

# The Years Of Indecision

McGEORGE BUNDY

THE CHALLENGE TO ISOLATION, 1937-1940, and THE UNDECLARED WAR, 1940-1941, by William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason. Harper & Brothers. \$7.50 and \$10.

THERE HAS BEEN no more important period of American history than that between Munich and Pearl Harbor. In those thirty-nine months a series of diplomatic revolutions spun the American people outward from their self-centered isolation into careening contact with the realities of international politics, until finally they found themselves at war in the one way they had not expected—by a direct attack upon their land and their fleet. In *The Undeclared War*, William Langer and Everett Gleason have completed the massive study of American foreign affairs in this period that they began in *The Challenge to Isolation*. It is a magnificent achievement of collection and organization, so thorough that it will not have to be done again. That so fine a record could be compiled within a decade of the events (for these volumes were essentially complete three years ago) is a commentary on the degree to which historians have now established their claim to full information on the very recent past. Only where the statesmen have reserved the right to be their own historians—in Soviet Russia and in both Red and White China—are there still major gaps in the record.

If these volumes have a major failing, indeed, it is that the treatment is too thorough. Together they total about eighteen hundred pages and a million words: It is too much, even for this momentous period. The skillful organization and the narrative clarity of the account sometimes fail to prevent the reader from getting lost among the myriad

trees of the forest the authors have re-created. And in the painstaking examination that is given to each and every problem one can come to feel that the discussion with Mexico over oil claims is just as significant as the last negotiations with Japan. Moreover, Mr. Langer's long interest in European diplomacy and his reluctance to leave any source unused seem to have led the authors too far into matters that might properly have been given more summary treatment in a history centered on American policy.

BUT THE QUALITY of the work remains. Among the million words there is hardly an error of type or fact beyond the curious misspelling of Clement Attlee's name. Although the judgments the authors made are restricted, many of them are fresh and nearly all are persuasive. And the very detail of this account, with its indefatigable report of each turning, small and large, has a special value. Almost more than if it were better proportioned and more sharply centered on the great issues behind the details, a history like this one takes the reader back into the prevailing atmosphere of the time. If the authors use too much space on Finland and not enough on the freezing of Japanese assets, do they not simply repeat an error that was a part of the reality of the time? The history is written in the same perspective in which it was lived. To relive the experience of 1941 is to be confronted again by some of the most persistently fascinating and disturbing questions of American history.

Langer and Gleason themselves, in the introduction to their first volume, pointed to one of the ques-

tions: the quality and character of Franklin Roosevelt. Certainly the President was the central figure in the determination of American policy during this period. And yet in these volumes he seems to fade and rematerialize like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice*. This is only partly the result of Mr. Roosevelt's penchant for unargued and verbal decision. Partly also it is that the President laid his course very close to the ground. It is true that he was partial to the brave phrase and the striking idea, and one of the high points to which these volumes give full play is the

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crystallization in the President's mind of the idea of Lend-Lease, with the winning analogy of the garden hose. But most of the time he lived in each situation as it came up, and over and over in these volumes it is events, pressing against Mr. Roosevelt's native sense of necessity, that drive him to action and to leadership.

In such a process, the balance of motivation often remains obscure. Cordell Hull's caution, Frank Knox's fighting ardor, Henry L. Stimson's insistence on facing reality, Harry Hopkins's devotion to the Grand Alliance—these and many other individual attitudes acting upon each other and upon the President are made much clearer in these volumes than ever before. Mr. Roosevelt himself does not stand out clearly in these pages. It is not apparent whether he drove history or history drove him.

### The Self-Deluded

And so attention turns naturally to the events themselves, and the first point is the now familiar but essential fact that the United States came all unready to the test of 1940—not simply unready in arms and armies, but unready in mind, spirit, and understanding. In a general sense, of course, this is what created the continuous debate between those who would not see the Nazi danger and those who were eager to go and meet it. But even among those who saw Hitler as he was, innocence and ignorance were abundant.

