

## C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

## Shall We Join the League of Nations?

**S**IR: At a moment when there is an unmistakable veering of American public opinion towards some measure of participation in the League of Nations, Professor John Dewey (in the *New Republic*, March 7th) lends the weight of his great name and influence to the opposition to that project, and apparently also to the opposition to "any specific move toward international cooperation on our part" at the present time. What, however, is the weight of the arguments which he presents in justification of his conclusion?

Mr. Dewey has observed that the League is not, and is never likely to be, so pure and holy a thing as its more exuberant advocates have imagined. The member states have not been suddenly purged of their national ambitions or their national animosities. "Every contending group in Europe" can be found represented in the Assembly at Geneva; its sessions are not free from open friction and secret faction and intrigue. They are, in short, not without a family likeness to sessions of Congress. The League, moreover, lacks power; some (Mr. Dewey with obvious rhetorical exaggeration says "all") of the "important post-war questions" are not in its hands but in those of commissions officially committed to the enforcement of the Versailles Treaty. Two of the largest European states are still excluded from membership; so that the League is not at present truly comprehensive or representative.

All these observations are true; but they are not conclusive of, they for the most part are hardly even relevant to, the main issue. That issue resolves itself into three entirely definite and searchingly practical questions: 1. Does the existence of the League have, or can it be made to have, any appreciable tendency to diminish the likelihood of war in Europe? 2. Would America's participation in the League strengthen such a tendency? 3. If so, would this advantage be more than offset by incidental dangers to interests more important (if, indeed, there be interests more important) than European peace? These questions, like all the real issues of public policy, are quantitative problems of profit and loss, of relative advantage and disadvantage. Instead of facing these essential questions, and attempting a balanced estimate of the probable consequences of both alternatives, Mr. Dewey for the most part content himself with pointing out certain imperfections and limitations of the present League, of the governments represented in it, and of the American character. In part, indeed, he descends to pure caricature. "The notion that we have but to offer ourselves as universal arbiter—and paymaster—and all will be well is," he remarks, "childish in the extreme." Of course it is; but who with any experience in human affairs imagines that "all will be well" in consequence of the establishment of any organization whatever? The question is whether, by means of the League, some things can be made somewhat better, whether a particular danger—the gravest danger that ever threatened Europe—can be, not suddenly and completely eliminated, but rendered sensibly and perhaps progressively

less acute. Mr. Dewey has taken the visions of the more naïf supporters of the League; he has exaggerated even these; and finding that the reality does not and cannot correspond to the exigent ideal thus generated, he bids us have nothing to do with the contrivance.

No doubt the easy and casual manner of Mr. Dewey's reasoning on this grave matter is largely due to his reiterated assumption that belief in the possible utility of the League can arise only from "emotions not readily amenable to argument." This is an interesting illustration (may I incidentally remark?) of the way in which the "the new psychology" has simplified the practice of public discussion. Nowadays, if you find (as of course you always will find) that the opinions of those with whom you disagree are attended by feeling, you conclude that they can have no other basis than feeling; hence that the arguments offered are mere "rationalizations"; hence that they need not be very seriously examined, and that you need not be too meticulously logical in replying to them. (It is, to be sure, requisite also to assume that your own beliefs are pure products of detached intelligence, a point for which the new psychology has perhaps insufficiently provided.) Professor Dewey thus easily disposes of the ostensibly reasoned belief of such emotional persons as Chief Justice Taft, ex-President Eliot, President Lowell, Professor Gilbert Murray, Viscount Grey, and Lord Robert Cecil. To the familiar and definite arguments of these and other writers, which purport to show that the League, however touched with human imperfection, can exercise a potent stabilizing influence in Europe, and with American participation could do so to a still greater degree, he gives no attention whatever—nor yet to the plain facts that the League has already achieved a pacific settlement of three exceedingly dangerous controversies, has protected Albania against an invasion which threatened to precipitate a new Balkan war, is even now saving Austria from economic collapse, and has, by Mr. Hughes's admission, provided the only possible machinery for the maintenance of a permanent court of international justice. In short, upon what I have mentioned as the first of the essential questions, Professor Dewey presents no argument at all. Yet this first question is all but decisive. If it be true that the League genuinely tends—and if further strengthened would more powerfully tend—to promote European peace, the presumption in favor of American participation becomes almost overwhelming. And the remaining questions can be properly discussed only in connection with this presumption.

