

August 2, 1940

[Representatives of National Civic Organizations]

FDR Speech File

1293

INFORMAL, EXTEMPORANEOUS REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
to the Representatives of National Civic Organizations
who had been delegated to attend a Conference
called by Miss Harriet Elliott, member of the
Advisory Commission for the Council of National Defense,
to discuss Consumer Problems
Executive Offices of the White House,
August 2, 1940, 12 M.

THE PRESIDENT: It is awfully nice to see you. I wish I had time to sit down and discuss things with you.

When I heard that Miss Elliott was going to ask you to come here, representing a great many very important groups and organizations, I said to her that I would like to meet you, to see you before your meeting, and to give you a very brief and summarized picture of some of the problems that we have had to face.

I do not have to go into the dangers of the present international situation because I know you all realize them. I am minded of an occasion about a year and a couple of months ago when I had down the Foreign Relations Committee of the Military Affairs Committee of the Senate and I made a statement which was promptly twisted out of all semblance to what I said. I said the existence of certain nations, their continued existence, -- and I mentioned Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark and the Balkan (Baltic) States, with Holland and Belgium and France -- their continued existence was a very important fact to the continued safety of the United States. They promptly tried to misquote that and alleged that I said that our frontier was on the Rhine, with the connotation that we would promptly send two or three million American boys to the line, which was, of course, merely a political effort on their part to misrepresent. But it was perfectly true that the continued

existence of these independent nations of Europe was a part of our defense, and as they have gradually disappeared, it has meant, unfortunately, that dictatorships and aggressions have come closer to us and nobody can tell what the mentality of Nazism and Fascism will ultimately mean to us.

Most people were very smug -- most Americans were awfully smug a year ago. They said, "We have three thousand miles of sea." Of course we have learned an awful lot since then, all of us, and we do know that three thousand miles of ocean here is only fourteen hundred miles a little lower down, off the coast of Brazil. And a good many people were startled when I said that planes from Mexico could cause a certain amount of damage in Omaha, St. Louis and Kansas City, and that probably that section of the Middle West would be more dangerous to live in, in case of attacks, than Dutchess County, N. Y. So we have been definitely preparing and, because of the war, people realize that it is not a case of partial defense, it is a case of total defense, and that means everybody in the country, they fit in somewhere and, unless you do the preparation beforehand of fitting them in, you cannot do it after war breaks out.

I said to the newspapermen this morning that there is one lesson people needed. You had an army of four million men started in 1917. We put them together with perfectly terrific effort on the part of the country, without a single attack on the United States during the thirteen and a half months while we were putting that army together. There wasn't a gun fired in the United States against us during that whole period. In other words, we were completely and fully protected for thirteen and a half months by the people who were waging war on the

other side. Now, that does not often happen. That was a very lucky fact and we did not put our armies into the action until the twenty-seventh day of May, 1918, although we had gone to war on the sixth day of April, 1917. Now, that does not happen. That was merely luck. Therefore we have got to think in terms of the defense of the country and we have got to prepare.

So, instead of going to the Congress this year and trying to get new legislation, we looked up the old statute of 1917 that allowed us to put together an Advisory Commission on defense. Well, when we came down to it, we tried to cover all of the elements of American life, because that is another way of saying total defense, and instead of putting in just one industrialist or financier at the head of this thing, we tried to gather all the component parts of American life that were essential to defense. And, if you will go down the list, you will know what I did. Mr. Knudsen went in there because he was a very great and very successful industrialist in turning out the finished articles. Then we had to think about the procurement of all of the raw materials and we put Mr. Stettinius into that place. Then we had to think about transportation and we put in Ralph Budd. But that did not cover all of American life. We had to remember a lot of other things and one of the important things was the relationship of this industrial program to agriculture. We put Chester Davis in there; he was head of the Farm Board. And then we had this question of preventing a spiral in prices -- in costs. Some of us will remember in 1917 the price that things went to, of raw materials, basic prices of wheat and corn and cotton and rubber, et cetera and so on. And as fast as our raw materials rose in price, then the

workers of the country, obviously, said, "The cost of living has gone up and I have got to have more money." Then, of course, we had to pay higher wages and when we paid higher wages, it put the cost of products higher. It was this "now you do, now you don't" sort of thing. So we put Leon Henderson on that. That was on the question of making the raw materials.

Then we got to thinking about the pocketbooks of people, in other words the consumer end, and I asked Miss Elliott to take that over. It is a terribly important job, to see that the people in this country pay fair prices for the things that they have to have, the necessities of life.

Well, that was the beginning of Miss Elliott, but then she started to cover a lot of other subjects. We had the problem of housing for these new plants and she and Sidney Hillman on the labor end have been working on the problem of housing so that when new plants were started there would be adequate places for the families of the workers to live in. That immediately brought up other things, such as education, and I remembered in the World War there was a lot of people from all around Connecticut and the Hudson River valley who went over to Bridgeport with their families. Bridgeport was a nice little city at that time, about fifty to sixty thousand people, with enough schools, but when they raised the population to 200,000, there weren't enough schools for those children to go to. The next thing that raised was the question of health -- there weren't enough hospitals or doctors for this new Bridgeport with four times the population it had before. You have several examples. So Miss Elliott has undertaken this new and additional work with Mr. Hillman and the other people on the Commission,

with the idea that we are going to protect every element in the community in this big defense program.

Now, there are certain other things that we, frankly, have not had time in the last few months to get to. I have quite a few cousins over in England, American girls who married Englishmen. Well, one question was how they and their children fit into the picture. Some of them went into practical nursing. They did not have time to become registered nurses, so they went into practical nursing. Some of them went into ambulance work. Some went into the air alarm system work, but all of these women in England were fitted into the national defense picture in their own communities. Now, we have not got to that yet but, as time goes on, of course the first thing to do is to order all kinds of planes and machines and ships, et cetera, and it is going to take a long time to get them delivered and, when they are delivered, we have to have organized man and woman power to see that the thing clicks, that they fit into the operating picture.

As I say, we have not got to that end of what we might call home defense, meaning community defense, yet. We are gradually working out that part of the program although it does seem as though there is a good deal of delay. I get a lot of letters from all over the country, men and women, chiefly women, saying, "Where do I fit in; I want to do something." Well, it is awfully hard to fit people in. We have been at this only two months, so if you will bear with Miss Elliott and myself a little longer, we will do something that is fairly practical and will give everybody a niche to fit into in practically every community in the United States.

Of course I think, personally, it is just grand of you to come

down here. I am appreciative of it and we are getting the finest kind of cooperation that I have ever seen in this country in time of peace. It is awfully easy in time of war to have everybody come forward and volunteer but it is a more difficult thing to get people to come forward and volunteer and work and give their time and labor in peacetime, just on the off chance that we may get attacked in the future.

It is fine to see you and I am very grateful to you.

*John can arrange
this any way
Please do so.*

Ready to be typed

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