

The American
LEGION
M A G A Z I N E

AUGUST, 1939

NEVER AGAIN?

WE AMERICANS TAKE STOCK AS WE LOOK BACK
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS TO THE OPENING OF THE WAR
THAT WE CAN NEVER FORGET



The goose step reaches the Belgian capital, Brussels. Time: August 20, 1914. Nearly two thousand years after Julius Caesar called the Belgians the bravest of all the tribes he faced this gallant nation held back the German horde long enough to save Paris, and perhaps the Allied cause

GEORGE WHARTON PEPPER

DUBT. Determination. Disillusionment. These three words tell the story of the relation of the United States to the "First World War." The fourth and final word cannot yet be written with certainty. It will, however, be either Wisdom or Folly.

Earlier modern wars in Europe and elsewhere had usually been duels. Two nations fought while the rest of the world looked on. Our War of 1812 with Great Britain and later our war with Mexico, our own Civil War, the Franco-Prussian, the Russo-Turkish, the Boer War, our War with Spain and the Russo-Japanese conflict are typical illustrations. There was always talk about third-party intervention but it seldom came to pass. When our relations with Spain were strained to the breaking point the diplomatic representatives of six powers called at the White House in a vain effort to avert the war that was pending. They were politely but firmly advised to mind their own business. When recently the United States volunteered similar advice to Germany and Italy the response was just as firm but not as polite.

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The Zeppelins are coming!

London got used to being strafed by both airplanes and lighter-than-aircraft. The British defenses stopped the Zeppelins after October, 1916, but the planes continued to bomb the metropolis up to May, 1918. Altogether, more than 500 people were killed, and property worth ten million dollars was destroyed in London.

Most of these wars were of short duration. They ended either in a draw or in a decisive victory. Peace treaties were signed; some territory changed hands; new boundary lines were drawn; costs were taxed against the losers and the wars passed into history.

When 1914 dawned a large section of the people of the United States had undergone a marked psychological change. As one result of the Spanish War and of the effective service rendered to Cuba, many of us had domesticated the idea that it was part of our business to right the wrongs of other nations even if they were geographically remote. As a consequence of the acquisition of the Philippines and other island possessions we had gone "imperialistic." Easy inter-communication throughout the world had made it plausible to assert that all national families had now moved into one big apartment house and that the day of staying at home was over. This assertion was widely accepted as a matter of course. Few stopped to reflect that the closer the international contacts the greater the importance of restraint in criticizing the conduct of others. When, therefore, in 1914 the several European powers plunged into war the psychology of millions of Americans was such our voluntary participation seemed, even at the outset, to be by no means impossible.

As soon as the several European nations had exchanged warlike declarations the United States promptly took a position of official neutrality. When, however, Germany invaded Belgium there were many Americans who at once proclaimed it to be our duty to resent the outrage and to go to war to punish the invader. Millions of Americans, especially in the West and Northwest, were slow to assent

NEVER AGAIN?

to this doctrine and there ensued a period of national doubt respecting the proper course for our Government to pursue. That this national uncertainty was popular with the majority was indicated by the reëlection of President Wilson on the strength of the slogan "He kept us out of war."

During this period Great Britain upon the high seas so often violated our rights as a neutral that, but for Germany's graver violations of international law, the cloud of an ugly Anglo-American rupture might have darkened the sky. Fortunately the British violations affected property rights only, whereas Germany inflicted irreparable loss by taking American lives. As time passed, public attention was focussed upon the conduct of Germany. Finally the sinking of the *Lusitania* marked the end of the period of national doubt and made our declaration of war with Germany only a matter of time.

The question of why we went to war has been furiously debated. It cannot be answered satisfactorily without recognizing that motives were strangely mixed. Those who from the outset had advocated the participation of the United States welcomed the long-delayed opportunity to help friends and to chastise the Kaiser. In addition to this group there were millions to whom therefore the war in Europe had seemed strangely remote.

