

This website uses cookies to improve the user experience. By using this website you consent to all cookies in accordance with our [cookie policy](#).

I understand



Sir Norman Angell

Nobel Lecture

Nobel Lecture*, June 12, 1935

Peace and the Public Mind

I want my first words to be an expression of my deep sense of the honor which the Nobel Committee have conferred upon me. You will understand me when I say that I have no adequate expression for what I feel in the fact that the thirty years of labor which I have given to this cause should have been so crowned. And because I have no words for what I feel I must be content with these somewhat formal terms.

I have entitled my subject today "Peace and the Public Mind", by which I mean the part played by popular opinion, or popular opinions and feelings, in the policies which lead to wars; a study of the nature of those opinions, of the fallacies which give them birth.

It is, of course, merely a truism to say that war, like other social or political evils, is the outcome of the bad management of human society, which is, in its turn, due to certain errors or deficiencies. But our task is to discern the sort of error or deficiency. Often efforts towards the preparation of the world for peace are vitiated at the start because the problem is conceived as one mainly of creating a will-to-peace, of intensifying the

sense of the miseries and horrors of war. That does not get us very far. For that will and that sense exist. Men honestly want peace (subject to wanting certain other things, like national defense). The problem is, not so much to create or intensify the will to peace, which exists, as to find out why that will is frustrated; why policies, the intention of which is peace, produce war; why men don't see that that will be the outcome.

If we recognize that the will to peace is genuine, it leads us to recognize a further truth related to it: war does not continue because men are evil, selfish, avaricious. It could not continue at all if millions on both sides were not prepared to make sacrifices which no other activity of man calls out in a similar degree.

The force which makes for war does not derive its strength from the interested motives of evil men; it derives its strength from the disinterested motives of good men. Pacifists have sometimes evaded that truth as making too great a concession to Mars, as seeming to imply (which it does not in fact) that in order to abolish war, men must cease to be noble.

Base motives are, of course, among those which make up the forces that produce war. Base motives are among those which get great cathedrals built and hospitals constructed—contractors' profit-seeking, the vested interests of doctors and clergy. But Europe has not been covered by cathedrals because contractors wanted to make money, or priests wanted jobs. The ordinary man does not face a twenty-five percent income tax, expose himself to death and mutilation, for the beaux yeux of armament makers. What is it that induces him thus to hand over his money *and* his life, or that of his son, as sacrifices to the God of War?

Let us face squarely the paradox that the world which goes to war is a world, usually, genuinely desiring peace. War is the outcome, not mainly of evil intentions, but on the whole, of good intentions which miscarry or are frustrated. It is made, not usually by evil men knowing themselves to be wrong, but is the outcome of policies pursued by good men usually passionately convinced that they are right.

In England at this moment there is a considerable section of the press systematically opposing the League of Nations on the ground that it would involve Great Britain in the risk of war. There is no reason whatever to suppose that these protagonists of isolationism are insincere in their professions of desire for peace. One of these groups has just organized a war museum for the direct purpose of bringing home to the public an intensified horror of war as an argument against the League. If their policy of destroying the League should ultimately produce war, it is not their intention which would be at fault, but their judgment; not their aims, but their calculations as to the means by which the end may be obtained. Our problem is to find out in what respect their judgment is defective (if we assume it to be defective); why nations have so often followed policies, the intention of which may have been peace, but the outcome of which has been war. Why, in what manner, the public mind is at fault in this matter. Until we face that aspect of the difficulty it serves little purpose to devise new plans for peace, for the plans will be rejected. It serves little purpose to find the way of escape if those who are to tread it do not believe it to be the way, cannot be brought to see that it is, and refuse to follow it. The problem which confronts our modern democracies is the problem of choosing between a great many different

remedies that are offered them, often between rival and mutually exclusive remedies, sometimes based upon highly technical considerations, the merits of which it is often extremely difficult for the layman to judge.

It must seem to the patient that the doctors are in most violent disagreement. And if the problem for the laymen is to know how to choose, the problem for the expert adviser is not only, and not first, to find the way of escape; it is first to enable those for whom the way of escape is designed, and who are travelling in other directions, to see that it is indeed the right road.

Yet this is an aspect of the problem which is curiously neglected. We seem to assume that if only someone could find the cure for our disease, some new plan, we should at once see that it *was* the cure and apply it. We ask for leaders and leadership. But if the right course, which the leader indicates, is regarded by the multitudes sincerely as the wrong one, they will declare that he is no leader but a misleader. Inevitably in a democracy the leader is he who expresses existing convictions in the most vivid way, who possesses, as someone puts it, “the common mind to an uncommon degree”.

How can it be otherwise? The convictions of the multitudes – and on certain points like the desirability of organizing the world on a nationalist basis there is overwhelming agreement – are sincere convictions. They are, as we know, sometimes disastrously erroneous; but they are also disastrously honest. The Nationalisms, the Protectionisms, the Mercantilisms and all the other fallacies which rack Europe and create the chaos are sincerely held fallacies. They are, to these multitudes, the truth, and the prophet who denies them shall be stoned.

