

NEUTRALS AT THE CROSS ROADS

By John Buchan

SINCE the beginning of the year, two speeches have been delivered in America which will probably rank as the most important exercises in the spoken word which the world has seen since the outbreak of war. The speaker was Mr. Elihu Root, an ex-Senator of the United States, formerly a Secretary of State, and one of the foremost living American jurists. One speech was made in Washington, another to the Republican Convention in New York City. They dealt partly with American domestic politics with which we are not concerned; but their main importance lies in the fact that for the first time a man of great eminence has stated the true doctrine of the interests of neutrals, stated it so broadly and sanely that his words mark an epoch no less for Britain than for America, for the Old World as well as for the New. We have drifted into a legal controversy with Washington in which lawyers' arguments have been bandied across the table. That way there lies no comfort. It is our business to get back to fundamentals, and raise the discussion to a different plane. Often in a wordy litigation the common sense of judge or jury cuts through the knots of dialectic tied by the counsel on both sides, and finds that a very plain question is at issue. That is what Mr. Root has done. To understand the significance of his speech we must go back a little.

German Peace Talk

The German attitude of mind, which believes in organised Force as the greatest thing in life and denies any rights to individuals or nations which they cannot maintain by force, is by now familiar enough to the world. It is the negation of the political ideals of the Allies, which are based on a reasonable liberty, and is indeed a denial of what is commonly regarded as civilisation. Germany hoped to realise her dream through her mighty armies, which she thought, with some justice, would give her the land hegemony of Europe. But in recent months she has begun to have doubts about the efficacy of this method. She has made immense conquests of territory, but to her surprise she seems no nearer ending the war. The Allies have shown in her eyes a shameless disregard of the rules of the game and have refused to acknowledge defeat.

About Christmas the Imperial Chancellor gave an interview to an American journalist and quoted "a high military authority" to the following effect:

"Germany could take Paris. It would only be a question of how many men we were willing to sacrifice. But that would not bring England to terms, and therefore would not end the war. We could take Petrograd. But suppose we drove the Tsar out of his capital—Britain would not care. We could drive the Italian army into the sea—it would make no difference to England. The more territory we occupy the thinner our lines and the greater difficulty in supplying them. Going ahead on such lines would help England more than us."

Germany is tardily recognising the meaning of Sea Power. Many wild things were said on this subject before the war. Sea Power alone will not give victory over a military Power. By itself it is not even adequate for defence. But now, as in the time of Napoleon, it stands between the land conqueror and his ambition. "Purposeless they surely seemed to many," wrote Admiral Mahan of Nelson's ships before Toulon, "but they saved England. Those far-distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world." It is as true to-day. The German High Command seem to have become converts to the creed which Admiral von Tirpitz has always preached. It is Britain's strength on the sea which bars the way to Germany's hegemony by land. But for that fatal Navy an early decision might have been won. It is that Navy, too, which threatens her economic endurance. The "freedom of the seas," in Germany's sense of the phrase, must be the first of Germany's winnings,

even if to gain it she has to sacrifice for a little some of her cherished territorial dreams. She cannot hope to dictate to the world on land if Britain rules the water.

During the winter there have been various unofficial overtures, emanating chiefly from the German circles of high finance. French and British business men have been abjured to interfere while there was yet time. "Is Europe, it has been asked, to make a present of her commerce to America? Suggestions for peace have followed. Their tenor has varied, but the terms have been moderation itself compared to those which filled the neutral press nine months ago. But one condition has been common to all. Germany demands the "freedom of the seas." In this respect the views of the financiers coincide with those of the naval and military chiefs.

The Freedom of the Seas

This high-sounding phrase is worth examining. In Germany's mouth it means that a naval Power should be compelled during a campaign to tie its hands, and to treat trade with neutral countries as wholly free, except for enemy consignments of munitions of war. The land Power will have the free use of its limbs, but the naval Power will be hobbled. The claim is a curious one to be made by a people who have sent every rule of civilised warfare crashing like Alnaschar's basket. But two blacks do not make a white. The dictatorial conduct of the British fleet, a conscientious neutral might argue, is really the complement on the sea to the high-handedness of the German armies on land. It is less brutal, to be sure, but it is no less arbitrary. If we decline to contemplate a German hegemony on the Continents of Europe and Asia, why should the world tolerate a British hegemony on the sea? Each of them is a form of omnipotence, and therefore has mankind at its mercy.

