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How important is public opinion in time of war?*

To what extent should Democracies be guided by public opinion in time of war?

The arguments against following public opinion in such a period have been recited often. The citizens of a country know little about military strategy; therefore, their views about the conduct of the war have little significance. They know little about military needs; therefore, their views about production for war have little value. They do not appreciate the complexity of problems of organizing man power and natural resources. What is to be gained, therefore, in listening to their views on this score? The people do not understand problems of world politics. These problems and others should be left in the hands of the experts and leaders.

We are told that only a united nation can prosecute a war successfully. The constant quarreling over domestic matters, coupled with criticism of those in power can have only one effect: to destroy the public's morale; to divide the nation; and to invite defeat. Since unity is all-important, so the plea goes, discussion should be limited and criticism avoided.

These arguments come naturally and sincerely from the leaders of a nation in every war period.

The time has now come when we can challenge these beliefs; when we can establish the value of the free and open discussion of all affairs of government, military as well as administrative; and decide whether or not public opinion is worth listening to in time of war as in time of peace.

When I speak of public opinion I refer to majority opinion, which must not be confused with the noisy outbursts of minority groups and of individuals who usually get the headlines but seldom represent the collective judgment of the citizens of the country.

Fortunately, today we have developed a technique and a machinery to sound the opinions of all the people of the nation – both those who shout and those who whisper. In recent years public opinion has been ascertained on almost every policy bearing on the war, not only in this country but in our sister democracy, England, as well.

From the great mass of material that has been gathered here and in England, and, more recently, in Canada and Australia, we are in a good position to judge the quality of public opinion on war time issues. On the basis of a great volume of evidence, we can answer the question of whether public opinion should be listened to as eagerly in time of war as in time of peace.

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First, may I record the views of the American people on war issues and on issues which arose just prior to our entrance into the war? I think you will agree that it is a record which time and again confirms the sound judgment and foresight of the common people.

On most of the important issues people have been ahead of their own political leaders. In fact the evidence is such as to raise the real question as to whether the leaders are leading the people or whether the people are leading the leaders. Let me cite some instances to show what I mean.

In November 1935, more than six years ago, our studies of public opinion found that more than 70 per cent of the people in the country were in favor of building a bigger army and navy. An even greater percentage (80 per cent) were in favor of building a larger air force. You may recall that this was in a period when the public was economy-minded; but, in the case of appropriations for the Army and Navy, the public was in favor of increasing, rather than decreasing these expenditures.

You will recall that 1935 was just two years after Hitler came to power. Each time that Hitler took over another country in Europe, the proportion of voters in the United States who wanted to increase the size of our Army, Navy and Air force rose sharply. By 1939 and the outbreak of the war, we were finding an overwhelming demand for substantial increases in the size of our Army and Navy and a still greater demand for a strong Air force.

All during the period of the 1930's military experts themselves were disagreed as to the importance of air power in modern warfare; but the people, who were not military experts, saw with a kind of common, salty, judgment the part that air power would play in the next war. The tragic story of Wake Island, defended first by four airplanes and then by two airplanes and finally by one, might have read quite differently if the views of the common people had been listened to six years ago.

Even as of today the people go farther than the experts in their belief in air power. Today the vast majority of the common people of the country believe that air power will be *the deciding factor* in winning the war for the United Nations.

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As soon as the war broke out in Europe Congress was called into special session to consider changes in the Neutrality Act. The President proposed to change this Act to permit the shipment of airplanes and military equipment to the Allies. But months before, the Institute had conducted a series of studies which revealed the public in favor of repealing the embargo provisions of the Neutrality Act. As early as March 1939, the public was in favor of lifting the embargo. Congress actually revised the Neutrality Act in October.

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Public opinion was ahead of Congress by at least four months on the Selective Service Draft. In fact in June of 1940, a majority of nearly two to one was calling for conscription. At that time no leader in either party had ever publicly stated his views on this issue, and to my knowledge only one political writer, Walter Lippmann, had as much as considered the possibility of peace-time conscription.

For many years the military leaders of the country had considered the problem of conscripting manpower. They had made elaborate plans for campaigns to put over conscription in the event of war. In Canada for over two years now the leaders have been debating the issue of conscription for overseas service.

Canada will decide that issue on Monday of this coming week, when the entire nation goes to the polls in the second plebiscite in the history of the Dominion. Even now the issue of overseas service is not being put bluntly to the people in simple language which all can understand. The issue on which the people of Canada will vote Monday is:

“Are you in favor of releasing the Government from any obligations arising out of any past commitments restricting the methods of raising men for military service?”

