

CONSCRIPTION NEEDED

Mayor Mitchel Urges Support of Administration So That Country May Be Able to Protect Itself

WITH respect to military policy the people of the United States have come to the fork in the road. Will they take the way to democratic and effective self-protection by universal training and service, or the way to waste and favoritism, and the inexcusable sacrifice of life, through the utterly discredited volunteer system?

Next to the question of entering the war, this is the most momentous question that Congress has been called upon to settle in more than half a century. Upon the answer hangs not alone our country's successful participation in the present war, but also our permanent safety and self-respect and prestige as a nation.

As I write these words I am encouraged by the news from Washington that a "backfire" has begun to work on the members of Congress—that the shortsighted and dangerous opposition to obligatory service has not the support, as many Congressmen seem to have supposed, of the people throughout the country. It appears that Senators and Representatives with their ears to the ground are hearing, instead of a voice of timid hesitation, a vigorous demand for the enactment of the President's program. If this is true—and I earnestly hope that it will have been made plain by the time this appears in type—it is a master triumph for enlightened public opinion.

To one who has given even the slightest study to the country's military history it is incredible that Congress should hesitate an instant in making its decision. With the records of previous wars before it—the record of the most vicious favoritism, the shifting of the burden from those who should have borne it to those who were often the very men who should have been exempted for the good of the nation—could it be possible that the Congress of this great, free, and enlightened people would deliberately invite a repetition of the evils of the past?

We have heard a great deal in the last few days about "conscription." The opponents of a really effective military policy seize upon this word and attempt to give it a meaning akin to oppression, or, as they sometimes foolishly say, "Prussianism." But why should any intelligent man allow himself to be frightened by a word? Of course it is "conscription" that we want and should have. It is only another word for universal obligatory service. And when the term "selective conscription" is used it means nothing more or less than what the advocates of universal service have always wanted—the call to arms of the men who can best be spared and the exemption of those who have dependents or are needed on the farms and railroads and in the factories, or who can be more useful to the nation anywhere else than in the field.

Universal service, as it has been applied in France, Germany, and other countries, has simply been the "selective conscription" that we now hear about. The main difference is this:

By Mayor John Purroy Mitchel

that, because of our large population, and the improbability that we shall have to go the limit in drawing upon our resources, there will be a far greater proportion of our able-bodied men who will not be called to arms. This is particularly fortunate now, because the short food supply, and the need of our Allies for our munitions and other products, make it necessary that we should have a vast agricultural and industrial

army steadily at work as part of our war forces.

A refusal on the part of Congress to support the Administration measure would be all the more remarkable in view of the fact that we have so vividly before us the melancholy experience of England in the present war. We shall never know how many thousands, or hundreds of thousands, were simply slaughtered because of England's un-

preparedness. It has been said, and I believe truly, that if England had had universal service—and that would have meant land forces comparable with those of France and Germany—this war would not have come about. Certain it is that if England had had trained troops, many brave men, all but helpless for lack of training, who were shot down, would have had that "fighting chance" that every instinct of fairness demands.

Yet, with this tragic picture before us, we have seen American citizens in the last two or three years doing everything in their power to subject American young men to the same danger. These citizens, who may have good intentions, but who are just as dangerous as if they were avowed enemies of the nation, have steadily sought to block appropriations for adequate armament on both sea and land. The results of their efforts have been bad enough as it is, but if they had had their way entirely, we should now face the possibility of sending American youths into war with the same sort of chance of protecting themselves that the Russian soldiers had when they had to wait for their comrades to be killed before they could get rifles.

What encourages me about our national situation now is that the opinion of the mass of people proves so often to be different from what Representatives in Washington suppose it to be. Many a Congressman was afraid to vote for war with Germany because he thought his constituents were opposed to it—and was surprised to find that his constituents were strong for it. Here we have what seems to be, and what I hope is, a similar situation. While Senators and Representatives have hesitated and faltered, and feared to go against the supposed sentiment of their constituents in favor of the volunteer system, their constituents have turned out to be not in favor of that system at all.

I recall that when I went to Toledo, on the way to the Mayors' Conference at St. Louis, I was told that Toledo was a pacifist town and that we would find no preparedness sentiment there. Well, a snowstorm broke that night, and everything looked bad for the mass meeting that had been arranged. Yet when our party entered the hall there was not only not a vacant seat, but the standing space was packed. And the audience rose to its feet and shouted its approval when I made the statement that the only sane and democratic solution of the military problem was universal training and service. We had the same experience in St. Louis. And we are now getting evidence of the same kind from every part of the land.

I believe the people are for obligatory service. I believe Congress is waking up to that fact, if it has not already done so, and will put the right sort of law upon the books. It was a serious mistake not to take this action before. But better late than never. The delay will hamper our efforts in the present war, but at least we shall be enabled to establish the country upon a sound basis for future self-protection.



Mayor Mitchel in Camp at Plattsburg.