

Personal and
Confidential

Habana, Cuba,
April 24, 1940.

My dear Friend:

I have just received your note of April 19th with regard to Dr. Mayer, and am very glad indeed that you wrote me about him. I met him here and formed a very high opinion of him. Aside from his professional qualifications I gathered the impression during the few opportunities that I had to see him that he is a man of fine character and a good deal of vision and good judgment. He has, as you know, a very deep interest in this Island and he has succeeded in establishing very helpful relationships here. The work which he and his assistants are doing in bringing together Cornell and the University of Habana is already most useful and, under the proper direction which men like Dr. Mayer are giving it, it is going to become increasingly useful.

The work which they are doing in promoting closer relationships between Cornell and the University of Habana is the type of work that we were trying to stimulate through the Division of Cultural Relations in the Department of State, which was organized during my time in the Department. We are making very rapid progress in bringing together our cultural institutions and organizations in the United States and in the American Republics. It is a much neglected field but one in which fine fruits can develop rapidly. Dr. Mayer has been a pioneer in this field and what he has already done will prove to be most helpful not only here but elsewhere.

His wife is remaining here and Dr. Mayer, I understand, intends to return in some months. You may be sure I shall cooperate with him in the work which he is doing in every way possible. I visited, by the way, the University of Habana the other day, and I think it is the first time that an American Ambassador has been there for many years. I hope, in accord with a wish the Rector expressed the other day, to make a more formal visit there in the near future. I think you know that the University here has between 11,000 and 12,000 students. This has its advantages as well as its disadvantages, which I will not go into here.

It is

George Backer, Esquire,
NEW YORK POST,
75 West Street,
New York City.

It is good of you to have written me and to express the sentiments you did in the last part of your letter, and I appreciate the confidence your letter implies. Of course it is quite impossible for us to send an Ambassador to Berlin for the present. We have everything to lose and nothing to gain by such action at this time. There are a lot of well-meaning people at home who think that we should send an Ambassador to Berlin now and that we should have done so during the past months. They do not realize that the dictators do not want to talk to Ambassadors. I think in these days it is well for us to learn from experience and it is about time to begin to recognize that it is our best guide. We have had a number of Ambassadors in Moscow in recent years, and I know of only one who had a conversation with Stalin and that was Joe Davis just before he left that post. We have an experienced Ambassador in Rome now, and I think he has probably seen Mussolini the maximum of three times in about four years and these conversations have not been of any particular significance. If Phillips wants to talk with the Italian Government he has to do it through Ciano and we know what that means - just nothing. I think Hugh Wilson was in Berlin well over a year and during that time I doubt whether he had a talk with Hitler except when he presented his letters of credence, and that was certainly a conversation of no importance. Our previous Ambassadors saw Hitler just as little.

Dictators do not want to talk to Ambassadors for it puts them too much on the spot. Of course, Hitler and Ribbentrop have been very eager that we should send an Ambassador to Berlin for it would be, for them, another of those diplomatic victories which they have succeeded in getting. Hitler knows that our sending an Ambassador to Berlin now would be misinterpreted in Germany by the people as indicating that our Government was giving approval to all that had happened and was happening. The German people would certainly misunderstand our action and it would have a depressing influence there among those who still nourish the hope of a return to decency in internal and external matters. Our action in sending some one to Berlin now would be misinterpreted and misunderstood in practically every country in the world, and particularly in Southeastern Europe where it would be considered as an evidence that we thought Germany was getting the better of it. Our action would have a very demoralizing effect when these States are really strengthening their attitude against Germany and are resisting Germany's pressures. I have, of course, a good many friends at home who think that in some way or other sending an Ambassador to Germany would enable us to do things which we are not now able to do. As a matter of fact, Kirk,

our

our Chargé there, is a very capable man, and we have a very competent staff there also. Kirk is able to do anything for us that an Ambassador could do. I had a good deal of difficulty in making some of my friends in Congress understand that we would have everything to lose and nothing to gain by sending an Ambassador to Berlin now. When the matter was explained to them they of course thoroughly understood and agreed. When this terrible war approaches its end, it will be very important for us to have the right kind of a man there. I would like to think that when that time comes that I may be able to be of some use in Germany. It is to me personally not so important in what capacity I go, because I have lived long enough not to place any false values on labels and distinctions. I do believe that when the appropriate time comes I may be perhaps in as favorable position to serve our country as Ambassador in Berlin as any one we have now, because I do have the confidence of the worthwhile people left in that country who know that I have no use for the present Government, but that I bear no enmity towards the German people themselves. In any event, I am hopeful that when the time comes I may be able to serve my country and its interests in Germany or anywhere that such special knowledge as I may have may be of most use.

