

## THE WEASEL WORDS OF MR. WILSON

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### Morning Speech of Theodore Roosevelt at St. Louis, May 31, 1916

I AM hereto speak for preparedness, and I wish at the outset to meet not an argument but a misstatement made by those who know it to be such—the statement that this preparedness movement is organized by the munition manufacturers. That statement is a falsehood, and I challenge any human being to produce evidence other than will show that ninety-nine out of every hundred men prominent in the preparedness cause have nothing whatsoever to do with any munition manufacturer.

In what I am about to say I shall speak with all courtesy and respect on the very vital points wherein I completely differ from the position taken by the President in his Memorial Day address. I speak of him because I can make my point clear only by taking up the position of the most prominent of the champions of the other side. I don't have to deal with Mr. Bryan and Mr. Ford. I regard them both as nice, amiable men, and I like them in private life. But I decline to take part in any such wild mental joy ride as would be necessary if I had to discuss seriously their attitude on public questions.

The President said that he was for "universal voluntary training," but that America did not wish anything but "the compulsion of the spirit of Americanism." Now, "universal voluntary training," as an expression, is precisely similar to any other contradiction in terms. It is like saying, in speaking of a truant law for the schools, that you believe in "universal obligatory attendance at the public schools for every child that does not wish to stay away."

#### Weasel Words.

In connection with the words "universal training" the word "voluntary" has exactly the same effect that an acid has on an alkali—a neutralizing effect. One of our defects as a nation is a tendency to use what have been called "weasel words." When a weasel sucks an egg the meat is sucked out of the egg; and if you

use a "weasel word" after another there is nothing left of the other. It is possible to have universal training. It is possible to have voluntary training. But when President Wilson uses the word "voluntary" to qualify the word "universal" he is using a "weasel word," which has sucked all the meaning out of "universal." The two words flatly contradict one another.

Again, the President said that "the acid test" was "about to be applied to business men to see whether they would allow their employees to volunteer." Now, I take flat issue with that conception of patriotism which makes the man of means heroically prepare to defend himself by having his employee trained to fight for him. I stand for the system under which the business man and the employee, or if they are too old, then the son of the business man and the son of the employee, will both have the same training, will sleep in the same dog tent, will eat the same rations, and go on the same hike, and if war comes will fight shoulder to shoulder.

I don't believe in that species of patriotism by which one man declares for it and the other puts the declaration into practice. I don't believe in cultivating that fine fervor which will enable the business man to let the other fellow do his preparing and fighting. I do not believe in taxing the patriotic business man by asking him to let his employees volunteer and thereby put himself at a disadvantage compared to his unpatriotic business rival who follows the opposite course. Still less do I believe in letting the rich man stay at home while his hired man trains for war and goes to war.

#### **It Applies to Us All.**

What I say I mean to make applicable to all of us here; to all Americans everywhere. I am not asking you to let the other fellow prepare so that he may do your fighting for you. I am asking you to prepare, you yourselves; all of us here; all Americans everywhere.

Consider what this "acid test" of which the President speaks amounts to in practice. It means that the employer who is patriotic is to put himself at a disadvantage, as compared with his rival, by letting his business be hurt by having his men spend their time in being trained while his rival is not compelled to follow the same course. Apparently the President doesn't here consider the possibility of the employer being patriotic enough to wish to face the same risk that his employee would have to face. In his highest flight of imagination about love of country, the President can only

conceive of that kind of "acid test" which will enable the stay-at-home man heroically to permit some other man to learn how to fight so as to defend both!

This is what the "compulsion of the American spirit" of which the President speaks means in actual practice. Such "compulsion of the American spirit" will drive into service the patriotic and disinterested man who yields to the feeling of love of country, but will leave out of service the cold and selfish man who is not stirred by patriotism. The President advocates the kind of "compulsion" which drives the honorable man to the sacrifice of material well-being and even of life, while it leaves the selfish man and the coward to make money at home, to profit basely at the expense of this gallant brother. Such a system is as wicked as it is foolish and ignoble.

### A Premium on Cowardice.

The other day a young friend of mine, a kinsman by marriage, recited to me a shocking incident. He was listening to the talk in a smoking car on one of our big railway lines. A big, prosperous man, evidently one who had made a great deal of money and who was boasting about it, was jeering at preparedness. He said that his father was one of five brothers who had come from Vermont and gone West. At the time of the Civil War four of them went into the army. Two of them were killed and two were broken down in health. The fifth brother was this man's father. This man said: "My father was too wise to go to war; he stayed out, and he made a fortune, while the other four fought; and I have all that fortune now. If there is a war now, I'll stay home and make money, and let other men fight!"

The "compulsion of the American spirit" of which Mr. Wilson speaks drove the four high-minded brothers, at the risk of loss of life or health, into four years' service under the flag. But the "compulsion of the American spirit" wasn't felt by the cold and selfish fifth man. He saved his own carcass, and bequeathed to his children the property which he was enabled to accumulate because better men than he fought for the Union. And this is the system, the system of putting a premium on cowardice and mere money-getting, which the President champions as representing the "compulsion of the American spirit"! Such words are worse than weasel words, because they really stand for the "weasel deeds" which suck the meaning from, which give the lie to, the high-sounding phrases

which astute and selfish politicians use when they desire to fool the people for their own personal and selfish profit.

