

AMERICA AND THE CZECH CRISIS

"SPECTATOR"

THE Czech-German crisis has passed, and America is thoroughly and completely engrossed in a study of—baseball! The World's Series of Chicago overshadows the "World's Series" of two weeks ago in Central Europe. The "big four", Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier and Chamberlain, are dismissed from the front page, and their place is taken by "Dizzy", Dean of the Yankees.

While John Citizen is treating himself to the emotional thrills of the baseball diamond, let us cast our eyes back for a moment to the American scene during the last two weeks of September.

The march of events in Europe did not come as a shock to the American public. Radio commentators, looking for daily items of sensational interest with which to regale their public, are wont even in quietest times to turn to Europe for headline news. The American radio public reacts to European news in much the same way as a theatre audience would to a mystery-thriller. They like to sit back in their chairs and get all the sensations of the actors without suffering any of the consequences of participation. There is vast sympathy for the righteous but injured parties; the victim is the subject of much weeping and gnashing of teeth; but very little sound logic is expressed in determining how he met his end; and finally the big, bad, villain is subjected to catcalls, boos and hisses. But very rarely, if ever, does one allow one's sentiment so far to excite one as to throw a brick at the players. Usually if one tries to interfere in something which is really not one's business at all, one gets hurt. Americans found that out in 1917-1918, and they have not yet forgotten it.

The drama of late September must then be considered in this cast:

Mr. Chamberlain—the goodly and righteous knight; M. Daladier, his right-hand man; Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini, the villains; and Czechoslovakia, the unfortunate victim. The stage,—all Europe; the space between the stage and the stalls, the Atlantic; and occupying the stalls, President Roosevelt,

Mr. Cordell Hull, and party. Persons sitting in the stalls—persons of affluence and breeding— would scarcely go so far as to boo or hiss the players. They might applaud, but nothing more. The noisy throng in the pit behind, to say nothing of the galleries, does not like the villain's face, and as it feels impotent to do anything about it, a deputation waits on the Presidential party in the stalls and asks that an intimation of displeasure be conveyed. President Roosevelt, through the Department of State, speaks to Hitler and Mussolini. But he does not stand up and shout threats and warnings of more tangible expression of displeasure to come, and here is where the foreign analyst of American opinion must be on his guard. One cannot but feel that to interpret the diplomatic intervention of President Roosevelt at this time as anything more than a gesture would be unwise and misleading. Hardly a section of the American press, while applauding the President's efforts to keep peace in Europe, has failed to remind him that America fought once to "make the world safe for democracy", and that America does not intend to do it a second time.

Letters to the editor fill columns of the press with expressions of opinion about the attitude of Mr. Chamberlain. Most of these letters are written by women, and almost without exception they criticize Mr. Chamberlain for what—to generalize—they call Britain's betrayal of Czechoslovakia. The legal or diplomatic background of Mr. Chamberlain's position seems to trouble these writers not at all. They proceed in their criticism with gay abandon, oblivious to the facts.

The editorial opinion, while much saner, and logical to a degree in its reasoning, expresses a pretty general approval of the actions of the British Prime Minister. It would be unfair to assume that all editorial writers in the United States are men! Characteristically enough, in the home of New England Puritanism, the *Salem News* (Sept. 28) quotes St. Luke in refutation of the charge of cowardice laid against Great Britain and France in "yielding" to Hitler:

Many Americans feel that England and France did a cowardly thing when they showed some degree of willingness to yield to Hitler. They might read St. Luke, 14:31, wherein it was said, "Or what king, as he goeth to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with 10,000 to meet him that cometh against him with 20,000?" The question of peace or war is trembling in the balance, and England and France are not in a very good position to defend the Czechs.

The *Fitchburg Sentinel* (Mass., Sept. 28), after quoting the official statements of the American Government's foreign policy, flays the Government for its inconsistency:

If our Government admits that each nation must choose between a policy of force and a policy of reason and justice; if our Government admits that every nation must align itself on one side or the other; if our Government admits that no nation can escape the consequences of a spread of the use of force in the world; if our Government admits that no nation can escape the consequences of war and that international cooperation is the only solution—then why is it that at this crucial hour the best that our Government can do is to remind Europe, as it lifts its voice for peace, that we cannot assume any obligations?

The hitch lies in this: that between our professions of belief in peace and our willingness to make sacrifices for peace is a vast gap which our national leaders have done nothing to close. Thus, as the shadow over the world deepens, we, as a nation, find ourselves expressing vacuous wishes for peace and indulging in futile gestures.