If the predictions of the newly organized Canadian Institute of Public Opinion are as good as we expect them to be, Canada will vote “Yes” on this issue by a very substantial majority.¹

The interesting side of this problem to one engaged in the study of public opinion is that a referendum or plebiscite by sampling techniques could have told Canada at any time during the last two years how the country stood on this issue. Months of useless debate – and about two million dollars – could have been saved.

Not only is it possible to say with a high degree of accuracy how Canada will vote on Monday on the plebiscite, but what is more important, it is possible to know how the people of Canada would vote if those in authority had seen fit to put on the ballot the very simple question: “Should the Government have the right to conscript men for overseas duty?” On this issue the majority of all voters of Canada would also turn in a substantial “Yes” vote.

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In addition to conscription, the people of this country have been ahead of their political leaders on virtually all other important war-time issues.

The public was in favor of convoying ships to England months before this part of the Neutrality Act was revised to make this legal.

Military commentators widely credit the Lend-Lease Act of 1941 with having pulled the Allied military cause out of imminent peril; in fact some claim that except for Lend-Lease, Hitler would have won the war last year.

It is interesting to note that the public was never satisfied with the amount of aid given to Britain up to the time the Lend-Lease Bill was passed. Weeks before the Bill was introduced in Congress, studies of public opinion found the people voting for greater aid to Britain by the overwhelming majority of nine to one. In short, legislation increasing our aid to England was desired by the voters long in advance of the passage of the Bill by Congress.

The policy of appeasing Japan was never in line with public thinking. The Chinese-Japanese war had been in progress only two years when an overwhelming majority of voters, 82 per cent, wanted a strict embargo placed on the shipment of war ma-

1 The Canadian Institute predicted that 68 per cent of all votes cast in the plebiscite would be “Yes,” 32 per cent “No.” The results show this prediction accurate within 3.5 per cent. The vote in every province also was correctly predicted.

terials to Japan. By October, 1940, embargo sentiment had increased to 90 per cent. It wasn't until ten months later that the United States Government froze Japanese credit and put a strict embargo into effect.

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So much for issues which directly affect our part in the war with the Axis. What is the record of domestic issues which likewise have an important bearing upon our total war effort?

Here again the common people of the country have time and again taken a position which proves the soundness of the collective judgment of the masses. Congress has hesitated to broaden the income tax base. If the people could write income tax legislation, they would have begun months ago to require every family except those on relief to pay at least something in the form of an income tax. The public has never accepted the "soak the rich" theory, and although they believe that people in the higher income brackets should pay proportionately higher taxes, they have been fair-minded enough to believe that everyone should pay at least a few dollars to help the government pay for the war.

Over a year ago the American public was willing to accept drastic wage-price control. In this respect the public would go much farther than the Government in fixing ceilings not only on prices but on wages. The farmers of the nation who are made to look like a greedy sector of our population by farm leaders who are always crying for special privilege, are themselves willing to have farm prices fixed, contrary to what their leaders would have the country believe.

The public is in favor of putting in many extra hours to speed the war effort and they look with disfavor on labor leaders who seem to the majority of people to be more interested in preserving the rights and gains of labor than they are in winning the war.

The public wants laws to forbid strikes in war industries on the one hand and to regulate war profits on the other. The public would have time and one-half pay start at forty-eight hours instead of forty.

The people, as I have said, are not only of the belief that others should make sacrifices in furthering the war effort, they are willing to do their share whether this means contributing free time to Civilian Defense, moving to another part of the country to lake work in a war industry, or having their employers deduct ten per cent of their wages to buy Defense Bonds.

So marked is this desire to do something to help the country win the war that the American Institute of Public Opinion has estimated that with proper organization the Government could make use of many millions of man hours of work without cost. In fact the amount of this help is equivalent to twelve million men working every day. This is a Niagara of power which has yet to be fully utilized.

Early in February the Institute was interested in finding out when the people of this country would be willing to accept total mobilization – when would the people of the country reach a point in their thinking when they would say that every person in the country over eighteen years of age should be required to register and to do his part in the total war effort.

When we undertook this first study we were frankly thinking merely of establishing a point for the measurement of future trends. You can imagine our great surprise when we discovered that the people even at that time were willing to accept total mobilization. The people were willing to abandon the voluntary system for what they believed to be a fairer system and a more efficient one. Today there are many plans afoot to bring about total mobilization. Our Government, in this respect, has moved much faster than England, where only a few days ago the *London Evening Standard* complained in an editorial: "We have had enough of appeals to self sacrifice. What this country needs is not appeals but orders."

