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APPLIED ETHICS

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WILLIAM BELDEN NOBLE LECTURE

1910

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APPLIED ETHICS

BEING ONE OF THE

WILLIAM BELDEN NOBLE
LECTURES FOR 1910

BY

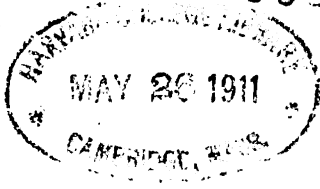
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THE WILLIAM BELDEN NOBLE LECTURES

THIS Lectureship was constituted a perpetual foundation in Harvard University in 1898, as a memorial to the late WILLIAM BELDEN NOBLE of Washington, D.C. (Harvard, 1885). The deed of gift provides that the lectures shall be not less than six in number, that they shall be delivered annually, and, if convenient, in the Phillips Brooks House, during the season of Advent. Each lecturer shall have ample notice of his appointment, and the publication of each course of lectures is required. The purpose of the Lectureship will be further seen in the following citation from the deed of gift by which it was established : —

“The object of the founder of the Lectures is to continue the mission of William Belden Noble, whose supreme desire it was to extend the influence of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life; to make known the meaning of the words of Jesus, ‘I am come that

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they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.' In accordance with the large interpretation of the Influence of Jesus by the late Phillips Brooks, with whose religious teaching he in whose memory the Lectures are established and also the founder of the Lectures were in deep sympathy, it is intended that the scope of the Lectures shall be as wide as the highest interests of humanity. With this end in view,—the perfection of the spiritual man and the consecration by the spirit of Jesus of every department of human character, thought, and activity,—the Lectures may include philosophy, literature, art, poetry, the natural sciences, political economy, sociology, ethics, history both civil and ecclesiastical, as well as theology and the more direct interests of the religious life. Beyond a sympathy with the purpose of the Lectures, as thus defined, no restriction is placed upon the lecturer."

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MR. PRESIDENT and ladies and gentlemen, this seems to me to be a pretty lively audience to listen to an address on Applied Ethics. It sounds more as if we were — not at the last foot-ball game, but at some other foot-ball game. It is naturally a very great pleasure to me to come back to my own college to speak here at Harvard to you — to you men who will have so much to do with shaping the future of our country; and I want, at the outset, to tell you how profoundly touched and

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pleased I am with your reception. I was glad to accept the invitation to deliver this lecture, and I am now much more pleased even than I had anticipated. The only thing is, I hope that I am not going to disappoint your expectations. I did not suppose there would be quite as much of an audience as this and I have a rather solemn address to make to you.

I feel that peculiar good comes from the foundation of lectures of just this kind, because I believe that any educational institution worth calling such must, consciously or unconsciously, train character quite as much as it trains intellect; for no man has gained what ought to be gained

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from his college career unless he comes out of college with a finer and higher sense of his obligations and duties as well as with a trained capacity to do them well.

I told President Lowell, when he spoke to me about delivering this lecture, that I wished to speak on Applied Ethics; and I intend to draw my examples mainly from our public life. I regard the study of ethics pursued merely as an intellectual recreation as being about as worthless as any form of mental amusement can be. In the course of my life I have had to deliver a good many lay sermons, — my enemies being divided as to whether the sentiments that I utter are incitements to revo-

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lution or platitudes, and usually compromising by saying that they are both. — I have had to deliver a good many sermons, and the more often I have had either to speak, or to listen to others speak, the more clearly and deeply I realize that it is not only no good to preach, or to listen to, a sermon which is not put into practical effect, but that it is a positive damage. The man who utters moral sentiments to which he does not try to live up, and the other man who listens and applauds the utterance of those sentiments and yet himself does not try to live up to them, — both those men not only gain no good from what they have said and listened to, but have

done themselves positive harm, because they have weakened just a little the spring of conscience within them.

