

***THEODORE  
ROOSEVELT***



***AMERICA AND  
THE WORLD  
WAR***

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**Theodore Roosevelt**

# **America and the World War**

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# FOREWORD

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In the New York *Evening Post* for September 30, 1814, a correspondent writes from Washington that on the ruins of the Capitol, which had just been burned by a small British army, various disgusted patriots had written sentences which included the following: “Fruits of war without preparation” and “Mirror of democracy.” A century later, in December, 1914, the same paper, ardently championing the policy of national unpreparedness and claiming that democracy was incompatible with preparedness against war, declared that it was moved to tears by its pleasure in the similar championship of the same policy contained in President Wilson’s just-published message to Congress. The message is for the most part couched in terms of adroit and dexterous, and usually indirect, suggestion, and carefully avoids downright, or indeed straight-forward, statement of policy—the meaning being conveyed in questions and hints, often so veiled and so obscure as to make it possible to draw contradictory conclusions from the words used. There are, however, fairly clear statements that we are “not to depend upon a standing army nor yet upon a reserve army,” nor upon any efficient system of universal training for our young men, but upon vague and unformulated plans for encouraging volunteer aid for militia service by making it “as attractive as possible”! The message contains such sentences as that the President “hopes” that “some of the finer passions” of the American people “are in his own heart”; that “dread of the power of any other nation we are

incapable of”; such sentences as, shall we “be prepared to defend ourselves against attack? We have always found means to do that, and shall find them whenever it is necessary,” and “if asked, are you ready to defend yourself? we reply, most assuredly, to the utmost.” It is difficult for a serious and patriotic citizen to understand how the President could have been willing to make such statements as these. Every student even of elementary American history knows that in our last foreign war with a formidable opponent, that of 1812, reliance on the principles President Wilson now advocates brought us to the verge of national ruin and of the break-up of the Union. The President must know that at that time we had not “found means” even to defend the capital city in which he was writing his message. He ought to know that at the present time, thanks largely to his own actions, we are not “ready to defend ourselves” at all, not to speak of defending ourselves “to the utmost.” In a state paper subtle prettiness of phrase does not offset misteaching of the vital facts of national history.

In 1814 this nation was paying for its folly in having for fourteen years conducted its foreign policy, and refused to prepare for defense against possible foreign foes, in accordance with the views of the ultrapacifists of that day. It behooves us now, in the presence of a world war even vaster and more terrible than the world war of the early nineteenth century, to beware of taking the advice of the equally foolish pacifists of our own day. To follow their advice at the present time might expose our democracy to far greater disaster than was brought upon it by its

disregard of Washington's maxim, and its failure to secure peace by preparing against war, a hundred years ago.

In his message President Wilson has expressed his laudable desire that this country, naturally through its President, may act as mediator to bring peace among the great European powers. With this end in view he, in his message, deprecates our taking any efficient steps to prepare means for our own defense, lest such action might give a wrong impression to the great warring powers. Furthermore, in his overanxiety not to offend the powerful who have done wrong, he scrupulously refrains from saying one word on behalf of the weak who have suffered wrong. He makes no allusion to the violation of the Hague conventions at Belgium's expense, although this nation had solemnly undertaken to be a guarantor of those conventions. He makes no protest against the cruel wrongs Belgium has suffered. He says not one word about the need, in the interests of true peace, of the only peace worth having, that steps should be taken to prevent the repetition of such wrongs in the future.

This is not right. It is not just to the weaker nations of the earth. It comes perilously near a betrayal of our own interests. In his laudable anxiety to make himself acceptable as a mediator to England, and especially to Germany, President Wilson loses sight of the fact that his first duty is to the United States; and, moreover, desirable though it is that his conduct should commend him to Germany, to England, and to the other great contending powers, he should not for this reason forget the interests of the small nations, and above all of Belgium, whose gratitude can

never mean anything tangible to him or to us, but which has suffered a wrong that in any peace negotiations it should be our first duty to see remedied.

