

# NEED OF DICTATOR URGED BY HARDING

## Republican Senator from Ohio Favors Absolute Power for President, Even If He Is a Democrat

By Richard Barry.

**W**HAT the United States needs and what it must have if it is to win the war is a supreme dictator with sole control of and sole responsibility for every phase of war activity, and this today means practically every phase of Government."

Thus spoke Warren G. Harding, Republican Senator from Ohio.

"More than that; not only does this country need such a dictator," he continued, "but in my opinion it is sure to have one before the war goes much further. It is the inevitable logic of events here in Washington."

The Senator was sitting on the veranda of the Capitol, just outside the Senate floor, and as he talked there floated through the marble room which alone separated him and the interviewer from the deliberations of the upper house the strident voices of Senatorial orators, each in his way opposing the passage of the Food Control bill, each in his way suggesting emendations or elisions. In the course of the afternoon the speakers were Gronna of North Dakota, New of Louisiana, Weeks of Massachusetts, and Hardwick of Georgia. They represented no one party, no one idea, no one section of the country. Over the whole Senate lay the castigations of John Sharp Williams of Mississippi accusing every obstructionist of potential, if not actual pro-Germanism.

At lunch the Senator from Ohio had remarked, casually, that the United States was drifting toward a dictatorship. Later he was asked to amplify and, if possible, to justify this idea. He was quick to add that he meant it in no offensive sense, but that at the same time he was profoundly sure of the desirability of a dictatorship and had no desire to postpone the day of its arrival.

"Is this not un-American?" he was asked.

"Whether it is or is not American," he replied, "it will be made American once the condition is an established fact; but at the same time let me answer your question more fairly by a short glance at our history, as I see it. While I am neither historian nor constitutional lawyer, it appears to me that the experiences of the founder of our nationality, George Washington, had convinced him that in times of national crisis supreme power should be vested in one head and that all responsibility as well as all power should be vested there. In his matchless vision Hamilton saw the necessity of such provision, and his influence in the drafting of the Constitution, exerted through Washington, was such that every avenue was opened for casting to one man in a crisis all the power. During the

conflict in the early days of our Government between the Federalists, under Hamilton, and the Republicans, under Jefferson, Washington's attitude was that of silent and effective favor to Hamilton, while he pacified Jefferson. Washington, who knew from bitter experience exactly what evils a country faced in grave crisis, and with the vision of a statesman preparing for the future, succeeded in laying down both the law and the tradition which would intensify centralized power in time of war.

"During the early days, and, in fact, for more than the first two years of the civil war the Congress in the North was rent with disagreement and dissension, and it was only as the logic of events combined with the perception generally of the unparalleled character of Mr. Lin-

coln that powers were placed more and more in the hands of the President, until, toward the close of the war, Congress as well as the Cabinet had all but abdicated in favor of the one man who had proved himself a safe dictator for the destinies of the nation.

"The same thing must occur in this war, and the sooner it comes the better for all of us. We will never be actually in the war, never be a menace to Germany in a modern military sense, until it does come.

"Of course, we shall preserve appearances, out of regard for our boasted democracy, and Congress will remain on guard, but it will go on delegating power, because human nature in a crisis turns to one commander. It always has been so, and ever will be. Meanwhile, if any

one is concerned about preserving inherited government, let us call the proceeding a suspension of the rules while we are saving national rights."

The thunder of Senator Gronna, protesting against the passage of the food bill, penetrated the quiet corner.

"Take, for instance, this present debate," continued Mr. Harding. "I would be the last one to impeach the motives of any Senator who has prolonged it. Each man who has spoken against the bill, each who has taken the precious time of the Senate, each who has delayed the enactment of a universally desired measure, and each who has participated in postponing for several weeks a war measure as vital as the mobilization of troops, has done so, I believe, with integrity and sincerity, in full accord with his oath of office and in behalf of what he interprets to be the desires of his constituency. Here is the menace. Out of the practices of peace men in Congress incline to study their constituencies rather than to understand the national need. Of the motives, of the character, or of the ability of these men I have no criticism. This is no time for the injection of personalities, much less of politics.

"Personally, I have not been enthusiastic over the Food Control bill. It was in part a necessity created by suggestion. Undeniably something was needed, and orderly government must meet such a need in hours of crisis, else it fails utterly, no matter what limitations temporarily have to be broken down.

"What I impeach is the system of legislation as it exists today. It is not adapted for wartime purposes; it is all very well for peace, but not for war. In war decisions must be made instantly, and they must be subject to instant change. To consult a legislative body concerning the desirability or the justice of these decisions is absolute folly. It amounts, in the end, to confession of weakness and failure in the face of the enemy. And in such a case there is little difference between confession of failure and failure itself.

"Legislative bodies cannot solve problems in detail, nor write flexible laws to be varied according to the exigencies arising. Only a grant of power will bring results through a discriminating and, let us hope, a just and righteous agency.

"I think all are agreed that in what is known as strictly military affairs power must be centralized and absolute. In the recruiting, mobilization, and disposition of troops, in the erection of fortresses and the array of navies no one questions the necessity of centralizing power, of asking about it no questions and of demanding of it only results.

"We have yet to learn that in war today practically every other affair of government is as vital to victory as soldiers, ships, and guns. To give a Commander in Chief control of men,



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Warren G. Harding, Ohio's Republican Senator, Who Says We Are Drifting to a Dictatorship and Must Have One in Order to Win the War.

ammunition, and ships, but to deny him control of food, clothing, and every variety of munitions is to tie one of his arms and one of his legs and to ask him to fight against a man in full use of all his limbs.