I believe, to the last degree, in the duty of the man who preaches to preach realizable ideals. Of course, when I say realizable, I do not mean that we can completely realize any ideal. When in battle you spur your men on to perform some deed of valor and prowess, it is impossible that all of them shall live up to what your words call them to do. But what you have said in battle to your men is absolutely worthless, no matter how high and exalted the sentiment, unless it does make a reasonable proportion of the soldiers to whom it is addressed

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move forward into the battle and do their duty reasonably well. The word of command is useless in the fight unless a reasonable number of those to whom it is uttered not only listen to it but act upon it; and the man who utters it will not find that the other men to whom he utters it will pay much heed to it unless they know he is prepared himself to show them the way.

Now, friends, that is rather elementary. The word of command, you understand, is a "platitude." Every adjuration to men in a great crisis to bear themselves well is such a "platitude"; but it is a mighty useful platitude to translate into action. It is rather elementary, but after all

it gives the exact analogue to what I mean should be our attitude in civil life. The preacher, whether he is in the pulpit or whether he is a lay preacher, whether he is a professor, an adviser, or a lecturer, — the preacher is really trying to give the word of command, the word of direction and encouragement, to the men whom he is addressing; and if he gives that word simply to get himself a sense of intellectual satisfaction at having given it, and if his hearers listen to it only as they would to any other form of entertainment, then it is not worth while for him to have spoken and it is not worth while for them to have listened. The only

value in a speech comes from there being the effort made with measurable success to translate the words into deeds. Of course, the man who preaches decency and straight dealing occupies a peculiarly contemptible position if he does not try himself to practise what he preaches; and, on the other hand, the men who listen to him — you here — should realize that if they treat listening to a lecture about their duties as a substitute for performing their duties they would better have stayed at home. The value of what is said arises solely from the effort measurably to realize it in action. ✕

Now, as I told you at the outset, I wish to-night to speak to

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you about the application of ethical principles, the application of morality, in actual life; and I wish to illustrate it by appealing to certain examples of action in public life. Of course, my hearers, it ought to be — and I hope is — unnecessary to say that the first and all-essential thing in seeking to practise any morality is to apply it to your lives as you actually lead them. If you go away from this hall feeling a fine glow of virtuous determination to do your duty in politics a few years hence, and meanwhile feel excused from performing your duties in other lines, you will not have gained much good from the lecture. You are not going to do much service

in public life unless you first fit yourselves for doing it by the way in which you do your duties in your private lives. The cases are rare indeed where the man is a useful citizen in his relation to the State at the same time that he is not a useful citizen in his relations to his family and his neighbors. Normally, the man cannot be a good citizen in the sense of performing his duty to the Commonwealth as a whole unless he is the type of man who performs the first and most essential of all duties,—those in connection with his own family, his own friends and neighbors and associates. But I do not intend to-night to speak about those first and most es-

sential duties. I want to speak of morality as actually translated into action in the public interest. I want to speak of Applied Ethics in public life — of the application of the principles for which we contend in the name of good citizenship to actual problems of service, — and to do that I must name names, I must speak of individuals. X

Let me interrupt, for a moment, as a digression. The other day I had a visit from a man who has to a peculiar degree fulfilled the duties of good citizenship, — Judge Ben Lindsay, who has done such great service, not merely for children but for grown men and women, out in Denver, and who has actually tried

in his life and his work to realize the highest principles that can be preached as a matter of doctrine. He mentioned to me that all his troubles came when, from denouncing vice in the abstract, he went on to attack vicious men in the concrete; that everybody was willing — not only willing but anxious — to turn out and heartily approve his assaults upon corruption, and the failure to do their duty on the part of rich men, and the evils of mixing up business and politics, as long as he did not give too definite information as to whom he was talking against. The minute that he did so, they said he was “an enemy to prosperity” and “an apostle of revo-

lution"; and, unfortunately, many of the men who should have been the ethical leaders of the community and who preached the highest kind of ethical teachings in the abstract turned around on him as soon as he spoke in the concrete, and attacked him for lack of charity, for turbulence of spirit, as trying to set one class of his fellow-citizens against another class, as "a muck-raker" and, in short, as "a highly undesirable citizen." Now, to-night, I shall not trespass upon your patience by speaking of any individual for purposes of condemnation, but I do wish to speak of some men who have emphatically deserved well of the republic; and I speak of them,

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not for their own sake, but as illustrating just what I mean when I talk of the application in practice of the principles that are preached.