In the following chapters, substantially reproduced from articles contributed to the Wheeler Syndicate and also to *The Outlook*, *The Independent*, and *Everybody's*, the attempt is made to draw from the present lamentable contest certain lessons which it would be well for our people to learn. Among them are the following:

We, a people akin to and yet different from all the peoples of Europe, should be equally friendly to all these peoples while they behave well, should be courteous to and considerate of the rights of each of them, but should not hesitate to judge each and all of them by their conduct.

The kind of "neutrality" which seeks to preserve "peace" by timidly refusing to live up to our plighted word and to denounce and take action against such wrong as that committed in the case of Belgium, is unworthy of an honorable and powerful people. Dante reserved a special place of infamy in the inferno for those base angels who dared side neither with evil nor with good. Peace is ardently to be desired, but only as the handmaid of righteousness. The only peace of permanent value is the peace of righteousness. There can be no such peace until well-behaved, highly civilized small nations are protected from oppression and subjugation.

National promises, made in treaties, in Hague conventions, and the like are like the promises of individuals. The sole value of the promise comes in the performance. Recklessness in making promises is in practice



almost or quite as mischievous and dishonest as indifference to keeping promises; and this as much in the case of nations as in the case of individuals. Upright men make few promises, and keep those they make.

All the actions of the ultrapacificists for a generation past, all their peace congresses and peace conventions, have amounted to precisely and exactly nothing in advancing the cause of peace. The peace societies of the ordinary pacifist type have in the aggregate failed to accomplish even the smallest amount of good, have done nothing whatever for peace, and the very small effect they have had on their own nations has been, on the whole, slightly detrimental. Although usually they have been too futile to be even detrimental, their unfortunate tendency has so far been to make good men weak and to make virtue a matter of derision to strong men. All-inclusive arbitration treaties of the kind hitherto proposed and enacted are utterly worthless, are hostile to righteousness and detrimental to peace. The Americans, within and without Congress, who have opposed the fortifying of the Panama Canal and the upbuilding of the American navy have been false to the honor and the interest of the nation and should be condemned by every high-minded citizen.

In every serious crisis the present Hague conventions and the peace and arbitration and neutrality treaties of the existing type have proved not to be worth the paper on which they were written. This is because no method was provided of securing their enforcement, of putting force behind the pledge. Peace treaties and arbitration treaties

unbacked by force are not merely useless but mischievous in any serious crisis.

Treaties must never be recklessly made; improper treaties should be repudiated long before the need for action under them arises; and all treaties not thus repudiated in advance should be scrupulously kept.

From the international standpoint the essential thing to do is effectively to put the combined power of civilization back of the collective purpose of civilization to secure justice. This can be achieved only by a world league for the peace of righteousness, which would guarantee to enforce by the combined strength of all the nations the decrees of a competent and impartial court against any recalcitrant and offending nation. Only in this way will treaties become serious documents.

Such a world league for peace is not now in sight. Until it is created the prime necessity for each free and liberty-loving nation is to keep itself in such a state of efficient preparedness as to be able to defend by its own strength both its honor and its vital interest. The most important lesson for the United States to learn from the present war is the vital need that it shall at once take steps thus to prepare.

Preparedness against war does not always avert war or disaster in war any more than the existence of a fire department, that is, of preparedness against fire, always averts fire. But it is the only insurance against war and the only insurance against overwhelming disgrace and disaster in war. Preparedness usually averts war and usually prevents disaster in war; and always prevents disgrace in

war. Preparedness, so far from encouraging nations to go to war, has a marked tendency to diminish the chance of war occurring. Unpreparedness has not the slightest effect in averting war. Its only effect is immensely to increase the likelihood of disgrace and disaster in war. The United States should immediately strengthen its navy and provide for its steady training in purely military functions; it should similarly strengthen the regular army and provide a reserve; and, furthermore, it should provide for all the young men of the nation military training of the kind practised by the free democracy of Switzerland. Switzerland is the least "militaristic" and most democratic of republics, and the best prepared against war. If we follow her example we will be carrying out the precepts of Washington.

