

AM I AN ALARMIST?

A forthright fighter debates the question:
"Why in the world am I kept on the job?"



BY HAROLD L. ICKES

Secretary of the Interior



REALIST—yes!

Pessimist—now and then!

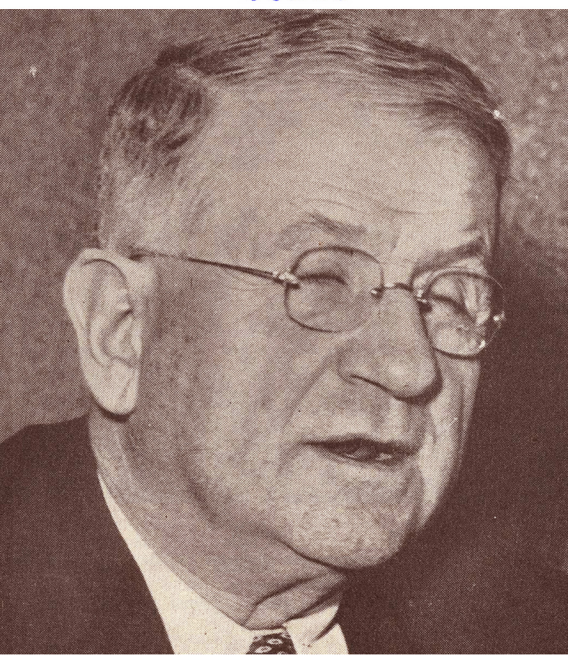
Scaremonger—no!

These are my private views in a pea pod.

I am just as well pleased that mine is not one of those deadly even tempers that sees a bright side to everything, no matter what. It must be a dull, monotonous sort of life, and a precarious one in some circumstances. How far did flower-smelling get Ferdinand? Didn't his public turn on him when he refused to drop his posies and fight like a bull?

You will recognize the placid and trusting nature that was Ferdinand's in the fellow who strikes out with a graceful flourish to prove that the ice is thicker than it looks, or drops a keg of TNT on a bonfire to demonstrate that it's all in the way you drop it. He's the one you have heard bleating that all of our international worries were little ones and soon over; that if Reichsführer Adolf (Schicklgruber) Hitler had been permitted to overpower every one on or adjacent to his continent without interference, the dove of peace would now be fluttering around our ears.

That is the kind of disposition I did not bring to the Petroleum Co-ordinator's office, which was wished on me cold. With no more advance notice of my appointment than the Japs gave us of their treacherous plans, there was no time to look up the answers and cram. Therefore, the minute I received official notice that I was "it," I took up a position behind dark glasses and viewed the situation in its worst possible light. And I'd do it again.



Mr. Ickes "not looking for any startling change for the better" in his public relations.

Supposing I had been of the other school—the kind that can think of things worse than air raids. Without curtailment and allotments and re-adjustments, imposed on dealers and the public on the grim theory that the worst was probably going to happen in spite of everything we could do, our production and consumption would have had no "breather," and our oil *surplus*, or *stocks*—the very thing the Senate Committee found there *was* a shortage in—would not have been spared and built up to a point where it finally became safe to cancel all restrictions.

Meanwhile, it is a significant commentary that the oil trade press, knowing the facts, found little or no fault with the "oil shortage," while the newspapers, having a limited factual background, "guessed" immediately that the "shortage" was phony and have been bitterly grouching about it ever since.

Disappointed when no actual famine developed after I had, as *they* read my statement, faithfully promised one on my sacred honor as a pessimist, back-seat co-ordinators have been calling me an "alarmist" and connecting me with plots to make and manage "emergencies" of all kinds.

One squint at the Far East ought to convince us that every gill of gasoline saved last summer is coming in mighty handy right now.

Recently a United States senator told a Senate committee that I once sent nine detectives into his state to bring about his political ruin. He said that they tapped his telephone wires, rifled his desk, read his mail, peeked at him through keyholes and over transoms, and shadowed him and his wife. I have no recollection of the incident, but it isn't easy to believe that nine police officers, no matter how active and agile, could have done all that he said they did. Pressed for something a little more specific as to Ickes, the senator confessed that he was "guessing"—"speculating" was the word he used. *Somebody* was trailing him as he went about exuding good, and who could it possibly be but hirelings of Ickes?

