Without it what sanction did the Monroe doctrine have; without it what sanction will there be for the great English speaking principles and policy.

"Shoulder to shoulder we can command peace the world over," said Joe, the greatest of the Chamberlains to that great American, John Hay, forty years ago, and it is a truth that has grown more valid and not less so with the years that have elapsed. It is for the English speaking people to frame their conception of world order and stick to it. If they do there is no doubt that mankind may resume its forward march clear eyed and unafraid.