It will be said, it is true, that very often in this matter the learned are in disagreement – the doctors differ. It will be asked how *can* the layman choose when the experts, the doctors, give him contradictory advice? I would like here to make a certain analogy. Doctors of medicine disagree on nearly everything. But does that mean that the layman has not been able to profit by medical science? The layman has been able to profit by this very inexact science of medicine to such a degree as to transform the world. Our daily life is no longer cursed by fear of those pestilences, plagues, black deaths, which used to devastate Europe. The layman has abolished those plagues by using the medical expert’s knowledge. The medical expert has said in effect, “There are not many things that we are agreed upon, but at least we are agreed upon this: that though we cannot cure bubonic plague or cholera, we can prevent them, for we know that they are caused by microorganisms transmitted through water and vermin. Keep sewage from your drinking water and vermin from your homes, and you will prevent these plagues.” The layman has seen the point, applied appropriate measures, and these dreadful pestilences have disappeared.

Now, if our publics these last twenty years could have grasped certain social truths, not inherently more difficult to understand than the microbic theory of disease, a large part at least of the economic and political pestilences which have come upon us in our generation would not have arisen.

I am not saying that the application of these truths would solve every political – and social problem, any more than the prevention of bubonic plague solves the whole problem of health, but that the application of these simple social truths would have enabled us to avoid such political pestilences as war, and so to have reduced enormously the scale of our problem.

We fail, not from lack of knowledge in the sense that we lack the knowledge to cure cancer or communicate with Mars. Our evils are due mainly to the failure to apply to our international relationships knowledge which is of practically universal possession, often self-evident in the facts of daily life and experience.

I will try to give concrete illustration in a moment, but will deal first with a caveat which is probably in the minds of some of you.

There are many who say in effect that public opinion has little to do with war, that it is explained by the influence of the vested interests who profit by it – armament makers or groups of capitalists. But even when we have admitted that those interests do exert great influence, it only pushes the question further back. Why are the mass of men, millions, powerless in this matter as against a tiny minority, a few dozen or a few score or a few hundred who profit by the general disaster? There are undoubtedly some who say to the millions in effect: “We should like you to go to war because it would expand our profits.” But why do the millions obey? Suppose that the building industries, in which there is far more money invested than in the armament industry, aware that it would make enormous profits if people could be persuaded to burn down their cities, said: “Kindly burn down your homes.” We know that the millions would not obey. No one would dream of acquiescing in a great conflagration if urged thereto by the building industries. Why is it relatively easy for a few armament makers to persuade ‘men to go to war, to give their lives; and quite impossible for the much larger group who would benefit by another form of general destruction to persuade men to destroy their property? It is broadly, of course, because the folly of burning down houses is plain; the folly of the policies which lead to war is not so plain.

The fact brings us nearer to the crux of our problem. To what motives in men’s minds do the war interests successfully appeal?

Before war can be fought, a long series of necessary steps, which quite obviously are not and cannot be enforced steps, must be taken by the mass of men. Naval and military budgets must be voted in parliaments and congresses, not just once or twice in a generation but year after year; not secretly, but accompanied by long and public discussion, the budgets being supported by members of parliament, or deputies or congressmen who are still in many states continuously reelected in free and secret franchises, often by great majorities. The voters who thus elect parliaments that vote the money that the armament makers receive, are not driven to the polls at the point of a bayonet; they are not even bribed. If those votes really are explained by the power of vested interests, it is clearly not by the power of direct physical force. Somehow, by some means, the minority must secure the free acquiescence of the majority in policies that defeat the majority’s purpose. How is that acquiescence achieved? To what motives do the minority appeal? By what confusions do they profit? It is sometimes urged that they are persuaded by a “bought” press. Face this fact: in the capital cities of Britain and America you may usually find two types of daily newspaper. The first tries to tell the truth about international affairs, to enable its readers to understand the foreigner’s point of view, to avoid sensations which

embitter the nation's foreign relations. The circulation of newspapers of that type is relatively small. It is extremely difficult to make them commercially successful. To my personal knowledge great fortunes have been lost in London and New York and other cities in the attempt to make that sort of newspaper a paying proposition.

But the second type of newspaper, which is usually very successful commercially, which usually pays handsomely, and which you can usually find in most great cities, does not attempt to give the news about foreign nations impartially. It is not really concerned in giving the facts of international affairs. Usually it exploits and exaggerates the offenses of foreign nations – everyone is familiar with the type. This type of press has been in the past one of the forces making for war.

