

Foreign Relations: Ad. General 43/14/39

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BRITISH EMBASSY,

WASHINGTON, D.C.,

February 3rd 1939.

No. 138.

*RAH
N.A.
D. Off.*

My Lord,

56/7/39

As I had the honour to inform Your Lordship in my telegram No. 44 of the 27th January, a very considerable sensation has been created here by the news that the Government were facilitating the sale of military aircraft to France. It would seem that a French mission to investigate the possibility of purchasing American aircraft has been in this country for some little time and has, with the assistance of the United States authorities, been actively pursuing its enquiries. The presence of this mission was, however, kept secret and it was only due to an accident - a Douglas bomber undergoing tests crashed in California with a member of the French mission on board - that the news leaked out about ten days ago.

*Since
November 1938
I don't know why it
has regarded as
secret. It was asked
quite openly in
December as to our
attitude of the
American budget
headings.*

2. This sudden chance discovery of the existence of the French mission caused a great stir not only in the newspapers but also in Congress. The Senate Military Affairs Committee met at once to investigate the position and interrogated several senior officers of the Army and Navy as well as the Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary for War. The meetings of the Committee would seem at times to have been quite stormy and the newspapers were full of rumours. Allegations were made that the French Mission had been unduly favoured and given access to aircraft and accessories

still/

The Right Honourable

The Viscount Halifax, K.G.,

etc., etc., etc.

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still on the secret list, that the Army authorities had been opposed to giving the mission such extensive facilities but had been overridden by the Treasury, and that the entire responsibility for the whole affair rested with the President himself, who had been convinced by Mr. Bullitt, when the latter was recently in this country, of the necessity of doing something to assist the French Government to reconstitute their air force. Some members of the Committee were reported as regarding the agitation as exaggerated, while others, such as Senator Nye, declared that "any deal whereby the French Government would be permitted to buy an indefinite number of planes in the United States constitutes in my opinion a military alliance."

3. The situation was clarified to a certain extent by the President at his press conference on January 27th. He declared that the French Government's request for facilities to buy aircraft in this country had been discussed by the whole Cabinet. The Cabinet had felt that the French request, if granted, would in no way interfere with the production of aircraft for the United States Government themselves. On the contrary several of the leading aircraft manufacturers in this country were short of work at the moment and it would make it easier for those firms to handle the eventual United States government orders if their factories could be kept busy in the meantime. Furthermore the proposal was in no way repugnant to the terms of the Neutrality Act and there was no reason why if His Majesty's Government had been permitted to buy aircraft in this country the French Government/

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Government should not be given the same privilege.

4. The President's explanations did not, however, satisfy his critics, either in Congress or in the press. The Senate Military Affairs Committee held another stormy meeting on January 28th but decided, despite the protests of several members, that the matters under discussion were so confidential that the proceedings should be kept secret. It was clear by this time that the opponents of the Administration intended to make use of the incident to launch a frontal attack on the President's foreign policy. The isolationists, of course, saw in the affair a splendid opportunity of accusing the President of having committed the United States to take sides with France in the event of a European war, while even those persons who were not out of sympathy with the President's aims and shared his views about the Neutrality legislation regretted the secrecy with which the arrangements for the French mission had been surrounded and emphasized the dangers of a policy of drift and the desirability of taking some definite decision in the very near future on the line to be taken by the United States Government in its dealings with Europe. As the "New York Herald Tribune" in an article headed 'Stumbling into war' put it "There will be no quarrel in the nation with respect to the English or French purchase of planes in this country. Rather will there be applause that our laws permit this collaboration of American skill with the needs of these old allies

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of ours. But there should be in our judgment an increased insistence upon a realistic view-point with respect to this collaboration and to the emergency in which the democracies of the world find themselves. Isolated cooperation is not enough in such a crisis. There must be a general exploration of work and methods and a searching effort to develop not only unity of military plans but a unity of policy throughout the democratic world".

