

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXVI (No. 4)

APRIL, 1922

NO. 791

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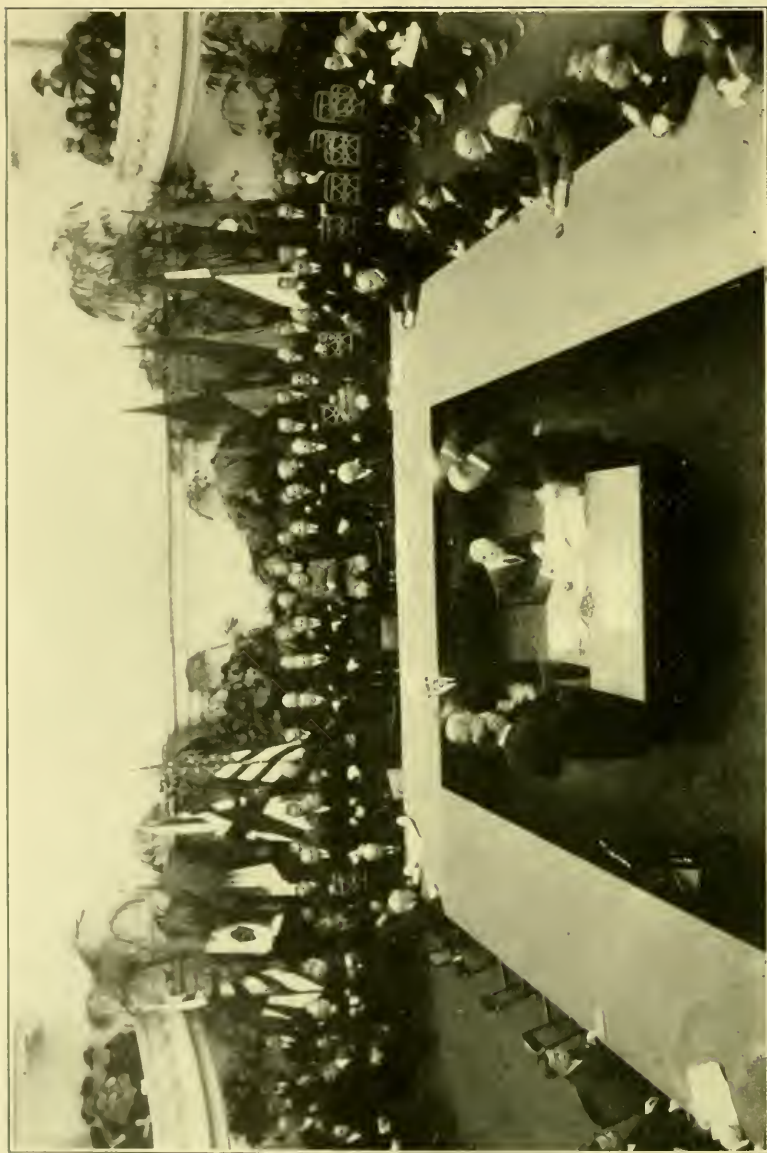
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LAST SESSION OF THE WASHINGTON CONFERENCE.

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THE WASHINGTON ARMS CONFERENCE.

BY ROLAND HUGINS.

AMONG the persons who in our time avow an interest in the establishment of a stable world peace are certain invincible optimists; and no matter how painful the immediate past or how sinister the present outlook they remain hopeful that the ancient evil of war will soon be eradicated. Persons of this disposition professed to see in the recent Conference on the Limitation of Naval Armaments and Far Eastern Problems, which convened in Washington on November 11, 1921 and concluded its labors on February 6, 1922, the beginning of a new era and a better order. They expected that the chosen representatives of the great world powers, spokesmen for nearly the whole of the naval and a large part of the military force now left in the world, meeting at once in the calm atmosphere of harmonious deliberation and in the after glare of the greatest armed conflict of history, could and would lay the foundation, or at least the corner stone, of permanent peace.

Now that the Conference is ended we see how distant its results are from expectations of these dawn-makers for the millenium. The speeches have been delivered, the resolutions have been passed, and the treaties have been signed. However satisfied the delegates may have felt as they sailed for home, surely they were not under the impression that they had just read the final obsequies over Mars. Great navies, though a little clipped, will continue to ride the seas. Vast colonial empires are still ringed with bayonets. There are today eight million men under arms in Europe and Asia, while Fear and Hate march along half the Frontiers of the world.