A few days before, a metropolitan newspaper editor with isolationist totters (he is now bravely over them) had "guessed" Ickes must be setting the stage for the administration to call

off the 1942 Congressional elections. Somebody was, and who but Ickes?

Poor Ickes! He's the fall guy for all stray and unidentified accusations. It will be no shock to my sensitive nature when some one "guesses" that I was the ghost writer of Mein Kampf, or have been chummy with Hirohito.

Nor am I the least bit surprised—or ruffled either, mind you—because so many people "guess" that, among other awful things, I am an "alarmist" or when I am asked seriously to plead to the charge. The more "guessing" the "guessers" do—even though the bulk of it is wrong—the less time, obviously, they will have to pry into more important matters. You might say, I suppose, without rupturing the truth, that I was an "alarmist" when, over the indignant and noisy protests of some fellow Americans and of Reichsführer Schicklgruber, I refused to approve a sale of great quantities of helium to Germany because I suspected that Germany might eventually get around to using it for military purposes. It was about that time, I recall, that Germany started its latest crime spree and took over Austria. Had I possessed more of the qualities of Ferdinand, I would have signed the order and made many people, including Schicklgruber and all the miniature Schicklgrubers, happy.

No doubt I was an "alarmist" when I held up a shipment of oil addressed to Japan because, from my morbid point of view, we might possibly run short if we sent any more petroleum to the Axis partners and expected to have enough to go around among ourselves and our allies.

As to the future, I am not looking for any startling change for the better in my public relations. I expect to remain *in statu quo* throughout the remainder of my public career, for, unlike Ferdinand, there are some things I refuse to take sitting down.

I don't seriously object to being called an "alarmist" if, by timely public warning, some of the excesses and leaks in the production and uses of our oil supply can be checked and federal regulation thereby forestalled.

If I can direct the serious attention of the people to the importance of our 100-octane aviation gasoline production in its relation to civilian consumption of ordinary gasoline, what care I what "my public" thinks of me? This is war. I have previously expressed my gloomy views on the subject of aviation gasoline to American refiners, and one of these dark overcast days I have no doubt I shall blow off at a press conference if the situation isn't speedily bettered. For it I'll be called an "alarmist" and the age-old question of why in the world I am retained on the job will be revived.

Hundred-octane gasoline is of paramount importance in increasing the power output of our airplane engines, improving the maneuverability of our fighters, and extending the cruising radius of our bombers. It has been estimated that 100-octane gasoline increases by 25 per cent the power that can be obtained in airplane operation. In fact, our new planes can't get along without 100-octane gasoline.

We are not even sure that we have sufficient capacity for producing all of the ordinary gasoline that we shall need. Such refiners are pretty close

to 100-per-cent capacity as it is, and the demand continues to rise.

"Guessing" that I am an "alarmist" or anything else isn't going to alter my opinion that as to our aviation gasoline production, which must keep our own and the British, Russian, and Chinese planes filled, we have something to be genuinely concerned about.

I don't wish to be understood as underestimating the danger of "guessing" on any subject, especially those relating to national defense, when carried to extremes. So long as the critics stick to "guessing" that I'm a detective agency or a Nazi ghost writer or an "alarmist," the country is safe; but when their "guessing" goes so far as to intimate that I'm in a plot to end constitutional government in America, it's time to check signals.

I have in mind a certain small group of more or less influential newspapers that has been "guessing" with tiresome regularity that we are going to call off this year's elections, and that I'm the spearhead of the movement. By this time they have no doubt charged me with the responsibility for the bill recently introduced in Congress proposing that the 1942 elections be moved forward to March. If two particular members of this group were not influential, as newspaper influence goes these days, I wouldn't bother bringing the matter up.

The main argument that they use is that the Constitution *has* been circumvented in the past—so why not again? They don't like Ickes. Ergo, Ickes is to lead the way to circumvention. How I envy a logical mind!

In my realistic view, the newspapers in question are performing a disservice in stressing what they have no honest reason to believe and what I don't believe that they believe. One would expect them to end their chant now that war is on, but even since the fateful documents were passed and signed they have referred to the probability of no elections in 1942. They have long hated the administration in Washington, although to their credit be it said that they have filed it away for the duration of the war. And they always have and probably always will hate me. I sometimes wonder how they get along among themselves. Perhaps they don't.

Yes, I suppose that one could truthfully say that I have what it takes to be an "alarmist." And, depend on it, I shall be an "alarmist" whenever I think that the occasion demands it.