When, however, American lives began to be taken the anger of these millions flared and they accepted war as a normal mode of expressing it. There was another group, relatively small at first, to whom the problem presented itself as a somewhat academic question of political science—the confrontation of Democracy by Autocracy. To this group President Wilson belonged. To him should be given the credit, if it be a credit, of rationalizing national anger by interpreting our participation in the war as a noble attempt to make the world safe for Democracy.

There was also in many minds the element of fear, in that the Kaiser's military program was popularly believed to in-



Even as you and I, the Germans decorated their Forty-and-Eights with chalk legends. The largest bit of writing shown here advertises a free ride to Paris via Liège.

NEVER AGAIN?

clude the ultimate subjugation of South America as well as the rest of the world. In February of 1917 the German minister to Mexico was instructed from Berlin to propose an alliance between Germany and Mexico with the hope that Mexico would secure the active coöperation of Japan. The publication of these instructions aroused bitter American resentment and stimulated the House of Representatives to an overwhelming vote in favor of arming American ships. Nothing but a minority filibuster prevented similar action by the Senate.

Though legislative action was thus blocked, such a German policy, officially declared, had an immense popular effect. Whether it was all a bluff or whether the program was seriously contemplated is still under debate. Were it not that multitudes of sensible people today attribute similar programs to Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini this apprehension might be regarded in retrospect as a form of hysteria. In October of 1917 the *New York World* published in map form a synthetic tabulation of various territorial claims advanced from time to time by German writers. "Obviously," wrote Newton D. Baker, "no such comprehensive plan of world conquest was ever adopted by responsible German statesmen."*

Nevertheless, such grandiose claims were taken seriously by so many Americans that the instinct of national self defense must be included in the list of reasons why we went to war. Futile attempts have been made to hold munition makers and bankers responsible for our decision to fight. The most effective demonstration that this theory is baseless will be found in Secretary Baker's book just referred to*.

When the decision to take up arms was reached by Congress in April of 1917 national Doubt was at once replaced by national Determination. The well-nigh universal acclaim with which the President's War Message had been greeted naturally made opposition to war intensely unpopular. The six Senators and fifty Representatives who voted against the declaration must be recognized in retrospect as brave men. At the time, however, they were accused of cowardice as is apt to be the case when a minority attempts to stem the tide of popular determination.

Not every man now alive who wore the uniform of the United States in the World War can give a comprehensive account of all our war activities. His own experiences in his training camp and through the 584 days that intervened between April 6, 1917 and November 11, 1918 are of course engraved in his memory. For the rest, frantic preparations at home and actual operations abroad were

* "Why We Went to War," p. 18.

NEVER AGAIN?

on so vast a scale that perhaps even the historians have not yet been able to tell the whole story. Suffice it here to record the unquestioned fact that American determination which was enthusiastic at the outset became more and more grim as reality replaced imagination. The present writer has no certain way of appraising the sentiments of the men of The American Legion. His conjecture is that nobody values our American heritage more highly than they; that if this heritage was really endangered by the World War they are glad that they responded to their country's call; but that they never again can be persuaded that it is America's duty to police the world or to intervene in the quarrels of other nations.

After Doubt, Determination had come but after Determination came Disillusionment.

The present well-nigh universal recognition of the folly of Versailles makes it hard to realize how near we came to national participation in it. The story of the conflict over ratification in the Senate of the United States is one of the most interesting in the annals of diplomacy. In an outcome which the writer regards as providential we declined to accept the fatal doctrine of "collective security" and refused to join in a guaranty of the artificial *status quo* which the Versailles treaty so unhappily set up. The theory that the consequences of war can by collective action be made so terrible that no nation will dare to risk them is as unworkable a theory as has ever been boldly asserted and plausibly maintained. When the crisis comes collective international action becomes impossible both because opinions differ as to who is wrong-doer and because the several parties to the compact are found to have diverse interests.

Recent events in Europe are nevertheless relied on by some as a compelling reason for American intervention, even if this means war. It is said, as it was in 1914, that Germany's policy is hostile to the United States. Every weighty consideration leads to a wholly different conclusion. It is further said to be our duty to hasten to the support of Great Britain and France. There can be no such duty until we know precisely what the issue is and where the vital interests of the United States really lie. Certainly we cannot wisely issue even to the most friendly nations a blanket policy of reinsurance.

