

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE HONORABLE GEORGE S. MESSERSMITH,  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE, BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY  
FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS AT THE HOTEL ASTOR IN NEW YORK  
CITY ON FEBRUARY 4, 1938 AT 2:30 P.M.

The Work of the Department of State and How the  
Women of New York Can Help In That Work

I appreciate very much the opportunity which the New York City Federation of Women's Clubs has given me as a member of the Department of State to appear before you at this time, and your particular request that there should be presented to you some observations on the work of the Department and how the women of New York can help in that work. This is very encouraging at a time when we not only have plenty of work but also have reason to feel keenly the great need of intelligent comprehension by our fellow citizens of what we are trying to do and their loyal support in doing it.

There has been, I think it safe to say, probably no time in the history of this country that our foreign relations have been of more vital importance to us, when the day by day conduct of our relations with our near and far neighbors assumes more significance and when any mistakes made today would more surely be likely to bear bitter fruit tomorrow. It is unnecessary before a group of women such as this to explain the degree to which our relations with the rest of the world have grown and become complex, more particularly in recent years. It is also superfluous for me to tell you that this increase in the vital interest we have in what takes place beyond our frontiers is in no sense due to any policies of our Government nor to the machinations of big business or of particular groups of our population as is only too often made to appear. It is the result of changes in the world in which we live -- changes which have grown out of a multitude of causes over

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which no people has had control and no one particular country has directed. What we must realize is that we live in a world very different from the one in which our forefathers established the independent existence of our country, - a world very different from the world in which for so many years our ancestors were able to develop our internal life and institutions. We live in a world in which the welfare of every country and people is inextricably bound up to a considerable degree with that of every other nation and people.

There are those who tell us that it is our sole duty to mind our own business at home and that it is of no concern to us what happens beyond our frontiers. There is something about the word "isolation" and in the doctrine of isolation for our country which seem very appealing to many in this country. These people are apt to tell us that we have everything at home that we want and need and that we must let others take care of themselves and perhaps disintegrate through their quarrels over getting what belongs to them. All this sounds very plausible but I fear that our friends who speak so loudly in this strain are not thinking very clearly or realistically. At least we can be sure that they are not facing realistically what is happening in the world today or realizing what a world we are living in. I will only permit myself to say that, because we have so much to be contented with at home, we must use every peaceful effort not to let the world go to pieces around us or it will not be very long before we may be called upon to defend our own and on our own ground.

It would perhaps be well for those who press complete isolation to remember that before the adoption of the Constitution the struggling colonies had already felt the necessity of sending representatives to the old continent to maintain contacts with other governments and peoples and that on the founding of our Government the Department of State was the first executive department to be established. The Constitution provides that the conduct of our foreign relations shall be vested in the President and among our earliest statutes are those establishing the Department of State as the instrument through which the President conducts these relations.

Although the Department of State is the oldest and premier of the executive departments and plays in reality so important a part in our national life, it has perhaps from time to time been the least highly appraised, the least understood and the least appreciated. It has as a consequence frequently lacked that popular, moral and financial support so necessary to the effective functioning of a vital department. It is interesting nevertheless that, although in the way of financial and often of moral support it has been somewhat of a stepchild of our people, it has been among the best conducted, best organized and in many respects the best functioning of the executive departments. It has remained the smallest and the least expensive of the agencies of our Government, costing in 1938 less than one percent of the cost of the Army and of the Navy.

And why should this be so? We are an intelligent people in this country even if we do not always do as much or as clear thinking as we should. We certainly read enough and newspapers, periodicals, books, radio and screen keep us alive to so much that is going on both near and far. That we know so little of our State

Department,

Department, its work and its relation to our everyday life is not greatly to our credit. I have often thought about this and I believe one of the principal reasons is because it is so largely a non-political department.

The very nature of its work is such that most of it must be non-partisan. It is trite but true that our internal political differences must stop on our frontiers and in our foreign policy we must have a common front. Our Secretaries of State are chosen by the President, and from his party, but the Presidents have always been most careful in their choice of the head of that agency. They have invariably chosen men who have been great and wise and who as the head of that Department have acted only as Americans. The personnel of the Department in Washington has likewise been less political than that in most other departments.

