

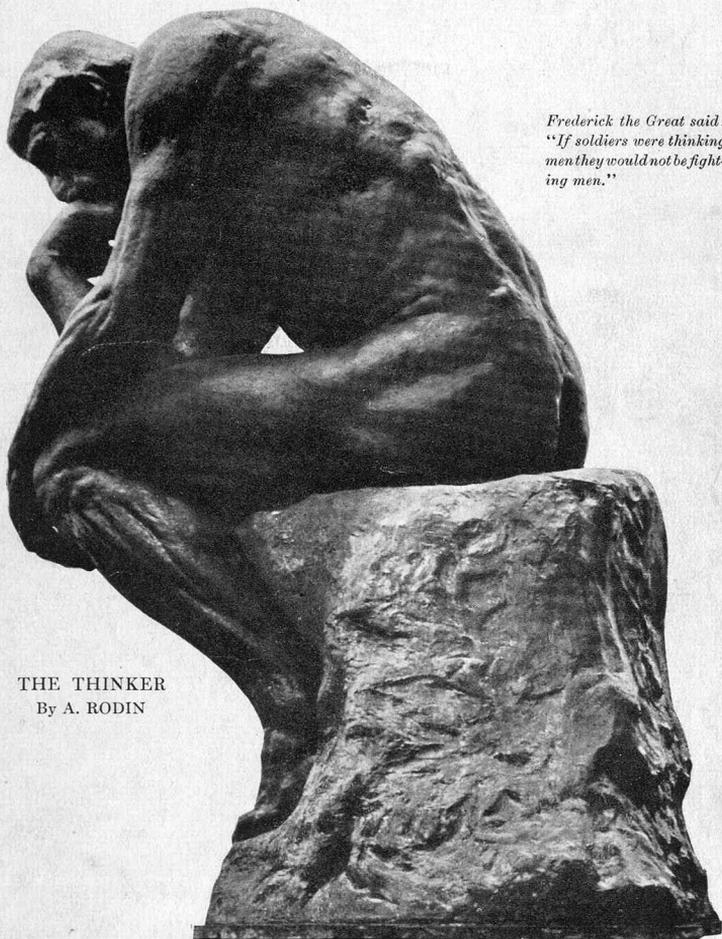
The Wisest Words ever Written

ON

WAR

BY

R. ^{apple} W. ^{acdo} EMERSON



*Frederick the Great said:
"If soldiers were thinking
men they would not be fighting
men."*

THE THINKER
By A. RODIN

PREFACE BY

HENRY FORD

PRICE FIFTEEN CENTS

JX1963
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Copies of this pamphlet can be
procured from the
AMERICAN NEWS CO.
11 Park Place, New York City

\$0.15
JUN 21 1916

©CLA432779

no. 1.

PREFACE

9. 3. 71. 25-28-16
I N his day, Emerson saw men thinking of war as an epidemic of insanity. When rats are found to carry disease and cause an epidemic, the rats are wiped out. What then will we say of the human rodents who spread the fever of fear and distrust that ends in the death we call war? Free men in a strong democracy may exterminate these human vermin by the use of sane thought and American cool-headedness.

He could see, seventy years ago, that peace would come only when the "manhood that is in war is transferred to the cause of peace." To-day millions of others are beginning to realize the truth of those words.

The manhood that can face bullets, which end all things quickly, must be tempered to face undismayed the storm of scorn, doubt, falsehood and malice, of avarice and lust for power, as well as the heroic insanity expressed in the words, "My country, right or wrong."

Selfishness is ever ready to capitalize the devotion of the patriot. And selfishness goes hand in hand with insincerity and inconsistency. Emerson found anti-duelling societies having at their heads duellists of renown. To-day we have peace societies led by men who profit financially or politically from war, militaristic preachers, and soldiers whose aim is conquest instead of defense.

The men who look to war as a means for profit must be educated to the point at which they can see more profits in peace than in war; the man who thinks that patriotism consists only in shouldering a gun must be taught that there is a greater duty he owes to all humanity; and the man who strikes for his HONOR must be brought to realize that his honor and his life are his own and not the property of a few quarrelling diplomats and statesmen. He alone must decide when he shall begin killing his fellow-men.

Peace is a state of mind, and the state of mind that maintains peace cannot survive in the glare of bristling bayonets, tinsel and flaunted flags. True democracy cannot exist where the soldier holds precedence.