The supreme hour arrives, and the United States finds itself powerless to say an effective word for peace; but, on the contrary, can only repeat that it assumes no obligation for negotiations.

The *Fosters Democrat* of Dover (New Hampshire) pays sincere tribute to Mr. Chamberlain (Sept. 29):

Prime Minister Chamberlain's dramatic flight to Germany to plead the cause of world peace with Chancellor Hitler places him, as Pope Pius said in Rome, "among the great" of humanity History will record the fact that Mr. Chamberlain desperately and almost humbly sought peace when the whole world and all humanity prayed for peace.

It was a splendid gesture, and no one has devised its significance better than John Masefield, poet-laureate of England, who thus interprets Mr. Chamberlain's purpose:

"To ask that young men's bodies, not yet dead,
Be given from the battle not begun."

The *Bath Times* of Sept. 29, in an editorial headed "No Entangling Alliances," beats the drums of isolation for the good people of Maine to hear:

We can be neighbourly and helpful to our European neighbours, and should be so. That has always been our disposition and purpose. But our own liberty and security can only be damaged, and the happiness of Europe not served at all, by any hard and fast political engagements. It is one thing to be a good neighbour, and quite another to try to live in the same house.

This editorial seems to have been inspired by the dangerous writings of one "Brother Staples of the *Lewiston Journal*,"

who had some sort of an idea that an international parliament of some sort might yet be the means of ending war.

One feels that the *Bath Times* is expressing very much the ideas of the average man in the street in America. To try to be on good terms with everyone, but to shun responsibility like the very Devil himself!

In a short editorial entitled "Europe Today" the *News* (Milford, Mass.) contrasts the two leaders, Chamberlain and Hitler:

No one who heard the two speeches could fail to note the contrast between the words and manner of Adolph Hitler on Monday and Neville Chamberlain yesterday. Evidently one is intent on a war of conquest; the other, with equal fervor, is striving for a last-minute peace, as Europe totters on the brink of another general conflict. (Sept. 28)

The *Worcester Post* (Mass. Sept. 28) expresses most clearly the general view of what the American people expect the President to do in the matter:

President Roosevelt is at his very best in handling this foreign crisis. He has the nation solidly behind him.

He has scrupulously avoided involving this country in the European quarrel; but he has thrown every ounce of this Government's moral influence into the arena in an endeavour to prevent a war which is bound to hurt us directly or indirectly.

If the President's stand is a trifle anomalous and contradictory, so is the nation's. We believe in democracy and a just peace, but we do not intend to become involved in a European war to preserve them in Europe after the futility of the last adventure overseas.

We want the President to spare no effort for peace in the world, that will not directly jeopardize peace here in America.

Thinking Americans were a bit bothered during the Czech crisis when they recalled that President Roosevelt had stated not long ago at Kingston, Ontario, that the armed force of the United States would immediately be called into action in case of an attempted invasion of Canada by a foreign power. The Quincy (Mass.) *Patriot-Ledger* (Sept. 27) clears up this matter for its readers in these words:

Reluctant as Americans are to get mixed up in anyone's quarrel, there can hardly be the shadow of a doubt that under any and all circumstances they would use their utmost strength to defend the Dominion against outside attacks. That does not, of course, mean that Uncle Sam is pledged to throw troops and fleets overseas the next time Canada becomes involved in a British war on the Continent of Europe.

But this is just New England. What about the Middle West, the Pacific States, the South? Curiously enough, the expression of public opinion is much the same in every part of the country. If any difference is to be noticed, it is simply that the writers of editorials for the mid-western readers show even less appreciation of the underlying causes of the dispute, and—perhaps for want of inspiring intellectual companionship—these same editors seem to enjoy one another's editorials so much that oftentimes they copy them, word for word, from each other's columns. No credit for sources even appears! One of the favorites, which, incidentally, first appeared in a New York paper, reads as follows:

Czech and German children danced together the other night in New York. It happened at a Fall festival staged for the children who attend a settlement playground known as the Avenue A. Children's Gardens. Youngsters of 17 nationalities play at this settlement, and at the festival they all had a good time together. At the end of the festival they all got together and sang "America the Beautiful", and then the announcer summed up the spirit of the evening by saying: "Now we are all Americans. We're friends now."

The sentiment is pretty. Are we to assume that the Czechs of Czechoslovakia and the Germans of Adolph Hitler should solve their difficulties by becoming Americans? Shallow, shallow thinking! The analogy of immigrant groups of different European nationalities in America is horribly unfair, unjust, to the statesmen who try to solve the tangle of centuries-old economic, political, racial, religious problems of Europe to-day.

