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Defense of the Free World in the Atomic Age [An Address by Dr. James B. Conant for the Committee on the Present Danger, June 3, 1951]

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Committee on the Present Danger

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The Defense of the Free World in the Atomic Age

Address

by

DR. JAMES B. CONANT

for the

COMMITTEE ON THE PRESENT DANGER

June 3, 1951

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This address, the thirteenth of a series of weekly broadcasts under the auspices of the Committee on the Present Danger, was delivered Sunday, June 3, 1951, over the network of the Mutual Broadcasting System by Dr. James B. Conant, President of Harvard University and Chairman of the Committee on the Present Danger.

June 3, 1951

The Defense of the Free World in the Atomic Age

I am speaking this evening on behalf of the Committee on the Present Danger, a non-partisan group concerned with strengthening the military defense of the free world. In particular, without neglecting the situation in the Far East, we are concerned with the need for increasing the defense of Europe on the ground.

What, you may ask, is the present danger to which we are addressing the attention of the American people? In a word, it is the danger of leaving Western Europe exposed to Communist invasion at a time when the Soviet Union has started to manufacture atomic bombs. In September, 1949, when President Truman announced that the Russians had exploded their first atomic bomb, the whole world picture altered. It was then clear that the atomic age had dawned sooner than some of us had prophesied and far sooner than all of us had hoped. Today it is evident to all that before long the Soviet Union will have a stockpile of atomic bombs sufficient to constitute a real military threat to the industrial centers of other nations. At just what date this growing menace will have assumed formidable proportions I am not prepared to say. But clearly now the United States has lost its monopoly of the manufacture of atomic weapons; it is only a question of time before we will be living

in an age when the possibility of the destruction of many vital centers from the air is a danger common to both the Soviet Union and ourselves.

Such being the case, I submit that every reasonable person in the free nations of the world must have deep concern with the following questions: How can we find a way out of this atomic age without a global war? How can we bring to an end the threat to our industrial civilization without surrendering to Communism or fighting World War III? Possibly there is no answer to these questions, so at least some believe.

A few, a very few, would advocate what amounts to a surrender, namely, the destruction of our atomic stockpile now without any return concessions on the part of the Soviet Union. It is hard to see how anyone except a convinced pacifist or a Communist can make a rational case for such a course of action. Indeed, one need not examine it further.

A more prevalent view, though one rarely expressed in public with complete frankness, is that labelled with the tag "preventive war." Some Americans appear to be convinced that there is no way out of the atomic age except through the holocaust of a global war. And if one accepts this premise, it can be argued the sooner the better; it can be urged that we had best take diplomatic and military measures which might well bring about World War III this spring, for at a later date the Soviet stockpile will be greater. To my mind all such argumentation

borders on the treacherous; it is flirting with treason against all that is best in Western civilization. I reject out of hand, as I feel a vast majority of this nation rejects, any idea that another global war can spell anything but disaster. We must find another way out of the atomic age and I believe we can, provided the free peoples of the world are willing to endure a long period of anxiety and make the sacrifices that are required.

Let me state my thesis in a few words: if a global war can be avoided and Western Europe made secure against invasion from the east, then in the course of years negotiations with the Soviet Union could begin to take a realistic turn. On the other hand, if by subversion or aggression Communism should reach the Channel ports, a global war would seem inevitable unless the United States were prepared to bow before the might of the whole Eurasian continent under Soviet rule.

Thanks to the Marshall Plan, the danger of Communist control of France and the Low Countries through revolution seems now remote. Against direct military aggression, the same countries are now defended by the striking power of the United States Strategic Air Force armed with the atomic bomb. This deterrent power I believe to be very great. If Russian troops should start to overrun Western Europe tomorrow, I believe the Russian industrial centers would be destroyed from the air. Thus at this moment there is a balance in the West between the Communist world and the free nations. But it is a balance

of two threats—no true balance of equal forces. Russia can threaten to march its troops to the English Channel, and at the moment the only counter the free world has to offer is the horrible prospect of an annihilation of Russian cities by our atomic bombs. As long as this sort of balance obtains, no basis for a real settlement can exist. We cannot forego the potential use of the atomic bomb, frightful as such use might be, as long as there is no way of stopping the movement of Russian troops by adequate ground defenses.

I, therefore, conclude that a prerequisite for peace is the defense of Europe on the ground. Adequate armies composed of soldiers of all the Atlantic Treaty nations must be built up and provided with the most modern weapons. Once this is done and the free peoples of Europe feel they have a reasonable chance of beating back an invasion of Russian troops, the whole international picture changes. Given time, and it will take years not months, the Soviet rulers may see the wisdom of exploring with candor proposals for disarmament. Today, even to think of such proposals seems fantastic optimism, I readily admit. But climates of opinion change with remarkable speed, as history shows. And we who believe that a global war is no solution to the problems of an atomic age must advocate actions which will alter the climate of opinion. We must advocate actions directed towards the development of military situations susceptible at some later date to modification by a gradual program of disarmament including the

atomic bomb. Therefore, however paradoxical it may appear, I believe the steps now being taken to build up the ground forces for the defense of Europe are steps away from a global war and towards the goal of peace.

