

OUR AIMS IN THE WAR

An Address Delivered by
JOHN SPARGO

at Minneapolis, Minn., September 5, 1917

under the auspices of the

American Alliance for Labor and Democracy

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*Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen—and you, my Fellow
Citizens:*

We are not assembled here for the purpose of indulging our emotions. We are confronted by a very serious and profound challenge, a challenge that comes to the heart and brain of every thoughtful American citizen, and in the time that is at my disposal I am going to try to indicate how I think that challenge ought to be interpreted and how it ought to be met.

The challenge is not less than this: Shall we men and women of these United States of America consent to the decision that has been rendered by our constitutionally elected representatives? Shall we, moreover, bring to their support all of our moral and material might? Or, shall we, because of preconceived notions and theories, say, "We still persist in our denial of that position; we assert our right to withhold from the nation the support that is ours?" To each man and woman I think in this great nation there has come within these past months a deep and stirring challenge, like unto that which has stirred the roots of my being and forced a re-valuation of all the values that have determined my life heretofore. (Applause.)

When, as a lad, bending beneath the burden of the day's toil in an English mine, when trudging wearily from the day's task to the home where poverty dwelt, there arose before me a vision of a world made beautiful, a world as William Morris described it, in which all things shall be "better than well"; and when, catching a glimpse of that ideal of a better, juster social system, I decided to identify myself with the men and women who had raised the standard of social democracy, I knew then that I was committed to a great ideal, broader than any nation, wider than any racial embrace—

the ideal no less of internationalism; that ideal so well described by the great poet Lowell:

"For mankind is one in spirit
 And an instinct bears along
 'Round the earth's electric circle
 The swift flash of right or wrong.
 Whether conscious or unconscious
 Yet Humanity's vast frame
 Through its ocean-sundered fibres
 Feels the gush of joy or shame;
 In the loss or gain of one race
 All the rest have equal claim."

From that hour until now it has been the polar star of my life that there could be no wrong inflicted upon any people anywhere in the world that was not a wrong inflicted upon me, that did not lay upon me the solemn obligation of fighting that wrong whenever the chance presented itself. (Applause.)

And in this struggle I come to you not as one who has abandoned his international faith. I am still an Internationalist; I am still a Socialist, and I come tonight asserting the right to say for myself, and for my colleagues, that we believe and we assert that in this hour of history the interest of the United States of America is coincident with the interest of all mankind, including the interest of the peoples of the German Empire. (Applause.)

They from whom we have separated ourselves, they from whom we have come out as a people apart, they who claim to be the keepers of the Ark of the Covenant of the Socialist faith, have in truth prostituted the soul of Socialism at the feet of the most merciless militarism the world ever saw. (Applause.)

Having said that much by way of personal explanation, if you will, may I ask you ladies and gentlemen to consider for a moment the occasion which brought this gathering of men and women to your city under the auspices of the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy?

We had learned that there was to be in this city a conference of people who presumed to speak in the name of the labor movement, in the name of Socialism, in the name of internationalism, in the name of the tolling masses of America. This so-called People's Council, with no authority save that of their own making, were coming to this city to affirm, first that the United States of America was blood-guilty in entering upon this war; second, that our democratic government had dragged us to the altar of sacrifice without having stated the reasons for which we entered the war, and the aims to besought through that bloody and terrible and tragic arbitrament.

Then this body, we understand from its program, was to unite all the forces that it could command to obstruct the efficient conduct of this war and to force the government of this nation to make an immediate peace with the German Imperial Government.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I do not marvel that the people of Minneapolis

wanted not the advertisement that that conference would have given your city. (Applause.) I do not marvel that you cringed and felt ashamed, but I say to you in all candor, I shall not soon cease to regret that they were not permitted to hold their conference in your city as scheduled. (Applause.) I am sorry that you did not decide to bear the burden which, after all, belongs to democratic communities; that you did not permit them to have full opportunity within the law to express their criticisms and their convictions, for, let me remind you, no driving of the people outside your city walls and gates, no act of repression, no imprisonment, no punishment, no judicial injunction, no official act of any kind whatsoever can dislodge the idea that finds its way in the mind of a man. (Applause.)

