

WHAT WE ARE DEFENDING

ADDRESS

By

FRANCIS BIDDLE

Acting Attorney General of the United States

before the  
Fifth Biennial Convention  
of the  
YOUNG DEMOCRATIC CLUBS OF AMERICA

Louisville, Kentucky  
Friday, August 22, 1941  
1:15 p.m. E.S.T.

There is a time for words and there is a time for deeds. Our choice has been confused by many counsels, but I cannot find that to choose is difficult, where, as in most moral issues, the fundamentals are clear. But to choose a way it is first necessary to know where you wish to go. Where you wish to go depends on the kind of person you are. And there are many of us who make up America; many types, many views, many races. Yet there are traits which we have in common, and there is an American type, a point of view and an outlook we must understand, in order clearly to see the direction we should take.

This is a generous continent, and has bred, I think, a generous people. If we have wasted and pillaged our natural resources, we have not been small or petty in our expression of life. We have thrown up a great humming conglomerate civilization with profligate abandon - we have not counted costs - or, at least, have counted them only for these past few years. We have not planned - there was no time for planning. Until our frontier was gone we hardly took a look at this raw but magnificent thing we had wrought. And when we did, we realized, with a searching heart, that it was not perfect.

Through the World War and the delayed depression which inevitably followed the war, national unity and the consciousness of that unity grew steadily. Rebels found they could join a fight alongside of Yankees, and the two words slipped into history. We were coming of age.

We went a little mad in the twenties, cheerily riding on the rosy American cloud of thought that we could make our cake and eat it and have it. Perhaps the madness was a sort of belated infantilism - we had not quite grown up. But if we had not been a little drunk with madness we should have learned less from the sobering years that followed. We looked about - there was time now to look about. Obviously, the system - even the American system - wasn't perfect, for it had broken down. The shock was great; everyone suffered; and we began to be afraid. But under the impact of a new and brave leadership we banished fear and set about the immediate tasks of strengthening the economic and social structure, which had been so long neglected that they seemed in fact altogether new - a new deal for the country.

Then came the new war - Germany, Poland, England, France. The depression with us seemed to have run its course. War orders helped. To many the war looked phony. Probably it wouldn't amount to anything. Anyway it couldn't touch us....

It couldn't touch us! The public really felt that. Hadn't we made sure that it couldn't come near us by passing the Neutrality Law, neatly drawing a circle around this disagreeable war, a paper circle of law? To a nation which only twenty years before had believed that it could eliminate a taste for alcohol by forbidding it, war could be sterilized by another statute.

Europe was far closer to us now than Washington was to Boston, when we had first laid down our political philosophy of isolation. But the Atlantic Ocean still seemed to separate us,

even after we had begun to cross it in a few hours. That we did not arm, as the clouds for years gathered and thickened, was not, as in France, owing to a timid and defeatist leadership; or, as in England, to a profoundly unimaginative judgment largely based on the lazy philosophy of muddling along. We simply couldn't see any dirty foreign clouds in our sky, which was pure and blue. It wasn't our war; 1918 hadn't been our war, it was argued, but the munition makers had pulled us in, and the great bankers. And what had the last war done? It had not helped us, or anyone else; the world was no safer for democracy, far less so with that man Hitler running about, and the Commies on the loose over here...This time we'd keep out, and resist the temptation to make money out of trading - or at least we'd make 'em pay cash over here and keep our boats out of danger. And we gave up the freedom of the seas, wrapping a law about us, and felt safe.

We have drawn together from the days of the War between the States, through the unifying experience of the Great War, through the depression, and through the events of the past few months. We are more mature now. We are more certain of ourselves. We think and speak as a nation, as a nation that is forming a race. Our instincts as Americans become clear, as do our hopes, and the scope of our beliefs.

What are they? - and what the common denominator beneath our American life?

If we are tolerant it is because a friendly Providence has given us room to move about, has shaped our physical background on

a vast scale - the two oceans, the mighty rivers, the plains. That we love freedom grows out of the past tyrannies from which we fled as well as the free talk and free land which we found as pioneers, and handed on to our sons. If we have courage it is something bred in the bone from a way of life that has not been soft. Our way of living has made us friendly, and has cut across the stratification of classes, has turned out our youth to adapt themselves to life rather than to a routine of life. We love sport and thrive on competition. We are not very respectful, and the cop calls the banker "buddy". "We have the air" - as Walt Whitman put it - "of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors." We haven't been licked, though we've had our leg pulled once or twice, so we don't know how to act as a subject nation. We have our own domestic problems, and they're pretty tough and often mean. But we're solving them; and we also have our own schools, run by the local people; and our own churches; and a press that is free and not afraid to speak.

