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Today And Tomorrow

By Walter Lippmann

"American Part In European Crisis"

THERE IS MUCH to be learned for the future of American policy by studying the experience of the past three months. But it would seem that the Undersecretary of State, Mr. Sumner Welles, who spoke on the radio Monday evening, was speaking before it was expedient for him to speak fully or to speak freely about the recent foreign policy of the Administration. For he felt compelled to omit from his history of the American part in the European crisis the whole of the first and the most significant chapter.

Mr. Welles' story begins with the critical day of Saturday, September 24, when it appeared that the Godesburg negotiations had broken down. The only American action which Mr. Welles refers to in the whole period before that day is the declaration of general principles made by Secretary Hull on July 16. Mr. Welles had nothing about what the Administration was doing in the intervening 70 days during which the crisis developed to a point where war seemed inevitable. Thus he did not even mention the President's Canadian address at Kingston. He did not mention the speeches of Ambassador Bullitt in the critical days of early September. He did not mention the President's press interview at Hyde Park in the week before Hitler's Nuremberg speech. He did not mention the conferences between Ambassador Kennedy and the British prime minister, or the visit of Ambassador Hugh Wilson to Prague during the decisive period of the Runciman mission.

BUT THOUGH MR. WELLES did not mention this whole phase of Administration activity, there is no doubt that there was such a phase and that during those 70 momentous days the Administration was intervening in the crisis and was attempting to influence the outcome. This experience needs to be digested and its lesson understood before it is wise or prudent to begin suggesting that the American Government is once again ready to take part in founding "a new world order based upon justice and upon law."

Insofar as an American observer in Europe could judge at the time, the Administration's policy in those days was designed to remind Hitler and his allies that they must not count upon American isolation in the event of war. The President at Kingston, Ambassador Bullitt in his French speeches, and Ambassador Kennedy in some of his utterances insisted that while we had no commitments to intervene, no one could be sure that we would not intervene.

In fact, they suggested a little more than that. They suggested that American sentiment against aggression and against dictatorship was so strong that our neutrality would probably not be disinterested, and that in one way or another we should probably find ourselves drawn into the coalition against Germany. And then, having created that impression, the President in the decisive week before the Nuremberg speech disavowed it.

IT IS, OF COURSE, hard to say how much effect this diplomatic activity actually had. But it seems probable that it contributed not a little to stiffening the Czech and the French resistance at the end of August, when it might still have been possible to make a more moderate settlement by negotiation, and that the President's subsequent disavowal was one among several factors which then convinced Hitler that the threat of a world war was allied propaganda rather than reality.

Until we know what the foreign diplomats in Washington were telling their governments in Europe, we can not know for certain what influence the Administration had on events. But we do know this much at least, that the public effect was to create a popular expectation in Europe that American help could be counted upon, and then, in the real climax of the crisis, before Hitler committed himself at Nuremberg, to dash that expectation.

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION raised by this experience is whether it actually is a contribution to the peace and order of the world for the United States to practice this kind of intervention in European affairs. For it amounts to an effort to exercise influence without accepting responsibility, and, without engaging the weight of American power in the world, to wield that power by creating uncertainty and confusion. We may well ask ourselves, and indeed we must ask ourselves, whether our policy has not been dangerously ambiguous in that we have attempted to talk as if we were partners in a system of collective security while we were resolved to act on the principle of isolation.

Without casting the slightest reflection upon the motives which inspired the policy, we must consider whether the world as it is, we do not do more harm than good by trying to combine the two diametrically opposed foreign policies of isolation and collective security. Is it consistent with the dignity and the vital interests of a great nation to practice a foreign policy which invites the rest of the world to speculate on what it may or may not eventually do? It does not seem to me a sound foreign policy. For insofar as it has any influence on events, the effect is to aggravate the crisis by stiffening first the one side which relies upon the promise of help and then by stiffening the other side when it realizes that the help will not be given.

BEFORE WE START talking about "a new world order," we shall do well, it seems to me, to make up our minds clearly what we are prepared to contribute to the construction and to the maintenance of such a world order. And while we are making up our minds, it seems to me that we are under a clear obligation to practice restraint in our public judgments upon nations that do not enjoy the security we enjoy and cannot afford to have opinions unless they are prepared to die for them. It is only fair not to indulge too freely in judgments that cost us nothing. And it is the only way to keep our own heads cool and clear enough to judge correctly our true course in so dangerous a world.