

Walter Lippmann

U. S. FOREIGN POLICY and U. S. WAR AIMS



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and
U. S. War Aims

by
WALTER LIPPMANN

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INTRODUCTION TO "U. S. FOREIGN POLICY"

FOR A very special reason a few words of explanation are needed by way of introduction to this book. My main thesis is that the foreign policy which had served the United States, on the whole so well, during most of the nineteenth century became dangerously inadequate after 1900. Then the United States expanded its commitments into Asiatic waters by the occupation of the Philippines, and then Germany, by deciding to build a great navy, emerged from continental Europe as a challenger for world power. I shall be arguing in this book that because of American failure to readjust the foreign policy of the United States to this revolutionary change in the situation, the nation has for over forty years been unprepared to wage war or to make peace, and has remained divided within itself on the conduct of American foreign relations.

The argument, as the reader will see, becomes a severe criticism of American policy during this period. Since I have lived through this period, and have for thirty years been writing books and articles about current events, I have been troubled because, with the advantages of hindsight, I am criticizing others for holding views which at the time I may myself have shared, or for a lack of foresight of which I was also guilty. Therefore, I should like to make it as plain as possible at the outset that nothing could be further from my intention than to say to anyone that I told him so. For the conclusions which I have set down in this book are drawn from experience. I was not born with them. I have come to them slowly over thirty years, and as a result of many false starts, mistaken judgments, and serious disappointments. They represent what I now think I have learned, not at all what I always knew.

Yet in writing the book during the summer of 1942 and the winter of 1943 I could not stop to confess as I went along how on this point or that I had at some earlier time thought differently. Confession may be good for the soul. But when our urgent business is to make up our minds on what is for the best interests of the

country, it would have been as conceited as it was boring to annotate the argument with a running history of my own previous opinions.

Now that the book is done I am much better aware than I was before writing it how wide has been the gap between my own insight and my own hindsight. Thus I cannot remember taking any interest whatsoever in foreign affairs until after the outbreak of the first World War. As a boy I had, to be sure, been greatly excited by the sinking of the battleship *Maine* and by Dewey's victory in Manila Bay and by the battle of Santiago, and from my grandfather who hated Prussia I had acquired the conviction that wherever the American flag was planted, there tyranny must disappear. But years afterwards, in spite of college and much reading about public affairs, I remained quite innocent of any understanding of the revolutionary consequences of the Spanish-American War.

In fact I came out of college thinking that Theodore Roosevelt, whom I admired profoundly, was in this respect eccentric, that he kept harping on the Panama Canal and the navy. For in my youth we all assumed that the money spent on battleships would better be spent on schoolhouses, and that war was an affair that "militarists" talked about and not something that seriously minded progressive democrats paid any attention to. So when my teacher, Graham Wallas, warned me, as I was leaving Harvard in 1910, that a great war might soon break out and that if it did, it would probably smoulder on for thirty years, I had no notion that it would ever touch me or jeopardize the interests of the country.

It was possible for an American in those days to be totally unconscious of the world he lived in. Thus I took ship and sailed for England a few days after the Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo in June 1914, and I spent a delightful month of July in London and then in the English Lake country where I attended a summer school presided over by the Webbs and by Bernard Shaw. I do not remember hearing any discussion of the Serbian crisis, and so little concern did I have with it that in the last week of July I crossed over to Belgium, loitered at Ostend and Bruges and Ghent, went on to Brussels and then bought a ticket for a journey through

Germany to Switzerland, where I meant to spend my vacation walking over mountain passes. I remember being astonished and rather annoyed when I went to the railroad station and found that the German border was closed because Belgium had had an ultimatum.

So I know at least one young man who was not mentally prepared for the age he was destined to live in. Nor even under the shock of one great war did an understanding come to him easily. I began to take foreign affairs seriously on August 4, 1914, when, having returned to England from Belgium, I was in the House of Commons lobby when Britain declared war. For two years, thereafter, in association with Herbert Croly, I struggled with misgiving and reluctance to grasp our interest in the war. Thus I had learned to understand, even before 1917, that a German victory through the submarine blockade would be a triumph of the Prussian military caste "which aims to make Germany the leader of the East against the West, the leader ultimately of a German-Russian-Japanese coalition against the Atlantic world." But though later I worked for President Wilson under Colonel House's direction on the terms of peace, I did not have the sense to see that the acquisition of the German islands in the Pacific north of the equator by Japan was a fatal blow to our defenses in the Pacific.