The most notable example was Mr. Hull, who tried to live in a world of fine thoughts and free trade even when reality made it impossible, so that negotiations with both allies and possible enemies were sometimes set askew by the Secretary's insistence upon centering all discussion on extraneous matters. But nobody in the Administration is to be acquitted entirely. Mr. Roosevelt exhibited a strange faith in disarmament as a cure-all; Mr. Stimson persuaded himself too easily that firmness, because it was right, would also be successful in dealing with Japan. The whole Administration, except for a few well-pilloried and then anonymous figures in the Department of State, appears to have believed, with ever-increasing urgen-

cy after June, 1941, that because the Soviet Union was a great help against Hitler, it must be capable of friendship. These volumes show Mr. Roosevelt in the first stages of that concern with Soviet appearances (Can they not say something good about religious freedom to please our Catholics?) that was to increase steadily, with him and Hopkins and some others, until shadow was mistaken for substance.

**Y**ET THE ERRORS of judgment committed by the Administration, large as they are seen to be in retro-



spect, cannot compare with the passionate misapprehension of those who would not see that the fall of France marked the end of American isolation. The authors quite properly do not tire themselves with a replay of this early "Great Debate," but they do remind us of the virulence of Burton K. Wheeler, the animus of Robert Taft (here at his least appealing), the haughty folly of Robert Hutchins, and the dedicated fervor of Colonel Lindbergh. To act wisely was the need, but in the face of this sort of opposition it often seemed as if the problem was to find a way to act at all.

The result, often, was a caution and lack of candor in leadership which Langer and Gleason do not seek to hide and rightly hesitate to judge. The election of 1940 remains, on the whole, the most striking example in our history of the degree to which large men will shrink them-

selves down in order to squeeze through political loopholes. (Many of the old-time New Dealers who suffered self-righteous pangs last year had short memories.) And the whole cast of argument and action led in the end to that strange dead feeling in the autumn of 1941, when the United States seemed too far in to stay out of the struggle in Europe but too closely tied by opinion to be able to get all the way in. There was a "Victory Program" to be sure, but no real plan for action.

Was Mr. Roosevelt a genius to get as far as he did, or was he a fearful leader, unwilling to make full use of his personal talent and the Presidential office? We cannot know, of course, how another policy would have worked out, but at any rate it seems clear from these volumes that there was a steady decline in the effectiveness of soft words and optimism. Such leadership draws constantly on the capital of public trust, and eventually the account becomes overdrawn. And yet both in the past and in the present Presidents have gone on drawing from this account.

From the impasse of late 1941 the Administration was rescued by Pearl Harbor, followed by Hitler's heedless declaration of war. (By this, of course, I do not mean that Mr. Roosevelt planned it that way; one of the marks of good sense in these volumes is the fact that the authors waste very little time on this diseased notion.)

### The Decisive Moment

What is most striking is that the die was cast when the United States government froze Japanese assets in July, 1941. But we do not yet know for certain how or why this decision was reached, or in what measure its meaning was understood. On this crucial issue Langer and Gleason do not take us as far as Herbert Feis did in *The Road to Pearl Harbor*. It was an act of retaliation for the Japanese movement into southern Indo-China. But it was also much more, because it could not be maintained without eventually strangling Japan, and Japan would not be strangled without war. So if war was to be avoided, Japanese assets had to be unfrozen, but no concession of this kind could be made after July,

1941, unless the Japanese not only backed out of southern Indo-China but began to liquidate their aggression in China itself. This they could not undertake to do.

The chain of propositions was unbreakable, and yet it seems not to have been foreseen. At any rate, war came in a place and at a time when it was not wanted by the United States government, which was concentrating on the Atlantic.

