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Today And Tomorrow

By Walter Lippmann

An Estimate Of American Public Opinion About Foreign Affairs

NOWADAYS anyone who wishes to make an estimate of public opinion must begin by asking how much he may rely upon the returns from the Gallup and the Fortune polls, for whether or not they are in fact correct, the leaders of opinion and the people at large follow these polls with close attention. The people are eager to know what the people are thinking, and there are no measures of popular opinion that have a comparable authority.

The authority of these polls has two main supports. The first is that, when they were tested by the election returns of 1936 and 1938, they showed not a perfect but a high degree of accuracy. Actual election returns are the only absolutely conclusive test of the reliability of these polls.

While we know that these polls can go wholly wrong, as witness the Literary Digest poll in 1938 after its many previous successes, the Gallup and Fortune polls have thus far proved themselves in general substantially right by the test of the election returns. This may be due in part to good luck. It may be due wholly to the fact that the directors of these two polls have, as they believe, discovered and eliminated the cause of the error in the Literary Digest poll.

2 Polls Believed Soundly Based

THE MOST careful students of this new branch of political science are, I think, on the whole convinced that Dr. Gallup's institute and Fortune magazine are proceeding on sound scientific principles. There is to begin with no doubt whatever of their entire good faith. They have invited investigation and, since their results have so often run counter to the wishes and the interests of politicians and editors all over the country, it is safe to conclude that any bias would have been detected and exposed.

Moreover, the two polls are a check the one upon the other, and since in general they have thus far tended to agree, the probability of their being accurate is greatly increased. Then, too, the method they employ is not some new tricky device but in principle the same method used by good reporters. The returns are derived from interviews with men and women all over the country and in various walks of life. The only difference between the polls and the experienced reporter who goes traveling to estimate opinion is that the polls interview more persons than any one reporter can interview and are able to take greater precautions against interviewing too many persons who think alike.

Nevertheless, in a field like that of opinion about foreign affairs there are no election returns with which to test the absolute accuracy of the polls, and the question is whether there are any other objective tests that can be applied. The polls have shown, for example, that American opinion is not indifferent but strongly partisan on the issues raised by aggression in Europe and Asia. They have shown an increasing concern about the outcome of the conflict between the dynamic and the static powers of Europe. They have shown a rapidly growing belief that if war broke out, the United States would be unable to remain securely isolated.

Armament Increase Widely Favored

IF WE WISH to test these returns by something tangible, what test can we use? The surest test, it seems to me, is not what has been said in Congress but what has actually been voted in Congress on the proposals to expand armaments. These votes have been overwhelming. Moreover, the opposition to armaments has melted away spectacularly since the autumn. Four months ago the best observers in Washington were saying that the President would get his program only after a long struggle. In January when Congress met, there was distinct evidence that the alignment on defense might follow the alignment in regard to the New Deal, with the Republicans and conservative Democrats opposing the program. But there has been no such opposition.

Having crossed the continent recently and talked with anti-New Dealers of all sorts in many places, it is evident to me why there has been no such division on the armament program. The plain fact is that Congress has been representing the real opinion of the great mass of the people. That opinion is that the aggressions abroad do concern the United States and that increased armaments are necessary. The votes in Congress on national defense confirm the returns from the two polls.

The polls measure opinion as it is, or more accurately, as it was within a week or a fortnight of the publication of the returns. Successive polls on the same question show the trends of opinion as they have been developing, but, of course, the most important question for statesmen is not what opinion is today, but what it is going to be later on. How is one to estimate the answer to that question?

There is no certain way of predicting the development of opinion. But we can say that the opinion will be made by the impact of events upon the mentality of the people.

Specific Issues Arouse Feelings

IT MAY BE SAID, I think, that the mental attitude of the American people toward foreign affairs is determined initially by the fact they make strong moral judgments on any issue in which they are interested. The American conscience is historically and fundamentally a Puritan conscience, and, therefore, almost incapable of remaining for long morally detached. This is, I believe, the clew to the difference between isolationist sentiment since the World War and isolationist sentiment before the war.

