

The President's Advice on Neutrality

Address of President Wilson at the Associated Press Luncheon, New York, N. Y., April 20, 1915

Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Associated Press, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am deeply gratified by the generous reception you have accorded me. It makes me look back with a touch of regret to former occasions when I have stood in this place and enjoyed a greater liberty than is granted me today. There have been times when I stood in this spot and said what I really thought, and I can not help praying that those days of indulgence may be accorded me again. I have come here today, of course, somewhat restrained by a sense of responsibility which I can not escape. For I take the Associated Press very seriously. I know the enormous part that you play in the affairs not only of this country but of the world. You deal in the raw material of opinion and, if my convictions have any validity, opinion ultimately governs the world.

TEST FOR AMERICA COMING

It is, therefore, of very serious things that I think as I face this body of men. I do not think of you, however, as members of the Associated Press. I do not think of you as men of different parties or of different racial derivations or of different religious denominations. I want to talk to you as to my fellow citizens of the United States, for there are serious things which as fellow citizens we ought to consider. The times behind us, gentlemen, have been difficult enough; the times before us are likely to be more difficult still, because, whatever may be said about the present condition of the world's affairs, it is clear that they are drawing rapidly to a climax, and at the climax the test will come, not only for the nations engaged in the present colossal struggle—it will come to them of course—but the test will come for us particularly.

Do you realize that, roughly speaking, we are the only great nation at present disengaged? I am not speaking, of course, with disparagement of the greatness of those nations in Europe which are not parties to the present war, but I am thinking of their close neighborhood to it. I am thinking how their lives much more than ours touch the very heart and stuff of the business, whereas we have rolling between us and those bitter days across the water 3,000 miles of cool and silent ocean. Our atmosphere is not yet charged with those disturbing elements which must permeate every nation of Europe. Therefore, is it not likely that the nations of the world will some day turn to us for the cooler assessment of the elements engaged? I am not now thinking so preposterous a thought as that we should sit in judgment upon them—no nation is fit to sit in judgment upon any other nation—but that we shall some day have to assist in reconstructing the processes of peace. Our resources are untouched; we are more and more becoming by the force of circumstances the mediating nation of the world in respect of its finance. We must make up our minds what are the best things to do and what are the best ways to do them. We must put our money, our energy, our enthusiasm, our sympathy into these things, and we must have our judgments prepared and our spirits chastened against the coming of that day.

HIS MOTTO "AMERICA FIRST"

So that I am not speaking in a selfish spirit when I say that our whole duty, for the present at any rate, is summed up in this motto, "America first." Let us think of America before we think of Europe, in order that America may be fit to be Europe's friend when the day of tested friendship comes. The test of friendship is not now sympathy with the one side or the other, but getting ready to help both sides when the struggle is over. The basis of neutrality, gentlemen, is not indifference; it is not self-interest. The basis of neutrality is sympathy for mankind. It is fairness, it is good will, at bottom. It is impartiality of spirit and of judgment. I wish that all of our fellow citizens could realize that. There is in some quarters a disposition to create distempers in this body politic. Men are even uttering slanders against the United States, as if to excite her. Men are saying that if we should go to war upon either side there would be a divided America—an abominable libel of ignorance! America is not all of it vocal just now. It is vocal in spots, but I, for

one, have a complete and abiding faith in that great silent body of Americans who are not standing up and shouting and expressing their opinions just now, but are waiting to find out and support the duty of America. I am just as sure of their solidity and of their loyalty and of their unanimity, if we act justly, as I am that the history of this country has at every crisis and turning point illustrated this great lesson.

NEW VIEW OF MEDIATION

We are the mediating nation of the world. I do not mean that we undertake not to mind our own business and to mediate where other people are quarreling. I mean the word in a broader sense. We are compounded of the nations of the world; we mediate their blood, we mediate their traditions, we mediate their sentiments, their tastes, their passions; we are ourselves compounded of those things. We are, therefore, able to understand all nations; we are able to understand them in the compound, not separately, as partisans, but unitedly as knowing and comprehending and embodying them all. It is in that sense that I mean that America is a mediating nation. The opinion of America, the action of America, is ready to turn, and free to turn, in any direction. Did you ever reflect upon how almost every other nation has through centuries been headed in one direction? That is not true of the United States. The United States has no racial momentum. It has no history back of it which makes it run all its energies and all its ambitions in one particular direction. And America is particularly free in this, that she has no hampering ambitions as a world power. We do not want a foot of anybody's territory. If we have been obliged by circumstance, or have considered ourselves to be obliged by circumstances, in the past, to take territory which we otherwise would not have thought of taking, I believe I am right in saying that we have considered it our duty to administer that territory, not for ourselves but for the people living in it, and to put this burden upon our consciences—not to think that this thing is ours for our use, but to regard ourselves as trustees of the great business for those to whom it does really belong, trustees ready to hand it over to the cestui que trust at any time when the business seems to make that possible and feasible. That is what I mean by saying that we have no hampering ambitions. We do not want anything that does not belong to us. Is not a nation in that position free to serve other nations, and is not a nation like that ready to form some part of the assessing opinion of the world?

