

AN OPEN LETTER TO BOYS OF MILITARY AGE

Paul Gerard Smith

ONE OF these days (if it hasn't already happened) an infuriated Czech, inflamed by a hysteric press, will take a pot shot at the right Sudeten, and over will go the apple cart, just as it went over some twenty-four years ago when Gabirle Princip bagged the Archduke in the streets of Sarajevo. If you are the kind of kid I was at your age, things that take place in Sarajevo and eastern Germany seem very, very far away when Southern California kicks off or Hank Greenberg steps up to the plate.

I paid very little attention to it back then. There were so many other things to think of. I remember a lot of people sided with the Germans, complimenting them upon their efficiency as soldiers. They were awed by the rotogravure pictures of the destruction of Laon and Liège. Richard Harding Davis wrote about their marching through one of the Belgian towns—a masterpiece of war reporting. We were neutral, except for the fact that some people didn't like the English and some didn't like the French and some didn't like the Germans. But we went ahead and felt kind of good seeing how money was pouring in, and we started buying more expensive suits and going to shows oftener.



Then, as time went on, we began to take a more personal interest. Now and then an American ship was sunk, and a howl of indignation went up in the press. Notes were exchanged, very stiff and formal, and as they look now, rather nonsensical. Fists were shaken, and then the *Lusitania* sank! Instantly this country was rattled from coast to coast by flaming headlines: "Bleeding Belgium" "Are you going to stand by?" It was a deliberate insult to America's standards—a slap in the American face, this sinking of an English boat upon which Americans had embarked after reading a notice warning them not to do so.

And the first thing you know, a tall, gaunt man stood up in Congress and declared this country was in a state of war with Germany. "God helping us, we could do no better." God help us, I wonder if he was right?

Then, young-men-of-war-age became prominent. They were howled at from posters. Uncle Sam pointed his finger directly at them, telling them he wanted them. Belgium bled all over them. The papers screamed at them. And the fever took hold of them, fanned into flame by the press of the nation—demanding patriotism of them, demanding their lives, their all, for the purpose of making the world "safe for democracy" in the "war to end all wars." They were fed on slogans and beaten into line with catch phrases. And if they didn't go, they were pointed at with scorn, and shunned by their fellow men (who, by the way, had to stay home to shun them).

That is what may happen, God forbid. At least, that's the way it looks. All the old familiar earmarks, all the same empty howlings and phrases are again being dusted off. And, being at an impressionable age, you will listen to them, and they will ring in your ears, and you will be afraid to say no. You will get no time to analyze your feelings or desires—the newspapers and the professional patriots will take care of all that for you. And the first thing you know, you will be aboard ship, sailing for a land where you don't belong, to engage in a war that will puzzle you from the day you enter it until the day of your death.

You will visit the equivalent of Bleeding Belgium—where you have been warned that women have been mangled, children spitted on bayonets, men emasculated and their arms chopped off short. You will look for evidence of these rumors, and you will find none. You will borrow shoes from Great Britain because America hasn't had time to make them for you. You will use poorly made French guns. But the ammunition will be Made-in-America and will be of a very inferior and undependable grade because the patriots who make it can run up bigger dividends by making it that way, and they run little risk of being caught in the excitement of war time. You will wear a raincoat that will melt off your back in a heavy mist. You will see motor cars delivered minus their engines. You will learn that locomotives have landed and left their running gear

AN OPEN LETTER

behind—and when the wheels do come over, they won't fit—and when they do fit, the locomotives will be too big for the tracks they are to run on.

You will walk a good many miles through foreign mud, and you will see the boy who used to play second-base on your kid baseball team make a quick grab at his chest and flop to the ground, and you'll know he'll never play second-base again. But you won't mind all this—for you will be filled with patriotism. You are fighting for your country—you won't know just why—but there you'll be, fighting for your country. And you'll feel in your heart that this really is the war to end all wars.

You will one day come across a freight car on a siding that has somehow miraculously escaped destruction. You will, with the aid of others, pry open the door, hoping that inside you will find boxes of something to eat. You will find boxes all right, but when you open them, instead of canned goods you will find ladies' evening gloves, brassières and underthings, carefully consigned to the A.E.F. And you will wonder—and then it will dawn upon you that some patriot has pulled a quick one and rid himself of a carload or two of unsalable stock at the expense of the government.

You will, now and then, in the rare periods of in-between receive copies of your home-town paper. And they will contain lists of people who are dropping their pennies in the kettle to provide "smokes for the home-town boys." And you will wonder what becomes of the money—for you never get the smokes.

And then one day will come an armistice if you are lucky—or unlucky—enough to live to see it. You will march into the enemy country where you will squat to wait until peace has been declared. You will, if you are interested, read the armistice and think it pretty severe but well deserved. They asked for it, and they got it.