I stand for the man who wore the blue and for the man who wore the gray, but I don't stand for the copperhead pacifist who during the Civil War stayed at home and made money because braver men than he died for the sake of duty. I ask you to apply the "acid test" to this sentence of the President, that "America does not wish anything but the compulsion of the spirit of Americanism." That spirit flamed high from '61 to '65. But even in those days it couldn't drive the copperhead or the pacifist into the ranks. It left those men at home to make fortunes and to pursue ease and comfort, while better and braver men went to the war. I am for the volunteer who volunteers to fight; I am not for the volunteer who volunteers to stay in safety at home.

#### **Cloaking Ignoble Action.**

I will take another part of the President's speech which strikingly illustrates our common and popular sin of using lofty words to cloak ignoble action or mean inaction. The President says that one of "the principles which America holds dear is that small and weak states have as much right to their sovereignty and independence as large and strong nations." I entirely agree with this fine sentiment, but only provided it is put into action in the concrete case. I don't believe in any fine sentiments that are not translated into deeds. Still less do I believe in fine sentiments that are used to cloak base and timid actions.

There are two defensible positions that can be taken by this nation in international affairs. One is that she owes nothing to any other nation, that she is not concerned with the rights of small and weak nations at all. This is a defensible position. I don't regard it as a very exalted position. But it is defensible to say that America must only consider herself and her own interests.

The other position is that, in addition to what America owes to herself, she also owes a real duty to humanity at large, to the other nations of mankind. This means that, especially where she has by treaty committed herself, she must endeavor in some way to protest against any wrong done to the liberty or life of a small, well-behaved, weak nation by a powerful and unscrupulous nation.

You can take either of those positions. I take the last. I think it is a loftier position than the first. But either position can be

taken. It is not possible, however, with self respect or regard for truth to talk in accordance with one position and act in accordance with the other. It is not possible truthfully or with self respect to say that we "hold dear the principle that small and weak states have as much right to their sovereignty and independence as large and strong nations," and then, when the concrete case arises, announce that it is our duty "to be neutral in word and thought" between the small, weak state and the large, strong nation which is robbing it of its sovereignty and independence. Yet this is precisely what President Wilson has done.

The fine phrase is that which the President used in his address yesterday. The ignoble act was that which he performed in the concrete case of Belgium. After this war began for the first sixty days I loyally supported the President in his attitude, assuming that he was right when he stated that we had no responsibility as regards Belgium. Then I became uneasy as to whether he was right. I made up my mind that I would look up the Hague Conventions for myself, and would study the matter independently. I did so, and I became convinced that the President was leading the people wrong, and that we as a people had a duty to perform; and from that day to this I have preached this duty.

#### Can't Walk Two Ways at Once.

We can't with safety walk two diverging ways at once. We can't with self-respect, we can't if we wish to escape the reproach of hypocrisy, occupy both the position that it was our duty "to be neutral in thought and deed" between Belgium and Germany, and also the position that we must "hold dear as one of our principles the right of small and weak states to sovereignty and independence." Follow one road or follow the other; don't try to follow both, under penalty of being convicted of moral dishonesty. Let us as a nation either refrain from uttering or sanctioning such a sentiment as that about "holding dear the rights of small and weak states," or, when the concrete case arises, reduce the abstract principle to practice in that concrete case. The case of Belgium exactly meets the President's fine phrase about "the principle of the right of small and weak states to sovereignty and independence." But the President's phrase was only a phrase. He feared to make it a fact. His words have been bold and vigorous. His deeds have been timid and feeble. And we the people are ultimately to blame; for in the long run our rulers behave precisely as we let them behave.

Remember that in the case of Belgium, while we were bound in honor to act under the Hague Convention, we were also required to act under the general principles of international law, as often loudly proclaimed by us, and as specifically set forth by the government of the King of Prussia, the after-time Emperor of Germany, in his action against the United States and on behalf of England at the time of the Trent affair during the Civil War. At that time Prussia protested, the protest being made by command of the King through his Foreign Minister, Herr Bernstorff, the father, as I am informed, of Ambassador Bernstorff. The protest, written in December, 1861, included advocacy of "the cause of peace with President Lincoln"—a peace which would have left secession triumphant and slavery definitely established. The protest was on behalf of England, setting forth that "although it is England only which is immediately concerned," yet that if the American Government ordered or sanctioned the conduct complained of, the Prussian Government, to its "great regret," would be "constrained" to see in the action of the United States "a public menace offered to the existing rights of all neutrals." Prussia, speaking through the aftertime German Emperor, thus championed "the neutral rights" of powerful England, against the weakened and seemingly beaten United States. It would have been well indeed for our honor if with this precedent in view, President Wilson had championed "the neutral rights" of weak, innocent, gallant Belgium against the triumphant wrong-doing of powerful and seemingly victorious Prussianized Germany.

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