The *Springfield News* of Sept. 25 is also inspired to discuss the Czech problem—for sentimental reasons again; gypsy music runs through the editor's soul; the editorial is headed "Long live Bohemia."

Perhaps we, so far away, are silly to become sentimental over the fate of a land that means so little to us. But our hearts bleed for Czechoslovakia. We have taken into our language the word "Bohemia". To us it is a land where the people live happy, carefree lives, where freedom and personal liberty mean so much.

The *Ellensburg Press* epitomizes for us the average American's reasoning:

People of various races do not seem to be able to live together in Europe in peace. The same races can come to the United States and live as friendly neighbours and loyal citizens of our republic, but in Europe racial feelings are too bitter, and one war follows another.

Ask anyone who has ever lived in the Southern States whether racial feelings do not play a part in the life of this country. Americans continue to ignore the fact that the basic causes of Europe's discontent are economic, not racial, and that race is but the fuel used in building up that hate based on inequality of national wealth. The bands of European immigrants who have come to America live in peace among themselves—yes—but because their economic opportunities at the start are equal. "Soak the rich" is a slogan in American national politics, just as much as it is in European international politics.

To refresh our minds for a moment, and to get down to some solid thought, let us glance at the editorial in the *Michigan City (Ind.) News*, entitled "Open the Mind and let a little Logic in." The language is typical, if a little difficult of literal interpretation, but the meaning is nevertheless clear enough:

American newspapers have had a good deal to say lately about the "betrayal" of Czechoslovakia. England and France, so the story goes, have sold the little country down the river (a term of some significance in the Mississippi area before 1861-1865), and have cravenly made peace with Hitler by ignoring their responsibilities. Well, this may be true enough. The Czechs have had a raw deal, and the big muscle-man of Europe is riding high, wide and handsome (mid-west American for saying that Herr Hitler has succeeded in imposing his will on the democratic statesmen of Europe.) But it hardly becomes Americans to say too much about it.

After tracing America's part in the creation of a Czech nation, the editor closes with these words:

The trouble with us is that we want to have it both ways. We want to stay out of trouble in Europe—and let's pray that we succeed!—but we also want to hand out a lot of free advice to other nations on how they should act. Such a cause doesn't make sense. Isolation implies indifference to what happens abroad. If we are going to stick to isolation as a policy, we might as well start cultivating an attitude of indifference. For if Europe's quarrels *are* none of our concern—well, then there isn't any logic in getting concerned about them.

The editor of the *Chicago Daily Record* also emphasizes the obligation of America as one of the most powerful of the democratic states:

World democracy is impossible. It must be defended as a unit. Death to one section weakens the whole. . . . America must act. . . . America can only act through an expression of the will of its people. This will to win peace and save democracy

must be made known to the President. Every labor and progressive organization can advise Washington at once. "Save the peace of the world by stopping Hitler."

The influence of Senator Borah and his policy of isolation seems to have missed the little town of Gary (Ind.) The editor of the *Gary Tribune* (Sept. 27) thinks that the President has failed to interpret the will of the American people:

The United States ought to take a stand against Hitler now, so that our influence can be thrown against this destructive influence without delay. We have no doubt that President Roosevelt feels this way, and only holds back because he fears the American people do not understand the danger Hitler can do to us.

One feels that perhaps the President realizes only too well that there is a danger, and in certain more recent internal developments in the United States there is an indication that the administration, indirectly at least, intends to impress that danger upon the American public. But of that more anon.

In lighter vein the *Jackson Ledger* (Sept. 26) assures the readers that

A general upheaval in Europe at this time might easily bring about an overthrow of the present régime in England and put Edward VIII, the idol of the British people, back in power—not as king, but as a dictator, far more powerful than King George.

King George in the rôle of dictator, albeit a not so powerful dictator, is a distinctly new way of regarding the Monarchy in the British Constitution. The idea of the supremacy of parliament would be difficult of comprehension for one brought up under the shadow of the American Constitution, if indeed he had ever heard of the theory at all. Further detailed review of editorial opinion will not help us better to understand America's position at this time. Under headings such as—

"No war for us; at least not immediately."
 "Peace or Truce?"
 "As the Bluffer bluffed!"
 "Is America inconsistent?"
 "Sudetens, Why and Where"
 "English misgivings"

and "What is the Way out?", editor after editor tries to picture the European scene, almost never impartially, usually in criticism of present British policy. In isolated instances an attempt at self-examination is made, to see just where America does fit into

the picture. Tremendous interest, readiness to take sides and to criticise or praise without a calm and impartial weighing of evidence, characterize the press of this nation—the nation which stands, so its people assert, for “splendid isolation.”