If there are tens of thousands and perhaps more people in this country who believe the things that the People's Council stands for, the way to remove that conviction from their minds is not by denying them the right of assembly and of discussion. Rather it is by saying to them, "Here, come to the Forum, make your case as strong as you can, and we believe that the facts are against you; we believe that we can reach all the men of good faith and good will and make them see that after all this nation is committed to the noblest cause for which men and women have ever endured sacrifice and peril in all the history of the world." (Applause.)

I am going to try, in so far as it is impossible for me to do so, to examine the evidence in the case under some heads of the indictment which this People's Council has brought and which we believe to be faulty and defective.

In the first place we are told that we Americans have no business in the war, that our interests were not at stake. If that be true, then of course the sooner we withdraw our men from Europe the better; the sooner we weaken the forces that are arrayed against the Kaiser the better. If we are not there with justice, if we are only there in a blood-guilty way, then I am prepared to say, "Let us retract, let us retrace our steps, let us bring back the men that we have already sent there and let us abandon the preparation we have made to send more." But is it our business? Let us reflect. For centuries untold men had gone on using, under the domination of the military concept, the whole world as the theatre of their struggles. Time was (and not so long ago, as you will remember) when nations that went out to make war against their enemies recognized no law and no limitations of the field. They slaughtered women and children and unarmed men quite as readily as they slaughtered the men who were under arms. When the slowly emerging consciousness of the race developed a passion for something that we call civilization, men said, "We must limit this beast, we must keep it back, we must deny its right to cover the world with its filth and its devastation." We said, civilized society said, to all nations, "If you make war you must make it in a smaller part of the world, you must leave all the civil life of the world free and untouched while you are engaged in war," and when we did that, that was establishing one of the great outposts of civilization.

That same spirit caused the nations of the world to say, "If there shall be war upon the ocean, then they who make war shall make war only upon armed ships. The poor, inoffensive and undefended fisherman in his trawler

shall not be assailed and sent to the bottom without having given just provocation and cause. The passengers upon great ocean-liners who are no party to the struggle shall be immune from attack from armed battle-ships." (Applause.)

And then there arose a power, a power in the twentieth century, with the mind and conscience of the fourteenth century, a power still relying upon the brutalities from which the world had emancipated itself, and that power said, "International law means nothing at all." That power said that the treaties guaranteeing the sovereignty and independence of small nations unable to defend themselves were not to be seriously regarded but were scraps of paper. That power said that the old barbarism of assailing unfortified cities without giving their inhabitants a chance to decide for themselves whether they wanted to escape or to make peace, should be restored. All the savagery, all the brutality from which the world had emancipated itself was again brought out in the twentieth century and brought out, ladies and gentlemen, backed and strengthened and fortified by all the arts and resources which the science of the twentieth century had made possible.

Do you say to me that it was no concern of ours to protect the right of a nation like Belgium to maintain its own sovereignty? That it was no concern of ours when that brutal bully among nations sank the Lusitania and with it sank not merely so much precious commerce and wealth, and what is more, so many priceless lives—but sank with these the faith and the anchorage of the internationalism that the world had already achieved?

If we of the United States had not been willing to risk and dare, if we had not been willing to sacrifice to the uttermost in order to maintain that civilization, we would have been indeed unworthy of the civilization we enjoy, we would have been unworthy of the great heritage which is ours and above all, we should soon have ceased to enjoy that heritage. (Applause.)

I say this because I am an internationalist. Internationalism means to me not merely the repetition of beautiful formulae, not merely the chanting of inspiring songs, it means the welding of the peoples of the world together in peace and solidarity; it means the assurance to all peoples of the right to live their own lives in their own law-abiding way without hindrance or domination from other people; it means the right of the world to say to the military masters and makers of war, "Go back! Go back! Go back! We are pushing outward and onward the frontiers of civilization and peace."

What was assailed by Germany was not a scrap of paper: it was your right to life, it was my right to life, it was the right of your son to live and to look with confidence to the future. It was the right of my own daughter to grow confidently into womanhood, to enter bravely into motherhood, knowing that her child would, in its turn, have a right to live in the world unmolested and unafraid. (Applause.)

And now, they say that we must make a separate peace, a peace forsooth with that power that still retains possession of murdered, bleeding, raped and ravaged Belgium; that power that still keeps its iron heel on the

necks of the prostrate in stricken Poland, in Serbia, in Russia—that we must make peace forsooth with that power whose victory means the betrayal of the new democracy of Russia!