A first conclusion, then, must be that our diplomacy toward Japan was unskillful in a matter of the utmost importance. The error arose mainly from a reluctance to observe some of the unpalatable realities of Japanese politics—ably reported by Ambassador Joseph Grew (who nevertheless seems to have had his own too shining hopes pinned to Prince Konoye). Certainly the sequel showed that Japanese military power had been wildly underestimated. These were errors that a more experienced diplomacy might have avoided.

And yet if we suppose that the war was necessary at all, it was probably as well to have Pearl Harbor come as soon as it did: The American effort was immediately redoubled, and it proved possible to concentrate first on Europe after all. It is hard to believe that another six months or year of the undeclared war of 1941 would have been preferable. It seems, then, that things turned out well enough in this great event, not by design but by good fortune.

In a game as complex and dark as the diplomacy of war and near-war, such accidents can hardly be surprising. The moral is not, however, that diplomacy is an irrational and futile game. There are greater and lesser follies, and higher and lower batting averages. A Churchill does better than a Chamberlain, and the very difficulty of the assignment puts a premium on skill.

### The Course Must Be Set

But beyond this matter of technique—and Langer and Gleason, craftsmen themselves, keep a sharp eye upon it—there is the still larger question of the purposes for which the techniques are used. Questions of method and timing aside, was it right to be angry over Indo-China

and to be unwilling to negotiate a *modus vivendi* that might abandon Chiang Kai-shek? Was this the right basic line of feeling and intent, or was it merely sentiment inhibiting a suitable “adjustment” of Pacific problems? This question and those like it which can be asked about Hitler are still basic, and on these questions this study tells us nothing

new. The truth is as it has been, that in these fundamental matters the American people and their government were proudly right in 1941. Since 1941 we have had to learn a great deal about diplomacy and the world's hard realities. These lessons should not lead us to forget that it is vital to keep our purpose generous and our standards high.

# Some Thoughts About Gertrude Stein

WILLIAM SAROYAN

THE FLOWERS OF FRIENDSHIP: LETTERS WRITTEN TO GERTRUDE STEIN. Edited by Donald Gallup. Knopf. \$5.

IT IS ALL kindness and sweetness up to page 233, except for a letter concerning publishing business from Robert McAlmon, and the failure of Gertrude Stein to accept the invitation of Stuart Davis to buy his painting “Egg Beater” and write an introduction for the catalogue of his show in New York.

These upsets seem strange since she became godmother to a French boy in the First World War and received an honor from France for kind concern and helpful money, and was visited and adored by so many working writers or painters or friends or wives of them.

You feel that McAlmon's letter is likely to be succeeded later in the book by one in which he and she become friends again, and you feel that it isn't very likely that she will not have made it up to Stuart Davis, if he lasts as a painter.

THEY ARE letters to her—most of them just that, nothing more—but when it is a letter from somebody who has not only survived but made out rather well, such as Hemingway, they are something more, although in themselves Hemingway's letters are among the best of the lot: quick, intelligent, warm, practical, helpful, informative.

Page 233 brings time forward

from June, 1895, to June, 1929, which is thirty-four years. Flipping the pages to the last page, which is page 403, and the last letter, which is a letter to Alice B. Toklas from Bernard Fay, whose first letter was a short note written about twenty years earlier, we find that the year is 1946 and Gertrude Stein is dead, so that all told the letters cover a span of a little better than half a century.

The first letter is from Hugo Münsterberg, a Harvard professor to whom she had been kind, along with some of his other pupils.

In between are letters from very nearly everybody, as the saying is, but it is not difficult to notice that it isn't *quite* everybody, for Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, H. L. Mencken, Upton Sinclair, James Branch Cabell, Joseph Hergesheimer—to name only a few of the writers who just might have written to her—never wrote to her; or *probably* they didn't, for this is a selection from around twenty thousand letters, most of them from the same people, most likely. But surely a hundred more people wrote to her than are in this collection.

As I recall it, for instance, I wrote to her twice, met her and Alice B. Toklas in California, and again in New York, and did not write again. There were, I mean to say, a few who wrote only once or twice in the book.

At the time that I wrote to Ger-