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NATIONAL SERVICE IN THE UNITED STATES

7 May 1948

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CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
SPEAKER -- Mr. Arthur L. Williston .....	1
GENERAL DISCUSSION .....	11

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RESTRICTED

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COLONEL BAISH: Captain Worthington, ladies, and gentlemen: We are really very fortunate today in having as our guest speaker, Mr. Arthur L. Williston, who has been a very prominent industrial engineer and technical educator since his graduation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology fifty-nine years ago. We have placed him last in our manpower series of lectures because of the great importance of his subject and because he is so well-qualified to discuss it.

We have distributed his published biography; so I will not go into it in detail. But beginning in 1942, he became the National Secretary of the National Council of the Citizens Committee for a National War Service Act. He collaborated with Mr. Grenville Clark, the Chairman of that committee, in the preparation of the bill for a war service act, which is known as the Austin-Wadsworth Bill. He is also reputed by the Department of the Army as being the "father" of the Experimental Unit for Universal Military Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. It is a great pleasure to introduce to the Industrial College and our visitors this morning Mr. Arthur L. Williston.

MR. WILLISTON: Thank you for those kind words.

I regard it as a very great privilege, gentlemen, to have the opportunity to come before you and discuss this question, which is so very close to my heart. I gave some of my blood to it; and if we have another emergency, as is not altogether impossible, a lot of us will have to give our blood, figuratively, if not literally, to accomplish something of the same sort.

This country of ours has an extraordinarily great potential strength in machines, but far more important than machines are the men behind them who are needed both to build them and to operate them. Those men have an extraordinarily great variety--and I want to emphasize that point--a great variety of potential aptitudes and capacities. The big problem is to find a way to make those aptitudes, all the different kinds of aptitudes--they are not all alike--potentially useful and actually useful.

I used an illustration in conversation the other day that I would like to give you at the start. It has been our habit to think of men, particularly, I think, in military efforts, as units. We want so many units to fill up a quota. There is no attempt to measure abilities and capacities before sending these men into the service in this place and that. In other fields all of us in the United States, I think, take

RESTRICTED

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for the successful prosecution of the war through a system of civilian selective war service with the aid of the Selective Service System, and urges its prompt passage by the Congress." Under Secretary Patterson made a similar statement. Admiral Land made a similar statement. Mr. McNutt, who afterward appeared to oppose its passage, earlier, in October of 1942, said, "I think a National Service Act is inevitable with the authority some place to make this allocation of manpower. The object of a universal service system is to answer the question which every patriotic person is now asking himself: 'Where do I best fit into the total national effort?'" Mr. Nelson, "In my opinion, it is going to be necessary to be done to win the war."

So we had an almost universal opinion regarding the necessity of such an act in order to get both full mobilization and something else that the President and others had placed great emphasis on, and that was equal sacrifice by everybody. I won't read you quotations from the press, but the press was almost universal in its support of universal military training; and the press throughout the country was willing to print practically everything that was submitted to it in the way of information. I have here some copies of some records of Gallup polls, which can be distributed to you later, showing that the public by and large believed that it was fair to have everybody take an equal share in our national effort to win the war.

One of the things that will probably surprise you is that the real opposition, the effective opposition that prevented the Austin-Wadsworth Bill from passing the Congress, was the opposition only of the top leaders of organized labor. Labor generally was supposed, and I think erroneously, to have been very definitely against the proposition. It was the top leaders who put forward all kinds of arguments in opposition of one sort and another, which I will go into in some detail later. But in my experience, I had trained something over fifty thousand young men for industrial occupations. Probably at least half of them had joined unions at one time or another, of one kind or another. I had the opportunity continuously to talk with these young men on the lower level; and in my entire conversation with hundreds of them I never found one young man but what believed in national war service because he thought it was fair to treat everybody alike, because before he was a union man he was a patriotic American, and because he could see that it would help win the war. But the top leaders very obviously could see that it interfered with their program of organization, and it interfered with the financial resources in their treasuries. And one can hardly blame them for not being enthusiastic about it. One might, however, perhaps blame them for some of the tactics that they sometimes used.

