September 4, 1939

Hon. George Messersmith,
The Department of State,
Washington, D. C.

My dear Friend Messersmith:

Thanks so much for yours of September 1, and the maps. I had great need of these and they fill the bill admirably. You certainly function promptly and usefully for your friends; no matter what the pressure on you.

It looks to me like we are already right in the midst of just such a mess as came in the Spring of 1913 with the torpedoing of the Lusitania. I write this just after having read a bulletin over the wire that the German Government denied that any of its submarines had been responsible for the torpedoing of the Athenia -- that this would have been violation of strict orders which their submarines had. They laid it to a mine. This sounds quite as thin to me as the Hitler claim last Friday morning that his troops were "counter-attacking" the Poles. It looks like Hitler's Germany has no more sense than did the Kaiser's, as to the ability of the neutrals to see through its thin lies.

Now as to the Lusitania comparison, may I make another request. What official change has there been, so far as published notes or treaties or acts of Congress are concerned, as to the doctrine of "Freedom of the Seas" upon which Woodrow Wilson was proceeding in 1915 in his Lusitania and later the Gullflight and Arabic notes stating our then United States position? I have some vague memory that the Versailles Treaty and then the special treaty of peace between Germany and the United States, and then the Anglo-German naval pact of 1934, contained provisions definitely abandoning U-boat warfare and particularly sinkings without notice. Likewise that there is some convention supposed to be in force, binding Germany as well as others, and unrepudiated by Hitler (except in act) as to the use of poison gas. As to airplanes raiding unfortified towns the recent Roosevelt action demonstrates the present situation -- in words at least -- of the continental nations on this.

I am wondering if our American attitude and mind has not already proceeded a tremendous distance toward the point that in the last war it only reached late in 1916 and early in 1917. As I see it now, if this is a short war, of less than six months duration, we will remain out. But I think the emotions already being generated by such things as bombings and the Athenia will quickly bring us to the breaking point.

I imagine it must have been nothing but pluperfect agony in the State Department the last week. Now that this war of nerves and indecision is over, I dare say there can be a somewhat more normal tension. I do hope you get a little chance to rest up for the duties and
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problems are going to be increasingly tremendous.

With all good wishes, I remain

Affectionately yours,

George F. Milton

P. S. Lincoln White wrote me the other day that he had been given a temporary position in the Division of Cultural Relations. He was most grateful. I appreciate your looking out for this matter amid the myriad of problems that have been impacting you.

GFM