Both of these types of paper are capitalist enterprises. What makes the second type, the war promoting type, so readily profitable and the more peace promoting type less profitable? The word “force” does not here apply. When Smith gives his penny in the morning for a paper that daily derides peace and attacks the League instead of for one that defends those things, he can hardly plead that newspaper capitalists or armament firms “forced” him. It is by an entirely voluntary act that he adds enormously to the forces making for war.

To shut our eyes to the part that John Smith plays in the perpetuation of unworkable policies, in building up the forces of which he becomes the victim, is to perpetuate his victimization. The only means by which he can be liberated from the evil power of organized minorities is by making him aware of the nature of the impulses and motives to which the exploiters so successfully appeal. If such phenomena as nationalism, for instance, can assume forms that are gravely dangerous, it is because the nationalist appeal finds response in deep human impulses, instincts, in psychological facts which we must face.

And this remains true despite the coming of dictatorships. One speaks of dictators ruling by “force”. But what has enabled dictatorial governments to possess force? The only means by which a man can become a dictator is by getting at the public mind. The politician does not become dictator by the strength of his own muscles. He must persuade others, millions of others, to use their muscles in a certain way.

The German National Socialists began as a party of ten persons¹. And it would have remained a party of ten persons had not its promoters been able to *persuade* – not force – others. Ten persons had no force as against the power of the German nation. The potential power of that party of ten persons consisted simply in its potential power to reach the public mind. Without that popular appeal it could never have come into being. And if, and when, it loses that popular appeal, it will cease to be.

It is certainly true to say that just as dictatorships would be impossible without the acquiescence in their establishment of a large part of public opinion, wars would be impossible except for the acquiescence of large sections of the public in the policies out of which they arise.

But there is this important difference between the two: The parties, Fascist, or other, which bring about dictatorship want dictatorship. But John Smith who insists on certain policies which produce war does not want war. The first is the result of conscious intention duly carried into effect. The second is the result of an intention which miscarries, miscarries because of certain current errors and fallacies. Which errors, which fallacies?

I have suggested that Smith is led into politics which destroy him often by disregard of truths which ought to be self-evident. Let us take a concrete case.

When the peoples and governments of great states say, almost certainly sincerely, that they want peace, there are in fact, certain implied qualifications. To say that we want peace does not mean that nothing would induce us to fight. John Smith would certainly explain, for instance, that foreign invasion would cause him to fight.

What he means when he says that he wants peace, is that he stands for peace so long as no one attacks his nation. "If we are attacked we will fight, go to war." Every great nation thus puts its defense before the mere preservation of peace. The very fact that every nation maintains its forces, clings to its proportion of power with such tenacity, means that in certain circumstances it will fight, fight for defense.

Incidentally, the fact that nations do everywhere put defense before peace means that our problem is to reconcile peace with national defense. War arises out of the measures which armed states take for their defense, from popular misconception as to the means by which defense can be secured. It might be described as arising from a perversion of the instinct of self-preservation.

Now I am assuming here that a great nation is justified in putting defense first. But note how nations have proceeded to grapple with the task which they regard as the most fundamental, the most important of all political tasks – national defense.

What is the most popular, the most instinctive measure of defense to which a people resorts, the one which has in fact been followed most often in the past? It is, of course, defense by preponderance of individual national power. The commonest argument runs: *Our nation honestly wants peace. It will never be guilty of aggression. Foreigners must be aware that we should never fight except to defend ourselves. The stronger therefore we are, the more secure peace must be.*

It is certain that not a week passes wherein at least one of the newspapers of London, or Paris, or Berlin, or Rome, or Moscow, or Tokyo, does not apply that argument with the completest assurance that it is unanswerable, self-evident; and usually with complete obliviousness of the fact that it defies alike ethics, equality of right, and arithmetic.

Not long before the war the familiar doctrine was stated by a British cabinet minister at a great meeting in Manchester in some such terms as these: "There is just one way in which we may have peace and be secure; and that is to be so much stronger than any potential enemy that he will not dare attack us. This I submit is a self-evident proposition."

Whereupon a thousand or so hardheaded business men of Manchester cheered to the echo. The proposition they were cheering was that two nations likely to quarrel would keep the peace and be secure when each was stronger than the other. It is possible that most, on second thoughts, would be brought to see that the principle does indeed defy arithmetic, but the vast majority would be sincerely astonished if it were suggested that this method of defense also defies morals, is based upon a flat denial of right, in the sense that each denies to the other the right he claims for himself.

By that policy a nation, in order to be secure in its defense, has to be stronger than its potential enemy. Then what becomes of the defense of that other? Is he to have none? We deny to that other the right of defense by superior power we claim. I am stating, of course, a very familiar dilemma. But stating it in ethical terms, the significance of which I am quite sure escapes the man in the street, for the man in the street wants to be fair. He would not want thus to ask others to occupy a position which he refuses to occupy, if he saw that in his demand there was this ethical contradiction.

He simply does not see it. His failure arises largely from a misconception of the nature and meaning of defense.