May I leave here these reproductions of two articles in the "New York Times" telling of the results of the Gallup Poll, and indicating the strong public support of national service, with the hope

RESTRICTED

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In the period between 15 April 1918 and the Armistice in November, we trained 378,000 in eight-week periods. The success was most extraordinary, because we were given a definite specification of what was required. The men when they were trained had definite assignments and directions of where they were to go. Our job was to get in this instance from the draft boards the men we wanted. We had the advantage of having the men in uniform and under the control which the uniform enabled us to have. Thus we were able to give those boys aptitude tests, classify them, and find out which ones were best fitted to be automobile mechanics, which ones were best fitted for airplane-engine work, or for wing repair, or for what not, and which ones would make gunsmiths.

Now, because there was none who had what appeared to be the foundation of these skills, we had to take people who had parallel skills that were being entirely unused. I will give you two or three illustrations. I got the order direct, or transmitted to me practically direct, from General Pershing to produce almost instantly six hundred gunsmiths. Everybody who had ever seen a gun had already been taken either by the Armed Forces or by some munitions firm. Remington Arms had combed the country for anybody who had ever had a gun in his hand.

What was I to do? I gave the draft boards the specifications for the physique that I thought was needed if these men were going overseas and do this job. In addition, I specified that the draft boards send me six hundred men who had evidence of definite competence in handling some kind of a musical instrument. It never occurred to the Army or anybody else to pick out persons who had skill with a musical instrument. But stop to think. These musicians had the mental conception of accuracy, a love of precision, a love of exactness, which a gunsmith requires. Intellectually they had the requirements of the job all there. They had in addition wonderful muscular coordination. They could make their hands and fingers move just as they wanted them to. All they needed was just a little more than the names of the tools. In eight weeks we produced, with almost one hundred percent efficiency, with only three or four failures, the six hundred gunsmiths required out of these musicians.

In another instance, I was called to one of the Boston armories after the Armistice, where a number of Army officers with an enormous amount of gold braid were trying closely to study something that they regarded as most extraordinary. It was a wonderful map, quite a bit larger than the board on which that clock stands, which General Pershing had in France, by means of which he could tell every day during the war throughout the entire line, from coast to the Alps, the position of every division of the Allied Forces. It was an exquisite map, I was particularly interested in the signature at the corner of that map

# RESTRICTED

# RESTRICTED

know the half of it," because Dr. Grenfell was so delighted to have his electric plants that, as the next thing, he wanted fireproof buildings. So one of these boys, Ted McNeil, told him that if he would bring up some literature from the United States, he would study up on reinforced concrete and try to build something that would be fireproof.

Some of you may know that reinforced concrete engineering is not simple; that the expansion of the steel in the concrete is not just the same as that of the concrete; and that the subject is complex and involves some awkward mathematics. I never liked to tackle it myself. But Ted McNeil was not worried. He was a dog-sled driver and he knew his stuff. He has built a couple of dozen reinforced concrete hospitals in Labrador and electric plants to operate in them. Dr. Grenfell was rather proud of the result and he illustrated them in a medical magazine in London. That magazine was copied on the Continent, and Lady Grenfell told my wife that just before she had left Labrador that year she had received a letter from the Queen of Rumania asking if Dr. Grenfell would lend Ted McNeil to the government of Rumania so that Rumania could have some hospitals as nice as those in Labrador."

Now, I took the time to tell you that story because I want you to remember that there are all sorts of transfers of ability that are vitally important if we ever want a full mobilization of the skills and abilities of this Nation in time of war. We must be able to take every kind of skill that we can find and transform it into usability. That is imperative. If you can remember that dog-sled story, that will help. Just think how many unimportant skills there are. Take paper hangers, for example. Nobody ought to need paper hangers during the real emergency of war, but they have a great deal of skill. I could give you a list yards long of corresponding examples of nonessential skills that can be in a very few weeks of training transformed into imperatively needed skills for effort during war.

Skills of this kind were discovered in our Baltimore survey, to which I have referred. We found a ship fitter who had been eighteen years a letter carrier, a ship electrician who had been a bartender, a ship rigger who had been a grocer, a boat builder who had been a musician, a marine engineer who had been a sales manager, a tool designer who had been a retail meat cutter, and so on through the list. Those people could easily be spared from such occupations, and were very much needed for war production in Baltimore.

