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Not Isolated

WHEN England and France yielded to Germany in the Munich agreement of last September, a significant change took place. The balance of power in Europe shifted from the democracies to the dictatorships.

This deep political change, it now appears, did not leave the United States unaffected. Although it has been a traditional American attitude to regard Washington as isolated from the effects of upheavals abroad, no realist can say today that America has not felt the impact of what happened at Munich.

At present, not a few foreign policy experts are giving serious thought to this theory: When England and France yielded to Germany, the United States had to stop thinking of England and France as America's "first line of defense" in time of European war. In giving way, Chamberlain and Daladier made it clear that their countries could not be counted upon to resist the march of dictatorship through the world. Hence, they could not be counted upon in case America should find itself clashing with dictatorship not only in a moral sense but also in an armed sense.

This is of course only a theory. But it is an interesting theory when studied in relation to the foreign policy being shaped at this moment in Washington. Although it would be unwise to draw too many conclusions from recent developments, it seems safe enough to say that our State Department has definitely departed from the isolationist tradition. The truth is that the public at large, as well as key government officials, is coming around to the belief that the United States can no longer regard itself as comfortably set apart from other nations. There appears to be general recognition of the fact that the world has changed, that oceans have ceased being important geographical barriers, that the airplane has greatly modified the security once found in distance.

And so today America is arming. Last spring Congress passed a naval expansion bill authorizing an outlay of more than a billion dollars. At the next session of Congress, large appropriations will be sought for the upbuilding of national air and land forces. Even now War Department officials talk about plans for a fleet of planes that may number 10,000.

All this is disturbing, and no less disturbing is talk about economic, political and military solidarity among the nations of the western hemisphere. The forthcoming Pan American conference fits well into the pattern. The United States State Department approaches it with great seriousness for more than one reason. In the first place, the idea of Pan America involves the subject of trade, of vastly important economics. In the second place, it involves international politics having to do with the possible spread of Nazi and Fascist influence in South America. In the third place, from the standpoint of the United States, it involves real or imaginary fears of a military character—fears, for example, that Japan or Germany may some day be able to establish armed bases too close to us in the western world.

With the isolationist attitude all but gone, it now becomes necessary to ask what foreign policy will be best for the United States. No one can deny that our current preparedness program is a costly and disturbing thing or that the Pan America idea carries with it grave meanings. For that reason, Washington's action will bear the closest watching from now on. Such questions as these need answering: For just what conditions and eventualities are American defense plans being shaped? If the United States is to assume moral leadership against the dictatorships, are the American people willing to implement words with action?

These questions need to be asked and need to be answered. We are no longer isolated from trouble abroad, but we do not have to rush into it. When Congress next meets, it must weigh the wisdom of our present foreign policy; and if there is wisdom in it, the American people must be prepared to meet whatever consequences it may involve.