We have seen our Foreign Service develop from a political organization into a career service below the grade of minister and very great and commendable progress has been made in the proportion of career ambassadors and ministers in the Service.

All this is as it should be, but we must not forget that we are only human and that members of Congress and public leaders are therefore human. Interested as they may be in our foreign relations, recognizing even their importance, many of these leaders but fortunately not all are relatively disinterested when it comes to insisting upon adequate appropriations for the Department of State. Why should they be interested - the more politically minded reason - when there are no places in that Department or in the Foreign Service for constituents who may be pressing for a place? I am afraid that we have to be very realistic about this and when the Congress is blamed for not providing the State Department with adequate funds, it is well not to overlook the human factor and probably the responsibility is not so much on them as it may be on our people at home. The progress, the very real and commendable progress, which has been made in giving us a Department of State and a Foreign Service made up of experts is due to the zealous attention of some of our Presidents, Secretaries of State, members of Congress and public spirited persons who have unselfishly and realistically fought for these ideals. I wish that time would permit me to pay an individual tribute to some of these great Americans.

And then there is the undeniable fact that in the popular conception a certain mystery surrounds the Department of State and the conduct of foreign relations and out of this mystery there has grown suspicion and distrust based on lack of understanding. There is perhaps no department of our Government that proceeds on sounder and more carefully thought out principles or that keeps in mind the interests of all sections of our population more carefully, but it is viewed with a vague but nevertheless damaging suspicion and distrust. If you are inclined to question this statement somewhat, I might recall to you that more recently the slightest steps which we have taken in the elementary protection of our nationals and of our interests on the basis of long established principles of international practice and treaties have led to loud protestations from certain of our people that the State Department is bent on dragging the country into war.

There is no mystery in the conduct of our foreign relations.

Those



Those who have to do with them learned long ago that the same principles and rules do and must apply and govern in the conduct of our foreign relations that control in the relations of the members of a family or a community. The same basic feelings, sentiments, aspirations and prejudices which control in the family and which shape the life of a village or a State are considerations which govern the motivations of a State and are inescapable factors in the conduct of its foreign relations.

And then our Foreign Service, - it has been and is still a never ending struggle to secure the small sums which are necessary for its adequate support. I am confident that this indictment of the intelligence of our people is due to the failure of so many to realize that the ambassador and minister, secretary and consul are not the fanciful figures of certain romances and detective stories but that they are hard-working men occupied with very practical problems and for the most part keeping hours and putting forth an effort that most American business men at home would not begin to exact from themselves nor expect from their executives and employees. Our people in all parts of the country are beginning to take a more realistic view of this Foreign Service and there naturally follows a more understanding attitude of the Congress. It is still, however, one of the favorite sports of certain travelers to tell how utterly bad one of our ministers or consuls is and not infrequently when we get down to the facts we find that it is because the minister or consul did not entertain elaborately enough for him or tickle his vanity by thrusting a needless appointment on a busy harassed official of a foreign government. We still have a few people in this country who cannot understand that our representatives abroad must be comfortably, decently and adequately housed although some of the smallest and poorest countries have realized this and acted appropriately for many years. I hope that in your clubs you will study some of the Department of State publications and become familiar with the kind of things our officers really do abroad every day. Romance there is in their lives - yes - the romance there is in living a busy and often a dangerous life.

The Department of State has remained a stepchild because in the very nature of things it cannot go out and advertise itself by telling every detail of what it is doing. It is very easy to talk of open diplomacy and one can always provoke popular feeling against so-called secret diplomacy. There was a time in history when there was really secret diplomacy, - when a few men made the policy of a country and might sit down with a few others from another country and make war or peace and define boundaries. With the growth of democracy, secret diplomacy in the popular sense of the word became impossible. Democratic countries need not worry about secret diplomacy because we have none. That secret diplomacy is bad we know perhaps better than ever for in the states in which democracy has been overturned and is being derided policy is again being made by the very few and we can see the results in this disordered world. While we have no secret diplomacy, the business man, who would not think for a moment of telling his friendly competitor before a business conference what his plans are, is not unlikely to accuse the Department of State of nourishing sinister secrets because it does not tell the world all that it has in mind. The Department is frequently criticized for not having done things that as a matter of fact it has done but in order to make what it has done effective it cannot say anything about it at the moment.