We feel no hostility toward any nation engaged in the present tremendous struggle. We feel an infinite sadness because of the black abyss of war into which all these nations have been plunged. We admire the heroism they have shown. We act in a spirit of warm friendliness toward all of them, even when obliged to protest against the wrongdoing of any one of them.

Our country should not shirk its duty to mankind. It can perform this duty only if it is true to itself. It can be true to itself only by definitely resolving to take the position of the just man armed; for a proud and self-respecting nation of freemen must scorn to do wrong to others and must also scorn tamely to submit to wrong done by others.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

SAGAMORE HILL,

January 1, 1915.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **THE DUTY OF SELF-DEFENSE AND OF GOOD CONDUCT TOWARD OTHERS**

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In this country we are both shocked and stunned by the awful cataclysm which has engulfed civilized Europe. By only a few men was the possibility of such a wide-spread and hideous disaster even admitted. Most persons, even after it occurred, felt as if it was unbelievable. They felt that in what it pleased enthusiasts to speak of as "this age of enlightenment" it was impossible that primal passion, working hand in hand with the most modern scientific organization, should loose upon the world these forces of dread destruction.

In the last week in July the men and women of the populous civilized countries of Europe were leading their usual ordered lives, busy and yet soft, lives carried on with comfort and luxury, with appliances for ease and pleasure such as never before were known, lives led in a routine which to most people seemed part of the natural order of things, something which could not be disturbed by shocks such as the world knew of old. A fortnight later hell yawned under the feet of these hard-working or pleasure-seeking men and women, and woe smote them as it smote the peoples we read of in the Old Testament or in the histories of the Middle Ages. Through the rents in our smiling surface

of civilization the volcanic fires beneath gleamed red in the gloom.

What occurred in Europe is on a giant scale like the disaster to the *Titanic*. One moment the great ship was speeding across the ocean, equipped with every device for comfort, safety, and luxury. The men in her stoke-hold and steerage were more comfortable than the most luxurious travellers of a century ago. The people in her first-class cabins enjoyed every luxury that a luxurious city life could demand and were screened not only from danger but from the least discomfort or annoyance. Suddenly, in one awful and shattering moment, death smote the floating host, so busy with work and play. They were in that moment shot back through immeasurable ages. At one stroke they were hurled from a life of effortless ease back into elemental disaster; to disaster in which baseness showed naked, and heroism burned like a flame of light.

In the face of a calamity so world-wide as the present war, it behooves us all to keep our heads clear and to read aright the lessons taught us; for we ourselves may suffer dreadful penalties if we read these lessons wrong. The temptation always is only to half-learn such a lesson, for a half-truth is always simple, whereas the whole truth is very, very difficult. Unfortunately, a half-truth, if applied, may turn out to be the most dangerous type of falsehood.

Now, our business here in America in the face of this cataclysm is twofold. In the first place it is imperative that we shall take the steps necessary in order, by our own strength and wisdom, to safeguard ourselves against such disaster as has occurred in Europe. Events have shown that

peace treaties, arbitration treaties, neutrality treaties, Hague treaties, and the like as at present existing, offer not even the smallest protection against such disasters. The prime duty of the moment is therefore to keep Uncle Sam in such a position that by his own stout heart and ready hand he can defend the vital honor and vital interest of the American people.

But this is not our only duty, even although it is the only duty we can immediately perform. The horror of what has occurred in Europe, which has drawn into the maelstrom of war large parts of Asia, Africa, Australasia, and even America, is altogether too great to permit us to rest supine without endeavoring to prevent its repetition. We are not to be excused if we do not make a resolute and intelligent effort to devise some scheme which will minimize the chance for a recurrence of such horror in the future and which will at least limit and alleviate it if it should occur. In other words, it is our duty to try to devise some efficient plan for securing the peace of righteousness throughout the world.

