

How Not to Be Neutral

WAR MEMORIES OF ROBERT LANSING, Secretary of State. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FRANK H. SIMONDS

APPEARING on the morrow of that panic which seized an exhausted Congress and swept it into a paroxysm of legislations designed to keep the United States out of the next World War, visibly impending, this book has patent timeliness. In fact, it might well have been called "How not to be neutral." For, in itself, it reveals a state of mind in the Wilson Administration which insured American belligerency. It then teaches by example, but by bad example.

In many ways Lansing was the ideal under-secretary of state. He had the hard, shrewd common sense of the up-state New Yorker. He knew a good deal about law and not a little about the history and traditions of American foreign policy. He had no imagination and little initiative. Not quite a "yes-man" he could advise a "no" alternative, but if it were rejected he was tempted not to resign but to make the best of it. In the end he was ejected from office brutally and bore injustice with great dignity. Under other circumstances he would have been, if not a great secretary of state, a sound and safe adviser.

Called suddenly to be the successor of Bryan, when "the great commoner" with a courage and consistency today commanding a respect it once failed to enlist, resigned rather than sign a Lusitania Note which he saw clearly was a first step toward involvement in the great struggle, Lansing came to his high office already convinced that the United States must go in. As early as July 11, 1915, he wrote a memorandum entitled "Consideration and Outline of Policies." In that he set down this final conviction—

Germany must not be permitted to win this war or to break even, though to prevent it this country is forced to take an active part. This ultimate necessity must be constantly in our minds in all our controversies with the belligerents. American public opinion must be prepared for the time, which may come, when we will have to cast aside our neutrality and become one of the champions of democracy.

In simple terms, this meant that the American Secretary of State, while recognizing the necessity to make formal protests against British invasion of American rights, was resolved not to go beyond formality because he saw in Germany an eventual enemy. After the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Lansing became one of the "believers in active support of the Allies." He realized, however, "that the sensible thing to do was to defer action until by a gradual process of education and enlightenment the American people had

been brought to a full understanding of the design of the German Government to become overlord of the world."

On July 14, moreover, he made the shrewd observation to the President that the American people, while resolved against war were equally insistent that their own government should not "recede a step from its position but compel Germany to submit to our demands." To carry out such ideas, he realized and reported was a task "well nigh impossible." It was, in fact, a *totally* impossible task, even had the minister, whose duty it was to undertake it believed in the experiment, which he frankly did not.

On the contrary he saw us presently fighting with the Allies against the Germans and he accurately conjectured that when that moment arrived, we should not want to be handicapped in our struggle by any inconvenient support of principles and neutral rights during the provisional period of non-participation. He distrusted the British, he was more than convinced that they were not only using illegal methods to bring about German defeat but

exploiting the invasion of our undoubted rights to the detriment of our legitimate trade and commerce. About the English, he had no illusions. For Walter Hines Page, become pacifically penetrated with British pretensions and propaganda, he had at most only tolerant pity. But he was a realist and says of his views—

In dealing with the British Government there was always in my mind the conviction that we would ultimately become an ally of Great Britain and that it would not do, therefore, to let out controversies reach a point where diplomatic correspondence gave place to actions.

Obviously the Germans were not likely to be taken in by any such procedure. And they were not. Technically they had no ground for complaint, actually, the United States was within its rights, but practically it was not neutral.

The objective of the Secretary of State was not neutrality but belligerency. His strategy was to seem neutral until American public opinion finally became sufficiently aroused against Germany and then