"The truth of what I say is not contested, as a general proposition, even by those who oppose, for various reasons, the various war measures now before Congress. But each man is able to find for himself and for the particular reason which he has for opposing any particular bill an exception to the rule. He is able to convince himself and many others that his purposes are not only patriotic, but that any other method than the one he employs of debate and delay is decidedly unpatriotic.

"This is the character of legislative bodies. It always has been and it always will be their character. Men are elected to legislative bodies for the purpose of discussing legislation. It is too much to expect that they will not, at least in a respectable minority, fulfill the strict letter of their function, even if 'Hannibal is knocking at the gates.' For them, at once, in the mass and unanimously, to perceive the inevitable logic of a war situation is more than can be expected, and it is a situation that past and present history does not lead us to expect."

Continuing along this line, Mr. Harding analyzed, quite frankly and with the kindly detachment of an unofficial observer, the various personalities now in the Senate heretofore called "a little group of willful men," "conscientious objectors," and, in some instances, much worse than that. He was careful to explain that, in his opinion, these personalities should not be considered either with antagonistic criticism nor yet with party, factional, nor even with patriotic spleen. He looked upon them as merely the present-day illustrators of a universal prin-

ciple which became the greatest weakness of democratic government in time of war.

"These men," he said, "are having a very hard time. They are doing their duty, as they see it, in the face of terrific criticism, and it is, in a very real sense, a courageous thing to do. Of them as men or as Senators or as Representatives I do not say one word of criticism. Many of them are my friends; all of them I respect.

"What I do say, unequivocally, is this: The system must and will be changed for war. We cannot travel much longer on this road of debate that leads only to indecision and finally to paralysis. Better let one man make the mistake and hold him responsible for it than for us all collectively to make the greater mistake of doing nothing, or else of doing what we do too late, or of half doing it, or of ineffectively doing it. How can Congress decide in advance anything about food prices, or any other prices? Those things must be regulated by one man in supreme control, and he must be in a position to effect his will instantaneously just as much as is the commander of any military force."

"What would you suggest? That Congress delegate all its power to one man?"

"Practically that, if not actually," the Senator replied.

"Does that not mean the complete abandonment of democracy?"

"Call it what you will; it is the only way to win the war. However, it means that we abandon nothing except the incapacity of all legislative bodies in wartime. We would not abolish Congress. There is much for it to do. It remains the 'buffer State,' as they say in Europe, guaranteeing democracy against the assaults of the very autocracy it creates. Even a dictator could not ignore it. It

gets the sentiment of the people and sifts the pure gold from the dross and thus can speak a people's best aspirations. Congress can always remain at hand ready to repeal any law it might enact, ready to impeach any dictator it might empower. To change the figure a bit, Congress would remain on the side lines, as it were, closely watching the great game, ready at any moment to rescind the powers it has delegated."

"Whom have you in mind for this position as supreme dictator?" Mr. Harding was asked.

"At the present moment there is but one possible man," replied the Senator from Ohio, "the President of the United States. I must say he is not my choice, but the people of the country have chosen him, and he is the only one to whom we can turn. Why quibble with events which are already accomplished? Mr. Wilson is our President, duly elected. He is already by the inevitable force of events our partial dictator. Why not make him complete and supreme dictator? He will have to answer to the people and to history eventually for his stewardship. Why not give him a full and free hand, not for his sake, but for our sake? He is not likely to succeed half bound; unbound he will have every chance. If he fails, then it is his fault, not ours. If he fails under present conditions, it is our fault, not his."

"But we are warring against autocracy, and you are proposing for us as great or even a greater autocracy than that to which we are declared antagonistic."

"On the prairies," replied Mr. Harding, "when a fire threatens the community in which there is no means of fighting it except one, a counter fire is started. They fight a great fire with a little one, but one which meets fierce element with the same fierce element, and

the element which alone, under the circumstances, can combat it. Our advantage over the Germans is that we would put on autocracy as a garment only for the period of the war, whereas they wear autocracy as the flesh that clings to their bones. Once the war is over, we would discard autocracy, just as we did after the Revolution and after the rebellion.

"In a sense I am not advocating a political measure so much as I am suggesting what must and will occur in this country in a very short while. A dictatorship, no matter what term of office is employed, almost always has occurred in moments of extreme national peril. Napoleon, the soldier of democracy, became the dictator of France. Caesar, the tribune of the people, founded the greatest empire the world has ever known, and one in which the dictators for hundreds of years were elected. Lloyd George, the most radical Democrat England has ever known, becomes the empire's dictator. Kerensky, a Socialist, becomes the supreme dictator of Russia. How long will America wait before she, too, voluntarily chooses a dictator? We must have one, sooner or later. Why not now?"

"I have had a thousand letters expressing fear of this very thing, making strong appeal against the abdication of Congress. It is a fear of the policy, rather than of the fact. My own conviction is that the world is aflame and that we have a Republic to save. We can't do it with the processes of a Republic in peace. If, under one supreme director, we can make our resources in men, minds, and money effective, and if we can save the United States and its inherited and treasured rights as a nation, we shall prove democracy's ability to defend itself, and the soul of that democracy will live again in its re-established institutions of peace."