Confidential

February 13, 1939.

The Secretary:
The Under-Secretary:

At the invitation of Hamilton Fish Armstrong I was present last evening (Sunday, February 12) at a dinner which he gave in the Knickerbocker Club for Dr. Benes, the former President of Czechoslovakia. Mr. Armstrong had invited some thirty guests. Justice Frankfurter, who was the only officer of our Government besides myself, was there. The guests were for the most part editorial writers of some of the principal papers and publications in the country as well as publishers.

After dinner Mr. Benes spoke very briefly and then answered questions for several hours. I think everyone was struck with the objectivity which he displayed, the apparent complete frankness of his replies and with the extraordinarily lucid analyses he gave of the various aspects of the European problem. While I think all of the guests were more or less sympathetically inclined towards Mr. Benes personally and some of them had known him for a number of years, I had the very definite feeling that he had made a very deep impression on all those at the dinner and that their opinions of him as
as a statesman were enhanced. Although he was asked some searching questions which he answered without reservation, there was an utter lack of recrimination and bitterness in all that he said.

I had the privilege of sitting next to Mr. Benes during dinner and conversed with him during the entire dinner. Knowing that he is perhaps one of the best informed men today on the Russian situation, I asked him some searching questions with the intent of getting his opinion as to the strength of Russia today.

Mr. Benes said that it was a great mistake to leave Russia out of our thinking from the point of view of power politics. Unquestionably the purges had affected the army at the time, but that from the colonels on down the Russian army was not much affected and he considered it still a very powerful instrument. During the September crisis and before, Russia had 57 divisions on the German frontier and on the whole 80 divisions were available for service on that frontier without weakening the strength in Siberia. He had had some of his most trusted officers in Russia for months before the crisis in September last and they were able to get about fairly freely. While these officers had not been with every one of these 57 divisions to actually identify all of them as individual units, they were satisfied that these 57 divisions were there.
Mr. Benes said that he did not have as accurate information as to the number of divisions on the Siberian front but that his officers in whom he had confidence were convinced that Russia could fight a war on both fronts. He went on to say that the fortifications which Russia had on her Western frontier were far better than it seemed to be appreciated in this country. There were practically no fortifications along the frontier of the small northern states, but from Poland down there was a triple line. The first line was not a strong one. Sixty kilometres behind this was a second line which was much stronger and quite strong. Sixty kilometres back of this was a third line which was a strong line and in some respects as strong as the Maginot Line. He felt that the Russians would be able to hold the Germans on these lines and that the Germans could not penetrate Russia.

I remarked to him that I seemed to have no knowledge of these lines. He said he could assure me that they were there. He himself had seen a part of them. The officers whom he had sent to Russia were men in whose loyalty he could have absolute confidence. I would realize how important it was to him to have accurate information with regard to the Russian military position. He was satisfied that this line existed and was a strong one. He was also satisfied that the 80 divisions all together had been available
available in September on the Western frontier without weakening the Russian position in the Far East.

With respect to these officers, Benes said that, due to the Soviet-Czechoslovakian arrangements, the Russians had sent some of their officers into his country and he had loyally shown them everything they had in their army. This naturally placed the Russians under the obligation to receive his own officers and when these were sent to Soviet Russia, he saw to it that they were men of high rank and in whom he personally had full confidence.

With respect to Russian aviation, he said that he could not be so specific as he could with respect to the fortifications and the army. Naturally in this respect his men did not have the opportunity to check as definitely as the Russian officers had had a chance to see what they had in Czechoslovakia. The Russians had told his people that they had all together 18,000 planes including old as well as new ones. Of these they considered 12,000 as being first class planes. He could not vouch for these figures but his own advisers had told him that they believed this figure of 12,000 good planes probably near the mark. The planes which the Russians had delivered to Czechoslovakia were unquestionably first class.
Mr. Banes constantly reiterated how important he thought it was not to underestimate the strength of Russia or to leave her out of consideration. He did not think that the situation in Russia was now such that the government would contemplate any arrangements with Germany. He could conceive, however, how such a situation would develop. There were those in England and in France who were pressing for a policy of leaving Germany an open path to domination in southeastern Europe, with the thought that this would keep her busy and almost certainly bring her into conflict with Soviet Russia and then the two countries would wear themselves out. It was the thought of these people in England and France that in this way the West would be safe from German aggression for a considerable period. He went into a lengthy analysis of this situation which I will not set forth here, but which was in many respects, in my opinion, a profound one. He did point out that the Russians might just as well get together with the end that the German power be diverted towards the West. This was not out of the question and in that case England and France would be finished.

In discussing the general situation in Europe and his policy with respect to Czechoslovakia, he said that he had always pursued a policy directed towards no one and one which was aimed at cooperation between all the principal
principal powers in Europe. For this reason he had been against a Four Power pact and any pact which did not leave Russia in the picture. Any Four Power pact would leave Russia out of the picture and would mean that Germany and Italy would be together with the constant possibility of playing up France and England against each other. The inevitable result would be to the disadvantage of France and England.

While Mr. Benes said many interesting things in this confidential gathering which I could not begin to recount here, he made one statement which I believe is of special interest. He was asked by one of the guests whether Czechoslovakia could not, by better treatment of its German minority, have avoided the events of last year. Mr. Benes made a long clear and frank statement of the minority situation in reply and said that on more than one occasion he had discussed with the German Minister in Prague this question. He had told the Minister that he must know what the situation was among the German minority and why he did not tell his government. He had said to the Minister why, knowing what the situation was, the German government continued these misrepresentations. The Minister had replied that it was not what the situation really was which was in question, but that Czechoslovakia was in the way, that her position had to be broken down and that this
was the means of attack. Mr. Benes made it clear that there were no steps which Czechoslovakia could have taken which would have stopped the German pressure.

C.S. Messersmith.