At the opposite extreme from the incurable optimists have stood groups of skeptics and scoffers. The radicals in America and Europe said before the Conference met that it must, of necessity, prove a failure. For what, they asked, is to be expected of politicians,—of the same governing classes but who lately maneuvered

the nations into war, and then imposed on them an infamous peace? Does one gather figs from thistles, or goodwill from diplomats? In this distain of the radicals there was, perhaps, an element of professional jealousy, since radicals have their own sovereign remedies, mostly economic, for the ills of society, and they look with suspicion on all other doctors of mankind. Yet the radicals were not the only skeptics. Since the Conference closed we have been assured by several men in public life that the Conference was a fraud or a fiasco. Senator Robert M. LaFollette, for instance, has said that the one primary object of the Conference was "to make the world safe for imperialism." He declared: "The ink is hardly yet dry upon the signatures of the delegates of the United States to new treaties and a new alliance which in many respects are more iniquitous and fraught with greater perils to the United States than was the treaty of Versailles. The 'four power treaty' is nothing more or less than a binding alliance with the three great imperialistic nations of the present time, which pledges the United States to place all her resources of men and money at their disposal whenever they are attacked." Another adverse opinion has been expressed by Norman H. Davis, Undersecretary of State under President Wilson. He thinks that the Conference has been "anything but an American diplomatic victory," and that the Chinese and Russian people will probably conclude that the United States has abandoned its "traditional friendship for them by entering into a pact with their oppressors." There is this to be noted about their hostile comments, both those quoted above and most others, that they come from irreconcilables and Democrats, and that in them may be heard echoes of long-standing political enmities. Furthermore the critics of the Conference concentrate on its weakest aspects: the four power pact and the Far Eastern compromises. What have these detractors to say of the ten-year naval holiday, of the restrictions on the size of war vessels, or of the return of Wei-Hai-Wei to China?

The truth is that both those who expected everything of the Conference and those who expected nothing of it, have been disappointed. The Conference accomplished something, and that something bulks creditably large considering the limitations under which the Conference worked. Land armaments were not under discussion. The territorial and economic maladjustments of Europe, Africa and the Near East were not on the agenda. And furthermore, two large nations, Germany and Russia, had no representatives

present. The Conference could hardly have been considered an attempt to examine and solve the whole problem of world peace. And more than all this, the Conference was intangibly but very definitely restricted by tacid assumptions, mental and moral, of its participants. The delegates certainly exuded a sense of superiority and self-esteem; as a group they showed an ethical condescension towards the rest of the world, and yet in national units they rather lorded it over one another. This attitude is admirably illustrated by the experience of the French delegation. The Conference cheered and complimented Briand for his sophistical defense of militarism in France, and then later united to denounce the perfectly reasonable demand of the French for ninety thousand tons in submarines—"the only naval weapon which the poor can afford."

I was present at the last session of the Conference, and saw the treaties signed. That morning, February 6, the small auditorium of the Continental Hall was crowded, for besides the delegates and advisory staffs and newspaper correspondents, about fifteen hundred spectators were packed about the hollow square of tables and in the galleries. The delegates signed in national groups, in alphabetical order: Americans, Belgians, British, Chinese, French, Italians, Japanese, Dutch (Netherlands) and Portuguese. The American delegation numbered four,—Hughes, Lodge, Root and Underwood. Hughes was easily the most distinguished looking man, American or foreign, in the Conference. Some of the countries had but one or two representatives, while the British had the most, a line of seven, headed by Balfour, and tapering off to the Indian, Saastri, in a white turban. The treaties to which the plenipotentiaries affixed their signatures that day were the five-power naval limitation treaty; the nine-power submarine and poison gas treaty; the nine-power general Far Eastern treaty; the nine-power Chinese tariff treaty; and the four-power Pacific treaty supplement, excluding the principal Japanese Islands from the scope of the pact. The four-power Pacific treaty had already been signed, as originally drafted, on December 13th. And a separate treaty on Shantung had been signed by the Chinese and Japanese on February 4th.

