

II

Concerted Action or Isolation?

COMING out of Spain on February 9, I picked up the *New Republic* of February 2 at Brentano's in Paris. There I found published my article in reply to Mr. Bruce Bliven, written on his invitation in the latter part of December. I was mildly surprised to find that my polemic with Mr. Bliven had been transformed into a debate with Dr. Charles A. Beard. On second thought, however, it seemed only natural that Mr. Bliven should call for help in the controversy, considering that the very essence of his position consists of raising doubt and uncertainty to the level of a principle.

But my surprise at discovering myself thus unceremoniously thrust into an unannounced debate with Dr. Beard was as nothing compared with the astonishment caused by reading what Dr. Beard had to say. I had thought myself inured to all possible surprises, but Dr. Beard carried my education in disillusionment to a higher stage.

This is not because Dr. Beard ascribes to me a bloodthirsty ambition to help President Roosevelt throw America and the world into a general war of mutual extermination. We have long grown used to such a charge; it is old stuff; it is the common stock-in-trade of all isolationists, which they share with the open apologists of fascism. It is a complete begging of the question, of course. All our isolationists, while ostensibly taking up a rational discussion as to which path gives more prospects of maintaining world peace and stopping the current wars, invariably avoid such a discussion in reality as though it were something indecent; they proceed in their arguments upon the *assumption* that everyone who disagrees with them

wants war. They do not even seem to be embarrassed when this dishonest little trick is exposed. So far have the isolationists departed from rational discussion that it is difficult for them to speak or write except in terms of hysterical denunciation of their opponents and a wild appeal to irrational prejudices. Dr. Beard, unfortunately, shows himself no exception in this respect, although we might have expected something better from him.

Dr. Beard, however—and this is the astonishing part—proceeds from the usual isolationist attitude to grounds far beyond any taken by Mr. Bliven, or by any other responsible writer in the liberal or radical press. He proceeds upon such *assumptions*, he poses his questions in such a form, as to admit the validity of all the basic arguments of the fascists.

Tacitly, but nonetheless effectively, Dr. Beard's position is one of *ideological disarmament* in face of the offensive of fascism. He reveals himself as contemptuous of democracy, skeptical of the desirability of peace, and opposed to any struggle against fascism. He does not defend isolation as the path to peace; he merely declares there is no such path.

Nothing that has ever been written in favor of concerted action as the path to peace is quite so conclusively in its favor, as are Dr. Beard's arguments supposedly against it.

Let us examine a few samples. Dr. Beard says:

It is highly probable that Great Britain could tear Hitler away from the Rome-Berlin axis by handing back to Germany the vast African colonies. . . . Does Great Britain want peace on such terms? Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Browder may know. I may be permitted to have doubts.

Here as in a drop of water is reflected the "cosmos" of isolationism. It *assumes* that there is no way to peace except surrender to the fascist demands. If Mr. Roosevelt or myself have any hopes of peace, we are called upon to substantiate

these hopes by "inside information" that Hitler is going to be given what he wants, or else our hopes are discredited. It is inferred that it is not only unreasonable, but also unjust, to hold any other view. This may be anything else, it may even be the basis for a partnership with Hitler, but it is not in any sense or degree the basis for any struggle against fascism and war.

To follow Beard's thought another step:

I find in history no justification whatever for assuming as truth that Italy, Germany, and Japan would surrender unconditionally to a grand quarantine if the quarantine could be arranged. On the contrary, I suspect that they would strike back. . . .

Here is a clear acceptance of the fascist bid for world rulership. The quarantine is rejected because the fascists might resist it. Since the fascist powers are in a "war frenzy," a spirit of "world power or downfall," therefore the United States must simply keep out of their way at all costs, allow them to seize the rest of the world piecemeal, and trust in God as to what will happen when they get around to us and can handle us alone. How we can keep out of the way in a world where elbow room is at a premium, and where the United States holds half of the world's wealth that the fascists covet, does not concern Dr. Beard. Since the fascist powers do not invade our territory first, that is sufficient basis for an isolationist policy.

Having laid such a sure foundation, Dr. Beard then draws a deep breath and plunges into the deep water of surrender to fascism. He says:

Could a quarantine maintain indefinitely the *status quo* of populations, resources, and empire throughout the world? If this were desirable, it scarcely seems possible. . . . There are likely to be profound changes in the distribution of population, resources, and imperial possessions in the future as in the past.

In these words Dr. Beard proclaims the futility of any effort to prevent a general war. He leaves open for argument whether war may not even be "desirable." He only wants to keep the United States out of it—at least until we are fighting for a bigger share in the distribution of the world as the fascists are. He rejects as utopian all idea of international readjustments except through war. He thereby abandons in advance all hopes of restraining the war-making powers.

