

From *The Times of London*, Nov. 11, 1932

The bomber will always get through

Stanley Baldwin, MP, Nov. 10, 1932

House of Commons, London

I find myself at the close of a most interesting debate which has been well worth while—I myself should not have regretted a second day—in which there have been a number of most interesting contributions, in profound agreement with one of two of the opening observations of Mr. Lansbury. Disarmament, in my view, will not stop war; it is a matter of the will to peace.

It is often said that two natural instincts make for the preservation of the race—reproduction of the species and the preservation of the species by fighting for safety. The right hon. gentleman is perfectly right. That fighting instinct, although he did not say it, is the oldest instinct we have in our nature; and that is what we are up against. I agree with him that the highest duty of statesmanship is to work to remove the causes of war. That is the difficult and the constant duty of statesmen, and that is where true statesmanship is shown.

But what you can do by disarmament, and what we all hope to do, is to make war more difficult. It is to make it more difficult to start; it is to make it pay less to continue; and to that I think we ought to direct our minds.

I have studied these matters myself for many years. My duty has made me Chairman for five years of the Committee of Imperial Defence. I have sat continuously for 10 years on that Committee, except during the period when the present Opposition were in power, and there is no subject that interests me more deeply nor which is more fraught with the ultimate well or ill being of the human race.

What the world suffers from is a sense of fear, a want of confidence; and it is a fear held instinctively and without knowledge very often. But my own view—and I have slowly and deliberately come to this conclusion—is that there is no one thing that is more responsible for that fear—and I am speaking of what Mr. Attlee called the common people, of whom I am the chief—than the fear of the air.

Up to the time of the last War civilians were exempt from the worst perils of war. They suffered sometimes from hunger, sometimes from the loss of sons and relatives serving in the Army. But now, in addition to this, they suffered from the constant fear not only of being killed themselves, but, what is perhaps worse for a man, of seeing his wife and children killed from the air. These feelings exist among the ordinary people throughout the whole of the civilized world, but I doubt if many of those who have that fear realize one or two things with reference to the cause of that fear.

That is the appalling speed which the air has brought into modern warfare; the speed of the attack. The speed of the attack, compared with the attack of an army, is as the speed of a motor-car to that of a four-in-hand. In the next war you will find that any town within reach of an aerodrome can be bombed within the first five minutes of war to an extent inconceivable in the last War, and the question is, Whose moral [morale] will be shattered quickest by that preliminary bombing?

I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. The bomber will always get through, and it is very easy to understand that if you realize the area of space. Take any large town you like on this island or on the Continent within reach of an aerodrome. For the defence of that town and its suburbs you have to split up the air into sectors for defence. Calculate that the bombing aeroplanes will be at least 20,000 ft. high in the air, and perhaps higher, and it is a matter of mathematical calculation that you will have sectors of from 10 to hundreds of cubic miles.

Imagine 100 cubic miles covered with cloud and fog, and you can calculate how many aeroplanes you would have to throw into that to have much chance of catching odd aeroplanes as they fly through it. It cannot be done, and there is no expert in Europe who will say that it can. The only defence is in offence, which means that you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves. I mention that so that people may realize what is waiting for them when the next war comes.

The knowledge of this is probably more widespread on the Continent than in these islands. I am told that in many parts of the Continent open preparations are being made to educate the population how best to seek protection. They are being told by lectures; they have considered, I understand. The evacuation of whole populated areas which may find themselves in the zone of fire; and I think I remember to have seen in some of our English illustrated papers pictures of various experiments in protection that are being made on the Continent. There was the Geneva Gas Protocol, signed by 28 countries in June, 1925, and yet I find that in these experiments on the Continent people are being taught the necessary precautions to take against the use of gas dropped from the air.

I will not pretend that we are not taking our precautions in this country. We have done it. We have made our investigations much more quietly, and hitherto without any publicity, but considering the years that are required to make preparations any Government of this country in the present circumstances of the world would have been guilty of criminal negligence had they neglected to make their preparations. The same is true of other nations. What more potent cause of fear can there be than this kind of thing that is going on on the Continent? And fear is a very dangerous thing. It is quite true that it may act as a deterrent in people's minds against war, but it is much more likely to make them want to increase armaments to protect them against the terrors that they know may be launched against them.

We have to remember that aerial warfare is still in its infancy, and its potentialities are incalculable and inconceivable. How have the nations tried to deal with this terror of the air? I confess that the more I have studied this question the more depressed I have been at the perfectly futile attempts that have been made to deal with this problem.

The amount of time that has been wasted at Geneva in discussing questions such as the reduction of the size of aeroplanes, the prohibition of bombardment of the civil population, the prohibition of bombing, has really reduced me to despair. What would be the only object of reducing the size of aeroplanes? So long as we are working at this form of warfare every scientific man in the country will immediately turn to making a high-explosive bomb about the size of a walnut and as powerful as a bomb of big dimensions, and our last fate may be just as bad as the first.

The prohibition of the bombardment of the civil population, the next thing talking about, is impracticable so long as any bombing exists at all. In the last War there were areas where munitions were made. They now play a part in war that they never played in previous wars, and it is essential to an enemy to knock these out, and so long as they can be knocked out by bombing and no other way you will never in the practice of war stop that form of bombing.