At the back of the ordinary man's mind when he uses the word "defense" is, I think, a picture of his army standing in serried ranks to prevent the incursion of foreigners, as Belgium stood for the defense of her soil against the German incursion. A great soldier, speaking once of the political aspect of his task, said, "I mean by defense what you mean by defense when you lock your doors at night against the burglar. Our army and navy are the bolts which we put on the doors of the national household." As he said this, I wondered how he had read the history of his country. As an Englishman, particularly as an Englishman standing upon foreign soil, I am, of course, prepared to argue that every war we have ever fought was a purely defensive war. But I am obliged to take cognizance of the quite simple historical fact that for about one thousand years, since the time indeed when Norwegians ravaged our coasts and a certain Scandinavian landed at Hastings in 1066², every war we have fought happens to have been fought in other people's countries.

Now if defense means merely keeping burglars out of the house, what were we doing on all those occasions in other people's houses?

Our history in this respect is not peculiar. The United States is proud of her remoteness from the old world, her freedom from entanglement in its quarrels, her isolation. Yet in her relatively very short history as an independent state she has fought at least six foreign wars while her troops have landed on foreign soil on nearly a hundred occasions. Not one of those wars was for the purpose of defending American soil³.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. When I point out that all our wars for a thousand years have been fought in other people's countries, I do not mean that any of these wars was necessarily aggressive. They may well have been, everyone of them, defensive. But plainly they were not defensive of soil, territory. Of what then were they defensive? They were defensive of the nation's interests, rights; interests which may well collide with the interests of other nations in any part of the world; the construction of this inter-oceanic canal, its use on equal terms; rights of trade; payment of debt; free passage through narrow seas; right to fortify their shores; use of this ice-free harbor; access to that undeveloped territory – an infinite number of questions about which two nations may sincerely differ as to their respective rights. Certainly so far, there can be no question. Nations do so differ as to what their respective rights are and differ sincerely. And often the question, which of the two is right, is extremely difficult, as anyone who has attempted to disentangle rival territorial claims in the Balkans or elsewhere knows only too well.

Now, if defense means the defense of the nation's rights, interests, see where it leaves you when a people asks for superiority of power "for defense". One great state says to others, as each in effect has been saying during the ten years of armament debate: "It is true that we ask for considerable power. Perhaps, all things considered, greater power than you. But it need not disturb you in the least, for we give you our most positive assurance that that power will be used purely for defense. And by defense we mean this: that when we get into a dispute with you as to our respective rights, when, that is, the question is whether you are right or we are right, what we mean by defense is that we shall always be in a position to be sole judge of the question. And so much stronger than you, that you will have to accept our verdict without any possibility of appeal. Could anything be fairer?"

Now the ordinary man, the John Smith, as I have called him, adopts normally that attitude about "arming for defense", with no slightest realization that he is propounding what is, ethically, a monstrous proposition. Placing himself in that position, he has no faintest realization that he is putting his power, his might, not behind right as he may genuinely suppose, but behind the denial of right, the denial to the other party of that right of judgment and superior power which he claims for himself.

See how the thing has worked out in recent history. Before the war we in Britain said: If the power of Germany increases much more; if, to the greatest military machine in the world, she now adds the greatest navy, she will be so much stronger than ourselves that we shall be defenseless, deprived, that is, of any means of defending our rights. In any quarrel with Germany, we could never challenge her judgment. We should just have to accept her decision in any major dispute because we should have no means of resisting it. This position of defenselessness is a position which no free people should ever occupy.

So far, perhaps, we were right. Not quite so right when we went on to add: We therefore propose that Germany shall occupy that position of defenselessness by being weaker than we are.

And to prove to Germany that she need not fear our preponderance, that British power could never be used for injustice, when we *had* established preponderance and were in the position of being judge, we made the Treaty of Versailles⁴.

When Englishmen commonly say that it is not possible that foreigners should ever fear the power of the British Navy, one wonders whether they give full weight to the fact that from the German point of view it was the British Navy that made the Treaty of Versailles, in the sense that without the power which it represents that Treaty could never have been made.

Looking at that Treaty today, the Germans say: "That is what comes of being weaker than your enemy. On the next occasion we intend to be stronger. We shall by every means build up our power and if we don't get justice – what we consider to be justice – we will tear up that Treaty." If resisted in so tearing it up, they would presumably fight and make a new Treaty of Versailles. Would it be better than the one made in 1919? I, who have been so often accused of pro-Germanism, venture to suggest that it would be even worse. The Germans are no more fit than the British or the French to be judges in their own cause when under the domain of nationalist passion. And of the war-dictated new Treaty of Versailles we British would in some measure be victims, and would then have to do what the Germans are now doing: Build up our power, secretly or otherwise, in order to wage war against injustice. And it *would* be war against injustice, though not war *for* justice. And if we won in that war, there would be a new Treaty of Versailles, number three. Would it be better than the one we made in 1919? As much worse as there would be more wrongs to avenge. And then if the Germans are compelled to rebel against number one, they would have still greater cause to rebel against number three. New war, a still more onesided Treaty – except that long before that all civilization, even the capacity to make war, would have vanished from the western world.

