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The Ideal of Peace

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THE IDEAL OF PEACE

The present temper of peace-loving America is very close to that of a nation on the brink of war. There is something in it almost baffling to one who has thought of his countrymen as a people to be saved from excess by a cool humour. No doubt their moral sympathies have been deeply stirred by the present conflict. Many of their prepossessions have been shocked, and one at least has been quite shattered. It had been hoped in many quarters that the age of war had passed, that international understanding and economic interdependence had made an open breach between the Christian nations of Europe an improbability if not an impossibility. There is small doubt that it is the violation of this recently cherished ideal of peace that has stirred America. Nothing else could account for the eagerness with which she has overlooked the remoter and more real causes of the war, ignored its justice or injustice, and sought for the immediate aggressor. Whether her findings even in this matter have been based on unprejudiced information is beside the present point. She has looked for the aggressor with honest intentions; and believing with a fair degree of unanimity that Germany was guilty of breaking the peace, she has, as a people, centred her surprising animosity upon that nation.

It is not only surprising but perhaps a little inconsistent for America to have felt animosity at all. Our case is different from that of any of the belligerent peoples in just the essential fact that our feelings are beside the point. With them it is a matter of love of country, of national honour, of the defence of national policies and ideals. The animus that possesses them has use in the temper of their defence or their aggression. But in America all such passion is wasted. It results in no action. It results only in the curious spectacle of a militant spirit in behalf of peace, and a windy partisanship in behalf of one of the warring parties.

Since our feelings can be to so little purpose, the logical attitude would seem to be to keep our thinking clear and right. No other exercise of our faculties can be of any service to the world or

to ourselves. But just this clear and right thinking that might have been so valuable seems to have been perverted by the very animosity that is so futile. Instead of first establishing a principle and proceeding to weigh all the nations by it impartially, we seem first to have established a prejudice and proceeded to lay about us for every semblance of ground to support our partisanship.

We have grasped, for example, at the idea of militarism; naturally enough, for militarism traverses our ideals of national life and our doctrine of peace. If that is really our principle of judgment there may be reason in it. But we have used it, not to support our judgment, but to feed our prejudice. In principle there is no difference between navalism and militarism; and yet we have taken England's armed dominance of the seas, and her navy bigger than any two foreign navies, for granted, even with a kind of pride, while German militarism, needed for identical purposes—to guard her own—we have held up to execration. We show, moreover, no abhorrence of Russian militarism, far more brutal than that of Germany, or of French militarism, which bites into the national life of France far more cruelly than that of Germany into German life. We hate German militarism for its temptation to aggression; and yet Germany is the only one of the fighting nations that since her formation in 1871 has not made aggressions. We concede without hesitation that Russia may go to the help of her Servian brothers, though she had more Slav brothers in Austria which she attacked than in Servia which she came to help; and in the same breath we decry Germany for going to the help of her Austrian brothers. We extol France for keeping to her treaty agreements with Russia; and we execrate Germany for not breaking her treaty agreements with Austria. The very efficiency of the German army, its readiness to act at the points of danger, at the moment of call, we have held against her, though the current phrase on all our lips, the shibboleth in every branch of our activity, is that same "efficiency."

Such laxity of thought is anomalous in itself in a country whose only vital function in relation to the war is to keep its thinking clear and right. But it is a more serious anomaly, though a more subtle one, as a side-light upon war in general and upon that current ideal of universal peace that was so brutally shocked by the outbreak of hostilities. It may be said that

universal peace is an ideal to be pursued with faith and hope from afar; and it is, indeed, no reproof to an ideal that it is lodged in infinite distance, perhaps ultimately unattainable. But to claim our allegiance an ideal ought to be rational. It is logical to ask that it should conform to the nature of things. And it is just because this one seems not to conform that I question whether the thinking that lies behind it is any more clear and right than the thinking that is called up to the support of the current prejudice. I question whether there are not elements too deeply grounded in this "nature of things" to make it aught but ridiculous for us to have based our animosity on the breach of this recent ideal.

For in point of fact it is reasonable to doubt whether for all our late professions we really have a belief in peace as a sacred principle. That we love peace and its ease and comforts is unquestioned. That we abhor war for its own sake is a virtue that we may pray to preserve. But we have not as a nation or in any considerable numbers discredited either our Revolutionary or our Civil War. We thought differently from England on the subject of taxation, and we fought to free ourselves from her. We thought differently from the South on the subject of slavery, and we fought to keep her from freeing herself from us. In both wars we were successful. Who was right is immaterial. Both instances exemplified the principle of war—the failure of two peoples to think alike, the extreme certainty of justice on both sides, the unwillingness to compromise, the willingness to die that the idea might prevail. In both cases we violated the ideal of peace, and made our ideas of right prevail by force of arms. And we have not repented either our separation from England or our abolition of slavery.

Indeed, to be believers in the principle of peace we should have to go much farther than to profess a regret at past wars. The principle of war is the principle of force. If we disbelieve in that principle, as for example Tolstoi disbelieved in it, not shallowly, but with fearless, penetrating minds, we must disbelieve as he did in all manifestations of government. For all government is based on force. The whole sanction of governmental authority is the physical compulsion it can exercise—its armed power to seize property, to deprive of liberty, to kill. Someone disagrees with the established ideas of the powerful many; he acts on his own insurgent notions; and he is suppressed

by the strong arm of the law. It is not absolute right that he has transgressed; it is changeable law, the recorded idea of the stronger party. The principle is the principle of war. That our government is a democracy is no escape; even more obviously than in other forms of government its sanctions are the arms of the powerful party. As long as a people believe in the divine right of kings, the king's law has the likeness of an absolute standard; but in a democracy the laws are avowedly but the impositions of the stronger by virtue of their strength, and the principle of war stands naked, unclothed with illusions. Nothing but anarchy, indeed, is consistent with the ideal of peace. That nothing has ever proved so inconsistent with the reality of peace throws, perhaps, an illuminating ray upon the human plight.

