

# "OUR PROPAGANDA IS SIMPLY TERRIBLE"

I WANT to discuss with you as openly and frankly as I can this question of British propaganda. Isolationists in the United States are very fond of referring to huge, highly-organised propaganda by ourselves and of repeating such statements as Senator Burton's that the British have the greatest propaganda organisation.

You gather from these references that the Nazis, who've actually spent more time, trouble and money on propaganda in a month than we've done in any given year, are mere children at this sinister game compared with ourselves. It's their sheer clumsiness that brings these Nazi propagandists into the open, whereas we subtle British keep our gigantic organisation under cover. Therefore we are really the dangerous people working day and night to bewilder the poor American citizen. Men with strange accents, wearing monocles, are probably spending millions in Whitehall on this gigantic propaganda machine of ours, and so on and so forth.

## "It Makes Me Laugh"

Now, this makes me laugh but not very heartily — bitterly perhaps rather than heartily. The job such as it is, is this, that far from being assisted by this gigantic machinery of propaganda, I've had so little assistance, so little official interest in what I was doing that lately I threatened to resign from doing these talks altogether. It is, I assure you most earnestly, with the very greatest difficulty that our Government can be persuaded to give propaganda even a moment's serious consideration. They don't understand its value.

The propaganda of this country, instead of being highly organised, lavishly prepared and distributed, is simply terrible. I've written one newspaper article after another pointing this out and so have many of my colleagues. Now, I've some right to speak with authority on this matter, and I defy any isolationist to contradict this, for since last June I've probably broadcast more talks overseas than any other person. If there is such a thing as a British propagandist then I am one, for month after month I've stayed up till all hours doing these talks. And if there is a big propaganda machine, then I'm certainly one of the people who ought to know all about that machine and ought to be in charge of a few pulleys and cogwheels myself.

## "Shamefully Neglected"

But my complaint, and it's been repeated and echoed by everybody who's tried to state our case to the world, is that not only is there no such elaborate machinery, but that the whole business of propaganda is most shamefully undervalued and neglected by our Government, and any American isolationist who knows all about the gigantic British propaganda organisation either inside or outside this country will do me a great service by putting me in touch with it. As it is, those of us whose task it is to state the British case do so with little official encouragement and with many obstacles to overcome.

## J. B. PRIESTLEY Makes Some Frank Admissions

(A talk broadcast by the BBC on December 4, 1940, in the series "Britain Speaks")

I suppose the kind of man who believes that American citizens are being victimised by a huge and elaborate campaign of lies and truth-faking by the British authorities must also believe that a broadcaster like myself is paid immense sums by officials who tell me exactly what to say. Well, I'll explain exactly what my own position is. I am employed privately, talk by talk, by the British Broadcasting Corporation. Occasionally, it's suggested that I might like to deal with a certain subject, but it's up to me whether I adopt the suggestion; and how I treat the subject is entirely my own affair. No important official, no official of any kind, has ever seen me and told me that I ought to talk in a certain way about a certain subject, and if he did I should ask him who the blazes he thought I was, and who he thought he was.

## "Worst Paid Job for 10 Years"

As for immense sums of money, I think I can truthfully say that this is about the worst paid job I've had for the last 10 years, for each one of these talks is at least half as long again as the kind of newspaper article I write, and I have not only to write it out but also to travel to a studio and then to deliver the talk over the air, and for all that I receive just a quarter of the amount I receive for a weekly newspaper article.

No, there's no money in this job, there's no official prestige, no public advancement, no honour and glory on their way. Why then do I do it? I'm a free agent. Nobody's threatened me with conscription if I refuse to do it. In fact, nobody in any position of authority cares tuppence whether I do the job or not, or for that matter whether anybody does it. But why then do I keep at it, for it's extremely tiring work, week after week, month after month?