Shall we do it? Men and women of Minneapolis, you have come from all the ends of the earth; you in whose veins flows the blood of eastern and western and northern and southern peoples, shall we be guilty in this hour of making peace under conditions that would leave Belgium and Serbia unavenged and unrestored, and leave Russia in peril at the mercy of the most unscrupulous militarism the world ever saw?

Nay! Nay! A thousand times would we rather go down to devastation and defeat than purchase a peace by the betrayal of that new Russian democracy. (Applause.)

That conference of the People's Council, had it been permitted to rest its weary head somewhere in this nation, would, according to its proclaimed intention, have advocated that you men and women of this city of Minneapolis, this great commonwealth of the Northwest, should bring your civic pressure to bear upon our government to make a peace without indemnities.

They tell us in all their utterances that in making this demand they are but following the example of our comrades in Russia. In the name of that great and brave people, in the name of our comrades there who are struggling against such titanic odds, in the name of that people blindly staggering into the sunlight of an unfamiliar freedom, I say to you that it is not true. They have never in the name of the Russian Revolution advocated a peace without indemnities in the sense that our People's Council use that term.

The man who wrote the program of the People's Council said in my hearing that he believed it would be wrong for the United States to try to make Germany repay to Belgium the material damages that she had wrought there. That same man said in the columns of a New York newspaper, over his own signature, that he believed it would be wrong for Germany to be compelled to make reparation to Belgium and Serbia for the wrongs so lawlessly done there.

I submit to you that if we of the United States should consent to make a peace with Germany upon conditions which did not compel that Empire to pay what she could to repair the damage wrought, our infamy would be unbounded. We know that she never could repay the great wrong that cannot be priced in the markets or in the chancelleries of the world—for she cannot bring back to the maiden of Belgium that which the raping invader has taken from her; she cannot repay to the mother of Belgium, weeping over that lone grave, the child whose brains were battered against the wall by the drunken, bully invader. (Applause.)

Germany can never pay in cash, in material substance, the greater and deeper wrongs, but so far as reparation is possible it is a fundamental requirement of international morality that she must pay, and if we in these United States of America should consent to a peace upon any other terms we should be guilty of an immorality not less than the initial crime of Germany in making war upon Belgium. (Applause.)

That same Council of self-appointed muddlers and anarchistic inter-ferers with the processes of orderly procedure, had it been permitted to

hold its conference would have said to you men and women of Minneapolis, "We must insist that the government of the United States tell us concisely and definitely what we are fighting for. We must know the aims that this nation has in view."

They have said that in all languages of the world. They have said it predominantly with the accents of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs. They have said it from coast to coast, until presumably they believe it themselves and have induced other people to agree with them.

But, ladies and gentlemen, what actually are the facts? It is not here a matter of opinion with which we have to deal; it is a matter of record, of cold, hard, written fact—a record open and available to all who desire to consult it. Let me see if I cannot show you in the next minute or so that the aims of this nation have been stated far more clearly and precisely than the aims of the People's Council have been stated. (Applause.) There is less room for misunderstanding or conjecture concerning the aims of this nation than there is for misunderstanding and conjecture concerning the aims of the People's Council.

Any man or woman who understands elementary English can read the record which sets forth our national purpose in this undertaking, and there need be no question as to the meaning of the terms. But let any ordinary person with an ordinary, straightforward mind read the declaration of the People's Council, and how great his perplexities to understand that declaration! (Applause.)

Before we had entered into the war at all, on the 22d day of January, 1917, the spokesman of this American people and of civilization in this crisis, the President of the United States, addressing the United States Senate, said that there were certain conditions which must govern any peace with which the United States should concern itself. That, mind you, was in January before we had entered into the war. It is a statement of our purpose in the days when we feared lest we be drawn into it and struggled to keep out of it.

And in that declaration on that date the President said: "There must be in this peace if it is to be worth our association equality of rights as between nations great and small." Is that a statement that you understand? Is that a statement that is precise and definite?