Last Commencement Day, in June, on this platform, among the addresses of the members of the graduating class to which I listened with real pleasure was one by young Bishop, in which he incidentally alluded to work on the Canal Zone down in Panama. His address suggested my speaking to you of the work that has been done down there for the American people. Travelling through Europe last year I was impressed by the fact that in every nation the leading statesmen whom I met had always be-

fore their minds as the two great feats performed by the American people during the last decade these two, — the voyage of the battle fleet around the world, and the digging of the Panama Canal. I do not think I need tell you that foreign nations are not in the least impressed with what we say of ourselves — not in the least. All that impresses them is what we do. No Fourth of July oration, explaining what a great people we are, has any effect outside of our own boundaries — and not much within them. The only thing that impresses an outsider is the way in which, on any given proposition, we make good. No foreign country expected that we could send

that battle fleet around the world in the shape in which we sent it, because none of the foreign countries of the greatest naval power believed that they themselves could do it; and they were proportionally impressed not only by the fact that we did it but by the way in which it was done, — by the fact that the fleet, after being away for a year and a quarter and circumnavigating the globe, came back, having kept to the minute every appointment on its schedule, and reached home in far better fighting trim as regards both men and ships than when it had sailed. That impressed all responsible statesmen abroad much more keenly even than it impressed our own people.

And so the digging of the Panama Canal, the success with which it has been dug, has, curiously enough, made, I think, a deeper impression abroad than at home. Unfortunately—and with a certain amount of justification—there has grown up a feeling that there is danger of corruption in work undertaken among us by the Government for the public, and the total failure of all previous efforts by other nations to accomplish anything on the Panama Canal had given rise in Europe to much cynical disbelief in our power to do the work. But it has been done; the success is literally astounding. It has been done with as near absolute cleanness, as near

absolute honesty, as it is humanly possible to do any work, public or private. We have put down there men at small salaries — improperly small salaries — who have handled hundreds of millions of dollars, without the slightest suspicion of financial corruption on the part of any Government servant holding a position of any importance in connection with the work. Moreover the work has been done with the utmost efficiency.

Now, when I speak of Applied Ethics, I want you to understand that I have mighty little use for ethics that are applied with such inefficiency that no good results come. I don't care a snap of my finger for the good man who

cannot do anything practical, for the virtue that is so fragile that the minute it is taken out of the study it decomposes under the influence of fresh air. It would not have been of any comfort to you, or anything but a source of shame to me, if we had had down on the Isthmus excellent and worthy men who could not do the job. Morality, to count, must include the two elements of uprightness and efficiency.

— You need the zeal, and the knowledge without which zeal amounts to so little; and I need not say, gentlemen, that to be efficient without also being upright is merely to be additionally dangerous to the community. The abler a man is, the worse

he is from the public standpoint if his ability is not guided by conscience. I hope to see the day when every citizen of the United States will feel that, of two rogues, infinitely the worse is the rogue who is successful, — that ability divorced from a sense of ethical responsibility, ability divorced from decency and morality, makes a man the kind of a public man whom it is our bounden duty to hunt out of public life. I cannot put that too strongly. But the converse is also true, that morality, decency, the sense of honesty, the desire to do right, are almost worthless unless accompanied by practical efficiency. It is a good thing for a community if you teach

it to think of goodness as being somehow or other connected with capacity to make things go. The applied morality of which I speak is compounded of both uprightness and efficiency.