Now it is not difficult to see what causes that tragic seesaw. We use power, of course, in the international fields in a way which is the exact contrary to the way in which we use it within the state. In the international field, force is the instrument of the rival litigants, each attempting to impose his judgment upon the other. Within the state, force is the instrument of the community, the law, primarily used to *prevent* either of the litigants imposing by force his view upon the other. The normal purpose of police – to prevent the litigant taking the law into his own hands, being his own judge – is the precise contrary of the normal purpose in the past of armies and navies, which has been to *enable* the litigant to be his own judge of his own rights when in conflict about them with another.

Yet, that there is this fundamental contradistinction in the way in which force is used, public opinion as a whole certainly does not realize. Thirty years of discussion of the matter has, I think, made me fairly familiar with the trend of the public mind therein. Only the other day a young man, a graduate of one of our older universities, thinking, I imagine, to put me in some logical dilemma, asked me whether I *would* take a stick if a burglar entered my house. And he invited me to consider the political significance of the fact that in old-fashioned bedsteads there was a place in which the householder kept a gun wherewith to greet the robber. I replied, of course, that I would take a stick to the burglar, and that I *had* considered the significance of the sixteenth century firearm, which I thought was this: That in the days when every householder had firearms as a matter of course, when the security of each household depended mainly upon its own powers of defense, highwaymen and bandits were very much more common than they are now when not one house in a thousand has any firearm at all. Plainly, therefore, the relatively greater security of today is not due to the improvement of household firearms because they do not exist. The improvement is due to the development of the collective method of defense within the state. In the sixteenth century a robber could argue; "We need only meet the power of one household at a time: John Smith quakingly flourishing his blunderbuss. This is easy." But that is not the situation today. We say in effect to the potential

robber and gangster that if he attempts these things, he has to meet, not John Smith, but all the John Smiths organized into a society with its elaborate mechanism of restraint – judges, courts, detectives, police, prisons.

Within the state we have made defense of the individual the obligation of the whole community, and by that fact have established such preponderance of power on the side of the law that it could never be good business to challenge it. And that fact has, in large measure, swept highwaymen from the roads and pirates from the seas.

I put it to my young friend that if he wanted analogies as between national defense and personal defense, the question that ought to be asked is not whether a man will take a walking stick to a burglar, but whether he will pay *his* police rate to protect others, including the perfectly detestable person next door. Because if he will not, the man next door will not pay his police rate either, and there can be no police for organized society, no defense for either.

My friend, graduate of a great university, had obviously misconceived what one might call the mechanism of defense in organized society, as the public normally misconceive it. He thought of defense as an individual act and believed therefore that the issue in this debate was the choice between abandonment of national defense altogether or preservation of the old international anarchy. Plainly he thought that if one wanted to abolish the old anarchy, one was indifferent about national defense. Whereas, of course, the real case for the organization of the nations in some collective system is that so long as arms *are* retained (and this is an important proviso because arms are certainly not the only means of national defense, as the security of certain lesser states shows), so long as arms are retained, they can only become a means of effective security by putting them behind a law or rule which protects all parties. So long as an individual, whether person or state, has only his own arms to depend upon in order to defend his rights by arms, then he must be stronger than anyone likely to challenge those rights. Which means that that other is deprived of similar defense. Within the frontiers man long ago made the discovery that the only way out of that dilemma is for the community, by putting its combined power behind a protective law, to assume the defense of the individual. Defense must be a communal, a collective function, or it cannot exist effectively at all.

I am dealing at some length with a very elementary fact in the organization of society in order to illustrate the point that misconceptions touching the problem of peace, which exist even in the minds of educated men, are usually concerned with what one might term the rudimentary mechanics of organized society. The conception that we can only protect ourselves if we are prepared to protect others surely ought to belong to the nursery stage of social education.

But such things as the mechanism of security through law, the place of force in society, are things not, it would seem, included usually in the common education of our peoples.

But if, in the western world there is, among the multitudes turned out of our schools, extremely little understanding of the nature of modern society, there seems to be just as little understanding of the nature of modern wealth, the defense of which, or misconceptions touching the way in which it can most effectively be defended, are certainly also part of the problem of peace.

Nations are concerned, of course, to defend their means of life, livelihood, the means by which their people are fed and clothed and maintained at a civilized standard. How is a nation to defend those things, to render them secure?