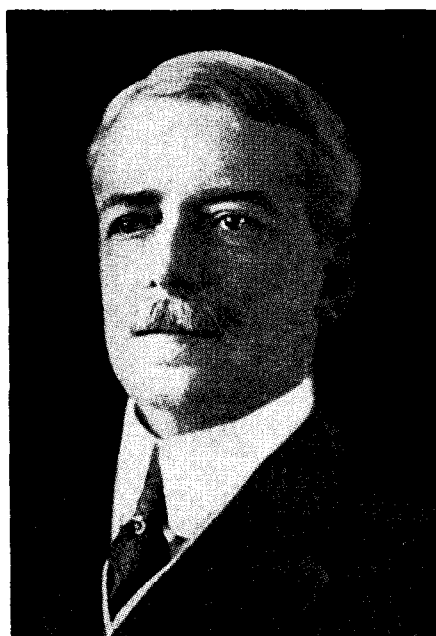
to act. Wilson, by contrast, believed it was possible to uphold American rights and avoid American involvement. But when, in March, 1916, the Germans sank the *Sussex*, Lansing thought the moment to strike had come. Accordingly he advised Wilson to speak "without subterfuge or evasion." He wanted to break off relations, but Wilson demurred and, for the moment, Germany temporized. This apparent victory for a policy seeking to uphold rights by peaceful means was responsible for Wilson's re-election, but Lansing was not fooled and, hard on the heels of the triumph at the polls, came the exposure of the bankruptcy of the policy responsible for that triumph.

By the autumn of 1916, however, with his election won and his neutrality policy apparently triumphant, Wilson's imagination, powerfully stimulated by the suggestions of Colonel House, had soared far above and beyond the limits of conventional conduct of foreign relations. By that time, he was dreaming his great dream of restoring world peace and making it permanent. Already he had ceased to be the American President and was thinking of himself as the World Prophet of peace. And the first step was to bring the warring countries to conference. But

of the futility of such an attempt Lansing was well aware "for the conditions made accomplishment practically impossible."

Lansing so advised the President, but the President persisted. He sounded out the ambassadors of the several belligerent powers. But, meantime the German Government stole his "show" and launched a peace offensive of their own. As a consequence, when Wilson's great note was published, he seemed to London and Paris to be only the tool of Berlin, the conscious or unconscious accessory of the Kaiser in an operation designed to break down Allied morale.

The first "adventure in peace" was thus a "dud." But thereafter the Germans went back to the unlimited submarine warfare and the United States became a belligerent. Meantime, when the Peace Note had been published, the Secretary of State suddenly intervened and told an astonished nation, satisfied that the President had "kept us out of war" definitively, that "the sending of the note will indicate the possibility of our being forced into



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war." He made it even more explicit, saying—"we are growing nearer the verge of war ourselves and therefore we are entitled to know exactly what each belligerent seeks in order that we may regulate our conduct in the future."

That interpretation produced a panic in Wall Street and an explosion in Congress. The country was, in fact, "on the verge of war," but it was without a suspicion of the fact. The awakening came a few days later, when Bernstorff advised Lansing that the submarine warfare would be renewed. That was the end of the Wilson dream of playing the part of the Great Pacificator and of bringing the struggle to a close by peaceful intervention. But, for him it was only a postponement; after military victory he now purposed to impose by force the peace which he had been unable to establish by persuasion. And that resolution led to Paris, Versailles, and last of all to the Senate.

Read in the light of the problems which today confront the American nation, considered with an eye to the background of the rapidly approaching struggle in the Old World, this book can serve a useful purpose. It demonstrates beyond peradventure that neutrality like virginity is not a matter of degrees. Lansing was not neutral because, like so many other Americans, he believed that Imperial Germany had become a common danger for all democracies. Today, it is plain that a similar conviction exists in many minds in respect to Fascist Italy and, tomorrow an identical emotion is likely to be aroused by the performances of "Nazi" Germany.

In the Ethiopian Affair British propaganda has naturally sought—not without some success—to arouse American feelings as it did in the Belgian. If Germany precipitates a new war next year, all the old appeals based upon democracy will have contemporary relevance. But the United States cannot combine neutrality with championship of the rights of small peoples or the defense of democracy on foreign soil.

What Congress was patently fishing for in its recent legislation, what the majority of the people of the United States are manifestly clamoring for, is some form of law which will prevent the President or the Secretary of State of the United States from involving the country in future foreign wars because of their own conviction that America has a mission in the world unrelated to any question of material prosperity or military security. And, needless to say, it has not found any such formula, nor, for that matter is it likely to find it. On the contrary, immunity from such attacks of executive idealism can only arrive when at last it becomes plain to the public mind that neutrality itself is a whole-time job. To the illumination of that public mind, moreover, the present volume should prove a useful contribution, particularly as it exposes both the idealist and the legalist as equally at sea.

