

The Air Defense of America (Delivered May 19, 1940)

In times of war and confusion, it is essential for our people to have a clear understanding of the elements upon which our national safety depends. Aviation has now become one of these elements, and it is about the air defense of America that I speak to you tonight.

The power of aviation has been greatly underrated in the past. Now, we must be careful not to overrate this power in the excitement of reaction. Air strength depends more upon the establishment of intelligent and consistent policies than upon the sudden construction of huge numbers of airplanes.

Even here in America, it is difficult to think clearly amidst the conflict of facts and headlines, the contradictory advice of columnists, the claims and counter claims of propaganda, and the blind selfishness of party politics. The conservative who scoffed at aviation yesterday has become the radical who says that tomorrow we will be invaded by European aircraft.

Let us re-examine the position of America in the air. New discoveries and developments affect nations in different ways. In Europe, aviation has affected England adversely and Germany advantageously. One nation may have a psychology and topography which promotes the development of aviation, while another finds itself entirely unadjusted to the tempo of the air.

Judged by aeronautical standards, we in the United States are in a singularly fortunate position. Our people have natural ability in the design, construction, and operation of aircraft. Our highly organized industry, our widely separated centers of population, our elimination of formalities in the interstate travel, all contribute to the development of American aviation. From the standpoint of defense, we still have two great oceans between us and the warring armies of Europe and Asia. In fact there is hardly a natural element contributing to air strength and impregnability that we do not now possess. Aviation is for us an asset. It adds to our national safety. With a firm and clear-cut policy, we can build an air defense for America that will stand above these shifting sands of war.

But until we have decided upon a definite policy of defense, the mere construction of large numbers of aircraft will not be adequate for our national safety. In fact, without a strong policy of defense, we will not even know what types of planes to build. The speed and range of our fighting planes depend upon the bases available for their use. If we are to defend the United States alone, then we must construct numerous air bases along the Mexican and Canadian borders. Such a plan would require large numbers of small bombers and pursuit planes, and eventually it would leave us as vulnerable to air attack as the nations of Europe are today. On the other hand, if we are to defend the entire western hemisphere, we need long range bombers capable of attacking a hostile fleet a thousand miles or more at sea. But there is little use discussing types and numbers until a defense policy is established.

This brings us to an issue which must sooner or later be faced. An adequate air defense of the western hemisphere necessitates the co-operation of the other nations of this hemisphere. Our military aircraft must have access to their bases. Their foreign policy must have some relationship to ours. We cannot hold this hemisphere free from foreign war if nations which lie within it declare war on foreign powers.

Let us not be confused by this talk of invasion by European aircraft. The air defense of America is as simple as the attack is difficult when the true facts are faced. We are in danger of war today not because European people have attempted to interfere with the internal affairs of America, but because American people have attempted to interfere with the internal affairs of Europe.

It is true that bombing planes can be built with sufficient range to cross the Atlantic and return. They can be built either in America or Europe. Aeronautical engineers have known this for many years. But the cost is high, the target large, and the military effectiveness small. Such planes do not exist today in any air force. A foreign power could not conquer us by dropping bombs in this country unless the bombing were accompanied by an invading army. And an invading army requires thousands of small bombers and pursuit planes; it would have little use for huge trans-Atlantic aircraft.

No, the advantage lies with us, for great armies must still cross oceans by ship. Only relatively small forces can be transported by air today, and over distances of a few hundred miles at most. This has great significance in Europe, but it is not an element that we have to contend with in America. Such a danger can come, in any predictable future, only through division and war among our own peoples. As long as American nations work together, as long as we maintain reasonable defense forces, there will be no invasion by foreign aircraft. And no foreign navy will dare to approach within bombing range of our coasts.

Our danger in America is an internal danger. We need not fear a foreign invasion unless American peoples bring it on through their own quarreling and meddling with affairs abroad. Our eyes should not search beyond the horizon for problems which lie at our feet. The greatest lesson we can draw from Europe today is that national strength must be built within a nation itself and cannot be achieved by limiting the strength of others.

What of the unforeseen developments of science? Rocket propulsion? New forms of energy? New methods of destruction? No generation can entirely safeguard the future for those that follow. They must meet their own problems as those problems arise. The great inheritance we can pass on to our children is a reasonable solution of the problems that confront us in our time - a strong nation, a lack of debt, a solid American character free from the entanglements of the Old World. Let us guard America today as our forefathers guarded it in the past. They won this country from Europe with a handful of revolutionary soldiers. We certainly can hold it now with a population of one hundred and thirty million people. If we cannot, we are unworthy to have it.

But the course we have been following in recent months leads to neither strength nor friendship nor peace. It will leave us hated by victor and vanquished alike, regardless of which way the tide of battle turns. One side will claim that we aided its enemies; the other, that we did not help enough.

To be successful in modern warfare, a nation must prepare many years before the fighting starts. If anyone doubts that, let him turn his eyes to Europe. Years ago, we decided to stay out of foreign wars. We based our military

policy on that decision. We must not waver now that the crisis is at hand. There is no longer time for us to enter this war successfully. The result of vacillating policies lies clearly before us in the chaos of Europe today.

Let us turn again to America's traditional role - that of building and guarding our own destiny. We need a greater air force, a greater army, and a greater navy; they have been inadequate for many years. Let us form with our neighboring nations a clear cut and definite policy of American defense. But above all, let us stop this hysterical chatter of calamity and invasion that has been running rife these last few days. It is not befitting to the people who built this nation.

That the world is facing a new era is beyond question. Our mission is to make it a better era. But regardless of which side wins this war, there is no reason, aside from our own actions, to prevent a continuation of peaceful relationship between America and the countries of Europe. If we desire peace, we need only stop asking for war. No one wishes to attack us, and no one is in a position to do so.

The only reason that we are in danger of becoming involved in this war is because there are powerful elements in America who desire us to take part. They represent a small minority of the American people, but they control much of the machinery of influence and propaganda. They seize every opportunity to push us closer to the edge.

It is time for the underlying character of this country to rise and assert itself, to strike down these elements of personal profit and foreign interest. This underlying character of America is our true defense. Until it awakes and takes the reins in hand once more, the production of airplanes, cannon, and battleships is of secondary importance. Let us turn our eyes to our own nation. We cannot aid others until we have first placed our own country in a position of spiritual and material leadership and strength.

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