One other thing I would mention from that Baltimore survey. At one period the Manpower Commission made an estimate that during the following six months there were going to be needed in Baltimore, or in the wide area around Baltimore, 59,000 added skilled workers. They thought they knew where they could get 27,000 of those within the

# RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

additional men in order to meet their December schedule. Yet the head production engineer told me that if he had six competent assistant production aides and had the authority to organize and control his existing labor force, he could double his monthly production; not meet his schedule, but double it without an added man.

I am confident, therefore, that I am not exaggerating in saying that in our over-all war production and in our whole civilian effort in essential requirements we were not over 60 percent efficient. And you gentlemen, I am sure, can tell me that in the Armed Forces there were multitude of instances where men were not the best men at a particular station for their occupation or had not had as perfect training as they might have had for the tasks that were in front of them.

Now, what were our problems in trying to get the law passed? They were very serious. If the President at the beginning of the war had given the same kind of support to the idea that he gave in his final message in January 1945, the bill would have gone through Congress without a question. Even a year later, it would have gone through if he had given it the same support. But it is extraordinarily difficult to build up public sentiment strong enough to be effective behind a measure of this kind without administration support, and without cabinet officers who go out and speak for it and call for it as a necessity. The Administration and the Cabinet did place great emphasis at the start of the war on the idea of equality of sacrifice; but when it came to the specific issue involved in the Austin-Wadsworth Bill, they did not give it their support. The imperative thing, as I see it, is to get at the start the kind of enthusiastic support of the Commander-in-Chief behind a measure that is so essential for the winning of the war. If the measure had been prepared earlier, so that the War Department could have urged it on the President at the beginning of the war, I think there might have been no question about its getting his support.

Now, if we had had this measure passed by Congress, it would have been a great deal simpler to have maintained a standardized level of wages and a standardized level of prices. We could have avoided any large measure of inflation, which we all have suffered since. Much of the inflation that occurred even during the war, when we did have price control, might have been avoided.

This is an idea that it was very difficult to get the public to comprehend, but I would like to get it into your minds if I can. In what I call a "free economy," there are two ways to get an enormous increase in the production of any particular article, be it shoes or anything else. If we want ten times the number of shoes that we are

RESTRICTED

# RESTRICTED

in nonessential and trivial occupations, we, in this country, actually increased our production of nonessentials by from 20 to 25 percent. Side by side with the important plants that were producing the war materials with which to win our victories we were producing artificial jewelry and gadgets that were totally unnecessary. We increased our civilian use of nonessentials from 20 to 25 percent. Our country, I feel, ought to hang its head in shame, in time of desperate war when boys were dying for not having reduced instead of increased our civilian production and occupations.

Gentlemen, I thank you most sincerely for this opportunity to talk to you.

COLONEL BAISH: We are ready for some questions.

QUESTION: I have two questions. One is, Why has the age limit been stretched upward to fifty or fifty-five years for national service? Why has that not been limited, or why has that been changed?

MR. WILLISTON: I think that is a perfectly fair question. We probably had to set some limit. Personally, if it had been my privilege, I should have set it at least at sixty-five; and I am not sure that I would not have gone higher than that. I am not going to ask you to judge my age, but I have a notion that in a war emergency there is still a place where I might be of use today. Does that answer your question?

QUESTION: Of course, that is what prompted the question.

My second question is this: At what level, local or national, and what type of organization would have to be established, consisting of what type of personnel, to make wise selections for transfer from the nonessential to the essential industries?

MR. WILLISTON: That raises a very large question, but I am very glad to answer it. You have seen some of the things that I have been talking about. I have sufficient self-assurance to believe I could speak with some authority on those things that I have discussed. But now you have me in an area where I don't have the same confidence. But here is the situation:

If we could only pass our universal military training bill, we would have in a few years an inventory of all the skills and capacities of our entire youth up to whatever age has had the opportunity to go through the training. We have been giving those aptitude tests at Fort Knox, and the precision demonstrated by them has been astounding. Six months' training is a mere bagatelle in producing professional soldiers, but a period of six months is long enough to test the

# RESTRICTED

# RESTRICTED

necessary to maintain our civilian lives. We have those three things, and they are all vital to winning the war. If you starve your population, you are not going to win the war. If you don't provide transportation and some of the other things that are imperative, you are not going to win the war. You have those three things, and there ought to have been an assistant director for each one of them.

