SCIENCE AND POLITICS

No official action taken by the Society during the past year should give us greater satisfaction than the recent gift of 10,000 dollars to the Royal Society of Great Britain. This gesture, I take it, means more than a friendly desire to assist our mother society at a time when its work may be limited by lack of funds. It is, I believe, an affirmation of our feeling of solidarity with English scholarship and democratic civilization. I believe that the President of the Royal Society has rightly interpreted its significance in the phrases which our President read out last night, that it is a gift ‘for the defence of the mental and spiritual freedom in which alone science can flourish,’ that it is ‘a token of the desire of men of science in America to help their colleagues of this country to keep alive the tradition of the pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of all mankind.’

Science knows no national boundaries. It might be suggested that according to this principle we should extend the same aid to similar societies in Germany and Italy. In a very real sense we are doing just that by making welcome here a large body of German and Italian scientists who have left their homes precisely because Germany and Italy are trying to restrict science by national, racial and ideological bounds. To do that is to commit treason against the spirit of science, and in welcoming these refugees from intolerance we are doing more than aiding individuals, we are preserving the foundation spirit upon which all science and all scholarship must be based.

The task of receiving worthily a large group of eminent scholars, many of them imperfectly acquainted with our language, and strange to the organization and methods of our educational system, is not an easy one. It is inevitable that there should be some friction, some murmuring, and that something like a protective tariff for American scholarship should be here and there advocated. It is important that we should look at this whole problem more broadly, should realize the fundamental issues at stake, and that the members of this Society should use their leadership to make sure that the learned world of America may prove worthy of this great opportunity.

This is indeed for us an opportunity. The educational system of the United States is so vast that if we were to try to make all our colleges and
universities first rate, all the faculties of all the universities of the world would not provide enough men of the first quality for the purpose. These guests of ours have much to teach us. America is convinced of the value of education, but America has not yet learned to provide adequately for scholarship. Teaching and research go well together; but we curtail the productivity of many of our most promising young men by giving them impossible teaching loads. We still have much to learn about the problems of so organizing our colleges and universities as to make them places where scholars can develop and flourish.

We must learn to broaden the range of our political thinking to match the spirit of science. Our civilization is one, and only the realization, in suitable international organizations of our political, economic and spiritual unity with other countries will make aggression of the Hitler type impossible. Hitler’s strength lies in the separateness of the modern world, in national policies of isolation, in the inability of the prospective victims to combine against him. So long as that continues there will be no limit to his conquests.

To-day it looks as if the English-speaking world were the last hope of effective resistance. Fortunately the nations of the British commonwealth and the United States constitute the group already closest knit by common spiritual and political ideals. Our gift to the Royal Society is symbolic of the need of the moment. Events are moving fast. Our help to Britain is a defence of our deepest interests, of all that we hold most dear, of all that gives significance to our democratic way of life. I am sure that upon reflection the American people will not wish to set any limits upon this help except the need of the hour. I am glad that the members of our Society joined yesterday in sending a telegram to the President and the Secretary of State for their vigorous emphasis on that fact.

These are dark days, but only the faint-hearted will feel that our cause is lost. The English-speaking nations of the world have in their possession one resource which promises in the end to be decisive—that is control of the seas. So long as the free nations can keep their control of the great oceans, domination of the world by Hitler will be impossible. And if he fails to dominate the world, Hitler will eventually see his empire crumble under his feet as every similar attempt at world conquest has crumbled in the past. The new order in the occupied nations of Europe is not order, but anarchy held in check by military force, which is the most inefficient form of government yet devised by man. It may appear strong at the moment, but if we do our part, as we now seem to be preparing to do, if we with the British hold the seas and control the sea-borne commerce of the world, the Nazi
empire, whatever its victories on the continent of Europe, will find itself incapable of self-support and that one day will fall of its own weight.

These are dark days, but it is profoundly true that men learn most from failure and adversity. The failure of the League of Nations to prevent this war has made many people sceptical of all forms of international organizations. Twenty years ago the democracies were masters of the world. They could do what they liked. They tried to organize the world for peace and the result has been this war. If we were creatures of blind instinct it might be reasonable to predict that even if the Nazis are defeated, we could only expect the same result again. That is the argument in a nut-shell of our isolationists. The answer to it can only be given by faith—that faith which has produced in the face of the greatest difficulties all the triumphs of science and scholarship which it is the function of this Society to safeguard and promote. We are not creatures of blind instinct, but human beings with the priceless ability to learn by our failures. The great structure of modern science which this Society represents has been built upon experiments which failed and upon the lessons learned from failure which eventually pointed the way to success. We can, if we will repeat that process in the realm of politics and solve the international problems which will confront the world after this war is over. We can, if we will, build upon the experience of the past a new international organization which will usher in an era of peace and happiness for all mankind. To accomplish that we have only to apply the methods and the courage of science to the political problems which confront the world.