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It would be folly to assume that the people are always right at all times and places. And it would be folly to assume that no problem is too technical for laymen to solve. But there are obviously many areas where public opinion has a right to be heard in war time as in peace time. Generally speaking these are the areas which involve broad questions of policy. How these policies should be carried out – the means – is a matter to be settled by the experts.

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Another all-important factor must be taken into account. To be intelligent, public opinion must be based upon facts – the facts which only a free press can give the people.

Even if it were possible to poll the people of Germany today one could hardly expect an intelligent judgment. Why? Simply because the people have only heard those facts which the propaganda ministry has wanted them to hear. Before Hitler took over, this was certainly not true. Perhaps one reason why der Fuehrer refers to the common people of a Democracy as "mere ballot cattle" is the fact that in the last free election in Germany – the one in which Hiller himself came into power – he received only 36 per cent of the total vote cast!

The people of England were undoubtedly asleep during the years from 1933 to 1937. They were asleep because the then Government of England kept from the people the full facts about the German rearmament program. Only Churchill had the courage to tell the people the bitter truth. Those in power did everything they could to discredit his statements as coming from a slightly unbalanced person. I'm sure that if all the facts about German war preparations had been known to the British people from the very beginning, the people would have exerted so much pressure on the Government that England at the time of Munich would have been sufficiently armed to chill the ardor of the Nazis for another war.

Last fall, the British Institute of Public Opinion found from a survey of workers in defense industries, that these factories were producing far less than their capacity. Results of this study aroused so much criticism that the Government felt called upon to answer it in Parliament. In the course of the debate over this issue Mr. Churchill said "you couldn't run a government by a Gallup Poll!" – a statement with which I thoroughly agree. But the important point was that the criticism brought action; and the war industries of England are today probably turning out more goods because the people spoke up.

When the Russians signed the peace pact with Germany at the beginning of the war, leaders in France and in England – and in this country, for that matter – were prone to look upon Russia as an enemy no less than Germany. But the common people of England never lost faith in the Russians, and never ceased calling for attempts to establish closer relations. Their belief that Russia was more friend than foe was proved to the satisfaction of the world on the night of June 21, 1941, when Hitler's hordes marched across the Russian borders.

Today the British people realize the debt they owe the Russians; today it is the British people who are demanding the establishment of a second front in order to help the Russians, and to contribute their full share to defeat Germany. I do not know whether from a military point of view an invasion of the continent is possible or not; but I for one am willing to let history pass upon the rightness of this opinion of the common people of England.

If public opinion in a Democracy is so important, you may well ask, why was France so badly governed? Why was France so poorly prepared to meet the Germans?

The answer is simple. Public opinion in France never had a full opportunity to be heard, or to be felt. The party system in France, prior to its fall, was so complex, government machinery so cumbersome, and the leadership in many respects so corrupt, that public opinion constituted but a still, small voice which nobody bothered to hear.

Public opinion can't be blamed when it has no opportunity to help guide the destiny of a nation.

And, strange as this may seem, all these points do not lead up to a final argument that Gallup Polls should speak for the people of all Democracies.

Any systematic effort to get at the views of the common people which any of you here might devise, would likely tell the same story. The job is simple – it doesn't require great statisticians with great organizations. All that is necessary is a great deal of patience, and an honest desire to learn what the *common people* are thinking.

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Seventy-eight years ago, a man with such a desire did the job in his own way. That man was Abraham Lincoln. Twice each week, all during the hectic years of the *Civil War*. Lincoln set aside a period of his busy time during which he received at his desk anyone who wanted to see him. There was a long procession, a never-ending scramble of plain people, some of them querulous, dirty and unkempt. As told by Carl Sandburg, Lincoln heard each one out. When a major in the War Department protested that this was inefficient, that the President was wasting his valuable time, Lincoln replied:

“No hours of my day are better employed than those which bring me again within the direct contact and atmosphere of the average of our whole people. Men moving only in an official circle are apt to become merely official – not to say arbitrary in their ideas. ...

“I tell you, Major, I tell you that I call these receptions my public opinion baths ... and the effect, as a whole, is renovating and invigorating.”

Gentlemen and Ladies – I say to you with all sincerity that what many of our men in official circles need today is a *public opinion bath!*