Let me make it plain that I am not saying that the case for the defense of Western Europe rests solely on the argument I have just presented. There are a number of compelling reasons why it is to the advantage of the United States to hold the tide of Communist aggression at the present lines. These are the reasons which moved this nation to institute the Marshall Plan. They are still valid and have no reference to whether or not the Soviet Union has started to manufacture atomic bombs. But over and above these former reasons for holding France, Italy and the other Atlantic Treaty nations secure against Communist aggression is the fact that only by so doing is there any chance of moving towards a more peaceful world picture three, five, or ten years hence.

I am well aware that opinions have been expressed with great frequency and violence that the defense of Europe by ground forces is impossible. Such an assertion involves economic, political and military considerations. As to the latter, I should like to remind you of two facts. First, that General Eisenhower has publicly expressed the opinion that the job can be done if the free nations of the world have the will to do it; second, that Dr. Vannevar Bush, who has considerable expert knowledge of modern weapons, believes that the

technological advances of recent years enormously favor the defense of land positions against mechanized and armored troops. He points out that at a not too far distant date even the use of atomic weapons for the support of ground forces may be a possibility for the United States. Without going into details or probing into secret matters, I believe it fair to say that if properly armed, the forces of the free nations will be in a position to defend a line in Europe before too long. And personally I hope that these technological changes will make it possible for armies based on the manpower of the present Atlantic Treaty nations to face Russia and its satellites on equal terms without calling on Germany to rearm. At all events, even now we are not in a position where we must match man for man, where we must mobilize an army equal in size to the Russian hordes. In short, the defense of Europe on the ground is by no means the hopeless undertaking that some have claimed.

Turning for a moment to the economic and political aspects of the problem, one thing seems clear. We must have close cooperation among the nations banded together under the Atlantic Treaty Organization. While much remains to be done, few will deny that great progress has been made in the last six months. Since the arrival of General Eisenhower in Europe, the trend has been in the right direction. Within this country the dispatching of American troops to Europe has been established as a bipartisan policy; likewise the

rearmament program and a partial mobilization for a long period to come. In the debate which is now in progress little has been said that can give comfort to those who once advocated a purely hemispheric stand against Communist aggression; nothing that would support a smaller armed force than three to four million men. General MacArthur himself has said: "The issues are global and so interlocked that to consider the problems of one sector oblivious to those of another is to court disaster for the whole." There can be no real issue as between concern with the military situation in the Far East and concern with the rapid building of the defense of Europe.

United action by three nations—the United States, Great Britain and France—is essential to the defense of Europe; and if my thesis is correct, essential for the hopes of peace. But each of these nations is involved in military and diplomatic problems in Asia and Asia Minor which are to some degree peculiar to each country. Quite apart from their common concern as members of the United Nations they have, because of history, their own areas of preoccupation. Korea, Iran, Indo-China are words that have special meanings for the United States, Great Britain and France. If we can have a united policy as regards Europe, is it not likewise essential that we have a united policy in the Far East and in the Middle East as well? If the free world is to remain free and secure, it must be united; this seems but common sense. To this end the pub-

lic in the United States, Great Britain and France must endeavor to understand the significance of the military and diplomatic action of each of the three nations in the Middle East and the Far East as well as Europe. One could hope that the Atlantic Treaty nations could before long evolve a mechanism by which the best military opinion of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the others could come to agreement as to an over-all Asiatic as well as European military policy. Surely if we are to defend Europe together, we must before long agree on a common global policy for the major Atlantic Treaty nations.

In conclusion, let me refer to a bill which has just been introduced into Congress to authorize the expenditure of 8½ billion dollars for military and economic aid to the other free nations of the world. Provisions for an appropriation of this order of magnitude are a necessity, we believe—a necessity from the point of view of the American people. The Committee on the Present Danger suggests that every citizen of this country might well follow the accounts of the hearings on this foreign aid measure. We believe the subject to be of vital importance and shall discuss it in more detail at an early date.

Thanks to the courtesy of the Mutual network, we have been able during the past three months to present a series of Sunday evening talks on the present danger. In this, the concluding broadcast, I wish to express the appreciation of the Committee to the Mutual Broadcasting System. We have emphasized the need for

the partial mobilization of America, the rearmament of Europe, the defense of the free world against military aggression. We do not believe World War III to be inevitable. Quite the contrary. The measures we advocate are designed to build a road out of the atomic age—a road to peace.

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