

The Proposed Embargo on Arms and Ammunition

By Congressman Dan V. Stephens of Nebraska

The following speech was delivered in the house of representatives, Washington, February 2, 1915:

Mr. Chairman: I wish to discuss briefly, principally for the benefit of many of my constituents, H. J. R. 377, which proposes an embargo on arms and ammunition destined for the belligerents now at war in Europe. There is a very vigorous propaganda being waged throughout the United States in favor of this resolution, with the result that thousands of naturalized citizens of this country are being misled into believing that this nation is not now observing neutrality in its intercourse with the belligerents.

The result of this agitation is the receipt of a flood of letters and petitions by members of congress requesting them to support this resolution. The petitions are nearly all alike, showing a common origin. The letters and petitions almost always, directly or indirectly, ridicule the president for his prayer for peace while we permit the export of arms and ammunitions. The German-American is among the most loyal of our citizenship, and these printed attacks, paid for no doubt at space rates, have done him a great injustice by leading some to believe he is not loyal to his own adopted country. No greater mistake could be made. The naturalized American is for his adopted country first, and he wants his adopted country to keep hands off the European situation, and that is exactly what his country is doing.

One of my correspondents had been so inflamed by the misrepresentations he had read, he was led to ask me if I had a son-in-law in England who had told me to oppose the resolution, which indicates the methods employed to injure the administration in the eyes of our naturalized American citizens. For the benefit of my correspondent and for the purpose of qualifying myself in the eyes of those who favor this resolution, and who usually charge everyone who is not in favor of it as being a partisan of England, I will state that I am a full blood German by descent on my own account. Upon the account of my wife we have several first cousins, natives of Germany by naturalized parents, who are now fighting in the Kaiser's army, if they have not already given their lives for their country. We are very much concerned about the welfare of these relatives, and our natural sympathies for Germany are very great. But we have no political sympathies whatever as between the belligerents. We refuse to permit the call of the blood to bias our political judgment in passing upon a national policy.

NOT A MORAL QUESTION

Many, if not all, of my correspondents, base their support of this resolution upon high moral grounds. My own contention is that it is not a moral question in a general sense at all. It is purely an economical question at this stage of our evolution. There is just one class of people who have any logical right to consider this question from a moral point of view, and that class is so small it is not worth considering. In fact, I am not certain that such a class exists, except in theory. I refer to the class that is in favor of peace at any price; the class that is ready to disband the army, scrap the navy and demolish our sea coast defenses and undertake to lead a Christ-like existence in this world of riot, and ruin, and rapine. Those who have faith enough to embark the nation upon the sea of "Peace at any Price," have a right to base their support of this resolution on moral grounds; because if it is wrong to sell arms to belligerent nations now, it was wrong to sell arms and ammunition to them in times of peace, when they were preparing for this war. If it was wrong for us to make arms and ammunition in times of peace for sale to other nations at peace, it necessarily follows that it is wrong for us to make arms and ammunition to use ourselves; because if it is wrong to make arms and ammunition to sell to others, to be used with which to kill their enemies, it necessarily follows that it is wrong for us to make arms and ammunition with which to kill our own enemies.

Therefore, if there is any moral side to this question at all, it leads us straight as a line to the absolute prohibition of the manufacture of arms of any kind or character. And if we adopt this end of the dilemma we are led absolutely to the peace-at-any-price program, and to the absolute prohibition of the manufacture of arms and ammunition for war purposes. We would then be led to an abandonment of our army and navy, and our sea coast defenses, and accept whatever consequences might follow. Now those who believe in this doctrine of "peace at any price," have a right to base their support of this resolution upon moral grounds. Those who do not believe in it have a moral right to continue to sell arms and ammunition to be used by belligerent nations, because they contend that it is a moral right for them to use them in the defense of themselves. Therefore, I dismiss the moral phases of this question as irrelevant and immaterial, having no value in this argument. It is true there will be many, either through superficial thinking or hypocrisy, who will harp upon our wickedness in permitting a few exports of arms and ammunition, while at the same time they will aid and abet their own nation in maintaining a reasonable army and navy against the day we may want to begin the slaughter of innocents on our own account. It is an honest war when we wage it, but brutal and unjust war when waged by other nations. Brutal murder when other nations indulge in the pastime of killing each other, but when we kill it is ordained by God. Let a belligerent blow up one of our battle-ships tomorrow, and the nation would blaze with wrath, and congress would be mobbed if it did not order the killing to begin at once. We would pawn our last shirt to raise money to buy arms and ammunition to revenge the outrage. Our clap trap sentimentality would be shed, as the skin of a snake is shed, showing glinting armor beneath, and no doubt those hot headed partisans who have a sob in their voices as they plead for an embargo on arms would be among the first to grab a gun and start for the front to defend their country.