Again, the great states have in fact answered those questions by the single word “power”, preponderant national power. The idea current among the public is that the defense of wealth consists in the defense of materials, goods, which, but for the possession of power to defend them, foreigners would seize; or of outlets for trade which power can secure. And there is a growing school of postwar political writers who declare that peacemaking should begin by a more equitable distribution of the world’s materials: Germany must have colonies, the Japanese means of outlet, that these things represent primary economic needs which if not satisfied peaceably must find their satisfaction by means of war. It comes near to that conception of war as “the struggle for bread”, that “biological conflict” of indefinitely expanding populations in a definitely limited world, about which I have been asking certain questions for thirty years. They are questions which I am afraid still need to be asked.

I now suggest, as I suggested thirty years ago, that the economic difficulty of the modern world is not shortage of materials but the organization of their exchange and distribution; distress arises, not from scarcity but from dislocation and maladjustment.

There is no difficulty in a state getting raw materials; it does not need to control them politically. Britain did not need to “own” the cotton fields of Louisiana in order to build thereon her greatest export industry; nor America to have the rubber plantations within her political control in order to build up the greatest automobile industry of the world. If France had any difficulty in securing the ores of Lorraine, they were difficulties created by the French government in the shape of tariffs.

Defense of wealth does not consist in preventing foreigners taking our goods. Foreign nations don’t want our goods. Each nation is trying by tariffs, quotas, and other devices, to keep out, not to seize, the goods of others.

Our admirals are always talking about the need of more cruisers to “protect our trade routes”. Half the trade disappears in a few years, and many of our ships lie idle in port, successfully blockaded by economic depression. What is the navy doing? If that dwindling goes on much longer, there will be no ships on those trade routes except the cruisers.

Vital trades in great industrial cities like Bradford are ruined by the tariffs of our own Dominions, of Canada and Australia. How does the navy protect it? An admiral once said that, but for the navy, foreigners would land in England and “loot” the cellars of the Bank of England. In 1931

we were pushed off the gold standard through a raid by foreigners upon our gold reserves⁵. What was the navy doing?

I doubt whether the public has fully grasped the change which has come over the nature of modern wealth. If the nature of that change *were* grasped by our publics, we should be much nearer to accepting the international organizations necessary for the defense of welfare and of civilization than we are. As it is, we are in danger of being diverted to the discussion of schemes for a vast rearrangement of frontiers in defiance of national feeling – for the boundaries of the national and the economic unit do not conveniently coincide – before which the difficulties of a Disarmament Conference would pale into insignificance.

Perhaps I can illustrate the change which I do not think the public has realized, by reference to certain incidents in the past relationship of your country and mine which I hope you will forgive my mentioning.

It so happens that at home I live on a little island off the East Coast of England that in the ninth century was the headquarters of a Norwegian visitor, a certain Anlaf, when he did us the honor of calling on us. On the last occasion he sailed off with fifty ships deeply laden with Saxon goods. They were times when the defense of wealth demanded possibly the defense of material goods against the attentions of visiting foreigners. As I look from the windows of the little farm house on that island today, I see about fifty ships in the estuary; *our* ships, laid up, rusting, rotting, their crews unemployed, blockaded by the depression more successfully than any foreign state would be likely to blockade our trade. One day I reflected that in a more masculine, virile period, those ships would not be idle. Anlaf would have known what to do with them. What would happen if we followed his example and returned his visit, a little late in the day, and escorted those fifty ships, with our new preponderant army to the shores of Norway, and there loaded them up with Norwegian timber, dairy produce, and brought them back to England? Well, what *would* happen? There would dawn upon our protectionists the horrid vision of fifty great ships approaching our shores laden with foreign produce to be dumped upon them for nothing – not with just ten percent off which made such trouble in Great Britain in the case of certain Russian produce. But for nothing! At such a thought every protectionist in the House of Commons would rise in great perturbation to demand an emergency tariff to keep those goods out!

Here was a complication that Anlaf did not have to meet. When he dumped Saxon grain or hides on these shores, I doubt whether the commodity markets or stock exchanges of Bergen or Oslo were very greatly disturbed. But in our day too many economic apple carts would be upset for that sort of operation to be commercially feasible or profitable.

It means this: in the modern world, material is only wealth if you can get rid of it. The British miner cannot eat his coal, nor clothe his children with it, nor build his house with it. If coal is to mean for the British miner food and shelter and clothing, he must get rid of it. Get rid of it, that is, to someone who has money, sell it. But how is that someone to get money? He can only get it by one means: By getting rid of *his* material to someone who has money, who can only get money by getting rid of *his* material – round the world.

In other words, as already noted, wealth, in our modern world of intricate division of labor is a flow, a process, analogous to keeping the traffic moving upon the highways of the world. If that traffic is blocked, as it inevitably is blocked, by the dislocations that follow wars, such as unpayable debts, which create in their turn a maldistribution of monetary gold, which involves in its turn dislocation of the whole credit and monetary system, disorganization of the exchanges – if that sort of thing happens, then material ceases to be wealth. The Brazilian burns his coffee, the Norwegian his fish, but neither burns the coal of the British miner, who goes without both the coffee and the fish.