Upon the matter of American participation, however, considered apart from the primary question from which it is in reality inseparable, Mr. Dewey does present certain arguments. If, he asks, we are to "cooperate," with whom and to what end are we to cooperate? The answer, surely, is easy; we are to cooperate with the other member states for the ends, and only for the ends, set forth in the Covenant. But, it is objected, the present members have differing views and often pursue conflicting aims; and in practice we should, on each specific issue, be obliged to co-

operate with some one group against some other—for example, either with “France or her satellites” or with Great Britain, in their conflicting views about the amount of reparations. (Mr. Dewey has elsewhere, it will be remembered, told us that “none of the important post-war questions are in the hands of the League.”) It is true enough that the necessity of sometimes taking sides is unescapably incident to any human organization yet invented. But the individual who keeps out of all organizations, lest he be obliged to vote against the views of someone else, is unlikely to play much of a rôle in the shaping of events; and the same is true of a country which is deterred from taking part in the counsels of the nations by the undeniable and doubtless regrettable fact that those counsels are not unanimous. The real question, however, is whether the matters dealt with by this particular organization are within our responsibility and concern our interests; if they are, it is our manifest business to join, and to cooperate with those who will cooperate with us for the measures which seem to them and us contributory to the world’s peace and order.

But Mr. Dewey further objects to American participation on the apparent ground that we are not fit for it and have nothing of value to contribute. “We are ignorant, inexperienced, governed by emotion rather than by information and insight.” “Who,” then, “are we that we should serve in such a capacity?” Here again Mr. Dewey falls into the impossibilist vein, into the besetting futility of the moral idealist. Since we Americans are very faulty mortals, he apparently argues, we ought to avoid assuming responsibilities in international affairs. The answer to this is that though we are doubtless much like other people, we after all are people; that, moreover, we happen to be the most powerful and most secure nation in the world; that we are little involved in the hereditary animosities of European nations and could therefore bring a greater detachment to the deliberations of the League; and that, as a demonstrable matter of fact, we have in the past shown more zeal than any other nation for the peaceful settlement of international disputes. National humility is an excellent thing, but not when it reaches the point of national abulia. To Mr. Dewey’s assertion of our unfitness to play any useful part in the general council of the world may be opposed the remark of a judicious student of contemporary politics who, as it happens, is not of American birth or education. Professor W. B. Munro, writing in the current *Atlantic*, says of the Washington Conference that “it demonstrated, so far as such a thing is susceptible of demonstration, that an international consensus on even the most important questions affecting the peace of mankind is possible only under one condition; namely, that America is ready to supply the initiative and the guidance. It is apparently not within the range of possibilities under any other condition.” If this is even an approximation to the truth, the opportunity of the United States is great; its obligation is plain; and the consequences of its refusal to play its part in the chief business now confronting mankind may be, and are likely to be, disastrous beyond measure.

ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY.

Baltimore, Maryland.

## A Reply from Mr. Dewey

SIR: Mr. Lovejoy has combined two issues raised in my article, one the main point, the other referred to incidentally, and in one paragraph. The matter I was mainly discussing was the tone and temper, moral and intellectual, of the current arguments in behalf of our joining the League. The other point is the objective merits of the League. In combining the two he has failed, as far as I can see, to get such force as my article may have had, and accordingly failed to refute its contention.

It is an intelligible proposition that, even if the League had claims upon this country which personally I do not believe it has, the purposes of our entrance into it might be compromised and even frustrated by the mental and moral state of mind, in Europe and in this country, that attended our going in. No thoughtful person will now deny, I suppose, that the reasons which governed a small group in this country in leading them to advocate our entering into the late war were not shared by the mass of people in this country before or after we went in, and were very different to those which animated the ruling statesmen of our Allies in desiring to get us in. The result was when the war aims were gained, the peace aims were lost. The present seems to me closely to parallel the former situation. For one I have no desire to see the mistake repeated.

Take the European side of the state of mind. Piously speaking, the ruling statesmen of Europe, of course, do not wish war. But neither do they wish to avoid it enough to lead them to reduce armaments, balance budgets, straighten out their affairs, and try to create a decently stable and amicable Europe. Under these circumstances, I submit that we should distrust the motives of some of the Europeans who are anxious to have us get into their politics. They want us now for the same reason that they wanted us during the war—to add power to *their* policies. There are others of whom this is not true; they are desperate because they realize the desperate state of Europe. We are entitled, however, to discount their desire until Europe shows some evidence that it is coming to their point of view. In any case they are naturally—and quite properly—looking at the matter from the standpoint of Europe. What happens to us in case our entrance makes things no better is not their affair. But it is our affair.

A Europe which is divided against itself on every important issue is not a Europe in which we are likely to reduce appreciably the risk of war, and it is a Europe in which we intervene at our own peril, at the peril of becoming entangled in the old problems of the balance—that is, the preponderance—of power. It is perhaps irrelevant to the present writing, but I think it is time that we told the European propagandists who are lecturing us both on our morality and our own best interests that they have a more pressing field of labor in both these respects at home.

These considerations would hold good, even if the American people were prepared to assume the responsibilities urged upon us. The dangers of our entrance would still be enormous. But when we are divided in sentiment and sympathy, when we have no worked-out policy shared by any large number of even the more intelligent part of our electorate, when we are ignorant and inexperienced in foreign affairs, it appears to many of us to be more than

Copyright of New Republic is the property of New Republic and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.