Second, there must be recognition of the principle that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed, and the President cited the case of poor, torn, scattered, dismembered Poland as an illustration of what he had in mind. Here was a great area and great people wantonly dismembered, subject to foreign tyranny, denied the right implied in the doctrine that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. When the President of the United States said that in any peace that is to be worthy of our participation that principle must be established, and cited Poland as an illustration of what he had in mind, there was a definite declaration which any child in the third grade in the public schools of this country might understand and know, and above all, a declaration the sincerity of which commends itself to every earnest mind. (Applause.)

As a third condition the President said that there must be the right of all great peoples to a direct outlet to the sea. That right must be gained by territorial adjustment or by neutralization of the great waterways. The President had in mind, unquestionably, Russia bounded within her icebound harbors, denied the right of free, natural normal development. He had unquestionably in his mind the position of Serbia, imprisoned inland, locked in with no outlet to the Adriatic, and he knew as every man of us knows that until that outlet to the sea is found for that people there will be discontent and and there will not be peace in Europe.

Was that a definite pledge? Was that a definite enough aim? "We must use our power," said the President in substance, "to establish as a fundamental condition of the peace that is to be, the right of every nation to an outlet to the open seas for commerce and for movements of their people." There must be, said the President, as a fifth condition of this peace that is to be worthy of the United States, a progressive disarmament of the nations in which we ourselves will gladly participate. (Applause.)

As a sixth condition the President said that we must see to it that in the peace that is to be "no nation shall attempt to extend its polity over any other nation or people against their will." Is that a definite enough statement of the aim which the President, in January, said this nation must pledge itself to?

And finally, as a seventh condition, the President said that we must work to bring about a concert of nations to guarantee peace and the rights of all nations. There must be a world organization for peace and not for war—no entangling alliances creating a competition for power, but a concert for peace. Again I ask you, is that a definite statement of aim? If not, how will you make it more definite? Surely the gentlemen who wrote the program of the People's Council with its subtleties, with its lack of directness, could not make a statement more definite of the aims of this great nation. (Applause.)

That was the position taken in January, 1917. Then we found ourselves in war. The passions of the fray had been aroused, all the fury and frenzy of war had entered in to complicate the problem. Yet if we read the messages and statements outlining our national purpose made since that time we shall not find that there is any departure from the clear conception of the aims set forth by the President in his address to the Senate on the 22d day of January.

I have taken the war message of April 2d, I have taken the note to the Revolutionary Government of Russia, of May 6th, I have taken the letter to His Holiness the Pope, and line by line, sentence by sentence, letter by letter, I have gone through them asking myself honestly and candidly this question: "Do I find here any departure from the high principles set forth in the statement of January?" and the answer always is "No." (Applause.)

Indeed, under the impelling sense of the tremendous responsibility of his task I think that our great President has taken infinite pains on the contrary to strengthen our statement of the high resolve not to seek for ourselves material aggrandizement or gain, but to seek only the best means of insuring the future well-being of mankind. (Applause.)

I have had the pleasure and the opportunity of seeing President Wilson in the midst of the burdens that he is bearing in the White House. I have had the advantage of talking with him about the great problems which confront our nation, and I say to you with all my desire to see a great and splendid Socialist movement in this country, I believe that no man in our time has more nobly voiced the best aspiration of modern Socialism than has that great man, our President—Woodrow Wilson. (Applause.)

I am glad to add to that, that this is the judgment likewise of all the men in the Socialist movements of Europe who have made that movement great. That is the judgment of the great leaders of the movement in the Scandinavian countries, the great leaders of the Russian Socialist movement, and of the French and the British movements. Indeed, there are only two pro-German Socialist parties in the world—one of them is the Majority party of the German Empire, which does the bidding of the Hohenzollern dynasty, and the other, I must say to my regret and to my shame, is the Socialist Party of the United States. (Applause.) Every other Socialist party in the world, and that part of the Socialist movement of Germany, which holds the future in its hands, repudiates the doctrines of pro-Germanism and recognizes the justice and the splendor of the ideals set forth by the President of the United States. (Applause.)

In reading and scrutinizing these documents that have come from Mr. Wilson's hands since we entered the war, one finds the same principles re-stated unflinchingly and unfinchingly: recognition of the rights and liberties of small nations; recognition of the principle that government derives its power from the consent of the governed; reparation for wrongs done and the erection of adequate safeguards to prevent their being committed again; no indemnities except as payment for manifest wrongs; no people to be forced under sovereignty under which they do not desire to live; no territory to change hands except for the purpose of securing those who inhabit it a fair chance of life and liberty; no adjustments of power except such as will tend to secure the future peace of the world and the future welfare and happiness of its people; a general and practical co-operation of the free peoples of the world in some common covenant that will combine their forces to secure peace and justice in the dealings of nations with one another.