But traffic can be kept moving in one way only, by traffic rules, rules of the road. Rules of the road were not always so important. In the old days of slow moving ox carts, if one drove to the left and the other on the right, and the two teams became entangled, in those days it did not greatly matter. After the appropriate blasphemy from the drivers each could go on its way. But in the case of the modern road, with its motor cars travelling at sixty miles an hour, if a driver does not know whether the other is going right or left, and makes a mistake – well, the discussion afterwards will be quite academic.

Yet again this need for rules is certainly not generally realized. A great popular press in Britain protests clamantly every time an international conference is called for. Are we, they ask, to obey rules made at international conferences, that is to say mainly by foreigners? One of these papers had a leading article not long since to this effect: Great Britain should resolutely refuse ever to enter any international conference if the majority were foreigners.

Insofar as we are dealing here with misconceptions, they do not arise from the misinterpretation of a mass of elaborate and difficult data; they arise from the misinterpretation of a few everyday facts known to everyone. Some of our most mischievous economic policies arise from similar failure to apply the knowledge we already possess. Let me illustrate.

As you are aware, the British Dominions have fiscal autonomy; their tariff making is not in the hands of the British Parliament but of their own parliaments. Of recent years efforts have been made to erect a system of “Empire preference”. It is assumed by our imperialists that while cheap foreign wheat or other agricultural produce is very much to the detriment of British agriculture, cheap Empire produce is to be encouraged. But what makes a Dominion? If Mr. de Valera refuses to take the oath of allegiance to the king⁶, the Free State will be regarded as a foreign country, and our imperialists will tell us that Irish butter, bacon and eggs, being foreign, will throw British farm laborers out of work. But if Mr. de Valera changes his mind and takes the oath, then hey presto, the butter, bacon, eggs which originally were so mischievous become quite innocuous and no longer throw British farm laborers out of employment. But it is the same butter, the same bacon, and the same eggs. This is not economics. It is magic.

Recently, I put a case to these imperialists. You assume, I said, that the commercial development of this great area, organized on the basis of these preferences which we discussed at Ottawa⁷, is to the advantage of Britain. So be it. Suppose one of the Northern States, Norway if you will, said to us, “We also want to enter this economic circle or club of yours. We are prepared to offer you every preference that Canada offers, on condition that you give us in return the same advantages that you give to Canada.” Would you, I put it to the imperialists, agree that it would be

to our advantage thus to increase our economic empire? And most amazingly the arch priest of imperial preference declared that such offers should be ruthlessly declined! It is indeed impossible to make clear to this type of nationalist that if a given tariff arrangement as between Britain and ten million Canadians is advantageous, precisely the same arrangement between Britain and two million Norwegians must also be advantageous.

If we find in a whole range of cases of this character that a large measure of public support is given to policies which make for international conflict, it is not, I suggest, from a lack of specialist or technical knowledge on the part of the public, but as suggested at the beginning of this address, and by the examples cited, from failure to apply to public policy knowledge which is of universal possession, inherent in the commonplaces of daily life.

Take, for instance, what is perhaps the commonest misinterpretation of the relation of human nature to the necessary disciplines of life. We who urge a League of Nations are told so often that we forget human nature, overlook the fact that men are naturally quarrelsome. The fact that men are naturally quarrelsome is presumed to be an argument against such institutions as the League. But it is precisely the fact of the natural pugnacity of man that makes such institutions necessary. If men were naturally and easily capable of being their own judges, always able to see the other's case, never got into panics, never lost their heads, never lost their tempers and called it patriotism – why, then we should not want a League. But neither should we want in that case most of our national apparatus of government either – parliaments, congresses, courts, police, ten commandments. These are all means by which we deal with the unruly element in human nature. With the shrinkage of the world, the time has come to add to them. Yet I would not hesitate to say that nine out of ten of the critics of the peace movement get the argument turned upside down. “You cannot change human nature” has become a sort of incantation with those critics. Perhaps you cannot “change human nature” – I don't indeed know what the phrase means. But you can certainly change human behavior, which is what matters, as the whole panorama of history shows.

Panic and other forms of folly are “natural” but not inevitable, and because they are natural we need discipline. Once in an American theatre one of the audience cried “Fire”. The audience obeyed their “natural instinct”, rushed for the doors in a panic mass. Several people were trampled to death. There was no fire. It was a false alarm. A few days later in another theatre the same cry was raised; the manager happening to be present jumped upon the stage and cried out in a commanding voice “Keep your seats. There is plenty of time and you all know what you must do. Rise, look to the nearest exit, walk; no one runs.” That theatre was emptied in perfect order; no one was hurt although this time there was a fire and the place was burned to the ground.

Was there not the same human nature in both cases? But you got a very different result in conduct, behavior, because in the latter case the first destructive impulse was made subject to the second more civilized thought. The more it is true to say that certain impulses, like those of certain forms of nationalism, are destructive, the greater is the obligation to subject them to the direction of conscious intelligence and of social organization.