We are now spending about three-fourths of the government's resources for war purposes, past and present, and the pressure for a larger expenditure is great. It is not likely, therefore, that the nation as a whole will suffer much of a moral shock because some manufacturers of squirrel rifles secure a small order from one of the belligerents for guns.

The facts are we are all quite human, and it is most difficult for naturalized citizens of this country not to favor their respective fatherlands, to the extent of injuring their own by impulsive acts. I consider it very unfortunate that the different classes of naturalized citizens of this country should permit themselves to become partisans under any circumstances. They ought not to contribute to a propaganda in support of their own respective fatherlands, which can not fail to greatly injure the administration and embarrass it in its diplomatic relations with other countries. The destiny of this nation is of more vital concern to naturalized citizens of this country who are protected by its laws than can possibly be their concern for the destiny of any of the belligerents. They ought to be willing to trust questions of diplomacy to their own chosen representatives, the president and his advisers. International questions can not be settled on the farm and in the workshop. They must be settled by the people's representatives.

THE PROPOSED REMEDY

It is commonly understood that we are shipping vast quantities of these munitions of war to the belligerent nations which is entirely erroneous, and on account of the allies having practically blockaded the ports of Germany and Austria, these countries are not able to secure any of these supplies. The friends of Germany and Austria therefore contend that we should immediately place an embargo upon arms and ammunition because neither Germany nor Austria can secure them. The reasoning is not sound, because whatever the tradesman has to sell he has for sale to anyone who has the money

and the desire to buy, regardless of whom they are or where they come from. The constitution of the United States guarantees to our citizens the right to pursue their peaceful avocations without interference, and unless the action of the citizen in his trade activities affects the peace and welfare of the nation, the government of the United States should not interfere with him.

This amount of exports of arms and ammunition is of so little consequence to the warring nations that one is forced to the conclusion that other motives lie back of this propaganda. The noise that these propagandists have made has been sufficient to lead the naturalized citizens of my own district to believe that this country has turned all of its implement factories into the production of arms and ammunition for the slaughtering pen of Europe.

OTHER SUPPLIES THAN GUNS

The motive back of the movement to place an embargo on arms and ammunition is no doubt to ultimately stop the exportations of all supplies that go to support an army in the field. These gentlemen who favor an embargo on arms and ammunition know that if the resolution should ever be considered at all it would certainly be amended to make it effective by including supplies of every kind that an army can use. Such a law as that would completely paralyze the industry of the nation more effectually than did the outbreak of war in Europe last August when we found ourselves without the ships to move our products. Products of every kind suffered a decline in price at that time, and if it had not been for the general anticipation of the people that the war would ultimately enhance prices, there would have been a still greater decline. As ships were procured and exports again began to move, conditions improved correspondingly all over the country. But even now, with ocean freight rates increased from three to fifteen times the rates in force prior to the war, our ports are still congested with products destined for Europe. The Pennsylvania railroad has refused to take any more grain for the ports at Philadelphia and Baltimore, because the yards are filled now with thousands of cars of corn and wheat awaiting ships to carry it abroad.

It requires only a small amount of business experience for one to see what would happen to the prices of products in this country should an embargo be placed on the real sinews of war—food and clothing, and the factory supplies, automobiles, saddles, harness, tools, etc. The economic disaster that would follow such legislation would bankrupt the nation and cause widespread suffering unparalleled in the history of this country.

There is not the slightest prospect of such legislation, but that does not dispose of the subject for there are large numbers of citizens in this country who are pressing for its consideration and who must be answered. The question I wish to put to them is this: Are they ready to make the sacrifice. There is no doubt about where the road leads us, nor what the results of such legislation will be. To place an embargo on a handful of arms, comparatively speaking, on the ground of humanitarianism, and continue to ship vast cargoes of supplies for the belligerent armies would make us ridiculous in the eyes of the world.

AMOUNT OF OTHER EXPORTS

On the face of it the object of the resolution is clearly intended to prevent, if possible, further carnage in Europe. With that object I am wholly in sympathy, but I do not want to be fooled into believing that there is any value whatever in the passage of that sort of a resolution. I deny that any such results will follow, I am opposed to the resolution, and I am opposed to any resolution that attempts to place an embargo upon the commerce of the citizens of this country who are carrying on legitimate trade. I wish to call attention to the character of the exports that we are now sending to Europe. Take for example the order for fifty thousand automobiles reported to have been received by the Ford Automobile Company for one of the belligerent nations. These cars are capable of transporting a quarter of a million of soldiers, or their equivalent in weight of provisions for the army, a hundred miles in a single day over the hard roads of Europe. There was nothing ever sold by a neutral nation to a belligerent in the history of the world, which, under favorable conditions would contribute so effectively to a successful movement of a great army.

Then following these 50,000 automobiles will