In foreign relations we have to keep in mind these human factors to which I have referred and we must, therefore, always remember the problems which the other party has to deal with just as much as those of our own people. We must place no unnecessary obstacles in the way of our accomplishing our end by making it impossible for the other party to meet our desires.

I have gone into these facts at such length because I believe we have not in the past given sufficient thought to the reasons why the State Department is not understood and as a consequence has not received the popular support it should have and has deserved.

And now let us consider very briefly the work of the Department as the instrument for the formulation and conduct of foreign policy. To recite the many kinds of problems which make up the day to day work of the conduct of our foreign relations would require, to give you really a comprehensive and adequate idea, more time than I can take today. May I suggest to you that for that purpose if you will take our publication entitled, "The Department of State", for study in your clubs at some of the meetings you will find in this official pamphlet very interesting and detailed statements which can serve as the suitable basis for that study.

I should, however, tell you a little of some of the work which we do in the Department and the following are some of the things which make up the grist of the State Department mill these days:

- (a) The consideration and settlement day by day of problems that arise between our Government and foreign governments on a wide variety of subjects.
- (b) Extending protection to American citizens and to American interests in all parts of the world. Investigating and reporting opportunities for the sale of our products in foreign countries and on the conditions under which they may be sold and distributed.
- (c) Carrying through the trade agreements program with all its implications and the complicated studies which are necessary in connection with each agreement.
- (d) The negotiation of treaties designed to protect American citizens in the enjoyment of their rights and privileges abroad.
- (e) Conducting the claims of certain American citizens against foreign governments.
- (f) Defending the interests of this Government in the case of claims by foreign governments.
- (g) Controlling shipments of arms and munitions.
- (h) Participating in international bodies and organizations which operate for the mutual benefit of the member countries on such questions as labor, industry, commerce, science, arbitration, boundaries.

(i) Carrying

- (i) Carrying on various functions abroad in connection with the immigration of aliens to the United States.
- (j) Issuing passports in this country and abroad to American citizens.

The Foreign Service of the Department is its eyes and ears. It reports constantly and objectively on every subject of political, economic, commercial, social and technical interest to our Government and people and to our manifold interests in this country. It is the function of our ambassadors and ministers, secretaries and consuls in their daily life and contact with the peoples in every capital and every great center of population abroad to interpret our policies to the leaders in government, business and other circles in the country in which they are stationed, and it is equally their duty to interpret the policies of these other governments to us so that we may have the adequate basis on which to determine our action.

We have built up a splendid Foreign Service than which I believe there is none better and as evidence of this we have the unbiased judgment of informed people in other countries. I wish I could tell you how carefully these officers are selected for the system of selection is the most democratic that could be devised and its sole object is to secure the best young men that our country can supply for this Service.

These field officers of the Foreign Service in addition to rendering these reports in the field I have already referred to are also charged under our statutes and by international practice with the performance of a wide variety of duties in which almost everyone of our people is directly or indirectly interested. So wide is the scope of these functions that I cannot even begin to give them to you in the most brief form. They visa the passports of aliens who wish to come to our country and they perform passport services of many kinds for our nationals abroad. They perform many services for our ships and seamen in practically every port of the world. They are charged with the execution of notarial services abroad, the certification of consular invoices and a wide variety of similar duties relating to documentation required by our law. They give advice, help and protection to our nationals who are sojourning temporarily abroad. They promote and protect the interests of our trade as well as endeavor to widen the foreign markets for our products. I wish that I could tell you a little of what these men are doing today of an extraordinary character in such places as Spain and China. It would make it clear to you that in peace even more than in war their duties are of primary importance to practically every one of our citizens.

