

The Duties of Americans in the Present War

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I fully agree with those who believe that men can reasonably define their rights only in terms of their duties. I have moral rights only in so far as I also have duties. I have a right to my life because it gives me my sole opportunity to do my duty. I have a right to happiness solely because a certain measure of happiness is needed to adapt me to do the work of a man. I have a right to possess some opportunity to fulfil the office of a man; that is, I have a right to get some chance to do my duty. This is, in fact, my sole inalienable right.

This doctrine that rights and duties are correlative is an old teaching. It is also a dry and somewhat abstractly worded bit of wisdom, unwelcome to our more flippant as well as to our more vehement moods, and of late unpopular. I am not here to expound it. I mention it only because I rejoice that we are here to-day to consider what we have deliberately chosen to name *the duties of Americans in the present war*. I doubt not that we Americans have also our *rights* in the world crisis through which we are passing. I was glad and eager to sign the recent memorial, addressed to the President of the United States, and issued by the "Committee on American Rights." But I signed that memorial with enthusiasm just because I believe not only that the American rights in question are genuine, but that they correspond with our duties as Americans, and with the duty which our country now owes to mankind. It is of our duties that I now rejoice to speak to you.

Two things have made clear to many of us Americans since the outset of the present war — and to some of us with a con-

stantly increasing definiteness of vision — what our duty is. First the fact that, in this war, there is constantly before our eyes the painfully tragic and sublime vision of one nation that, through all its undeserved and seemingly overwhelming agonies, has remained unmistakably true to its duty — that is, to its international duty, to its honor, to its treaties, to the cause, to the freedom, and to the future union of mankind. That nation is Belgium.

In the heart of every true American this consciousness ought therefore to be kept awake (and, in many of our minds this consciousness is glowingly and radiantly active and wakeful), — the desire, the longing, the resolution: “Let us, let our dear republic, do our duty as Belgium and the Belgian people have done theirs. Let us, with all our might, with whatever moral influence we possess, with our own honor, with our lives if necessary, be ready, if ever and whenever the call comes to our people, to sacrifice for mankind as Belgium has sacrificed, to hazard all as Belgium has hazarded all, for the truer union of mankind and for the future of human brotherhood.” That vision of Belgium’s noble and unsparing self-sacrifice for international honor is one of the two things that to-day constantly remind us of what international duty is, and so what our own American duty is.

The second thing which constantly keeps wide awake, in the minds of many of us here in America, the knowledge of what our duty is, is the moral attitude which has been deliberately and openly assumed by Germany since the outset of the war. This attitude gives us what will remain until the end of human history, one great classic example of the rejection, by a great and highly intelligent nation, of the first principles of international morality, — the rejection of international duty, the assertion that for its own subjects, the State is the supreme moral authority, and that there is no moral authority on earth which ranks superior to the will of the State.

The assertion has often been made that we Americans have believed the lies of Germany’s enemies, and have thus been ignorantly and woefully deceived. Countless German attempts have been made to tell us through books, pictures, newspapers, —

sometimes through other documents, — what Germany's real motives are. I am sure that I speak the minds of many of you, my countrymen and fellow citizens, when I say that, next to the vision of bleeding and devoted Belgium, — that suffering servant of the great community of mankind, — no picture more convincingly instructs us regarding our duty, than the picture that comes before our minds whenever we remember Germany's summons at the gates of Liège, or recall von Jagow's answer to one of President Wilson's early Lusitania notes, or when, more recently, we read the first Austrian note in answer to President Wilson's peremptory demand about the case of the Ancona.

No, not Germany's enemies, but Germany herself, her prince, her ministers, her submarine commanders, have given us our principal picture of what the militant Germany of the moment is, and of what Germany means for the future of international morality. This picture constitutes the second of the two great sources of our instruction about what our American duty in this war is.

We are all accustomed to "look on this picture, and then on this." The first of the two pictures is now familiar, — inexpressibly sad and dear to us. Belgians are amongst us as friends or as colleagues; Belgian relief is one of the principal good causes of American charity. Belgian wrongs,—but also Belgian heroism and Belgian unswerving dutifulness, — are before our eyes as inspiring admonitions of what is the duty of Americans in the present war. That constitutes the one picture. The other, — well, Germany has chosen to set before us this second picture. That, in its turn, has now become too familiar. But since our memory for diplomatic notes easily and early begins to fail, that second picture often tends to fade out amongst us. And since we all long for peace to come, and since some faint hearts forget that it is as immoral to make light of grave wrongs, and merely to condone them, as it is irrationally to cry out with lust of vengeance, — since these things are so, there are Americans who forget the second picture, and forget that Germany has done as much as Belgium to set before us what our international duty, as individuals and as a nation, really is.