Henry Ford

WAR¹

IT has been a favorite study of modern philosophy, to indicate the steps of human progress, to watch the rising of a thought in one man's mind, the communication of it to a few, to a small minority, its expansion and general reception, until it publishes itself to the world by destroying the existing laws and institutions, and the generation of new. Looked at in this general and historical way, many things wear a very different face from that they show near by, and one at a time,—and, particularly, war. War, which, to sane men at the present day, begins to look like an epidemic insanity, breaking out here and there like the cholera or influenza, infecting men's brains instead of their bowels,—when seen in the remote past, in the infancy of society, appears a part of the connection of events, and, in its place, necessary.

As far as history has preserved to us the slow unfoldings of any savage tribe, it is not easy to see how war could be avoided by such wild, passionate, needy, ungoverned, strong-bodied creatures. For in the infancy of society, when a thin population and improvidence make the supply of food and of shelter insufficient and very precarious, and when hunger, thirst, ague, and frozen limbs universally take precedence of the wants of the mind and the heart, the necessities of the strong will certainly be satisfied at the cost of the weak, at whatever peril of future revenge. It is plain, too, that, in the first dawns of the religious sentiment, *that* blends itself with their passions, and is oil to the fire. Not only every tribe has war-gods, religious festivals in victory, but *religious wars*.

We see, it is the subject of all history; that it has been the principal employment of the most conspicuous men; that it is at this moment the delight of half the world, of almost all young and ignorant persons; that it is exhibited to us continually in the dumb show of brute nature, where war between tribes, and between individuals of the same tribe, perpetually rages. The microscope reveals miniature butchery in atomies and infinitely small biters that swim and fight in an illuminated drop of water; and the little globe is but a too faithful miniature of the large.

What does all this war, beginning from the lowest races and reaching up to man, signify? Is it not manifest that it covers a great and beneficent principle, which nature has deeply at heart? What is that principle?—It is self-help. Nature implants with life the instinct of self-help, perpetual struggle to be, to resist opposition, to attain to freedom, to attain to a mastery, and the security of a permanent, self-defended being; and to each creature these objects are made so dear, that it risks its life continually in the struggle for these ends.

But whilst this principle, necessarily, is inwrought into the fabric of

¹ Extracts from an address by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1838.

every creature, yet it is but *one* instinct; and though a primary one, or we may say the very first, yet the appearance of the other instincts immediately modifies and controls this; turns its energies into harmless, useful, and high courses, showing thereby what was its ultimate design; and, finally, takes out its fangs. The instinct of self-help is very early unfolded in the coarse and merely brutal form of war, only in the childhood and imbecility of the other instincts, and remains in that form only until their development. It is the ignorant and childish part of mankind that is the fighting part. Idle and vacant minds want excitement, as all boys kill cats. Bull-baiting, cockpits, and the boxer's ring are the enjoyment of the part of society whose animal nature alone has been developed. In some parts of the country, where the intellectual and moral faculties have as yet scarcely any culture, the absorbing topic of all conversation is whipping; who fought, and which whipped? Of man, boy, or beast, the only trait that much interests the speakers is the pugnacity. And why? Because the speaker has as yet no other image of manly activity and virtue, none of endurance, none of perseverance, none of charity, none of the attainment of truth. Put him into a circle of cultivated men, where the conversation broaches the great questions that besiege the human reason, and he would be dumb and unhappy, as an Indian in church.

To men of a sedate and mature spirit, in whom is any knowledge or mental activity, the detail of battle becomes insupportably tedious and revolting. It is like the talk of one of those monomaniacs whom we sometimes meet in society, who converse on horses; and Fontenelle expressed a volume of meaning, when he said, "I hate war, for it spoils conversation."

Nothing is plainer than that the sympathy with war is a juvenile and temporary state. Not only the moral sentiment, but trade, learning, and whatever makes intercourse, conspire to put it down. Trade, as all men know, is the antagonist of war. Wherever there is no property, the people will put on the knapsack for bread; but trade is instantly endangered and destroyed. And, moreover, trade brings men to look each other in the face, and gives the parties the knowledge that these enemies over sea or over the mountain are such men as we; who laugh and grieve, who love and fear, as we do. And learning and art, and especially religion, weave ties that make war look like fratricide, as it is.

The proverb was,—“No peace beyond the line”; and the seaman shipped on the buccaneer's bargain, “No prey, no pay.” In 1588 the celebrated Cavendish, who was thought in his times a good Christian man, wrote thus to Lord Hunsdon, on his return from a voyage round the world:—“Sept. 1588. It hath pleased Almighty God to suffer me to circumpass the whole globe of the world, entering in at the Strait of Magellan, and returning by the Cape of Buena Esperança; in which voyage, I have either discovered or brought certain intelligence

of all the rich places of the world, which were ever discovered by any Christian. I navigated along the coast of Chili, Peru, and New Spain, *where I made great spoils. I burnt and sunk nineteen sail of ships, small and great. All the villages and towns that ever I landed at, I burned and spoiled.* And had I not been discovered upon the coast, I had taken great quantity of treasure. The matter of most profit to me was a great ship of the king's, which I took at California," &c., and the good Cavendish piously begins this statement,—“It hath pleased Almighty God.”