It is in the nature of this human plight that whatever ultimate truth may be, it has not yet been attained. Men and nations have to struggle along in actual life with the best approximations of it they can conceive. When the approximations of two peoples come into conflict there is no absolute standard of truth for them to appeal to. If the clash is reached in sudden passion they may, indeed, be willing to arbitrate when the sudden passion cools. Or on deliberation they may consent to compromise when their approximations seem not worth the sufferings of war. But to suppose that the time has come when men will never again deliberately find wrong unbearable, injustice intolerable, right not worth fighting for, is to argue oneself not only ignorant of history, the only basis for judgment as to matter of fact, and ignorant of human nature, but guilty of that shallow idealism that is vicious because it has no relation to reality. Such idealism is based, not on reality, but on vague feelings that it would be "nice" if it were realized. But life is not nice. To feel that times have changed, that human nature is better than it was twenty years ago (when we had our last war) is to be optimistic. It is, alas, to be typically American. But could there be, in truth, a more threatening, more potent, blacker pessimism than lies in the supposition that the time has passed when men shall ever again care enough for truth and right and justice to offer their lives in the hope that they may prevail?

In point of fact the world has not come to that pass. If two peoples have arrived at the point of war, each deliberately willing

to fight for its cause, there can be for them no stronger belief, and no higher standard to appeal to. And no threat can stay them, for no threat can be so harsh as the death they have staked. There is no recourse but war. Even here, indeed, we may conceive an arbitrator; but he must be so strong as to deprive the fighting peoples of all hope of making their ideas prevail. And that arbitration would itself be a violation of the ideal of peace—an imposition by force of the arbitrator's own idea upon the weaker peoples. It is because there is no absolute standard of truth that humanity must struggle to make its own best ideas prevail. Where those ideas clash there is no decision but the decision of actuality—maintenance by force.

That such conflicts must needs be arises from the nature of the human make-up. Wars are not fought over matters of knowledge. There may be battles of the books but they are bloodless battles. Knowledge is susceptible, so to say, of arbitration. Its standards are objective, lying in facts outside the passions; its tenure is in external things and external records. Rather, wars are waged over moral ideas; that is to say, those ideas which have to do with human conduct and human desires and human happiness. And moral ideas have their tenure, not in objective things, but in the human breast. We hold to them with the very passionate nature that strained to the breaking point, makes war itself. To decry war is to decry the very intensity with which we may hold our ideas of good and our ideas of right and justice. It is to beg of us when the ordeal comes to give them up rather than to die—to prefer ignominy to death. For war and the passion for moral ideas are inseparable in a world without absolute standards. The chance for an idea to prevail, for civilization itself, is but a fighting chance.

The ideal of peace seems, therefore, scarcely tenable. That an American should hope for the defeat of Germany because he loves England, or France, or Russia is wholly rational. That he should hope for the defeat of Germany because he believes in the superiority of English or French or Russian civilization is wholly rational. But just these reasons he has rarely echoed in support of the reigning animus. To utter them would seem to commit him to a belief in war. He keeps his love of war for a war against war. It is needless to point out that this is no different from any other belief in war—a belief in maintaining a moral idea though one must fight for it. But I wish to point it out, and to recall the

inconsistencies of American thinking in relation to the belligerent countries, and to reassert the shallowness of the ideal of peace, because it seems to point to another inconsistency in the American assumption of championship of that cause.

If we can fancy such a thing as universal peace we must fancy a state of the world in which all nations think alike. Nations do not go to war over points upon which they can agree. If therefore those points could be extended over all grounds of present and future differences war would cease. Until then it will probably not cease. But the promise of that time is not brightened by illogical thinking. There is no uniformity of thought except through the channels of logic. And though even with perfect logic a difference in premises will lead to diverse conclusions, yet the greatest hope of agreement lies in clear and right thinking. Illogical thinking is infinite, chaotic, diverse, separative, the source of discord, of injustice, and of war.

America lies outside the heat of conflict. We are at peace with all the world and remote from danger of clash. All our external conditions are favourable to our championship of peace. But within we have neglected the one qualification through which our ideal could ever be attained. We have not looked to our clear and right thinking. We have rather been guilty of mere enthusiasm—of that shallow enthusiasm, moreover, that lies at the base, not only of war in general, but of just those useless wars that arbitration might be hoped to avert. We have been sophomoric. We have not seemed remotely to understand the long, hard struggle ahead of the nation that should take up the search for the grail of peace—the self-examination, the self-restraint, the austere training of the youth, nation wide and generation after generation, in a uniform discipline of their thinking, by which alone a nation can hope to bring one day nearer the time when all peoples should agree. On the contrary we are even now in the throes of a sweeping revolution in the opposite direction.

Perhaps the present exhibition of eager credulity, of feeble thinking, and of jejune enthusiasm is the first large demonstration of the fruits of our modernized training. At all events our American attitude toward the war is inconsistent with the ideal in the name of which we have justified ourselves. When the time comes when we shall see that in the absence of absolute standards, and in the presence of diverse knowledge and diverse

thinking, war is humanly inevitable, we may be in the way of making for a maximum of peace. The first result, I dare say, if we should experience such a clarification of mind, would be to give to the German cause a fairer consideration than it has yet received at our door.

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