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5. It was to check such criticism that, as I reported in my telegram No. 54 of February 1st, the President summoned the members of the Senate Military Affairs Committee to a secret meeting on January 31st. At this meeting Mr. Roosevelt is alleged to have declared that this country should be prepared to render assistance to Great Britain and France in the event of a war in Europe; to have said that in the event of such a war "the frontiers of the United States would be in France", and to have indicated that the United States should be prepared to help the democracies against the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis by furnishing them with everything they wanted, provided they paid for it. Whether or not the President actually went as far as this there can be little doubt that, as Mr. Arthur Krock says in the "New York Times" of February 2nd, he intended the meeting to "serve an unofficial but authoritative notice to Hitler, Mussolini and the ruling party in Japan that in the event of aggressive war abroad, the

President/

President will do everything in his power - and under the Constitution it is very great - to circumvent whatever so-called Neutrality Laws may be on this nation's statute books and lend every aid short of force to the democratic powers".

6. The effect of the President's remarks on the Opposition was what might have been expected. In a broadcast on February 1st ex-President Hoover, besides claiming that "our foreign policies must be determined by the American people and the Congress, not by the President alone" warned the country that the President was trying to lead the United States to forsake its traditional policy of isolation and detachment in favour of one of intervention. The new policy, he declared, could only be enforced if the United States Government were prepared to embark on "embargoes, boycotts and other economic sanctions" and such measures in the last resort could only be made effective by armed force. "Those who think in terms of economic sanctions should also think in terms of war". The new policy would involve the United States "determining who are the aggressors in the world", would expose the United States to reprisals and would necessitate the maintenance by the United States of armed forces far beyond those required for the defence of the Western Hemisphere. How much more effective, he claimed, would it be for the United States to revert to their traditional policy. "Our country standing apart can make a contribution of transcendent service in holding aloft the banner of moral relationships". When it

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came to explaining how this contribution was to be effected Mr. Hoover, however, apparently could do no more than suggest that "the American people should express unhesitatingly their indignation against wrong and persecution and should aid the suffering".

7. Mr. Hoover's sentiments were shared by some speakers in a debate in the Senate on February 1st on the subject of the French Mission. All the best known isolationists were in full cry and much will be heard of the President's secret diplomacy and attempt to entangle the nation in the affairs of Europe. In general, however, the criticism in Congress so far has been directed not so much against the principle of supplying aircraft to France as against the secrecy with which the whole affair had been conducted. Various subsidiary points were raised such as the wisdom of allowing secret information to be given to foreign air forces, and the effect of any French orders on the United States rearmament programme. Senator Lodge, too, started a new hare by calling for an assurance that no part of the 2000 million dollar stabilization fund had been used to provide credits for the French government to facilitate their purchase of aircraft. The burden of criticism, both on the Republican and the Democratic side was, however, directed primarily at the secrecy with which the President was conducting his whole foreign policy. As Senator Hiram Johnson said "The fundamental question is shall we be eased into war and our people never know it? Shall we be in the position of men and women who are carried into war without their

knowledge/

knowledge or shall we be entitled to knowledge if we are being carried into war?" This call for a clearer definition of the President's intentions is echoed in several of this morning's newspapers.

8. All these matters would sooner or later have had to be ventilated in Congress but the accident to the Douglas bomber has brought them to the fore at a time which was not of the President's choosing. He had, I think, intended to get his defence programme through before provoking the more violent clash of opinion which must become apparent when the neutrality Act is up for discussion. His tactics are still believed to be to keep the question of amending that Act as far as possible in the background until much later in the Session when at a time judged suitable Senator Pittman will produce a proposal to allow the President latitude to put on a "cash and carry" basis not only raw materials etc. but also weapons and munitions of war. Such an amended act would make possible the continued export even in wartime of arms, aeroplanes and munitions to the Powers who have the cash with which to buy them and the ships in which to transport them across the ocean. I have heard it said by people who favour such a course that it may in the long run be all to the good that Congress should blow off steam now and be left in a calmer frame of mind by the time the neutrality debates begin. On the other hand, the "New York Times", which rightly praises the President's purpose, is critical of his secretive methods/

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methods which are creating, it says, misgivings at home and abroad. It urges him to come out into the open now and recommend to Congress the revision of the Neutrality Act. It would also like him to ask Congress to withhold from aggressor nations the right to purchase weapons in American markets even when only an "undeclared war" is being fought, as in the case of Japan. Such action would, the paper claims, substitute open for secret diplomacy and carry a message to the aggressor nations which they could not possibly misconstrue.

9. I am sending copies of this despatch to His Majesty's Ambassador at Paris and to the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Canada.

I have the honour to be,

with the highest respect,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient,
humble servant,

(SGD) V.A.L. MALLET,

H.M. Chargé d'Affaires.

V.A.L. MALLET