The foreign policy of our country is determined in the last instance by the President and in this task the Secretary of State and the Department of State are his regularly constituted aides and advisers. The formulation of foreign policy is the result of accumulated experience gathered from our relations with other states over the entire period of our national existence and it is developed and expanded by the taking of day to day action under already existing policies. The changing of existing policy and the adoption of new policy are necessarily influenced by the developments we have to face at home and abroad and particularly those which come to us almost daily in the reports from 800 career officers of the Department's Foreign Service at some 354 posts in

the field. They report faithfully and objectively and continuously on all that is happening which could be of interest to us. I need not tell you that the State Department is also in constant contact with the other departments of our Government in order that before determining action to be taken in certain cases all the information which should be considered from every source may be correlated, coordinated and fully digested.

As to how the women of New York associated in your splendid women's clubs can help the Department in its work is something which I must leave to you for it has been my experience that women when they set themselves to a task always find some way of reaching their objective. I may say that we do need a more understanding comprehension of the work which the Department is doing and of the really intimate manner in which it is related to the lives of everyone of us. I am sure that if you will follow out the suggestion that I have made for studying some of our activities in your study groups, you will get that wider comprehension and that more intimate appreciation of the problems which have to be handled and of the inherent difficulties in so many of them.

In considering matters which affect the conduct of our foreign relations, I venture to say that we must accustom ourselves to give more faith and credit to the ability and foresight of those whom we have chosen to do this work and not judge their work solely on the basis of superficial information. I have already emphasized and it is important to keep always in mind that this is not a political department, that it is made up for the most part of permanent personnel chosen for proved skill and training and background and that most of the men who are handling these daily problems for you in the Department and in the field would, if they were serving in the professions for which they are trained and adapted, be receiving many times the relatively modest sum which they are paid by our Government. We must know and recognize that these men are just as intelligent and just as good Americans as some of those who pretend to speak on our foreign relations and who are not in a position to have the same full background and knowledge of all the elements involved. I think we must remember that the Department of State cannot, because it would be definitely harmful in most cases to our interests, defend itself publicly against even the most unwarranted criticism.

I have often hoped that we would become a little more discriminating in the credence we extend to certain lecturers and propagandists. We are fortunate in this country in having an unusually large number of well informed persons writing and speaking very objectively on our internal and external problems. We must not forget, however, that some of those who make their living through speaking and writing on these subjects feel that they must say something critical or startling to command attention. I wish to be clearly understood in not under-estimating the public spirit or the wisdom of so many persons in our country who are constructively interested in and who are speaking and writing on our foreign policies. I only wish to ask from you a certain discrimination and that you will at least give equal faith and credit to those who officially have to bear the burden. I would ask that your judgment be searching and discriminating after all the facts are clear and you can be sure that you are not dealing with propaganda or hasty conclusions based on insufficient or false premises.



I believe that through the women's clubs in which you are associated you will be able to stimulate the study of some of the problems affecting our foreign relations in the public schools. In this respect a women's club in a community can do a great service for our young people.

I believe that your clubs can do a really fine work in giving the foreign born in the community and more correct perspective and a basic knowledge of some of the things that every American citizen should know concerning our institutions and ideals. I know that through your clubs a great deal can be done to expose vicious propaganda activities which we in this country almost always have to deal with in one form or another. I know that you can keep in touch with the members of Congress in order that they may know that in spite of the non-political character of the Department of State the great mass of our people are really interested in having this Department function in the best possible manner and that to that end it requires the necessary funds.

It is still as difficult for the State Department to get \$5,000 for its essential needs as it is for the Navy to get \$5,000,000. There is something in that which doesn't flatter our intelligence or our democratic institutions. I do not wish in any way to under-estimate the importance of our Navy for I am one of those who believe very definitely in a Navy completely adequate for our defense and for the maintenance of the prestige of our word. I do wish to emphasize merely that the Department of State is our first line of defense and that although this is a phrase commonly used its real meaning is seldom fully understood. We must give that Department the moral and financial support essential to enable it to formulate and successfully carry out a foreign policy which will insure us security and peace. It is for you to give to that Department the moral support essential for it to speak with the full authority of our people and thus assure our influence for the maintenance of law and order and all those ideals which we in this country have learned to cherish and consider fundamental.

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