This is just what has been shown by the people down on the Isthmus. I spoke of young Bishop making his speech here last Commencement Day. His father has for years rendered the highest and most disinterested and efficient service on the Isthmus in connection with digging that canal; and he has rendered this service for an utterly inadequate salary. The work as a whole has been done under the direction of an army officer, Colonel Goethals, whose

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name is not very familiar to the people here in the United States; and yet, I think, this country at this time owes as much to him as any country in the world owes to any public man now performing a public duty. I am not speaking hyperbolically. I have had some historical training myself, and I am using exactly the words that I think describe the case, when I say what I have said. I believe that, excepting a certain number of men who have taken part in the wars which founded and perpetuated this republic, there is no body of our citizens of similar size which has more emphatically deserved well of the republic than the men engaged in doing that work down

at Panama, men like Dr. Gorgas, Mr. Bishop, all the engineer officers, and above all Colonel Goethals. It is he to whom we owe most — to whom we owe more than to any other one man for what has been done down there.

Now there are plenty of things in the body politic to which we cannot point with any especial pride, and it is good to remember the men who, on our behalf, for our interest and honor, have done such work as Colonel Goethals has done. His is one case of Applied Ethics; of the efficient application of ethical principles in public life. And remember, Colonel Goethals does not profit pecuniarily by doing that won-

derful work in our interest. He will finish it as part of his duty as an army officer and then take any other detail to which he is assigned; and so far from being properly rewarded by this Government, he will be uncommonly lucky if he is not ferociously attacked should any effort be made to recognize his great services by giving him some special promotion. I am not making "a wild guess" here. I am speaking having vividly in mind the attitude taken by so large a portion of the press, and by no inconsiderable portion of the public, when the best man in our army, outside of the engineer corps, was thus rewarded for his services; the reward taking

the shape of putting him in a position where he could render still further service to the American people of a kind that no one else could render quite so well. I am speaking of the present head of the general staff of the army, a Harvard man, Leonard Wood, who represents another instance of Applied Ethics in public affairs.

So much for the Panama Canal and the Army. Now take another matter in which I think we are all interested, the question of the conservation of our national resources,—the forests, the water, the soil of our country. We have all agreed in the abstract that it is right to conserve them. We are taking some steps in the

concrete to do it. We have established a first-class school of forestry here at Harvard. We are all glad to come together in convention and make speeches, or listen to speeches, about the necessity of keeping our forests, — especially if none of us wish to cut them down, — and of the duty of somebody else not to waste any water. And those meetings do some good but the real value comes in the work of practically applying what is said. I think each one of you knows — and if any one of you does not know, he will find out in after life — that it is infinitely easier to draw up a perfect plan in the study than to realize however imperfectly that plan in

action. It is none too easy when the plan affects only one human being. When it affects a great many human beings it becomes ever increasingly difficult.

Far and away the best work that has been done, for the cause of conservation has been done by two men, James Garfield and Gifford Pinchot. I saw them work while I was President, and I can speak with the fullest knowledge of what they did. They took the policy of conservation when it was still nebulous and they applied it and made it work. They actually did the job that I and the others talked about. I know what they did because it was something in which I intensely believed, and yet it was

something about which I did not have enough practical knowledge to enable me to work except through them and largely as the result of following out on my part their initiative. They did not confine themselves only to speaking. (Don't think that I am running down all speaking. It is sometimes necessary; and its necessity can often be gauged by the measure of discontent that it excites.) They translated their words into actions; they actually did what we were all saying ought to be done; and our profound respect and appreciation is due them for their work.

Now I wish to touch upon Applied Ethics in a totally dif-

ferent type of governmental work. The papers today have contained the statement that Mr. Carnegie has made a most munificent, a most generous gift, consecrated to the bringing about of international peace, of peace among the nations of the world. Mr. Carnegie has rendered many and real services to peace, and apparently this will be one of the greatest, and he is entitled to the gratitude, not only of lovers of our own country, but of all patriotic citizens of all countries, for what he has done. I trust that there will be no mistake as to the amplex of the recognition which I hope to see given to Mr. Carnegie's generosity in this cause, and

that you will not misunderstand me when I add that, in spite of what I have just said, the worth of the gift will in the end largely depend upon the common sense and good judgment and efficiency with which the trustees or those working under them try to embody the purpose of the donation in actual acts.