The traditional sentiment of isolation had its source in the fact that the people knew little about Europe and, therefore, cared little. That absence of information rather than moral indifference was its cause is proved, it seems to me, by the fact that all through American history the people have become quickly aroused on specific issues abroad such as the treatment of Ireland, or the despotism of the Czars, or the massacre of the Armenians.

Post-war isolationist sentiment, on the other hand, has been based not on absence of information but on moral disillusionment. The thing which repelled Americans from post-war Europe was the fact that they were morally disgusted with their former allies. They were driven to the conclusion that all the European powers were morally alike. Precisely because they are moralists to the core of their beings, they became disappointed moralists, that is to say cynics, when they contemplated the Treaty of Versailles and the oppression of the German republic. This was their mood when they approved the neutrality act. They set up an embargo on munitions because they felt that there should be a moral embargo against Europe as a whole.

Public No Longer Neutral In Thought

IF THIS IS correct interpretation of isolationist sentiment, that it operates only when the moral issue is not clear, then one can hazard a guess as to how opinion has been developing and how it will develop in response to events abroad. The actions of Hitler, for example, have already modified radically the post-war feeling that there is no moral difference between the powers of Europe. The polls confirm what any observer can see for himself, that the American people have decided that there is a fundamental difference between the democracies and the dictatorships.

There is no real doubt whatever that the people are not indifferent and that they are not neutral in thought. But it also is true that the degree to which they wish to intervene in Europe is a direct reflection of their own feeling as to how clearly the democracies abroad draw the moral issue. Thus Munich, for example, caused a reversion to isolationist feeling, because once again it seemed to the people that the British and French were abandoning the moral issue. On the other hand, the rearmament of Great Britain and the recovery in France have worked in the opposite direction.

In short, insofar as the dictators use violence and insofar as the democracies resist it, American opinion, which is always moved by moral judgments, tends to leave isolation and become interventionist. In so far as the democracies retreat, and surrender and compromise the moral issues, American opinion becomes cynical and isolationist.

Moral Stakes Wake U. S. Frontier Spirit

IT MAY BE asked whether this anatomy of American opinion does not leave out of account the immense hatred for war and the profound desire for peace. My own view is that American pacifism is not at all, like some pacifism abroad, caused by weakness and fear and decadence. American pacifism is itself the product of the Puritan conscience, which hates the waste and destruction and lawlessness and violence and unrighteousness of war as such. Where the issue between nations is not a moral issue, the Americans are, therefore, very pacifist. But they are not at all pacifist when they feel that something morally vital is at stake in a specific war.

The frontier spirit remains, and Americans are, once they are exasperated, very quick on the trigger.

Of all the people in America who become most impassioned about a moral issue in foreign affairs, the pacifists, the morally outraged pacifists, are the most ardent. The pacifists are, so to speak, the radical wing of American Puritanism. Mr. Hoover was profoundly right therefore, when he said recently that the massacre of thousands of civilians by the aerial bombardment of London and Paris would produce an uncontrollable indignation in this country. The Americans would have to be a much older nation, a much more tired and morally disillusioned nation than they are, in order to sit by and be willing to do nothing about a calculated horror of that sort.

Explosion Imminent In Public Opinion

IF THIS IS correct, then there are very practical conclusions to be drawn from it both here and abroad. The dictators should realize that as indicated by the successive polls, by the tendency of the votes in Congress and by the drift of sentiment as seen by observers, American opinion is now in a state of imminent explosion. A spectacular unprovoked act of violence would almost certainly touch off that explosion. The European democracies and their allies should realize that another Munich will cause another return to isolationism, that they may expect assistance only insofar as they first show that they help themselves.

And the American Congress should realize that the only sure way to keep the American people out of war is to do everything that can now be done to prevent war. Legislation designed to keep America out after war breaks out will almost certainly be shattered by the moral partisanship of the people. Therefore, the only legislation which can surely be effective is legislation which makes clear before the fatal decision is taken abroad that war is too dangerous a gamble to be risked by the dictators.

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