After the delegates, amid rounds of applause, had duly signed the documents, President Harding delivered the closing address. It was on the whole a felicitous and sensible speech, although fat with congratulations—congratulations to mankind in general; congratulations to the nations participating; congratulations to the American delegates; and, by implication, congratulations to the

Administration and the Republican Party. The President asserted: "If the world has hungered for new assurance it may feast at the banquet which the conference has spread." And again: "It is all so fine, so gratifying, so reassuring, so full of promise, that above the murmurings of a world sorrow not yet silenced, above the groans which come of excessive burdens not yet lifted but now to be lightened, above the discouragements of a world struggling to find itself after surpassing upheaval, there is the note of rejoicing which is not alone ours or yours, or of all of us, but comes from the hearts of men of all the world." It is unfair to reflect how reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson that fast phrase sounds?

The sagest paragraph in the President's speech was perhaps the following: "It is not pretended that the pursuit of peace and the limitations of armament are new conceits, or that the conference is a new conception either in settlement of war or in writing of conscience of international relationship. Indeed, it is not new to have met in the realization of war's supreme penalties. The Hague conventions are examples of the one, the conference of Vienna, of Berlin, of Versailles are outstanding instances of the other." Historical retrospect of this sort brings to mind (though Mr. Harding may not have so intended) many sobering reflections.

The activities and accomplishments of the Washington Conference fall into four groups.

First, the leading five naval powers, the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy agreed to suspend the building of new capital ships and other warcraft, except for purposes of replacement, during the next ten years; and furthermore fixed the ratios that their naval armaments should bear one to another.

Second, the four "Pacific Powers", Japan, Great Britain, the United States and France, negotiated an agreement to respect and safeguard their respective interests in the Far East.

Third, the nine powers represented at the Conference drafted several new rules of international law, intended to ameliorate the horrors of war.

Fourth, the Conference examined the territorial and economic situation in the Far East, principally and ostensibly for the purpose of obtaining a greater measure of independence and of self-determination for China.

These four sets of activities need to be considered separately, for the values of the resultant products by no means stand on a par.

The suspension of competitive naval building is the big outstanding achievement of the Conference, the one performance supremely worth while. The nations agree that during the next decade at least the race for supremacy on the seas shall be halted. They have struck an equilibrium, and allotted definite quotas of capital ships: to the United States 525,000 tons, to Great Britain 525,000 tons, to the Japanese Empire 315,000 tons, to France 175,000 tons, to Italy 175,000 tons, with auxiliary craft in proportion. They have decreed that no single ship in their navies shall exceed 35,000 tons. The gain in economy is patent, particularly in view of comparative expenditures, considering, for example, that a single modern battleship costs over \$40,000,000, whereas the great Capitol building in Washington cost but \$20,000,000. For nations struggling along under huge loads of paper bonds, barely able or unable to balance their annual budgets, to continue to throw huge sums into the bottomless pit of competitive armaments is a folly against which the taxpayers in all countries protest. Naval rivalry is extravagance on a colossal scale; and it is something worse; it is a direct incitement to war. In the years that preceded the outbreak of the world war in 1914 there were a number of armament scares in Europe. In 1909, for instance, a wave of hysterical suspicion swept England when it was learned that Germany was accelerating her naval program. We in America do not easily realize with what intense anxiety the rest of the world has watched the recent rush of the United States towards naval supremacy. Neither the British or the Japanese credit this country with purely unselfish motives: why should the Yankees want an overwhelming fleet unless they intend to dominate the trade, the shipping and the markets of the world? The fleet of the United States already stood, last year, almost equal to that of Great Britain; in five years it would have been superior; and in a long period of competitive building the wealth and resources of this country would have made American mastery certain. When, therefore, Mr. Hughes, on the first day of the Conference offered in the name of the United States to forego the advantages that fate had placed in American hands, a sigh of relief and satisfaction was breathed in all the leading chancelleries of the world. The Japanese and the British in particular had received a concrete assurance that the United States had no aggressive designs, entertained no grandiose scheme for hegemony, and harbored no secret ambition to dictate world policies. And the American

plan for limitation went through, very little modified even in its details.