Coming to the question of democracy, Dr. Beard here also abandons the field to fascism. He wipes out all effective distinction between the democratic and fascist powers (as for the Soviet Union, it is mentioned only in passing). He ridicules any reliance upon the democratic powers. He proceeds to sneer at the labor movement of France, England and America, as inevitably only an appendage to the imperialist circles. He says that all efforts to save democracy can only lead to war—"and the probabilities are that we should then have universal fascism rather than universal democracy." His conclusion is that the more determined is the effort to save democracy, the more certain is it that the very effort will bring the victory of fascism. Democracy is doomed, it has no vitality, and it has no value worth trying to salvage.

In short, for Dr. Beard all roads lead to the inevitable victory of fascism throughout Europe and Asia, and by inference also in the United States in the last analysis. He only hopes that, perhaps, if we keep very quiet and don't talk too loud, the fascists may overlook us for a few years.

From all of which, there is only one practical conclusion, one line of advice for action: Don't do anything, don't say anything, don't try to stop the threatening war, don't try to maintain democracy—everything you do will only bring the catastrophe all the quicker. Fascism and war are inevitable under any circumstances, but if we sit very quiet, do nothing, say nothing, we might be overlooked for a little while. Let us

be thankful for even such a short breathing space before we go to our inevitable doom.

Such are the pitiful depths to which the logic of isolationism has led Dr. Beard. It is indeed a tragedy to see a man, whose life contained so many fearless words and deeds against reaction, come forward in the twilight of that life and in the midst of the world's greatest crisis, with advice of such complete and cowardly surrender.

Dr. Beard proceeds to cover up his surrender with "theoretical" considerations. He rebukes the advocates of concerted action for peace for their supposed "assumption that politics—democratic theory—can be separated from economics." Now if anyone makes such an assumption, it is of course a fatal error, and Dr. Beard has scored a heavy blow. But who assumed this, when, where, how? Dr. Beard is silent on these questions. He merely *assumes* that we are guilty of such an assumption, and lets it go at that.

But this diversion of Dr. Beard, to call upon economics to help him dispose of politics he does not like, is not a naïve gesture. He is hinting, what he dared not say openly, that the defense of democracy is useless or impossible until there has been established full democratic control of the national economy in each country. He has used the statement of an abstract truth to cover up a concrete falsehood of the worst sort. In the name of a perfect democracy, he rejects the struggle for a democracy because it cannot be perfect and entire from the beginning of the struggle.

Dr. Beard is thus operating with a logic that deals only in absolutes. It has no room for a democracy that is in process of becoming, for the struggle to realize democracy. It is a formal, static, mechanical logic, which leads only to doubt, skepticism, passivity and surrender. It is connected with economics itself only formally. It in no way expresses the *economic urgency* of

the masses, which throws them necessarily into *struggle for democracy and peace*.

It is the economic needs of the masses which is the living connection between politics and economics. It is this to which Dr. Beard is completely blind. This blindness is not something new for Dr. Beard. In his historical studies, with all their merits, he has always displayed a lack of understanding of the mass struggle for democracy, an underestimation of its achievements, a cynicism as to its value, a blindness with regard to the mass forces that make for historical progress and which unite politics and economics. This long-standing weakness has now brought Dr. Beard to full capitulation to that reaction which he tried to oppose during most of his active life.

Dr. Beard closes his remarkable essay on how to keep peace by collaborating with fascism, on a "high moral note." He thinks that "anybody who feels hot with morals and is affected with delicate sensibilities can find enough to do at home." While I yield nothing to Dr. Beard in moral heat against the miseries in America, I must protest against his attempt to use it to reduce our heat against the crimes being committed in Spain and China.

When I arrived in Barcelona last week, I visited many of the thirty-five apartment houses blown to bits by high-power bombs from Italian planes, dropped the day before, a sunny Sunday morning. I saw dismembered and mutilated babies and mothers being removed from the wreckage. In my mind rose the question, how long will it be before similar bombs drop on New York, Chicago, San Francisco, with similar results "at home" to our women and children—perhaps to my own family too. When I read the horrible dispatches from China, I see behind the grim statistics the faces of my many Chinese friends, most of them now corpses from the effect of Japanese bombs and machine guns.

What reason have we to assume that America is immune to

this madness that is sweeping the world? What reason have we to think we can shut ourselves away from it all, and with impunity wash our hands of the fate of our brothers in other lands?

When I see these things, I do indeed become "hot with morals," to use Dr. Beard's derisive phrase. And I cannot forgive Dr. Beard for that derision. It is a shameful and unworthy thing. As for me, I cannot rest until I know that I and the people which gave me birth, the American people, are doing everything in our power to stop these crimes in Spain and China, to make them unprofitable, and to make their recurrence impossible. That several thousand American boys are giving their lives in Spain to help do this job makes me proud of our people, and very humble that we are not doing more. Fascism must be stopped in those places where it first strikes. The Spanish and Chinese peoples are fighting the battles of all mankind. We must come to their help. We must stop all direct and indirect aid to the fascists. We must end once and for all the farce of "non-intervention." If we fail in this duty, then we deserve no better fate for ourselves, and I am sure we will get our deserts. There is no way forward for America, or for the world, except we find the way together, through concerted action for democracy and peace.

New Masses, March 1, 1938.