

JUST BACK FROM AMERICA

An Observer's Impression Of Changing Public Opinion

(By ROBERT SPEAIGHT in a "Home Service" Talk reported in the BBC "Listener")

IT is one thing to read the speeches of President Roosevelt and to rejoice at the passage of the Lend-Lease Bill; but it is another thing to be on the spot and to watch with your own eyes the swift movement of American sympathy. That is what I was doing from October, 1939, to February, 1941. I didn't go everywhere and of course I didn't see everybody, but I did go about a good deal from New York and Boston and Washington in the East to Chicago in the Middle West; from the forests and lakes of Maine in the North to the blue-grass of Kentucky in the South; and in the course of these travels I did see and talk to Americans of every class and kind. I was able to watch at close quarters their reactions to every dramatic event overseas.

They Were Nervous

When I reached New York in the beautiful Fall of 1939, I found the Americans rather jumpy. It so happened that quite a number of English lecturers were arriving at that time, and the Americans were afraid we were trying to "get" at them. I remember that I suggested giving a talk on the poetry of G. K. Chesterton, and the reply came that it would be inadvisable to talk about an Englishman owing to the delicate state of public feeling. Few Englishmen of our time have been as popular among Americans as Chesterton and those who had invited me were as warm as any in their admiration of him. But they were nervous. Like the rest of their countrymen they wanted to make up their own minds, without any assistance, however indirect, from outside. Of course most educated Americans wanted the Allies to win, but I don't think many of them envisaged the kind of help they were going to give us later on. Most Americans I met believed in the British Navy and when the *Graf Spee* met her inglorious end about that time they were more confident than ever. But they also believed in the Maginot Line, and it wasn't until France fell that America began to realise fully her own danger.

Sudden and Decisive Conversion

Let me give you an example of this. At the end of January, 1940, I was staying with an American friend and his wife. He was the editor of one of the most important newspapers in the South, and he had lived in England for some years. At the same time he wasn't one of those professional and highly unpopular Anglophiles who are for ever exalting Great Britain at the expense of their own country. I know no American with a deeper sense of the real meaning of American democracy, a sense to which he has given expression in several admirable books. Well, in January, 1940, he certainly didn't feel that American interests were at stake. He wished us luck, and more or less left it at that. Later on, at the beginning of June, I stayed with him again. When I arrived I found his wife alone

—he was still at the office. "I am trying to prevent X from joining up in the British Army," she said. "I am trying to persuade him that he can do more good here, educating American opinion." She was right. He became one of the moving spirits in the William Allen White Committee to help America by aiding the Allies.

"Direct Action"

That was an instance of sudden and decisive conversion. My friend had travelled, in a few weeks, the whole distance from the passage of the Neutrality Bill in October, 1939, with its "Cash and Carry" provisions to the passing of the Lend-Lease Bill in March, 1941. Henceforward, he was to be in the vanguard of American sympathies. But don't imagine that it was only educated people who felt like that. That same summer, I was down in Kentucky, in the rich agricultural country round Harrodsburg and Bardstown. One day two farmers gave me a lift in their creaking Ford car, and I found them full of a highly ingenious method by which they claimed the German Panzer Divisions could be stopped. You simply fired some steel rods into the muzzle of the guns, and that would effectively silence them. I didn't argue the merits of this rather romantic remedy, but I observed the Southerner's readiness for direct action.

Again, only six weeks later, I was 600 miles further north up in Maine, close to the Canadian border. I wanted to know how people felt about the war in that largely untrodden wilderness of lakes and woods. Accordingly I walked for a hundred miles through the forests, guided only by the markings of the Appalachian trail, and seeing only the fire-watchers and trappers in charge of the lakeside camps. One night I was too late to reach camp, so I stopped with a solitary watchman in his single-room hut near the summit of Mount Whitecap. He never saw a newspaper; he had no wireless set. Once a fortnight he collected his food from the nearest point on the road, several miles away. He lived all alone. But he couldn't have been more convinced of the necessity

for defeating Hitler if the *Luftwaffe* had been dive-bombing his observation-post.

In the Middle West

In fact wherever you found people remote from the more crude and fantastical influences of the radio and the press you found a very solid sympathy. But when you came down into the smaller towns and the larger cities, particularly in the Middle West, you found opinion much more hesitant and divided. For six months I was lecturing at a big University on the borders of Indiana and Michigan. When I came there in January, 1940, the majority were quite detached. I was never asked to give my opinion on the war, either in public or in print. Many of the students were of Irish, German, or Italian origin, and were, therefore, slow to concede the justice of the Allied cause. I remember, at the time of the invasion of the Low Countries, that, out of a class of twenty-four, eight were found who really believed that Hitler was morally justified. Perhaps this was just a rationalising of prejudices or even of fear, but it does explain why Mr. Roosevelt has never allowed himself to go too far ahead of the Middle West. You must remember that many of these students have never been beyond the Great Lakes to the north, the Alleghenies to the east, and the Rockies to the west. They had seen neither the Atlantic nor the Pacific oceans. It was difficult for them to envisage an immediate threat to their country.

The "Faculty of Broken English"

America has often been called a "melting pot" of races, and you feel that very strongly in a university such as this I speak of. Here you have many refugee or émigré professors, who have brought the learning and science of Europe in exchange for American hospitality. I counted among my own friends a professor of philosophy from Lille, or physics from Vienna and Budapest, of mathematics from Vienna, of political science from Bonn, of economics from Berlin. They used to be called the "Faculty of Broken English," but

they were brilliant men and they were against Hitler to a man. Only two of them were Jews. And gradually I came to distinguish less and less sharply between them and their American colleagues or pupils. I simply felt the hand-clasp of civilised men, all the world over; the recognition of a common cause.

N.Z. Airmen In Canada

LOCAL NEWS SENT WEEKLY

NEW ZEALAND airmen training in Canada are kept up-to-date with news of Dominion happenings, sent them by radio each week. Although we hear little of them except by their letters to relatives and friends, and the personal messages they give in the *Boys Overseas* programme on Sunday mornings, they are kept, through this service, in regular touch with news of home. The service has been operating for nearly two months.

The news is prepared by the Prime Minister's Department, Wellington, in the same way as the daily and weekly bulletins sent to the Middle East. It is cabled by the NBS to the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and in Sydney is incorporated as a New Zealand section into a bulletin of Australian news, sent by short-wave to Canada each Sunday.

The bulk of our local news is cabled across at the end of the week in skeleton form, and on Saturday evening an additional cable is sent with the latest sporting and racing results. The bare bones of these two sections are filled out in Sydney before being spoken into the short-wave microphone.

The news sent covers a wide field. There are paragraphs about leading personalities in the news, and obituaries of any people who are likely to be known to the men, such as former schoolmasters. The names are given of winners of art unions, details of fires and accidents, news of the formation or extension of the W.A.A.F., and Territorial and Home Guard training, political gossip such as candidates announced for electorates, and visits of outstanding people to our shores. For the men who come from farming districts there is news of agricultural conditions, and for the mechanically-minded a note about the make of new ambulances. Occasional reference is made to new buildings completed or to coal output, or to a significant resolution passed by such bodies as the R.S.A.

It would be impossible to provide a news coverage to suit all tastes, or to supply as much news as the boys would have at home through conversations with their friends and through reading the newspapers, but in these short summaries an attempt is made to keep the boys informed of at least the major happenings in New Zealand.

The sporting section naturally gives pride of place at this time of year to the Rugby games, but the winners of the chief races are also given. It is wonderful how much sporting information can be crowded into 100 words.

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