This argument seems to have impressed a certain proportion of American observers. But it is fundamentally unsound, for the two hegemonies differ in kind and in purpose. In time of peace the seas have been free for law-abiding citizens of all countries to go their way upon. This freedom was won by the British fleet 300 years ago, and it has been maintained by the British fleet ever since. Is this the object of the German land hegemony? A control exercised on behalf of liberty and peace is one thing, and a conquest sought for pride and aggrandisement is another. The first is a task of police, the second of brigandage. Now that all nations are subtly linked together the sea is the great common highway of the world, and its routes are the arteries of every nation's commerce. Let us imagine what the situation would be if Germany, holding her present creed, dominated the ocean as she now seeks to dominate the land. This freedom would utterly disappear. The sole security for its continuance is that Britain still rules the water. In the far future, when the domain of law has grown, this police work may be internationalised, but for the present it must be done by the only Power that can do it.

It is true that in the course of the war Britain has been forced to depart from some of the practices of International maritime law in which she had hitherto acquiesced. It is easy to fasten on such minor infractions; the American Note of November 5, 1915, laboriously enumerated them. But in a world war, where conditions have suffered a chemical change, some such departures were inevitable. Rules framed under one set of circumstances may be sheer nonsense under another, and International Law, like all human law, must have a certain elasticity and conform to facts. Some of the British departures may have borne hardly on neutral commerce. That was inevitable, for a great war cannot be strictly delimited. A householder, whose house has been shaken by an earthquake, cannot sue on his covenant for quiet enjoyment. If neutral rights have been infringed in minor matters, Britain is fighting to establish the greatest of all neutral rights, the right to freedom

The infractions concern the inessentials, the struggle concerns the fundamentals. To quote from an admirable article in the current number of *The Round Table*: "When one of those fundamentals has been challenged there ought in principle to be no neutral rights and no neutrals . . . No nation is entitled to say that its rights entitle it to obstruct those who are endeavouring to defend international right and liberty."

American Interests

President Wilson has taken up a very simple and intelligible line. He is the mouthpiece of the American people, and therefore can only carry out the will of the majority of his countrymen. In this he would seem to have succeeded. He considers further that it is his business to concern himself solely with American interests, a view in which he is doubtless right. No statesman is obliged to be a Paladin, setting forth to do battle against wandering Paynims. But the question arises as to what is the true American interest, what is the true interest of all neutrals, and on this point it would appear that President Wilson and the majority of his countrymen have judged superficially.

Let Mr. Root speak:

"The American democracy stands for something more than beef and cotton and grain and manufactures; it stands for something that cannot be measured by rates of exchange, and does not rise or fall with the balance of trade.

The American people achieved liberty and schooled themselves to the service of justice before they acquired wealth, and they value their country's liberty and justice above all their pride of possessions. Beneath their comfortable optimism and apparent indifference they have a conception of their great republic as brave and strong and noble to hand down to their children the blessings of freedom and just and equal laws.

They have embodied their principles of Government in fixed rules of right conduct which they jealously preserve, and, with the instinct of individual freedom, they stand for a Government of laws and not of men. They deem that the moral laws which formulate the duties of men toward each other are binding upon nations equally with individuals.

Informed by their own experience, confirmed by their observation of international life, they have come to see that the independence of nations, the liberty of their peoples, justice and humanity, cannot be maintained upon the complaisance, the good nature, the kindly feeling of the strong towards the weak; that real independence, real liberty, cannot rest upon sufferance; that peace and liberty can be preserved only by the authority and observance of rules of national conduct founded upon the principles of justice and humanity; only by the establishment of law among nations, responsive to the enlightened public opinion of mankind."

Against that Law was set the German Force and the Law was broken. It was, says Mr. Root, American law, just as much as any domestic statute.