That any plan will surely and automatically bring peace we cannot promise. Nevertheless, I think a plan can be devised which will render it far more difficult than at present to plunge us into a world war and far more easy than at present to find workable and practical substitutes even for ordinary war. In order to do this, however, it is necessary that we shall fearlessly look facts in the face. We cannot devise methods for securing peace which will actually work unless we are in good faith willing to face the fact that the present all-inclusive arbitration treaties, peace conferences,

and the like, upon which our well-meaning pacifists have pinned so much hope, have proved utterly worthless under serious strain. We must face this fact and clearly understand the reason for it before we can advance an adequate remedy.

It is even more important not to pay heed to the pathetic infatuation of the well-meaning persons who declare that this is "the last great war." During the last century such assertions have been made again and again after the close of every great war. They represent nothing but an amiable fatuity. The strong men of the United States must protect the feeble; but they must not trust for guidance to the feeble.

In these chapters I desire to ask my fellow countrymen and countrywomen to consider the various lessons which are being writ in letters of blood and steel before our eyes. I wish to ask their consideration, first, of the immediate need that we shall realize the utter hopelessness under actually existing conditions of our trusting for our safety merely to the good-will of other powers or to treaties or other "bits of paper" or to anything except our own steadfast courage and preparedness. Second, I wish to point out what a complicated and difficult thing it is to work for peace and how difficult it may be to combine doing one's duty in the endeavor to bring peace for others without failing in one's duty to secure peace for one's self; and therefore I wish to point out how unwise it is to make foolish promises which under great strain it would be impossible to keep.

Third, I wish to try to give practical expression to what I know is the hope of the great body of our people. We should



endeavor to devise some method of action, in common with other nations, whereby there shall be at least a reasonable chance of securing world peace and, in any event, of narrowing the sphere of possible war and its horrors. To do this it is equally necessary unflinchingly to antagonize the position of the men who believe in nothing but brute force exercised without regard to the rights of other nations, and unhesitatingly to condemn the well-meaning but unwise persons who seek to mislead our people into the belief that treaties, mere bits of paper, when unbacked by force and when there is no one responsible for their enforcement, can be of the slightest use in a serious crisis. Force unbacked by righteousness is abhorrent. The effort to substitute for it vague declamation for righteousness unbacked by force is silly. The policeman must be put back of the judge in international law just as he is back of the judge in municipal law. The effective power of civilization must be put back of civilization's collective purpose to secure reasonable justice between nation and nation.

First, consider the lessons taught by this war as to the absolute need under existing conditions of our being willing, ready, and able to defend ourselves from unjust attack. What has befallen Belgium and Luxembourg—not to speak of China—during the past five months shows the utter hopelessness of trusting to any treaties, no matter how well meant, unless back of them lies power sufficient to secure their enforcement.

At the outset let me explain with all possible emphasis that in what I am about to say at this time I am not criticising nor taking sides with any one of the chief

combatants in either group of warring powers, so far as the relations between and among these chief powers themselves are concerned. The causes for the present contest stretch into the immemorial past. As far as the present generations of Germans, Frenchmen, Russians, Austrians, and Servians are concerned, their actions have been determined by deeds done and left undone by many generations in the past. Not only the sovereigns but the peoples engaged on each side believe sincerely in the justice of their several causes. This is convincingly shown by the action of the Socialists in Germany, France, and Belgium. Of all latter-day political parties the Socialist is the one in which international brotherhood is most dwelt upon, while international obligations are placed on a par with national obligations. Yet the Socialists in Germany and the Socialists in France and Belgium have all alike thrown themselves into this contest with the same enthusiasm and, indeed, the same bitterness as the rest of their countrymen. I am not at this moment primarily concerned with passing judgment upon any of the powers. I am merely instancing certain things that have occurred, because of the vital importance that we as a people should take to heart the lessons taught by these occurrences.

