

Our Drift Toward War
(Delivered June 15, 1940)

I have asked to speak to you again tonight because I believe that we, in America, are drifting toward a position of far greater seriousness to our future than even this present war. There is an attempt to becloud the issue that confronts us. It is not alone an issue of building an adequate defense for our country. That must and can be done. Our people are solidly behind an adequate military preparedness, and no one believes in it more than I. But we must not confuse the question of national defense with the question of entering a European War. And it is just as important not to confuse this present war with the type of war we would have to wage if we fought against Germany. Arming for the defense of America is compatible with normal life, commerce, and culture. It is an integral part of the destiny of our nation. But arming to attack the continent of Europe would necessitate that the lives and thoughts of every man, woman, and child in this country be directed toward war for the next generation, probably for the next several generations.

We cannot continue for long to follow the course our Government has taken without becoming involved in war with Germany. There are some who already advocate our entry into such as war. There are many perfectly sincere men and women who believe that we can send weapons to kill people in Europe without becoming involved in war with those people. Still others believe that by gestures and applause we can assist France and England to win without danger to our own country. In addition to these, however, there are men among us of less honesty who advocate stepping closer and closer to war, knowing well that a point exists beyond which there can be no turning back. They have baited the trap of war with requests for modest assistance. This later group is meeting with success at the moment.

There is a saying that grew in the old west to the effect that a man who enjoys life should never touch his gun unless he means business; that he should never draw unless he is ready to shoot, and that he should never shoot unless he is ready to kill. Those old pioneers of ours knew from long experience that there can be no successful dabbling with death. But the red-blooded wisdom of the old west is gone from American politics today. Our present danger

results from making gestures with an empty gun after we have already lost the draw. Fortunately, the wide wall of the Atlantic stands between us and the shooting that is going on.

This dabbling we have been doing in European affairs can lead only to failure in the future as it has in the past. It is not a policy that we can continue to follow and remain a great nation. Let us look at our position today. Our leaders have lost the influence we could have exerted as the world's greatest neutral nation. The dribbles of munitions we have sold to England and France have had a negligible effect on the trend of the war, and we have not sufficient military strength available to change that trend. We demand that foreign nations refrain from interfering in our hemisphere, yet we constantly interfere in theirs. And while we have been taking an ineffective part in the war abroad, we have inexcusably neglected our defenses at home. In fact we have let our own affairs drift along until we have not even a plan of defense for the continent of North America. We have been doing to England and France what they did to Abyssinia, to Czechoslovakia, to Poland, to Finland, and to Norway - we have encouraged them to hope for help we cannot send. Yet with these examples before us, we still continue in this course - the same course that led England to failure abroad and weakness at home, a course that will lead us, also, to a disastrous and unsuccessful war if we persist in following it.

When the subject of our participation in war is discussed, most people visualize the war that is now going on in Europe. They think of sending more arms, and possibly some soldiers. There is still very little understanding of what our entrance into European war would mean. When we talk of such a war, we must realize that we are considering the greatest struggle the world has yet known - a conflict between hemispheres, one half of the white race against the other half. Before allowing ourselves to become further involved, we should consider the conditions which may exist by the time we are ready for military action. If we enter war at all, we should prepare to meet the worst conditions rather than the best.

It is useless to talk of sending American troops to Europe now, for we would need months of preparation before we could train and equip even a small army, and small efforts

do not effect great movements - witness Norway, Holland, and Belgium.

We must face the fact, regardless of how disagreeable it is to us, that before we can take effective action in an European war the German armies may have brought all Europe under their control. In that case, Europe will be dominated by the strongest military nation the world has ever known, controlling a population far larger than our own. If we decide to enter war, we must be prepared to attack that nation. We must prepare to invade a continent which it controls.

No people ever had a greater decision to make. We hold our children's future in our hands as we deliberate, for if we turn to war the battles will be hard fought and the outcome is not likely to be decided in our lifetime. This is a question of mortgaging the lives of our children and our grandchildren. Every family in the land would have its wounded and its dead. We start at a disadvantage because we are not a military nation. Our is not a land of guns and marching men. If we decide to fight, then the United States must prepare for war for many years to come, and on a scale unprecedented in all history. In the case we must turn to a dictatorial government, for there is no military efficiency to be lost. We should start to build an army of several million men. We will need several hundred thousand airplanes before the battling is over. And we must have a navy large enough to transport this force across the sea. This war we are asked to enter would not be a repetition of the last war. It would be more comparable to the struggle which took place between Athens and Sparta, or Rome and Carthage. It would involve the destiny of America and of western civilization as far into the future as we can see.

But whatever our decision may be in regard to Europe, we must start now to build our own defenses. We must stop these gestures with an empty gun. In this, we are a united nation. The only question that arises concerns how our defense can best be built. We must first construct a clear cut plan of defense, and have the cooperation of all American countries in carrying it out. We must insist upon military bases being placed wherever they are needed for our safety, regardless of who owns the territory involved. We must be willing to do more than pay taxes and make appropriations. Military strength cannot be purchased by money alone. Strength is a thing of spirit, of

preparation, and of sacrifice extending over years of time. The men of our country must be willing to give a year of their lives to military training - more if necessary. And our capitalists as well as our soldiers should be willing to serve without personal profit. We must have a nation ready to give whatever is required for its future welfare, and leaders who are more interested in their country than in their own advancement.

With an adequate defense, no foreign army can invade us. Our advantage in defending America is as great as our disadvantage would be in attacking Europe. From a military geographical standpoint, we are the most fortunate country in the world. There is no other nation in this hemisphere strong enough even to consider attacking us, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans separate us from the warring armies of Europe and Asia. If the British navy could not support an invasion of Norway against the German air force, there is little reason for us to worry about an invasion of America as long as our own air force is adequately maintained. As far as invasion by air is concerned, it is impossible for any existing air force to attack effectively across the ocean. In the Arctic regions, the severe climate and ruggedness of terrain counteract the vulnerability of shorter distances between land. With our geographical position, nothing but the gross neglect of our military forces, or quarreling between American countries themselves, could make possible an invasion by foreign armies.

America stands today where the road divides, at the signpost of war and peace. Now that we have become one of the world's greatest nations, shall we throw away the independent American destiny which our forefathers gave their lives to win? Shall we submerge our future in the endless wars of the old world? Or shall we build our own defenses and leave European war to European countries? Shall we continue this suicidal conflict between western nations and white races, or shall we learn from history as well as from modern Europe that a civilization cannot be preserved by conflict among its own peoples, regardless of how different their ideologies may be?

You men and women of America who believe that our destiny lies in building strength at home and not in war abroad - to you I say that we must act now to stop this trend toward war. An organized minority in this country is flooding our

congress and our press with propaganda for war. They are spending large sums of money in advertisements. They are telegraphing, writing, and talking every hour of the day, pushing us closer and closer to the edge. Some are even now demanding a declaration of war.

If you believe that we should not enter a European war, you must support those of us who oppose such an action. We cannot stop this trend alone. Some of your representatives in Washington are already considering a declaration of war, but they are responsible to you for the action they take. Let them know how you feel about this. Speak to your friends and organize in your community. Nothing but a determined effort on the part of every one of us will prevent the disaster toward which our nation is now heading.

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