"We had bound ourselves by it; we had regulated our conduct by it, and we were entitled to have other nations observe it. That law was the protection of our peace and security. It was our safeguard against the necessity of maintaining great armaments and wasting our substance in continual readiness for war. Our interest in having it maintained as the law of nations was a substantial, valuable, permanent interest, just as real as your interest and mine in having maintained and enforced the laws against assault and robbery and arson which protect our personal safety and property."

Where then does the true interest of neutrals lie? In a pettifogging insistence upon the details of old international practice in commercial affairs, thereby hampering the efforts of the Power which dares to defend the greater matters of the Law? Or in co-operation, active or passive, with the Power which stands for the fundamentals? Mr. Root has no doubt. In his speech at Washington he said:

"Up to this time breaches of international law have been treated as we treat wrongs under civil procedure, as if they concerned nobody except the particular nation upon which the injury was inflicted, and the nation inflicting it. There has been no general recognition of the right of other nations to object. . . . If the law of nations

is to be binding there must be a change of theory. And violations of the law of such a character as to threaten the peace and order of the community of nations must be treated by analogy to criminal law. They must be deemed to be a violation of the right of every civilised nation to have the law maintained."

The Cross Roads

Happily we may believe that Mr. Root does not stand alone. His speeches have cleared the air, and much of the best opinion in his country is on his side. America to-day stands at the cross roads. She has to decide whether she will remain apart in selfish isolation, reaping where she has not sown and gathering where she has not strewed, or whether she will take a share as a Great Power in the police work of the world. It is no question of sacrificing American interests. The question is where her true interests lie.

Each of the Allies to-day is fighting for its own special purpose. Britain, for example, aims at security and at the maintenance of that free Empire, whose ideals will be found in those lines of Claudian which have never yet found an adequate translator. But all the Allies are fighting for one major cause, and that is the establishment of Law as against Force on the world's throne. We have to check and punish the law-breaker, and for the purpose the chief instrument is the British fleet. Can any neutral, small or great, who sees in the reign of law his true interest, seriously desire to weaken the power of the constable against the criminal? For, remember, the criminal is self-confessed. The case is not *sub judice*. Germany has proclaimed and gloried in a creed which reposes the conduct of the world's business on the ethics of the Stone Age. Does a man, when the house next door to him is burgled, try to trip up the policeman, even though in his haste that zealous officer may have trodden on his toes?

To anyone who has visited the Grand Fleet there must come a sense of pride which is something more than the traditional devotion of Englishmen to the Navy, and the remembrance of a famous past. The great battle-ships far up in the Northern waters, the men who for twenty months of nerve-racking strain have kept unimpaired their edge and ardour of mind, are indeed a shining proof of the might and spirit of England. But in the task before them to-day there is a high duty, which their forefathers indeed, shared, but which lies upon them now with a peculiar gravity. They are the modern crusaders, doing battle not only for home and race and fatherland, but for the citadel of Christendom.

FRENCH RED CROSS

Verdun is a name henceforth immortal in history. When the full story of the gallant defence by our Allies comes to be written, it will be found to rank among the most heroic deeds in the long annals of war. The French battalions have withstood the onslaught of German forces often four and five times their numerical strength. The tornado of shells has been appalling, but nothing has been able to break the steadfastness of the defenders or to daunt their courageous spirit. The losses inflicted on the enemy have been stupendous, and though compared with them the French casualty lists may appear light, nevertheless a heavy price has had to be paid, and at the moment the resources of the French Red Cross Society are severely strained.

Now is the time when we at home may testify to our admiration of French bravery in a practical manner. The London Committee of the French Red Cross Society, of which the French Ambassador in London is President, will welcome gifts of clothing, food, comforts, drugs, surgical stores and, above all, money. This Society is admirably controlled and managed. Money is of course especially needed, for the work of the Society is necessarily limited by the funds at its disposal. We have always to remember that many of the richest industrial districts of France are in the hands of the invader, wherefore our Allies are heavily handicapped in the voluntary support they would naturally render to their Red Cross Society. It is for us to make good this loss in so far as money can do so.

Send at once a contribution, however humble it may be, as a token of gratitude and affection for France, to the Committee of the French Red Cross, 9, Knightsbridge, London, S.W.