At the end of July Belgium and Luxembourg were independent nations. By treaties executed in 1832 and 1867 their neutrality had been guaranteed by the great nations round about them—Germany, France, and England. Their neutrality was thus guaranteed with the express purpose of keeping them at peace and preventing any invasion of their territory during war. Luxembourg built no fortifications and

raised no army, trusting entirely to the pledged faith of her neighbors. Belgium, an extremely thrifty, progressive, and prosperous industrial country, whose people are exceptionally hard-working and law-abiding, raised an army and built forts for purely defensive purposes. Neither nation committed the smallest act of hostility or aggression against any one of its neighbors. Each behaved with absolute propriety. Each was absolutely innocent of the slightest wrong-doing. Neither has the very smallest responsibility for the disaster that has overwhelmed her. Nevertheless as soon as the war broke out the territories of both were overrun.

Luxembourg made no resistance. It is now practically incorporated in Germany. Other nations have almost forgotten its existence and not the slightest attention has been paid to its fate simply because it did not fight, simply because it trusted solely to peaceful measures and to the treaties which were supposed to guarantee it against harm. The eyes of the world, however, are on Belgium because the Belgians have fought hard and gallantly for all that makes life best worth having to honorable men and women. In consequence, Belgium has been trampled under foot. At this moment not only her men but her women and children are enduring misery so dreadful that it is hard for us who live at peace to visualize it to ourselves.

The fate of Luxembourg and of Belgium offers an instructive commentary on the folly of the well-meaning people who a few years ago insisted that the Panama Canal should not be fortified and that we should trust to international treaties to protect it. After what has occurred in

Europe no sane man has any excuse for believing that such treaties would avail us in our hour of need any more than they have availed Belgium and Luxembourg—and, for that matter, Korea and China—in their hours of need.

If a great world war should arise or if a great world-power were at war with us under conditions that made it desirable for other nations not to be drawn into the quarrel, any step that the hostile nation's real or fancied need demanded would unquestionably be taken, and any treaty that stood in the way would be treated as so much waste paper except so far as we could back it by force. If under such circumstances Panama is retained and controlled by us, it will be because our forts and garrison and our fleets on the ocean make it unsafe to meddle with the canal and the canal zone. Were it only protected by a treaty—that is, unless behind the treaty lay both force and the readiness to use force—the canal would not be safe for twenty-four hours. Moreover, in such case, the real blame would lie at our own doors. We would not be helped at all, we would merely make ourselves objects of derision, if under these circumstances we screamed and clamored about the iniquity of those who violated the treaty and took possession of Panama. The blame would rightly be placed by the world upon our own supine folly, upon our own timidity and weakness, and we would be adjudged unfit to hold what we had shown ourselves too soft and too short-sighted to retain.

The most obvious lesson taught by what has occurred is the utter worthlessness of treaties unless backed by force. It is evident that as things are now, all-inclusive arbitration treaties, neutrality treaties, treaties of alliance, and the like

do not serve one particle of good in protecting a peaceful nation when some great military power deems its vital needs at stake, unless the rights of this peaceful nation are backed by force. The devastation of Belgium, the burning of Louvain, the holding of Brussels to heavy ransom, the killing of women and children, the wrecking of houses in Antwerp by bombs from air-ships have excited genuine sympathy among neutral nations. But no neutral nation has protested; and while unquestionably a neutral nation like the United States ought to have protested, yet the only certain way to make such a protest effective would be to put force back of it. Let our people remember that what has been done to Belgium would unquestionably be done to us by any great military power with which we were drawn into war, no matter how just our cause. Moreover, it would be done without any more protest on the part of neutral nations than we have ourselves made in the case of Belgium.