It is difficult for the Englishman to picture the American scene at a time like the Czech crisis. Screaming newspaper headlines with huge black type three or four inches wide! Special edition upon special edition; newsboys shouting meaningless phrases in almost unintelligible English,—“Hitler wins”, Chamberlain on way to Godesburg”, “Czechoslovakia betrayed,” and so on. One’s car pulls up for a red traffic light in the heart of a busy New England city. Through the open window one hears the vibrant voice of a news-commentator telling the radio public that German troops are on the march, that strange aeroplanes have been seen flying towards Prague from the east—presumably Russian. One’s mind is rudely awakened by the shrill whistle of the traffic “cop” as he waves on the horde of luxurious automobiles; a big limousine pulls up alongside waiting for the next light; from out of its depths comes the voice of an Englishman, speaking slowly, deliberately, agonizingly. It is Mr. Chamberlain asking quietly, without panic or excitement, for volunteers for the A.R.P. Again the whistle—America rushes on its way!

Or picture the scene in any average American home. It is 7 o’clock in the evening. The radio is going full blast, pouring out a hodge-podge of “swing music” or a band, interspersed with urgent admonitions to use only Blank and Company’s soap to keep the hands lovely, or never to fail to gargle with So-and-So’s mouth wash to avoid offence in social gatherings. Suddenly the program is cut short, and an urgent voice from New York assures us that Mr. X will now tell us, direct from Prague, of the happenings in that city during the last two hours. Mr. X does so. If he is a Czech, he does so with remarkable calm and deliberation. If he is an American correspondent, with not quite so much calm and deliberation. With the words, “We return you to America”, there follows an analysis of what has been said from overseas, by some American commentator whose duty it is to make the situation clear to the listener. In all fairness it must be said that these interpreters of the news, these commentators, are by far the best source of information to which the American public has access. But after listening to correspondents speaking from four or five

European capitals, and hearing the comments interpreted by an American listener on this side, one's mind is likely to be fogged, and one longs for the calm, well-modulated voice of the B.B.C. announcer giving the ten o'clock news to an equally calm, albeit an intensely worried, audience. As the next best, one turns the dial to pick up the news-bulletin of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. At least one can feel assured that the Canadian commentator will not allow his interpretation to be colored by the sort of soap that the people to whom he is speaking do, or do not, use. America, during the last two weeks of September, 1938, was very like the old lady who is fussed and annoyed by a group of noisy children, but who hesitates to be really severe, for fear one of the youngsters may knock off her spectacles, or injure her pride, or make her look silly in some way.

For the moment the scare has passed, and the nightmare has faded from memory. But Mr. and Mrs. America still toss and turn. The picture of the "big muscle-man of Europe" still hovers about to haunt them. What if some of his emissaries should be at work downstairs, making off with the family silver? John Citizen hops out of bed, runs nervously down the stairs, and bumps into a couple of masked thugs ransacking the sideboard. And his desk was searched too—all his private papers disturbed! The thugs make a bolt for it, but are caught by the police as they run down the sidewalk. The hunt for the "big shots" of the crime ring is on. Spy hunt! The burglars! Two or three minor members of a foreign espionage service! That foreign espionage service belongs to none other than the old nightmare figure, the "European muscle-man", Adolph Hitler! So now America has a veritable attack of hysteria, and is peeping carefully into every closet and looking under every bed for Nazi spies. By a very clear process of logic, it is evident that Germany means us in America no more good than it meant Czechoslovakia, or France, or England. Perhaps Mr. Chamberlain *was* right. A doubt creeps into the mind of the man in the street. Or perhaps Mr. Roosevelt is trying, indirectly, to impress his people with Herr Hitler's inherent badness, and the need for stopping him—with America's aid—now. Perhaps the sensational stories about Nazi espionage are a little, just a little, over emphasized by the "Federal authorities". Time alone will tell. But the feeling of security, the feeling of isolation, if you will, in which the American people has endeavored to wrap itself, is partially torn away.

☞ The next crisis in Europe, if it comes, may see, if not a

right-about-face, at least a right turn of public opinion in America. The very emphasis which characterizes the present disavowal of American responsibility in Europe suggests that America, at heart, realizes the weakness, the inconsistency, of her own attitude. May the change of heart be manifest before the flickering lights of democracy in Europe all go out!