What that second picture means, what spirit it expresses, what view of the nature of each nation's obligations to mankind it sets before us, we have not been left to learn from the enemies of Germany. The chief ally of Germany, whose submarine policy was "*made in Germany*," and whose will in this matter is the will of Germany, lately explained the matter to us in unmistakable terms. I refer to the Ancona case. President Wilson accepting, not any so-called "lies" of the enemies of Germany, but the official statement of the submarine commander who sank the Ancona after that vessel had ceased to make her effort to escape, and while her passengers were still in danger of drowning in case their vessel was sunk, — President Wilson addressed to Austria a note in which he plainly and accurately said that the officially reported act of the submarine commander was in principle barbarous and abhorrent to all civilized nations. Austria in its reply very courteously, ironically, and cynically thanked our Government for the "esteemed favor" of its communication, and expressed its entire ignorance of what law, of what principle of international morality, there might be which the submarine commander was supposed, by the American Government, to have violated.

Now this Austrian reply, — widely praised by the inspired German press as a masterpiece of diplomatic skill, and received with "quiet joy" by the official lovers and defenders of the German submarine policy, — was precisely in the spirit of Cain's reply when he was challenged from overhead regarding the results of his late unpleasantness with his brother Abel. For Cain, while his brother's blood was crying from the ground, received a somewhat stern diplomatic communication from a moral power, demanding: "Where is thy brother?" And Cain in substance begged to acknowledge the esteemed favor of this communication from on high, and seems at first to have taken a certain *stilles Vergnügen* in begging to represent first that, so far as he knew, he was not his brother's keeper, while, for the rest, he desired most respectfully, and in the friendliest spirit, to inquire what law of God or man he was supposed to have broken.

Now this is the spirit of international immorality, — this is the sort of enmity to mankind, — which the German submarine policy, its official allies and defenders, have expressed and justified. Upon this second picture then, with its lurid contrast to the picture of Belgium, we have to look when we think of our duty as Americans. For deliberate national deeds cannot be undone, nor can their official justifications be lightly condoned by reason of later diplomatic trifling and by reason of speciously well-written notes of apology and withdrawal. The deed stays. Its official justification reveals motives, and confesses a national spirit, whose moral meaning is as irrevocable as death. We Americans know what the Lusitania outrage meant, and to what spirit it gave expression. That spirit has the “primal eldest curse upon it, — a brother’s murder.” For the young men, the women, the babies, who went down with the Lusitania were our dead. At least I know — some of whose pupils were amongst the victims of the Lusitania — that they were my dead. And the mark of Cain lasts while Cain lives.

Such facts determine the duty of Americans in this war. Our duty is to be and to remain the outspoken moral opponents of the present German policy, and of the German state, so long as it holds this present policy, and carries on its present war. In the service of mankind, we owe an unswerving sympathy not to one or another, but to all of the present allied enemies of Germany. We owe to those allies whatever moral support and whatever financial assistance it is in the power of this nation to give. As to munitions of war: it is not merely a so-called American right that our munition-makers should be free to sell their wares to the enemies of Germany. It is our duty to encourage them to do so, since we are not at the moment in a position to serve mankind by more direct and effective means. For the violation of Belgium, and the submarine policy of Germany and of her ally — a policy deliberately and boastfully avowed as long as the central powers deemed such avowal advantageous — this violation and this policy together suffice to keep clearly before our eyes the fact that Germany, as at present disposed, is the wilful and deliberate enemy of the human race. It is

open to any man to be a pro-German who shares this enmity. But with these two pictures before our eyes, it is as impossible for any reasonable man to be in his heart and mind neutral, as it was for the good cherubs in heaven to remain neutral when they first looked out from their rosy glowing clouds, and saw the angels fall. Neutral, in heart or in mind, the dutiful American, when once he has carefully looked upon this picture and then on this, will not and cannot be. He must take sides. And if he takes sides as I do, he will say: "Let us do all that we as Americans can do, to express our hearty, and, so far as we can, our effective sympathy with the united friends of Belgium, who are the foes of those German enemies of mankind. Whenever the war is over, if it ends in the defeat and consequent moral reform of Germany, then in due time let Charity have its perfect work. For we in America have long loved and studied German civilization, and would be loving it still but for its recent crimes. But now, while the war lasts, and Belgium bleeds, and mankind mourns, let us aid the allied enemies of Germany with sympathy, since the cause of the allied enemies of Germany is the cause of mankind; let us enthusiastically approve of supplying the enemies of Germany with financial aid and with munitions of war, let us resist with all our moral strength and influence those who would place an embargo upon munitions, let us bear patiently and uncomplainingly the transient restrictions of our commerce which the war entails, let us be ashamed of ourselves that we cannot even now stand beside Belgium, and suffer with her for our duty and for mankind, and while we wait for peace let us do what we can to lift up the hearts that the Germany of to-day has wantonly chosen to wound, to betray, and to make desolate. Let us do what we can to bring about at least a rupture of all diplomatic relations between our own republic and those foes of mankind, and let us fearlessly await whatever dangers this our duty as Americans may entail upon us, upon our land and upon our posterity. We shall not thus escape suffering. But we shall begin to endure as Belgium to-day endures, for honor, for duty, for mankind."