If, as an aftermath of this war, some great Old-World power or combination of powers made war on us because we objected to their taking and fortifying Magdalena Bay or St. Thomas, our chance of securing justice would rest exclusively on the efficiency of our fleet and army, especially the fleet. No arbitration treaties, or peace treaties, of the kind recently negotiated at Washington by the bushy, and no tepid good-will of neutral powers, would help us in even the smallest degree. If our fleet were conquered, New York and San Francisco would be seized and probably each would be destroyed as Louvain was destroyed unless it were put to ransom as Brussels has been put to ransom. Under such circumstances outside powers

would undoubtedly remain neutral exactly as we have remained neutral as regards Belgium.

Under such conditions my own view is very strongly that the national interest would be best served by refusing the payment of all ransom and accepting the destruction of the cities and then continuing the war until by our own strength and indomitable will we had exacted ample atonement from our foes. This would be a terrible price to pay for unpreparedness; and those responsible for the unpreparedness would thereby be proved guilty of a crime against the nation. Upon them would rest the guilt of all the blood and misery. The innocent would have to atone for their folly and strong men would have to undo and offset it by submitting to the destruction of our cities rather than consent to save them by paying money which would be used to prosecute the war against the rest of the country. If our people are wise and far-sighted and if they still have in their blood the iron of the men who fought under Grant and Lee, they will, in the event of such a war, insist upon this price being paid, upon this course being followed. They will then in the end exact, from the nation which assails us, atonement for the misery and redress for the wrong done. They will not rely upon the ineffective good-will of neutral outsiders. They will show a temper that will make our foes think twice before meddling with us again.

The great danger to peace so far as this country is concerned arises from such pacifists as those who have made and applauded our recent all-inclusive arbitration treaties, who advocate the abandonment of our policy of building battle-ships and the refusal to fortify the Panama

Canal. It is always possible that these persons may succeed in impressing foreign nations with the belief that they represent our people. If they ever do succeed in creating this conviction in the minds of other nations, the fate of the United States will speedily be that of China and Luxembourg, or else it will be saved therefrom only by long-drawn war, accompanied by incredible bloodshed and disaster.

It is those among us who would go to the front in such event—as I and my four sons would go—who are the really far-sighted and earnest friends of peace. We desire measures taken in the real interest of peace because we, who at need would fight, but who earnestly hope never to be forced to fight, have most at stake in keeping peace. We object to the actions of those who do most talking about the necessity of peace because we think they are really a menace to the just and honorable peace which alone this country will in the long run support. We object to their actions because we believe they represent a course of conduct which may at any time produce a war in which we and not they would labor and suffer.

In such a war the prime fact to be remembered is that the men really responsible for it would not be those who would pay the penalty. The ultrapacificists are rarely men who go to battle. Their fault or their folly would be expiated by the blood of countless thousands of plain and decent American citizens of the stamp of those, North and South alike, who in the Civil War laid down all they had, including life itself, in battling for the right as it was given to them to see the right.

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# CHAPTER II

## THE BELGIAN TRAGEDY

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Peace is worthless unless it serves the cause of righteousness. Peace which consecrates militarism is of small service. Peace obtained by crushing the liberty and life of just and unoffending peoples is as cruel as the most cruel war. It should ever be our honorable effort to serve one of the world's most vital needs by doing all in our power to bring about conditions which will give some effective protection to weak or small nations which themselves keep order and act with justice toward the rest of mankind. There can be no higher international duty than to safeguard the existence and independence of industrious, orderly states, with a high personal and national standard of conduct, but without the military force of the great powers; states, for instance, such as Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Uruguay, and others. A peace which left Belgium's wrongs unredressed and which did not provide against the recurrence of such wrongs as those from which she has suffered would not be a real peace.

As regards the actions of most of the combatants in the hideous world-wide war now raging it is possible sincerely to take and defend either of the opposite views concerning their actions. The causes of any such great and terrible contest almost always lie far back in the past, and the seeming immediate cause is usually itself in major part