I am sorry that I did not get to see you before I left home for Habana. It was with the greatest difficulty that I could dig up my roots in the Department, and it was not until the Saturday preceding the Wednesday that I sailed at the end of February that I was able to leave my desk in the Department. I left my work in the Department and my associations with the deepest regret and with much reluctance. My decision was governed entirely by the consideration that I knew better than any doctor could tell me that I had reached the end of my rope. For three years, I had been working anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours a day, and I had tried to do in a few years what one would ordinarily endeavor to do in ten. The result was that I had placed a strain on myself which no machine can stand and you know that nature is inexorable when it comes to taking its toll for our imprudences, even though we may have been imprudent in what we think a good cause. Confidentially, I had to take the choice between an inevitable breakdown and a post in the field where I would have a worthwhile mission but would, for the time being, be relieved from pressure. The change was really, therefore, one of conservation and a case of putting the old horse out to pasture so as to store up the strength for some of the hard furrows which I see that we will have to plow before we are out of our troubles. I am particularly happy that the President sent me to Habana because it gives me an opportunity to do a real job here and at the same time I remain sufficiently close to home where I can follow the problems which have absorbed me in recent years and in which, I need not assure you, my interest remains as keen as ever.

Cuba

Cuba is passing through a very difficult period and is in the process of making a Constitution on which a great deal of its future will depend. I have a very delicate task before me which I am trying to carry through as best I can. I hope sometime when you are seeking the sun you may be able to come to this very delightful spot and I need not tell you how pleased we will be to see you here.

I will not begin to comment on the situation in Europe, because I think you know very largely what my thoughts would be. I am confident that Germany overreached herself in the Norwegian venture. It is a move of desperation brought about by the absolute necessity of keeping the ore supplies open to her. She is similarly in need of gasoline and high grade lubricating oils and for this reason we must keep our eyes on the Southeast continuously. Germany has a tremendous military machine, but has not the economic backing which is necessary to support such a machine in active war. Her sea power is broken and the best part of her fleet is gone. Her power to construct submarines is still unimpaired and she may be able to produce as many as eight a month, as the experts say, but I am confident that she has not the trained crews which are necessary for these new submarines. The loss of a submarine means the loss of a crew and this means psychological as well as other considerations. It takes at least two years to prepare a competent submarine crew, and I am confident that Germany does not have the crews to man any considerable number of new submarines even though she can produce them. Again, reverting to the lessons of experience, it is worthwhile remembering that the beginnings of the revolution at the end of the last Great War started among the submarine crews at Kiel. I am confident that Germany cannot win this war, but, on the other hand unless we lend all our aid that we possibly can to England and France, it may be a long war, and the longer the war the greater the general demoralization and the longer and the more difficult the reconstruction which will have to follow. I make no concealment to you of my opinions that I think we are definitely interested in this war, and I am convinced that if Germany should win it we would have a war on our hands in a few years on two fronts with no ally that would be capable of helping us. We can save ourselves infinite pains, infinite treasure, and much precious life, if we do now what we should do. I know that it takes courage to say these things, but those who profess to love peace so much are the ones who do not realize that this talk of peace is just what may bring us, and almost certainly will bring us, into a bitter and costly war. We live in a world where certain powers are showing an utter disregard for everything except force. In the face of such facts, we must act realistically in our enlightened self-interest. If we do what we should now, we will never have to send an American soldier beyond our frontiers for as long as you and I can look into the future. If we do not do that now, we shall

have

have to reckon with the problems in this hemisphere and you know what that means.

I have been most indiscreet in opening my heart to you in this way, but I have felt that I must do so as I have not had the privilege of seeing you for so long. I have no hesitation in writing to you so frankly, as I know you will keep these observations of mine for yourself and for such interest as they may have for you.

I hope before very long that we may have an opportunity for a real chat, as there are many things on which I would like to exchange views with you.

With very good wishes and with very real appreciation of your letter,

Cordially yours,

GEORGE S. MESSERSMITH

GSM:fm.