The prohibition of bombing aeroplanes or of bombing leads you to two very obvious considerations when you have examined the question. The first difficulty about that is this—will any form of prohibition, whether by convention, treaty, agreement, or anything you like not to bomb be effective in war? Quite frankly, I doubt it and, in doubting it, I make no reflection on the good faith of either ourselves or any other country. If a man has a potential weapon and has his back to the wall and is going to be killed, he will use that weapon whatever it is and whatever undertaking he has given about it. The experience has shown us that the stern test of war will break down all conventions.

I will remind the House of the instance which I gave a few weeks ago of the preparations that are being made in the case of bombing with gas, a material forbidden by the Geneva Protocol of 1925. To go a little more closely home, let me remind the House of the Declaration of London, which was in existence in 1914, and which was whittled away bit by bit until the last fragment dropped into the sea in the early spring of 1916.

[Sir Austen Chamberlain here interjected to say that “It was never ratified.”]

No, but we regarded it as binding. Let me also remind the House what I reminded them of before—of two things in the last War. We all remember the cry that was raised when gas was first used, and it was not long before we used it. We remember also the cry that was raised when civilian towns were first bombed. It was not long before we replied, and quite naturally. No one regretted seeing it done more than I did. It was an extraordinary instance of the psychological change that comes over all of us in times of war. So I rule out any prospect of relief from these horrors by any agreement of what I may call local restraint of that kind.

As far as the air is concerned there is, as has been most truly said, no way of complete disarmament except the abolition of flying. We have never known mankind to go back on a new invention. It might be a good thing for this world, as I heard some of the most distinguished men in the air service say, if men had never learned to fly. There is no more important question before every man, woman, and child in Europe than what we are going to do with this power now that we have got it. I make no excuse for bringing before the House to-night this subject, to ventilate it in this first assembly of

the world, in the hope that what is said here may be read in other countries and may be considered and pondered, because on the solution of this question not only hangs our civilization, but before that terrible day comes, there hangs a lesser question but a difficult one, and that is the possible rearmament of Germany with an air force.

There have been some paragraphs in the Press which looked as though they were half inspired, by which I mean they look as though somebody had been talking about something he had no right to, to someone who did not quite comprehend it. There have been paragraphs on this subject in which the suggestion was put forward for the abolition of the air forces of the world and the international control of civil aviation. Let me put that in a slightly different way. I am firmly convinced, and have been for some time, that if it is possible the air forces of the world ought to be abolished, but if they are you have got civil aviation, and in civil aviation you have your potential bombers. It is all very well using the phrase "international control," but nobody knows quite what it means, and the subject has never been investigated. That is my answer to Captain Guest.

In my view, it is necessary for the nations of the world concerned to devote the whole of their mind to this question of civil aviation, to see if it is possible so to control civil aviation that such disarmament would be feasible. I say the nations concerned, because this is a subject on which no nation that has no air force or no air sense has any qualification to express a view; and I

think that such an investigation should only be made by the nations which have air forces and who possess an air sense.

Undoubtedly, although she has not an air force, Germany should be a participant in any such discussion which might take place. Such an investigation under the most favourable circumstances would be bound to last a long time, for there is no more difficult or more intricate subject, even assuming that all the participants were desirous of coming to a conclusion. So in the meantime there will arise the question of disarmament only, and on that I would only say a word. Captain Guest raised a point there and pointed out quite truly that this country had never even carried out the programme of the Bonar Law Government in 1922-23 as the minimum for the safety of this country. He expressed a fear—a very natural and proper fear—lest we, with a comparatively small air force among the large air forces of the world, should disarm from that point, and the vast difference between our strength and that of some other countries would remain relatively as great as it was to-day. That kind of disarmament does not recommend itself to the Government. I assure my right hon. friend that the point which he raised has been very present to our minds, and, in my view, the position is amply safeguarded. I would make only one or two other observations; my desire having been to direct the minds of people to this subject. It has never really been much discussed or thought out, and yet to my mind it is far the most important of all the questions of disarmament, for all disarmament hangs on the air, and as long as the air exists you cannot get rid of that fear of which I spoke and which I believe to be the parent of many troubles.

One cannot help reflecting that during the tens or hundreds of millions of years in which the human race has been on this earth, it is only within our generation that we have secured the mastery of the air, and, I do not know how the youth of the world

may feel, but it is no cheerful thought to the older men that having got that mastery of the air we are going to defile the earth from the air as we have defiled the soil for nearly all the years that mankind has been on it.

This is a question for young men far more than it is for us. They are the men who fly in the air, and future generations will fly in the air more and more. Few of my colleagues around me here will see another great war. I do not think that we have seen the last great war, but I do not think that there will be one just yet. At any rate, if it does come we shall be too old to be of use to anyone. But what about the younger men, they who will have to fight out this bloody issue of warfare; it is really for them to decide. They are the majority on the earth. It touches them more closely. The instrument is in their hands.

There are some instruments so terrible that mankind has resolved not to use them. I happen to know myself of at least three inventions deliberately proposed for use in the last War and which were never used. Potent to a degree and, indeed, I wondered at the conscience of the world. If the conscience of the young men will ever come to feel that in regard to this one instrument the thing will be done. But if they do not feel like that ... As I say, the future is in their hands, but when the next war comes and European civilization is wiped out, as it will be and by no force more than by that force, then do not let them lay the blame on the old men, but let them remember that they principally and they alone are responsible for the terrors that have fallen on the earth.