We must first know about and approve the risks they propose to assume and be made to recognize that reinsurance is, for us, a measure of enlightened self-interest. It is, for example, far from clear that Britain and France acted wisely in giving commitments to Poland in connection

NEVER AGAIN?

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with the Polish Corridor and Danzig problems. The re-shuffling of the cards has been going on for centuries in Central Europe. This is not to say that this ancient game has always been "on the level" or to deny that grave injustice has often been done. The point is that these successive new deals are not necessarily a justification for intervention by outside powers.

It is not the fashion of today to read ancient history for light on modern problems. Nevertheless an American citizen in 1939 might find it interesting to review the record of the relations between Rome and Carthage. After Rome had won the first round in what was in its day a veritable world war, oppressive terms were as usual imposed by the victors on the vanquished. When the latter had regained a measure of strength they decided to endorse the project of their great military leader, Hannibal, who planned to renew the war and carry it over the Alps into Italy. This he did.

Livy's account of what followed two thousand years ago reads as if written today. "The hatred with which they fought" says the Roman historian "was almost greater than their powers of attack; the Romans burning with indignation that the conquered should dare to take up arms against their conquerors; and the Carthaginians likewise enraged because they believed that the conquered had been treated with supercilious arrogance and greed." Scipio, perhaps the best balanced of all history's military heroes, first turned the tide of battle by vanquishing Hannibal at Zama and then vainly sought to commit his countrymen to a policy of generous liberality toward the conquered.

How, opposing him, the vindictive Cato insistently clamored for the utter destruction of Carthage will be recalled by many school boys. Echoes of Cato's popular slogan "Delenda est Carthago"—Carthage must be blotted out—must have rung through the council chamber at Versailles. Certainly its echoes are ringing still. As this article is being written† the newspapers are chronicling still another incident in Germany's international policy which will put patience to a further test. It is just another temptation to raise the cry "Delenda est Germania." It is to be hoped, however, that this incident will not bring a repetition on the part of high United States officials of intemperate and abusive utterances about German policy.

No matter how deeply we regret on the part of other nations acts of injustice and oppression, denunciation by our government officials is out of order unless we seriously mean again to take up arms to redress the wrong. This we do not intend. Disillusionment has opened our eyes to

NEVER AGAIN?

the futility of an international policy of knight-errantry. It may safely be predicted that as long as The American Legion is a stabilizing force in American life the United States will make the most of our fortunate geographical position.

It has become with some the habit to apply the word "isolationist" as a term of reproach to those who insist upon capitalizing our position of natural advantage. It is recorded of James IV of Scotland that on the eve of the battle of Flodden he forsook his advantageous position on high and rocky ground because he thought it unfair to subject the English cavalry to the consequences of an unequal fight. In the ensuing combat he perished and almost his entire army with him. It is to be hoped that in his last moments he had the consolation of realizing that at *(Continued on page 54)* any rate he was not a selfish isolationist.

The truth is that the word "isolation" clamors for definition. Those who use it should explain clearly just what they mean.

If the term is applied to one whose offense is that he does not agree with his critic on some matter of policy, the critic's argument is not helped by a mere repetition of the word. The true question is, what is the policy under discussion and is it right or wrong? If, on the other hand, the term denotes the decent reserve of a well-bred family in an apartment house, who neither intervene in their neighbor's quarrels nor shout denunciations through the keyhole, then the term is descriptive of one of the most desirable traits of civilized man. To talk with owl-like solemnity about the futility of "isolation" is neither creditable to the talker nor convincing to his hearers.

If, as a result of the disillusionment which followed the World War we first determine that our proper policy is to make America strong and to shun war unless we are attacked, we are likely to make in this way the greatest possible contribution to the cause of civilization. It is something more than a coincidence that the Franklin Penny,* the first coin minted under the authority of the United States, carried upon its face this homely and sagacious injunction: "Mind Your Business." It would be reassuring if Congress were today to authorize the minting of a new coin bearing the slogan "Never Again."

*See Resolution of Congress (under the Articles of Confederation) July 6, 1787.

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