But it can only be done if we believe that it can be done. If each says “There is certain to be a panic, let us get to the doors first”, then there will be a panic. The public create by their belief, the very danger which they fear. But if a proportion – one in five or ten, one in a thousand in the case of the theatre manager – believe the better way possible and stand for it, it will triumph as against the other.

Surely such simple fundamental truths of social action ought to be commonplaces of the public mind, commonly applied to politics as a product of education. But they are not. The failure to grasp these fundamental simplicities can coexist sometimes with great learning, profound erudition. Someone once said “There is no truth so simple that the learned cannot render it incomprehensible.”

Surely it is not beyond the wit of our educationalists to develop, through education, the particular skill which enables the ordinary man, the ordinary voter, to apply such commonplace truths to the guidance of the policies for which he is responsible and which he imposes upon his government. Not more knowledge but better use of the knowledge which we now have, is perhaps the main educational need and the main educational problem which confronts us.

Thirty years of wrestling with the public mind has convinced me that this is indeed the contribution which education must make to peace: a clearer understanding, not so much of each nation’s special problems by the others, for that, in the case of sixty nations, would involve a degree of learning in history, political geography, ethnography which the ordinary citizen simply could not acquire, but a clearer understanding of the elementary, the rudimentary principles upon which all human society rests, by means of which alone it can be made to work.

There are three directions in which the education of the millions, who in the last resort determine the policies which determine the fate of society, seems to need development. First, the ordinary citizen and voter must acquire a greater awareness of his own nature, his liability to certain follies, ever recurrent and ever disastrous; secondly, a greater knowledge of the nature of the necessary mechanism of society; and thirdly, of the nature of truth, of true methods of interpretation, the means by which the lessons told by common facts can be applied to the solution of social problems as they arise.

To such tasks as these the small state can make as great a contribution as the vast empire. It is indeed to the little states – to states such as Greece and Palestine – that man owes most in this field, owes much more than to the great empires. It is the little states, like this one of Norway, which have today evolved the highest civilization and the greatest social stability, have developed, more than others, the art of free and peaceful life together. They, more than others, may show the way by which the world may be led to security and peace.

Man’s greatest advances these last few generations have been made by the application of human intelligence to the management of matter. Now we are confronted by a more difficult problem, the application of intelligence to the management of human relations. Unless we can advance in that field also, the very instruments that man’s intelligence has created may be the instruments of his destruction.

The obstacles to peace are not obstacles in matter, in inanimate nature, in the mountains which we pierce, in the seas across which we fly. The obstacles to peace are in the minds and hearts of men.

In the study of matter we can be honest, impartial, true. That is why we succeed in dealing with it. But about the things we care for – which are ourselves, our desires and lusts, our patriotisms and hates – we find a harder test of thinking straight and truly. Yet there is the greater need. Only by intellectual rectitude and in that field shall we be saved. There is no refuge but in truth, in human intelligence, in the unconquerable mind of man.

* Unable to attend the presentation ceremony on December 10, 1934, Sir Norman delivered this lecture in June of the following year in the Auditorium of the University of Oslo. The text is taken from *Les Prix Nobel en 1934*.

1. In Munich in 1919.

2. In 1066 Harold (III) Haardraade (1015-1066), king of Norway, invaded Northumbria but was defeated and killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge by Harold II (1022?-1066), king of England, who then hurried south and was, in turn, defeated and killed at the Battle of Hastings by William of Normandy (1027-1087), descendant of the Norseman, Hrolf the Ganger.

3. Foreign wars fought by the United States between 1783 and 1935 include: Tripolitan War (1801-1805), War of 1812 (1812-1814), Algerine War (1815), Mexican War (1846-1848), Spanish-American War (April-December, 1898), World War I (1917-1918).

4. Germany was not represented at the peace conference but, despite protest, was obliged to accept the Versailles Treaty of 1919.

5. The value of the pound sterling dropped from \$4.86 to \$3.49.

6. Eamon de Valera (1882-), Irish statesman, agreed to take the required oath in 1927 but in 1932 was elected president of the Irish Free State on a program which included abolishing it.

7. The Ottawa Imperial Economic Conference of 1932 resulted in a series of agreements for some mutual tariff preferences to member states of the British Commonwealth.

From *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1926-1950*, Editor Frederick W. Haberman, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1972
Copyright © The Nobel Foundation 1933

To cite this section

MLA style: Sir Norman Angell – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2023. Sat. 26 Aug 2023.

<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1933/angell/lecture/>>

Nobel Prizes and laureates

Nobel Prizes 2022

Fourteen laureates were awarded a Nobel Prize in 2022, for achievements that have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind. Their work and discoveries range from paleogenomics and click chemistry to documenting war crimes.

See them all presented here.

