

WHAT'S YOUR FOREIGN POLICY?

Oxford Don Calls For More Controversy

FROM a talk, in the BBC's Third Programme, by A. J. P. TAYLOR, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

IN beginning this talk, which was one of a series, A. J. P. Taylor commented on the difficulty facing him in having to follow the distinguished people who had preceded him at the microphone, each of whom had, in his different way, been telling listeners the foreign policy which Britain ought to follow.

But, continued the speaker, I cannot spin an ideal foreign policy out of my head like a spider making a web out of its stomach. As the poet said:

I am not Mahomet
Far from it.

A great war washes away many established landmarks: it creates the illusion that anything is possible, that you can rearrange the world as you like. But you cannot. Foreign policy is not a matter of what I should like or what you would like; it is a matter of what you can have—what the facts will let you do, or, more probably, make you do.

For instance, when some authority talks about a Western European union, that is something he would like, not something he can have. He ignores the fact that the Communists are now the largest single party in France—partly owing to blunders in British foreign policy—and that therefore you could not get France into a Western Union without civil war. Or take another instance: ever since the end of the war, the British Government has been trying to establish a common economic policy in international affairs with the United States—advocating a free world market, reviving what is called equal economic treatment for all countries, or (as I would call it) the rule of the jungle. A long time ago, I said to myself: "That cock won't fight." Well, now the British Government is beginning to discover that it won't fight, that the Americans have no intention of reducing their tariffs—their political system won't let them—and that we in this country cannot afford to go back to the rule of the jungle, we are not king of economic beasts any more. I do not flatter myself that anything I said made them change their minds: they were far too embogged in 19th Century *laissez-faire* prejudices. No, they have had to give way, grudgingly and in a confused way, before the impact of facts.

What is Possible

In international affairs more than in any other sphere the saying is true: "Politics is the art of the possible." What is a possible foreign policy? And, still more important, what is an impossible one? Foreign policy is not made in the studies of professors, not even of Professor Carr*: it is not even made at the Foreign Secretary's desk—what is made there are the phrases to put the House of Commons in a good temper. Foreign policy is made by the jostling of forces: by shifts of economic power, by conflicts of class-interests: by the clash of moral principles and prejudices

*A previous speaker in the series—Professor E. H. Carr, Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales.

(by principles I mean the ones I agree with, by prejudices the ones I do not); and, to a large extent, by the hang-over of old ideas once perhaps sensible but now out-of-date.

It is influenced by the outlook which elderly members of the Foreign Office and diplomatic service acquired when they were boys at school, thirty or forty years ago; and men in their fifties or sixties do not change the mental habits of a lifetime. That is why a change of foreign secretaries, or even a change of government, cannot bring a complete change of foreign policy: the men who carry it out are the same. Look, for instance, at the *ententes* which this country made with France and Russia before 1914. British and French diplomats had a long experience of working together, though they had also experience of quarrelling; therefore the *entente* worked with very little suspicion on either side. British and Russian diplomats had only the experience of quarrelling for almost a century; and they went on doubting and scrutinising each other even when the famous *entente* agreement had been made. And in just the same way, much as I should like to see it, I do not believe that a policy of day-to-day co-operation with the Soviet Union is possible now. The background and training of both British and Russian diplomats are against it.

Fighting the Last War

Policy is influenced, too, by the preparations which our military men are making, now as always, to fight the last war over again—only this time to get off to a flying start. It would be a mistake to think that strategy is the decisive factor in foreign policy, but it is a factor all the same. British policy in the Middle East, for instance, would be very different—different in Greece, in Egypt, in Palestine, and at the Straits—different altogether, if our military leaders did not think it necessary to have a strategic centre somewhere there. Why do they need this strategic centre? In order to meet the Axis attacks of 1940, to be able to shift forces to Singapore against the Japanese attacks of 1941, and perhaps also to carry out other curious projects of the spring of 1940 which (fortunately) never came off. I sometimes think they are planning to force the Dardanelles in 1915. Generals always go on like this. The Germans did just the same. The German general staff devoted themselves between the wars to plans for fighting the campaigns of the first German war over again; that is to say, they repeated their mistakes on a more colossal scale than before and so brought Germany to an even more catastrophic defeat. At present, we are still living in a sort of armistice period, when policy is a continuation of war; and therefore strategic considerations count a good deal. Later on, perhaps, they will count for too little.

Power Politics

More fundamental than the ideas of diplomats or soldiers is the common stock of ideas, held alike by ministers, by members of Parliament, by writers



W. E. GLADSTONE
Right, not might, was right.

in newspapers and speakers on the wireless, and by what is called public opinion. We are a very old-fashioned political community and our habits of thought are very deeply ingrained; it does not make sense to discuss foreign policy without allowing for these habits even when they have become old-fashioned.

Traditional British foreign policy was negative; I mean by that, it supposed that if you prevented certain things you could get what you wanted—peace and the opportunity for economic prosperity. The two great traditional assumptions on which British policy rested—assumptions which came to be regarded as laws of nature—were the Balance of Power and the supremacy of the British navy, which gave Great Britain control of the seas. It was held that normally there were a number of great independent Powers in Europe who would hold each other in check; and it was British policy to intervene only if one of these Powers—at one time France and, later, Germany—threatened to become too strong and to dominate the others. But always it was supposed that the balance could be redressed and its advantage recovered. This advantage was not merely security from direct invasion, but, quite as important, freedom to pursue imperial expansion overseas. You remember Macaulay's phrase about winning an Empire on the Rhine; that is, France was kept too busy fighting Prussia to be able to prevent our conquest of Canada. But the control of the seas, that is, the supremacy of the British navy, was equally essential; it was that which enabled the system of the Balance of Power to show a profit.

Now both these laws or assumptions, call them what you will, no longer correspond with reality. The Balance of Power in Europe has ceased to exist and, as an automatic self-regulating system, can never be restored. At the present time, according to many good judges—Walter Lippman, for instance—Russia could occupy all Europe as far as Calais and the Bay of Biscay; there is nothing in Europe to stop her, or even to put up more than a show of resistance. Perhaps the Russians could be expelled again later by a new Anglo-American coalition, but they could not