

## FORESIGHT VERSUS HINDSIGHT

Prepared by Thomas H. Healy, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Dean, Georgetown Foreign  
Service School.

411

12 May 1932.

History teaches us the wisdom of profiting by past experience. Unfortunately human nature is such that all too often we ignore the past.

The great troubles that menace America today can be traced largely to listening to false prophets. In spite of many past lessons showing conclusively the vital necessity and economy of adequate national defense, new false prophets have arisen who fill the public forums with loud denunciations of any attempts to keep our army and navy on an efficient basis.

We have too much confidence in the sound judgement of our Congress and people, to believe that after so many costly experiences America will heed their unwise counsel and again learn by expensive hindsight rather than intelligent foresight.

Those responsible American leaders, from our President down, who insist on reasonable preparedness and who are opposed to unwise cuts in our already dangerously low national defense, are frequently assailed by old discredited arguments. "Why must we be prepared for war, for what war and for war with whom?" "No one would dare attack us, there is no probability of anybody attempting to do so and if they did so the United States would overwhelm them with all ease."

The Senator from North Dakota a few days ago on the floor of the Senate was so confident of the complete adequacy of our national defense that in opposing the Hale Naval Bill as a waste of money and "a program of national suicide", he made the following all-inclusive statement: "All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with a Bonaparte as a Commander, could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or leave a track on the Blue Ridge in a thousand years".

The confidence of the Senator was by no means lessened by the fact that the organized military forces (including reserves) of the United States are fewer than one-half million as against considerably more than forty millions for Europe, Asia and Africa - only 80 times as many! The Senator would have been justified in pointing out to the gentlemen who are now giving speeches in the House and Senate against trained preparedness. The British landed a force of approximately four thousand trained men who were met on the outskirts of Washington by seven thousand hastily assembled and untrained American volunteers. After the loss of only eight American lives, plus eleven wounded, the British force of less than half the size routed completely the American forces, and chased them over the hills of Virginia. There the American forces, accompanied by the flying President and his cabinet had the "pleasure" of witnessing the destruction of the city of Washington, including the burning down of the Capitol Building and the White House. It is believed that the

412

hindsight of these American officials after witnessing the burning of Washington changed a bit their foresight, which proved at least theoretically that we did not need a well trained standing Army and Navy. Even Thomas Jefferson who gloried in the fact that "Peace was his passion" and who was opposed to spending money on Armies and Navies, was converted.

In 1812, untrained American volunteers sprang to the defense of their country to the number of 528,000. Sad though it be, they made little headway against the trained British soldiers, whose total invading force never exceeded at any time 16,000.

Does the North Dakota Senator remember that Britain had to limit its efforts against us largely because of the simultaneous life-and-death struggle it was waging against the same Bonaparte whom the Senator mentioned?

The War of 1812 was sufficiently disasterous for us as it was; if Bonaparte had not fought the British in Europe there is grave doubt whether today there would be a "Senator from North Dakota".

The American people paid dearly and many times over, both in lives and money, for these presumed pre-war "economies".

Our anti-preparedness prophets, realizing the vast size and power of the United States today, will doubtless ridicule this excursion into earlier history. For their information, it might be well to bring the picture a trifle more up to date. In 1914, the United States was a great world power and possibly more so even than it is today.

In December 1914, about four months after the World War started, Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, then as now a distinguished advocate of world peace, made the following remarks against preparedness in a public address: "When we are told in terms of most vivid eloquence that we must be prepared for war, I ask for what war and for war with whom?" After showing with impeccable logic the absurdity of any possibility of any war with Canada, he moved on to Europe. "But if we are not to be prepared for war with Canada, are we to be prepared for war with Europe? If so, with what nation in Europe, and why are we to prepare just now? There would have been some theoretical force five years ago in the argument that we should be prepared to defend ourselves against nations from across the sea; but today speaker the "bill of particulars" demanded by the "practical" lovers of peace, unfortunately and to the misery of the world, the "bill of particulars" soon became a sad reality to an unprepared America. The nations who Dr. Butler told us in December 1914 were just on the point of being reduced to helplessness through exhaustion, carried on the struggle for four more long years with increasing vigor and with the loss of many millions of lives and the expenditures of almost untold billions of dollars.