And though I knew, and had often argued, that British-American sea power combined was necessary to our own security and to the maintenance of peace, nevertheless I was too weak-minded to take a stand against the exorbitant folly of the Washington Disarmament Conference. In fact, I followed the fashion, and in editorials for the old *New York World* celebrated the disaster as a triumph and denounced the admirals who dared to protest. Of that episode in my life I am ashamed, all the more so because I had no excuse for not knowing better.

So the reader will, I hope, feel that I have said quite enough about myself to discount any suggestion in what follows that I see the mote in my brother's eye and not the beam in mine own.

W. L.

Washington, D. C.

March 6, 1943.

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U. S. FOREIGN POLICY

. . . When we may choose peace or war, as our
interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

The Farewell Address, September 17, 1796

Part One

CHAPTER I

THE SUBJECT OF THIS BOOK

AS THE climax of the war finds the people of the United States approaching a national election, we must face the fact that for nearly fifty years the nation has not had a settled and generally accepted foreign policy. This is a danger to the Republic. For when a people is divided within itself about the conduct of its foreign relations, it is unable to agree on the determination of its true interest. It is unable to prepare adequately for war or to safeguard successfully its peace. Thus its course in foreign affairs depends, in Hamilton's words, not on reflection and choice but on accident and force.

The country, as I shall try to demonstrate, had a secure foreign policy toward the great powers from the decade after the end of the War of 1812 to the end of the war with Spain in 1898. In that long period it was true that politics stopped at the water's edge, and that the people were not seriously divided on our relations with the Old World. But in the election of 1900 the nation became divided over the consequences of the war with Spain, and never since then has it been possible for any President of the United States to rely upon the united support of the nation in the conduct of foreign affairs.

The consequences have been grave. The war with Spain left the United States with commitments in the Pacific 7000 miles west of California. The lack of a settled foreign policy made it impossible for the United States to liquidate the commitment by withdrawing from the Far Pacific or to fulfill the commitment by assuring the defense of the Philippines. The outbreak of the first World War in Europe precipitated an internal controversy in the

United States about America's rights and its interests, its duties and its obligations. As a result of that division of opinion the country was unable to prepare for that war even when American participation had become probable, and it was unable to consolidate the victory which it helped to win. During the twenty years which followed there was unending domestic controversy over foreign policy. This made the American government as ineffective in preventing the second World War as it was in preparing for it. Now, under the spell cast by the coming elections of 1944, the country again finds itself unable to think clearly and to decide firmly what policy it will follow in the settlement of the war.

The spectacle of this great nation which does not know its own mind is as humiliating as it is dangerous. It casts doubt upon the capacity of the people to govern themselves. For nowhere else on earth, and never before in all history, has any people had conditions so favorable as they are in the United States to proving their capacity for self-government. It will be a profound humiliation, therefore, if once again we fail to form a national policy, and the acids of this failure will be with us for ages to come, corroding our self-confidence and our self-respect. Our failure now to form a national policy will, though we defeat our enemies, leave us dangerously exposed to deadly conflict at home and to unmanageable perils from abroad. For the return from a state of total war to a state of peace which no one trusts will raise catastrophic issues in our midst. Rent by domestic controversy, for want of a settled foreign policy we shall act not upon reflection and choice but under the impulse of accidents and the impact of force.

In pondering our failure to form a foreign policy in the twentieth century, we must remember that each of us is himself susceptible to the partisanship which is the cause of that failure. Therefore, we must shun the temptation to explain on the ground that they are stupid, ambitious, or self-regarding the opposition of those who have differed with us.

Candor, as Hamilton said in beginning his argument for the adoption of the Constitution, will oblige us to admit that, in this half century of controversy, "wise and good men" have been "on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society," and that "we are not always sure that those