If the treaty for naval limitation was a victory, the four power Pacific Pact was a capitulation. Under its terms Great Britain, Japan, the United States, and France agree that in the event any controversy shall arise between them concerning their insular possessions in the Pacific Ocean they shall all consult together, and in the further event that their insular possessions shall be threatened by the "aggression" of any outside power they shall consult together to determine upon the most efficient method of defense. Although stated in cautious terms, this is a military alliance; it is intended to supersede the British-Japanese defensive and offensive alliance, by widening and strengthening that compact between the two great island empires of the East and West. If it is not an alliance, of what use can it possibly be to any of the four nations? And if it is an alliance what obligations does it impose on the United States? Obviously we are committed to back our Allies; to aid them in retaining their present possessions, particularly the island territories which they recently seized from Germany and from Russia; and to defend them from any foe that threatens their spoils. This pact was concluded in secret; it was not on the agenda of the Conference when it convened. But it seems almost impossible for imperial statesmen to meet in an international conclave without seeking to do something for their friend Status Quo. Alliances are the meat and drink of diplomats; and no conference is complete without some effort to link hands. Mr. Hughes and the other American delegates were led into the present attempt to fasten old world international politics on America by the argument that the British-Japanese alliance was impossible to break without its formal repudiation by one of its parties; and that therefore the only way out was for the United States and France to join the circle. President Harding misunderstood the scope of the treaty; and there has developed a determined opposition in the Senate. The treaty ought to be killed; but if it is passed, with or without reservations, it should be allowed to become a dead letter. It is an entanglement that answers no need of this country, and can only involve us in trouble that others may stir up in future years.

The nine powers at the Conference attempted to read two new rules into international law, the first prohibiting the use of submarines as commerce destroyers, and the second barring the use

of asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases in warfare. Pious resolutions of this sort, passed in time of peace, undoubtedly express the conscience of mankind. The trouble is that in time of war conscience goes to sleep, and these rules seem merely to afford opportunity for mutual recriminations. The attempt to prohibit absolutely the use of lethal and other gas is a bold stroke; if it sticks it will be both a blessing and a marvel. In the past certain practices have been outlawed, such as the use of dum dum bullets, the poisoning of wells, the slaughter of prisoners and the bombardment of open towns. But these barbarous practices, however successfully carried out, could scarcely have much effect on the outcome of a whole campaign, whereas in the ban on chemical warfare we have an attempt to eliminate in its entirety a weapon and a method of modern warfare. In the hands of a war-mad humanity such a rule is likely to prove brittle.

Lastly, the Conference undertook to pour oil on the troubled waters of the Far East, and to solve the problems which imperialism has created in China and Siberia. For the future the promises are clear and explicit; the powers bind themselves to hold wide the Open Door, and not to acquire territory or carve out spheres of influence in China. Japan announced her intention of evacuating Siberia as soon as conditions warranted a withdrawal, and Mr. Hughes made it clear that he thought that the time to withdraw had arrived now. A few weeks before the Conference closed there was an outbreak of protests in the public press; Japan, it was said, had won a great diplomatic victory; she had made herself impregnable in Asia through the Agreement of the United States not to build fortifications and naval bases in the Far East; and she had conceded practically nothing in return. Prodded by these criticisms Mr. Hughes and Mr. Balfour employed their good offices with China and Japan; that is to say, they put pressure on them. At this stage of the negotiations one was reminded of the observation of the French philosopher: "What makes us so often discontented with negotiators is that they almost always abandon the interest of their friends for that of the success of the negotiation, because they wish to have the credit of succeeding in their undertaking." The outcome was a treaty between China and Japan, signed two days before the Conference closed, returning to China the former German leased territory of Kiaochow. In restoring the Tsingtao-Tsinanfu Railway and various mining properties in Shantung, Japan drove a hard bargain; it is expensive to be exploited. But

all the gestures were graceful, and to cap the ceremony Mr. Balfour offered to restore Wei-Hai-Wei, a British leased port at the tip of Shantung. Generally speaking the Conference left the position of China somewhat improved. We can scarcely dispute the opinion of Mr. Sze: "While certain questions will have to be settled in the future, the Chinese delegation wishes to express its satisfaction with the results of this Conference."

Taking the sum of it all, considering the things which this meeting of alien minds accomplished, the things which were left undone or done badly, and the things which were not even attempted, the world can be said to be further along than if the Conference had never been held. Americans have reason to be satisfied with the fact that under the leadership and initiative of the United States the costly and dangerous competition in naval armaments has been for the time being arrested, that international suspicions have been allayed, and that a friendlier spirit has been fostered among the great powers. That much the Americans achieved; and they paid for it with honest coin: the good intentions which lay at the bottom of their hearts.