For the last sixty years these conferences have been among the fairly common phenomena of international history. Some of these conferences have done real good, very great good. But unfortunately, peace seems to be a subject that attracts a good many people who have a more marked emotional than intellectual development; and at any

such conference those who, like myself, sincerely believe in the purpose for which the conference is held have to do all we can to try to secure action of such wisdom as to offset the unfortunate impression made by the perfectly worthy people who propose to bring about peace by abolishing the use of tin soldiers in the nursery, or by other plans almost as preposterous. Probably most of you do not know that that is a proposition seriously made by different persons in different nations; and we have to try to win victories for the cause of peace in spite of the fact that some of its advocates are of such a type!

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There have been, of course, many proposals for furthering the cause of international peace which were so wild or so foolish that they have not only done no good, but have probably done a little harm. Nevertheless, many of the great peace conferences have done a real good. They have gradually accustomed peoples and statesmen to considering the possibility of at least normally getting some wise substitute for war as a means of settling international disputes. Good has come from those conferences; but the good has only come when there have afterwards arisen men able, practically, to put into execution the resolutions passed so easily at the conferences them-

selves. Any man who has had any experience in public life knows that it is the easiest thing possible to pass through any legislative or deliberative body a resolution in favor of almost anything, if the resolution is not to be followed by practical action; and to gratify people who believe in peace almost any legislature is willing to pass any resolution, on the sole condition that it shall not be followed by action. Such legislative action is of course as nearly worthless when adopted as it is easy to adopt.

The worth and the difficulty both begin to appear only when the effort is made to reduce the resolution to action. I will give you an example of what I mean,

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and again I am happy to say that it is an example as to which we have a right to take pride in American action.

— The first Hague Conference, besides doing other things, established the Hague Court which was—I won't say the first practical step, but resolving in favor of taking the first practical step, towards the realization of what was hoped for. The resolution was passed. The Hague Court was in theory established. The judges were appointed, the mode of procedure was hinted at, at least; but there were no clients. The nations that had joined in establishing the court had been quite willing to pass resolutions in favor of peace and for the

principle of the Hague Court; but when it came to practical action, they would not send to that court one single controversy in which they were engaged among themselves or with any other nation. They would not put a single issue before the court; and there was not a chancellery in Europe in which the mention of the Hague Court excited any other emotion than gentle derision. Under such circumstances that court would speedily — I won't say have sunk into nothing, because it had n't become anything — but it would speedily have, by mere disuse, taken its place among the rosy dreams, impossible of realization, of well-meaning vision-

aries. It was saved from this fate by the action of an American public man who, in his work as a public man, did try again and again, and did succeed again and again in actually translating ethical principles into ethical action, John Hay. John Hay secured the sending to that court of the first case that ever went to it, the settlement of a controversy between ourselves and the Republic of Mexico, and the success of that arbitration at once and for good put the Hague Court on its feet. At last the man had arisen who could practically apply ethical principles, and who actually did what he had said ought to be done — a very different thing.

Now, take what has just happened this last summer. The settlement by treaty and in other peaceful ways of differences between ourselves and other powers during the administration of, and in accordance with the action of, President Taft has resulted in a sum of real achievement redounding greatly to the credit of the country during his first year and three-quarters of his administration; and one of the conspicuous instances of the success of the administration in dealing with this class of cases was in connection with the Hague arbitration of our fisheries difficulty with Great Britain. That arbitration turned out so well because of the high character and able

service of the distinguished men who actually did the work which made it successful; and above all of Elihu Root. Mr. Root has rendered great service to this country as Secretary of War, as Secretary of State, and as Senator, but few greater than that which he rendered last summer at the Hague tribunal. And I want to just call your attention to this fact. Mr. Root went over there, stayed the whole summer, worked most arduously, and rendered service to the nation the equivalent of which, if rendered by him to a great corporation, would certainly have earned him a fee of fifty or a hundred thousand dollars; and he rendered it without getting a dollar,—

rendered it simply as part of his work as a public man and a Senator, because he thought he ought to do it. ~~X~~ And, mind you, inasmuch as we in this country do not take any very great or keen interest in anything that happens beyond our borders, he rendered it with mighty little appreciation from us of what a big service it was. He thereby rendered the cause of peace an infinitely greater service than could possibly be rendered by any man making the most impassioned oration for peace at a Peace Convention.