Also, the assistant director ought to have a considerable staff. It ought to go all the way down the line to the corresponding three experts for each draft board. If we had had that kind of machinery, plus a democratic law that covered everybody, I think we would have done a better job.

QUESTION: How can you deal with the question at this time of students? I am thinking of interrupting their training and thereby causing a gap in the educated population at some future date.

MR. WILLISTON: I am very glad to have that question asked. You see, I am a professional educator and have some jealousies. It will be a great misfortune, a national calamity, to have our educational institutions cease to function during a war emergency. They are one of our great potentialities.

However, according to my thinking, they cannot go on as usual. We had during World War I what was known as the Battle of Washington. The Battle of Washington was never won. The principal issue in the Battle of Washington was "colleges usual" versus "war necessities." I think it is not necessary for me to tell you on which side of that issue I was, although the institution that I was in charge of at that time modified its program a great deal to meet war needs.

I don't think that institution lost one iota in its value in producing young men of brains and ability and character in the operation of meeting war needs, which, after all, were not so extraordinarily different from what we had been trying to do before. I am quite convinced that the war effort gave the institution some added vitality. I had the authority, as I told you, in New England of creating fourteen other corresponding schools within other educational institutions. I don't think I did them a bit harm, and they gave a great deal of help in producing during that short emergency 24,000 of those technicians.

But it did interrupt some of the regular courses. It was interesting, however, to see how we could use Latin professors in making radar and telephonic specialists. We would call in a former telephone company expert, who knew nothing about teaching but knew his subject, and with a good Latin teacher beside him, who knew how to organize classes and

RESTRICTED

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avoid the submarines that might be watching in case they skipped from Boston or New York or some other northern port. A young Army officer who was ordered to provide some rations for these men for this three-day train trip had been told by somebody that raw beef sandwiches were awfully good for soldiers, and he provided three days' rations for these six hundred boys. Well, the sandwiches when fresh were lovely. The boys enjoyed them for their first meal on their first evening. But the next morning, in the middle of August, with the thermometer over ninety, the raw beef was rancid; and the rest of the three days' rations had to be thrown away.

Those boys went from Boston to Florida with nothing to eat with the exception of that one meal of raw beef sandwiches. They were in charge of a West Point colonel. I don't know how many of you knew intimately some of the West Point colonels of that day; but according to my observation and contact, at that period they were not in the habit of going very far out of their way to extend their compliments to civilians. And yet the colonel in charge, the West Point colonel in charge of that train, after he came back, made a special trip from New York to Boston to congratulate me on the behavior of those boys. He said that in his entire military experience he had never seen an example of morale to equal it, and he was anxious to find out the reason for it and what was the cause of something that he had never seen before.

The answer was very simple. Each and every one of those boys on that train had had revealed to him a skill or a talent that he didn't know he had, a usefulness to himself and to his Nation that he was not conscious of; and he was perfectly willing to show his appreciation by his behavior during those three days. That was the answer.

To a certain extent doesn't that story give you the answer to your question about the volunteering? There should be some guidance to the volunteering, some wise directing of it. Isn't there something that can be done that may be comparable to this service that we tried to render to those six hundred boys?

QUESTION: Were all those courses in World War I short courses, of eight weeks?

MR. WILLISTON: Yes. They were all confined to eight weeks. We had just that limit and had to shoot them along in that time. The results would have been impossible if we had not had considerable skill in finding out just what these boys were good for and what they could do best.

- 15 -

RESTRICTED

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an engineer I know what happened in so many of our plants in detail that seemed impossible before. But I know also of that hundred percent turn-over, and I know also of that 371,000 in the reservoir at Baltimore when they pulled in 20,000 from outside and didn't use what was there at hand. I know both kinds of facts. One makes me proud and the other makes me hope that when another emergency comes we will correct it.

Then, if the public understands both sides, knows the whole truth, when another emergency comes, they will all want to do the best that is possible in order to get the quickest possible victory and in order to have the very minimum number of lives lost.

COLONEL BAISH: Mr. Williston, on behalf of the College and our visitors, we thank you very much for this fine lecture this morning.

(7 June 1948--450)S.

# RESTRICTED