Do you say to me that these are not definite statements of national purpose? Ladies and gentlemen, it would be an insult to your intelligence to argue the question one moment further. I say with all confidence that never at any time in the history of the world has any great nation, making war for any purpose, on entering that war or while that was in the process of being made, stated its aims with anything like the precision, the clarity and the force that the aims of this nation have been made manifest to all mankind. (Applause.)

If, then, the People's Council persists in repeating its parrot-cry: "Let the aims of the nation be definitely stated!" we shall know without a doubt—we shall be justified beyond any possibility of serious challenge in concluding—that they speak not in good faith; that they speak not the language of men who seek the truth; that they are indeed but seeking to

disturb our national life in order that they may paralyze our strong right arm in the struggle against the enemy of ourselves and the enemy of mankind. (Applause.)

I say to you further, ladies and gentlemen, that it seems to me quite evident that these aims of this nation as avowed by the spokesman of the nation are, first of all, the inevitable principles of our international faith. If we are internationalists, if we are social democrats, we are compelled to subscribe to each and every one of those principles. I know that the Hohenzollern and the Hapsburg would deny their justice. I know that the Czar of Bulgaria and the Sultan of Turkey would deny their justice, but it would be too much even for the People's Council to openly deny the justice of principles so obvious and so directly related to our democratic faith. (Applause.)

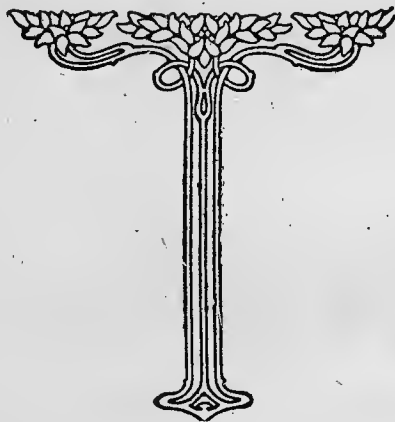
Let there be an end of this trifling disputation! You know and I know, and every man who knows the spirit and purpose of our labor movement knows, that through every fiber of that movement of ours, through every fiber of this great world labor movement, runs the deep conviction that the principles outlined in these messages that I have enumerated to you are but the steps upon which man must climb if he is to attain to that international fellowship and world brotherhood of which we have so often dreamed.

Is it necessary for this American Alliance for Labor and Democracy to plead with our fellow citizens? I do not think so. "We must be free who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold that Milton held." We can't help ourselves. We can't acquiesce in a cowardly peace. We can't fail to struggle against despotism, against the militarism that desires to rule and dominate the world. And above all, we can't surrender that that we have inherited as the result of so much sacrifice and so great a struggle. (Applause.)

Shall the immortal prophecy of Gettysburg be belied after all? Shall "government of the people, by the people and for the people" perish from the face of the earth? Shall the great struggles of the past have been in vain, and the Declaration of Independence be superseded by a Kaiser's fiat?

These are the questions that this trying time brings to each man and to each woman. If I have not misread the hearts of my fellow-men and women in this great movement, if I have not misread the character of the people among whom I have found opportunity for work, for life, for happiness and advantage and opportunity for my children, if I have not misread all these things I know that we shall rise in our might, that we shall thrust aside all People's Councils and Workmen's Councils, and all other forms of political sabotage, destined to cripple our national life in this country, and with all that we have and are, conscious of the rectitude of our high purpose, we shall pursue this struggle without hate, without envy, without thirst for revenge, until we have made it possible for free peoples to live unmolested; until we have restored to the peasant of northern France his vineyard and his home; until we have restored to

the Serbian mother her home and a place where her children may play without fear and without dread; until we have restored the body of international law again; until we have set mankind free from the Hohenzollerns; until we can stretch out our hands and say to the German people, "Through our struggle you won the freedom that you could not win yourselves, and now together we shall dwell in amity and together build the temple of human brotherhood." (Applause.)



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