The orator who says what a good thing peace is, after all, is not performing a very difficult task. We all of us agree with

him in the abstract. But the man who actually gets down to the work of making two different countries, each of which is convinced that it is right and that its opponent is very iniquitous and entirely wrong, — the man who gets down to the practical work of securing an agreement between those two countries, and gets the agreement, has done more to forward the cause of peace than any mere orator, any mere platform speaker for peace, can possibly do in an entire lifetime spent in agitation for the cause. It is the practical work of realizing the ethical principle in action that finally counts. That is what really amounts, not only to the major part, but to

ninety per cent, of bringing the reform into real operation. That is the service which Root rendered. That is the kind of service which will have to be rendered by a constantly greater number of statesmen in public life in order ultimately to bring about the day when rational and merciful methods of obtaining justice between nations shall take the place of war. I believe that we can make real progress toward that day. I believe that in our own generation we can so act as to minimize — perhaps “minimize” is too strong a word; but we can so act as constantly to lessen — the chances for war.

Now, having said that, I ask you to remember also that if we

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are to be a power for peace, we Americans, it must be evident that we wish peace in the name of justice, that we wish peace because it is right, and not because we are so weak that we fear war. As things are in the world at present there is this fundamental difference between international justice and justice as administered to individuals within the state, that is, as between international law and civic law: civic law rests on a sanction of force, and international law does not. There is not a big city that could get along twenty-four hours without a police force, and the criminal is only held to account because the policeman, in some shape or other, is at hand

to carry out the order of the judge. As yet we have been wholly unable to devise any international police force, so that in international law there is no sanction behind the decree of any court. Good will, and the friendship of foreign powers, are utterly insufficient substitutes for ability to protect ourselves. No foreign nation, not the most friendly, will respect us or give us its slightest aid, save on condition that we make it evident that in case of need we can fight for our own land. Any nation which declines to provide for its own self-defence has before it in China a striking picture of what its ultimate fate must be. China has believed in peace; but it

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has believed in a peace that should come from weakness and not from justice. China is not making aggressions on anybody; China is not endeavoring to attack anybody; and it is only saved from destruction — and it is not saved from spoliation and hectoring and attempted division — by the fact that there are many outside powers jealous of one another. The well-meaning people who wish America to disarm (so far as you can say that we are armed — for we are armed mighty little) — the well-meaning people who wish America to take any such course, really seek to turn it into an Occidental China, which would not only become contempt-

ible in itself, but would also become just as powerless as China now is to advance the cause of peace among other nations. You need not take my word for this. Think yourselves; if we have a peace conference tomorrow how much weight will the Chinese delegates at that conference carry? The Japanese and the Germans will carry a great deal. They can help the cause of peace. China cannot. China cannot help the cause of peace because the other nations think that her desire for peace is due to fear, and not to the love of justice. **XI** wish to see America's influence cast in every case for righteousness and for fair-dealing as be-

tween nation and nation. I wish to see our public men, and our public at large, scorn to act with brutality, with insolence or injustice, or even with lack of consideration toward any other nation; and I hope to see an aroused public opinion that will frown on all Americans, wherever they may be, who wantonly act in any way adversely to the honor and interest of another people. But I also wish to see it made clear, as due to the peoples of the earth, that we act in such a way because we think it is right and not because we fear any consequence to ourselves. There are well-meaning — I say “well-meaning” in a rather conventional

sense, — there are short-sighted men sufficiently unpatriotic to wish us to cease keeping the American Navy up to the proper point of efficiency and preparedness, who wish us not to fortify the Panama Canal. Those men, if they had their way, would make us powerless to act with any efficiency in the cause of peace. No attention would be paid to our people when they sought for peace if it were not realized that they spoke as representing the conscience, and not the timidity, of the American nation. I ask, in the name of peace, that this nation be prepared to hold its own against the strong, and I ask, in the name

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of justice and peace, that within and without our borders we act with scrupulous fairness toward the weak. That is the true American doctrine.

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