## "Why I Keep At It"

I keep at it because in the first place I have many friends overseas with whom I like to feel that I am in touch. In addition there are hundreds of thousands of good folk who are at least acquaintances, though we've not met, because they've read my books or seen my plays. I feel it is a privilege during a time when it's hard to offer them any more books and plays to be able to talk to them in an easy, friendly fashion about how things are going here, as well as being able as it were, to write a hundred thousand letters at once. Thirdly, I have my own slant on this war and it happens that my point of view coincides with that of most of the people who listen to our overseas talks. So I feel that here is an excellent audience.

Now, what that slant or point of view is ought to be pretty obvious by this time. It is that this war must be fought for the democratic ideal. It's either for

that or it's nonsense. I don't think it's nonsense. Moreover, it happens that so far in this conflict the real heroes and heroines, the outstanding characters of the war are the ordinary British people.

## "A People's War"

Those of you who have been listening to these talks all along will remember that quite early in them I promised solemnly that when the real challenge came the character of the ordinary folk here would stand up like a rock. Well that's happened, as nobody can deny, which only confirms me in my opinion that it's the people who are "taking it" in this war, and so, before we have done, this will be the people's war, by which I mean not merely that they will go on "taking it" and be patted on the head, but they will show the world that democracy in this hemisphere isn't dead, but is about to take on a new and more glorious life.

This brings me naturally to a now familiar criticism of Britain that is made by those people in the United States who want any excuse to keep their heads in the sand. This criticism is that Britain is no longer a democracy, that democracy is dead here, so that any talk of our fighting for democracy is just so much humbug. Now, I'm a very good person to answer this charge, and for this reason; that before this war I was saying and had been saying it in one form or another for several years, that democracy was dying in this country. I said it because for one thing I disliked the Government of that period, and for another because the indifference of most of our people to the antics of this bad Government seemed to me to suggest that we were no longer a politically-minded, public-spirited, truly democratic people. It's all there in print, though I won't take this opportunity of advertising my goods by telling you exactly where it is.

## Have We Gone Fascist?

The point is that these critics of Britain are only saying now what some of us were saying two or three years ago. But now we're at war, fighting—and let's make no bones about that—for our very existence as a self-governing, free people. Are we still less of a democracy now? Have we arrived for all our tall talk at a kind of disguised Fascism? I'll deal as honestly as possible with this searching question. First I'll say all that can be said in favour of this view. Thus it's true that the powers of the Government, the executive powers, have been immensely enlarged at the expense of some ancient liberties. Things can be done that



J. B. PRIESTLEY  
Why does he do it?

couldn't have been done two years ago and that would have been regarded with horror thirty or fifty years ago. In theory, many of the traditional liberties and rights of the British citizen have vanished. Let so much be freely admitted.

Then again, it's true to say that there are persons who wouldn't greatly mind a thinly disguised Fascism who are still occupying places of power and influence. There has been no great direct attack upon privilege. Most of the faults of our system still remain. And I will admit this much, that if our Parliament, our press, our people, were all indifferent, showing much the same spirit, or to be more accurate, lack of spirit, that they were doing during the years just before the war, I'd regard this state of affairs with considerable dismay. Indeed, I'd be wondering now what we were all in for, and how soon I could smuggle my family and myself to a freer air.

## The Other Side

But let's look at it from the other side of the picture. In the first place, with a few minor exceptions, the increased powers of the Government were themselves the result of a popular demand. The people, through Parliament and the press said, in effect, "more Government please." And ironically enough, a familiar grumble—I've made it myself more than once—is that the Government doesn't make enough use of its enlarged powers, that it ought to be riding us harder, and not pretending so often that things are still normal when we all know that really they are wildly abnormal and should be treated as such. Secondly, what about Parliament and the press? If these are sinking into silence and oblivion then some sort of Fascism is arriving, but if they're still lively and outspoken then democracy hasn't been defeated. Now this Parliament, although in my opinion it was elected far too long ago, in 1935, to represent purely our opinion to-day, has shown itself not at all unworthy of its old tradition, for it's by no means

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