BETTER THAN FIGHTING

My interest in the neutrality of the United States is not the petty desire to keep out of trouble. To judge by my experience, I have never been able to keep out of trouble. I have never looked for it, but I have always found it. I do not want to walk around trouble. If any man wants a scrap that is an interesting scrap and worth while, I am his man. I warn him that he is not going to draw me into the scrap for his advertisement, but if he is looking for trouble that is the trouble of men in general and I can help a little, why, then, I am in for it. But I am interested in neutrality because there is something so much greater to do than fight; there is a distinction waiting for this nation that no nation has ever yet got. That is the distinction of absolute control and self-mastery. Whom do you admire most among your friends? The irritable man? The man out of whom you can get a "rise" without trying? The man who will fight at the drop of the hat, whether he knows what the hat is dropped for or not? Don't you admire and don't you fear, if you have to contest with him, the self-mastered man who watches you with calm eye and comes on only when you have carried the thing so far that you must be disposed of? That is the man you respect. That is the man who, you know, has at bottom a much more fundamental and terrible courage than the irritable, fighting man. Now, I covet for America this splendid courage of reserve moral force, and I wanted to point out to you gentlemen simply this:

WANT WORLD TO KNOW THE TRUTH

There is news and news. There is what is called news from Turtle Bay that turns out to

be falsehood, at any rate in what it is said to signify, but which, if you could get the nation to believe it true, might disturb our equilibrium and our self-possession. We ought not to deal in stuff of that kind. We ought not to permit that sort of thing to use up the electrical energy of the wires, because its energy is malign, its energy is not of the truth, its energy is of mischief. It is possible to sift truth. I have known some things to go out on the wires as true when there was only one man or one group of men who could have told the originators of that report whether it was true or not, and they were not asked whether it was true or not for fear it might not be true. That sort of report ought not to go out over the wires. There is generally, if not always, somebody who knows whether the thing is so or not, and in these days, above all other days, we ought to take particular pains to resort to the one small group of men, or to the one man if there be but one, who knows whether those things are true or not. The world ought to know the truth; the world ought not at this period of unstable equilibrium to be disturbed by rumor, ought not to be disturbed by imaginative combinations of circumstances, or, rather, by circumstances stated in combination which do not belong in combination. You gentlemen, and gentlemen engaged like you, are holding the balances in your hand. This unstable equilibrium rests upon scales that are in your hands. For the food of opinion, as I began by saying, is the news of the day. I have known many a man to go off at a tangent on information that was not reliable. Indeed, that describes the majority of men. The world is held stable by the man who waits for the next day to find out whether the report was true or not.

HOLDS "PEOPLE'S HEART SOUND"

We can not afford, therefore, to let the rumors of irresponsible persons and origins get into the atmosphere of the United States. We are trustees for what I venture to say is the greatest heritage that any nation ever had, the love of justice and righteousness and human liberty. For, fundamentally, those are the things to which America is addicted and to which she is devoted. There are groups of selfish men in the United States, there are coteries, where sinister things are purposed, but the great heart of the American people is just as sound and true as it ever was. And it is a single heart; it is the heart of America. It is not a heart made up of sections selected out of other countries.

What I try to remind myself of every day when I am almost overcome by perplexities, what I try to remember, is what the people at home are thinking about. I put myself in the place of the man who does not know all the things that I know and I ask myself what he would like the policy of this country to be. Not the talkative man, not the partisan man, not the man who remembers first that he is a republican or a democrat, or that his parents were German or English, but the man who remembers first that the whole destiny of modern affairs centers largely upon his being an American first of all. If I permitted myself to be a partisan in this present struggle, I would be unworthy to represent you. If I permitted myself to forget the people who are not partisans, I would be unworthy to be your spokesman. I am not sure that I am worthy to represent you, but I do claim this degree of worthiness—that before everything else I love America.

During the month of April hundreds of establishments have increased their working forces and mills that were closed by the disturbance of all business following the sudden plunging of Europe into war have been re-opening as fast as they could get in shape. Even the railroads, which have been trying to touch the hearts of the interstate commerce commissioners by wearing their old clothes almost threadbare, have been placing large buying orders. The fact that Wall street is having a boom in stocks but adds to the conclusive evidence already introduced as to the return of prosperity.

Evidence that the world does move continually accumulates. The republicans of Chicago inaugurated their newly-elected mayor with what they called "a prosperity parade." And this was done with the full knowledge that a democratic administration was still on down at Washington. When the republicans officially admit the existence of prosperity anywhere in the country when the democrats are in control of the national government, it is useless to keep on wondering how soon the millenium will arrive.