The tragedy was not to leave America untouched. Not many months had passed before Dr. Butler had his answer as to "who is this invisible, this unknown, this unheralded enemy against whom -- we are to prepare for an unknown war". This war, which was

413

"mythical" to Dr. Butler in December 1914, had the following non-mythical results: nearly five million Americans were called into armed service; two million of them (including the writer of this article) saw service in France; the total American casualties have been estimated at three hundred thousand; approximately one hundred thousand Americans died as a result of the War and many thousands of these are sleeping today under the soil of France as the mute evidence of a "mythical" war; ex-President Coolidge has estimated that the World War will cost us in money alone over one hundred billion dollars and the huge Federal budget that our Congress is striving valiantly today to balance is accounted for in large part by the billions that we are paying out to the veterans of that war. It is well to remember that present national defense counts for less than 17% of the budget or seven hundred million dollars or an average of one and a half cents per day per capita for the American people.

Colonel E. M. House, the great advocate of peace and the principal peace emissary of President Wilson, made the following significant statement after the War: "I was sure, given a large and efficient army and navy, the United States would have become the arbiter of peace and probably without the loss of a single life."

The following facts flowing from our lack of preparedness in 1917 are worthy of serious consideration. It was six months after our declaration of war before a single American division took its place in the lines of battle. It was fifteen months before American troops took any decisive part in the conflict and seventeen months before an American army commanded by American officers engaged in battle. Not having sufficient military equipment of our own, our allies were obliged to furnish the artillery necessary to equip our army. Faced with a shortage of rifles, we were obliged to adopt the British rifle, modified to shoot our own ammunition. We had practically no machine guns nor automatic rifles, nor did we begin to produce them on a large scale until nearly a year after our entry into the war. We were never able to put American aeroplanes into action in decisive numbers, and were obliged to depend largely on our Allies for this important equipment. More than half our troops were carried to France in Allied ships and a large part of the remainder in captured German ships. We put into battle many green men with only a few months training, some of whom had never been taught to shoot a rifle. Much as it hurts our national pride to admit it, it is a fact that what we did achieve during the World War and offer us a substantial hope for a changed future based on peace and justice. Many of the most competent and ardent workers for world peace have recently, although regretfully, reached the conclusion, after careful study, that these conferences and treaties have not produced any important substantial change in the practical situation. The Hon. John J. Esch, President of the American Peace Society, the oldest peace society in the world, only a few days ago made the following statement: "Because the machinery for the pacific settlement of disputes among nations is, as yet, inadequate, the Society believes that until the power of world public opinion has had many years of tests, there will not be that confidence which warrants the abandonment of preparedness for defense among nations." The American Conference on International Justice,

which has just completed its sessions in Washington, adopted a report containing the following statement: "It is believed that, basing our actions on ideals rather than on common sense facts, we have proceeded with our disarmament program to such an extent that our national defense at the present time may be considered inadequate." 414

The present world situation is sufficiently critical for the United States that the prospects of our being dragged into armed hostilities within the next few years are by no means remote. If we are compelled to enter such hostilities and are not properly prepared, it will merely mean the horrible and useless slaughter of American youth and the expenditure of many billions of dollars which proper preparedness might obviate.

The traditional American system is against the large standing armies that nearly all of the other major nations of the world feel necessary for their security. Our system is based more on a nucleus of trained men in permanent service, with a sufficiently large officer personnel to provide, on an economical basis, for the part-time training of other American citizens, through the medium of such institutions as the National Guard, the Reserve Officers Training Corps, and the Citizens Military Training Camps. This is the least military and the most economical system of national preparedness of any nation. Hence, the present attacks against these particular institutions under the guise of economy are not only vicious but the worst form of extravagance. Compared to other nations, the permanent army of the United States has almost reached the vanishing point and there is no way of insuring the safety of the United States, both external and internal, without strengthening these sanest forms of preparedness. The total annual cost of the R.O.T.C. to the Federal Government is approximately \$4,000,000. Our average rate of expenditure during the World War reached the staggering sum of \$2,000,000 per hour! An elimination of only two hours of the World War would have enabled the R.O.T.C. to carry on its splendid work of preparing future army officers over a period of a year.

Hindsight should prove to any thinking American that the so-called pre-war economies in national defense were really crushing extravagances under which we are still struggling, although the World War ended fourteen years ago. Would it not be better for the American people to steer their course in the future by foresight rather than hindsight? Failure to maintain at this time an adequate army and navy may cost us dearly in lives, property and trade. The people should reflect seriously on "economies" which, if