You will see your President arrive for the conference—a world hero. There will be parades in his honor; streets will be named after him. And then the brains of the world will sit down and haggle—and turn each syllable of the armistice they agreed upon into a lie. And the enemy will object and say they signed a certain paper containing certain terms, and they expect the treaty of peace to be based upon those terms. And the gentlemen across the table will tell

them to "sign it or leave it." And they will sign it, practically with a gun at their temple, and will go home hating the ink with which it was signed, hating the hand that held the pistol that was leveled at their temple, and fully determined to reverse the hated treaty at every opportunity that presents itself.

And your President will go home. And the men who hailed him as hero will laugh up their sleeves at his gullibility; they will change the names of the streets they named after him, and the school children, who not long before were cheering him and bowing down to him as a god, will be informed that he is really a sap in a frock coat, something to mock and make fun of.

Then you will see the nations that promised your country their future, their life blood, their all, in return for what your country did for them turn like a dog and snap at everything your country represents. The money they borrowed—what of it? It was your war too, you know—you can't expect to sit in on the game without paying for your chips—and ours too for that matter. The war's over—to hell with you.



You will return home. You will find the hated "slackers" who remained behind well thought of, prosperous, and happy, with huge bank accounts patriotically earned through the shipment of bad ammunition and the sale of blotting-paper rain coats and ladies' unmentionables to the army. You will see the men who agreed with your President in his every move harry him at every turn, and cut his political throat. You will see high officials in the army who stayed at home criticize the behavior of the army which went overseas. You will return to march up Fifth Avenue, and if you delay your return long enough, you will notice that your parade attracts but little attention. This may or may not please you. I don't believe you will want to attract attention. You will want to go home and pick up where you left off when Uncle Sam called you.

You will see men who wrote letters like this in those days, and who were cast aside almost as lepers, coming to the fore again and uncovering the graft, the stupidity, and the

AN OPEN LETTER

scandal of the whole silly mess. You who left a patriot will return a cynic. Your belief will be gone, your belief in everyone and everything. Your belief in your fellow man, who, having remained behind, now considers you a fool for having gone. Your belief in your country, which has unmercifully lied to you and played upon your sympathy. And you may even begin to weaken a bit about a God who can permit men created in His image do such utterly stupid things.

You will marry and have a son. And he will go through high school and look the country over wondering "where do we go from here?" He will be raised in an anti atmosphere—anti-Capital, anti-Nazi, anti-Communist, anti-Prohibiton, anti-everything. He will read papers that feature strikes and the capture of gunmen. He will see men, well educated, desirous of putting their ability to work, forced to accept veiled charity from the government. You will find him a very perplexed boy who would like to know just what it is all about. And you will try to tell him, but words won't come. He's eighteen, and you're forty-something, and it's hard to tune those two stations in on the same wave length.

But you will be safe in telling him this, when the aforementioned world-rocking events come to pass and upset the apple cart; when the right ship has been sunk and the right papers printed and the right pressure brought to bear upon the youth of the country:

Here's the way it is, kid. If you go to war, you're a chump as I was—unless it's your war. Inspect it carefully first. Look back of the headlines and the billboards, and see what and who is instigating them. See what selfish interests will be served by engaging in a war. Find out whose oil properties or whose overseas investments you are drafted to protect. Don't pull other people's chestnuts out of fires that don't concern you. Don't believe the ballyhoo. Headlines are cheap, rumors are cheap—and can be readily influenced by those with enough money. Take time out, look the situation over thoroughly, and if you're satisfied that it is what the last war was, a manufactured frame-up with a couple of hundred billion dollars' overhead, which ended up in a return to the starting place and merely provided a pretty thorough dress rehearsal for the next big blow-up, have guts enough to defy anybody. When they try to bully you into enlisting or force you by draft into a set-up which is 100 per cent

AN OPEN LETTER

fraudulent, tell them to go to hell even if they shoot you in your tracks. At least you'll die honest.

But, if upon examination you find that you can, even at the cost of your life, protect your ideals, and the ideals for which this country came into being, then grab your gun cheerfully and go. If you are satisfied that your home is in danger (they will tell you it is, but *assure* yourself), if you find out that America and the future of America is threatened (they will point out to you in any case that the future of civilization rests upon your shoulders—but determine for yourself whether or not it does), then go, and kick hell out of the enemy, and God be with you.

And when you come home, I hope you'll have a country and a God to believe in. Ours was crucified, as Bill Bryan said, on a cross of gold.

Rob Wagner's
Script
September 24, 1938
p. 6



Smith, as he appeared in the Twenties