Innocent Merriment

GILBERT AND SULLIVAN. By Hesketh Pearson. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by GEORGE STEVENS

IT is impossible to write a dull book about Gilbert and/or Sullivan, and Mr. Pearson's book is one of the most readable that have been inspired by the Savoy partnership. Much of it, of course, will be familiar to those who have read, even casually, about Gilbert and Sullivan; the familiar material, however, is worth reading again, and besides this, Mr. Pearson is original enough in his presentation to justify his book.

For one thing, he has combined the biographies of both men in one volume, without being either too detailed or too sketchy to hold the interest of the average Gilbert and Sullivan fan. The emphasis is biographical, not critical, throughout. Naturally, we hear again about Gilbert's famous lawsuits; about Sullivan's ambitions in serious composition, so unfortunately encouraged by Sir George Grove and Queen Victoria; about the trip to America to establish copyright for "The Pirates of Penzance;" about Gilbert's plot involving the lozenge which turned people into other people—a plot which Sullivan abominated, and which in consequence nearly wrecked the partnership more than once. In addition, we hear for the first time of an ill-advised letter sent by D'Oyly Carte to Gilbert which had more disastrous consequences even than the lozenge plot. Carte, as manager of the Savoy Theatre, assessed both Gilbert and Sullivan, his fellow-stockholders, with part of the cost of recarpeting the theatre. Gilbert objected; and Carte replied that both he and Sullivan were tired of Gil-

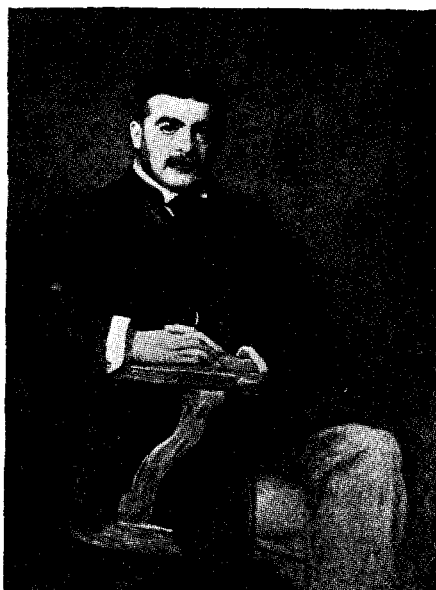


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bert's "interference," and would perhaps be well advised to look for another librettist.

Mr. Pearson has this from an old Savoyard, Mr. Jack Robertson, who says that Gilbert showed him the letter. Mr. Pearson also has some contributions from Miss Jessie Bond, who sang in the Savoy company when the operas were first produced. Whether or not it is owing to the nature of his sources, the author tends, at the end of the book, to discard the biographical method for the anecdotal. This is particularly true in the chapter on Gilbert's last years, for here we find anecdotes of all kinds—some new, some well known, and a few others which, although Mr. Pearson now tells them about Gilbert, have previously been retailed at the expense of other eminent Victorians. Mr. Pearson's willingness to tell every good story he has heard makes us wish that, in regard to such an important piece of evidence as the D'Oyly Carte letter, he himself had been able to see it and reproduce it, instead of having to describe its contents at second hand.

But leaving out any debatable points, Mr. Pearson has done an informed, appreciative, and most diverting book. His psychological insight into Gilbert and Sullivan is remarkably acute. One might, indeed, occasionally question at a point of interpretation: for instance, doesn't the evidence make Gilbert out to be more of an exhibitionist than Mr. Pearson allows? At least one reader got the impression, from Gilbert's hilarious testimony quoted in the account of one of his lawsuits, that Gilbert liked lawsuits because they gave him a chance to make witticisms in public. However that may be, we read this book not primarily for psychological explanations of Gilbert and Sullivan, but because it brings them to life.



SIR ARTHUR SULLIVAN