And we propose to hold what we've got. I don't mean merely the limits of our possessions in this hemisphere; or our policy to the other American nations; or our trade abroad, our interests in the Pacific, our freedom on the Seas. I mean the things of the American spirit which our life here and the lives of our fathers have yielded - the tolerance, the freedoms; a life that will give us a chance to be generous, to be friendly; a way of life that is the American way of life.

The isolationists stop us and say casually: "You don't really think Hitler's going to come over here and drop bombs on us, do you?" Which is to miss the significance of our choice. Some argue the improbability of a German attack on our shores, though our technical experts tell us we may expect it. But that is perhaps neither immediate nor certain. But what is certain is that there can be no American way of life in a world where the goose step and the enslaving of those who disagree, and the spy and the whip and the torch and the firing squad are the guardians of life. For to compete with a single Nazified Europe, we too will have to continue to pile up our arms and our taxes, sweat our labor, turn into an armed camp, and eventually fight for our right even to live that kind of life. And there is no room for generosity or freedom or friendliness, little scope for schools and churches in such a society, built on fear, expressing itself in terms of death, continually living in the shadow of military competition from which we have been free so long.

This, I insist, is what we face. Too much has been said about defending England so that the seas will not be closed; too little about the terrible world in which, without any question, we shall have to live, if the war machine of Germany absorbs the poor remains of Europe.

Those who do not understand, who will not read below the surface, insist on confusing us with the old argument that if we stick our heads in the sand, like ostriches, somehow we can escape. We can never escape reality. Hitler will pass, they murmur, if we

but wait and keep our hands off the final struggle between two kinds of civilization, even if our hearts are in the struggle. Norway and Denmark, Yugoslavia and Greece, nation after nation were neutral; and they are no longer nations. Russia was Germany's ally; and Hitler has her by the throat.

The isolationists, plucking at half truths, say that the polls show that half the country is against our entering the war or are undecided. Of course they are against war; everyone is against war, until war becomes necessary. But if the President, on the advice of his military and naval experts, tells the country that in his deliberate judgment any step, however warlike, is necessary for the preservation of our American way of life, the country will be overwhelmingly behind him, for that is how a democracy functions. The people can approve a broad policy, a general direction; but then they leave it to their leaders to carry out. They cannot be expected to determine whether Iceland must be occupied, whether the Dutch East Indies must be saved from Japan, or Dakar from Germany. And they will insist that these leaders do carry it out. The people want to stop the terrible threat of this spread of insane power; they will rely on their President to take whatever steps may be necessary. In no other way can a democracy function; so that resistance to that leadership becomes resistance to the will of the people itself, since the President's leadership speaks for the will of the majority. Opposition to that will is oft of course, sincere; but often, too, it is dictated by political motives. That is not to say that even at such

a time Congress should blindly follow the lead of the Chief Executive, or abdicate its functions. But the mass partisan opposition, obviously based on political grounds, and the attempts to delay and enfeeble the drive for national defense, should not and will not be tolerated by the country.

Today we see the world picture clearly and see it whole. Hitler, building his armaments for six years, has loosed them over Europe, and has conquered and enslaved her people. England and Russia alone remain. Russia may be gone tomorrow; and without our help England slowly would die, each day less able to match her arms against the Nazis. If she loses the Mediterranean, Africa is gone. Unless we stand with her to defend the East the Japs will do there what the Germans have done in Europe - and then what would be left of the American way of life, in such a world, except a frantic militarization forced on us for as long as we can look forward, from a shrinking circle of sterile isolation?

We cannot surrender to such a course. We have made our determination, finally, to destroy the Nazi tyranny; and to establish, in the words of the President and Mr. Churchill in the historic Joint Declaration of Policy, "a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want." To carry out this essential program, we have given and will give the President such powers as he needs, and stand loyally behind him to achieve the common end.