Indeed, our American annals have preserved the vestiges of barbarous warfare down to more recent times. I read in Williams's History of Maine, that “Assacombuit, the Sagamore of the Anagunticook tribe, was remarkable for his turpitude and ferocity above all other known Indians; that, in 1705, Vaudreuil sent him to France, where he was introduced to the king. When he appeared at court, he lifted up his hand, and said, ‘This hand has slain a hundred and fifty of your majesty's enemies within the territories of New England.’ This so pleased the king, that he knighted him, and ordered a pension of eight livres a day to be paid him during life.” This valuable person, on his return to America, took to killing his own neighbors and kindred, with such appetite, that his tribe combined against him, and would have killed him, had he not fled his country for ever.

For ages (for ideas work in ages, and animate vast societies of men) the human race has gone on under the tyranny—shall I so call it?—of this first brutish form of their effort to be men; that is, for ages they have shared so much of the nature of the lower animals, the tiger and the shark, and the savages of the water-drop. They have nearly exhausted all the good and all the evil of this form: they have held as fast to this degradation as their worst enemy could desire; but all things have an end, and so has this. The eternal germination of the better has unfolded new powers, new instincts, which were really concealed under this rough and base rind. The sublime question has startled one and another happy soul in different quarters of the globe. Cannot love be, as well as hate? Would not love answer the same end, or even a better? Cannot peace be, as well as war?

This thought is no man's invention, neither St. Pierre's nor Rousseau's, but the rising of the general tide in the human soul,—and rising highest, and first made visible, in the most simple and pure souls, who have therefore announced it to us beforehand; but presently we all see it. It has now become so distinct as to be a social thought: societies can be formed on it. It is expounded, illustrated, defined, with different degrees of clearness; and its actualization, or the measures it should inspire, predicted according to the light of each seer.

The idea itself is the epoch; the fact that it has become so distinct to any small number of persons as to become a subject of prayer and

hope, of concert and discussion,—*that* is the commanding fact. This having come, much more will follow. Revolutions go not backward. The star once risen, though only one man in the hemisphere has yet seen its upper limb in the horizon, will mount and mount, until it becomes visible to other men, to multitudes, and climbs the zenith of all eyes. And so, it is not a great matter how long men refuse to believe the advent of peace: war is on its last legs; and a universal peace is as sure as the prevalence of civilization over barbarism, of liberal governments over feudal forms. The question for us is only, *How soon?*

That the project of peace should appear visionary to great numbers of sensible men; should appear laughable, even, to numbers; should appear to the grave and good-natured to be embarrassed with extreme practical difficulties,—is very natural. “This is a poor, tedious society of yours,” they say: “we do not see what good can come of it. Peace! why, we are all at peace now. But if a foreign nation should wantonly insult or plunder our commerce, or, worse yet, should land on our shores to rob and kill, you would not have us sit, and be robbed and killed? You mistake the times; you overestimate the virtue of men. You forget, that the quiet which now sleeps in cities and in farms, which lets the wagon go unguarded and the farmhouse unbolted, rests on the perfect understanding of all men, that the musket, the halter, and the jail stand behind there, perfectly ready to punish any disturber of it. All admit, that this would be the best policy, if the world were all a church, if all men were the best men, if all would agree to accept this rule. But it is absurd for one nation to attempt it alone.”

In the first place, we answer, that we never make much account of objections which merely respect the actual state of the world at this moment, but which admit the general expediency and permanent excellence of the project. What is the best must be the true; and what is true,—that is, what is at bottom fit and agreeable to the constitution of man—must at last prevail over all obstruction and all opposition. There is no good now enjoyed by society, that was not once as problematical and visionary as this. It is the tendency of the true interest of man to become his desire and steadfast aim.

But, further, it is a lesson, which all history teaches wise men, to put trust in ideas, and not in circumstances. We have all grown up in the sight of frigates and navy yards, of armed forts and islands, of arsenals and militia. The reference to any foreign register will inform us of the number of thousand or million men that are now under arms in the vast colonial system of the British empire, of Russia, Austria, and France; and one is scared to find at what a cost the peace of the globe is kept. This vast apparatus of artillery, of fleets, of stone bastions and trenches and embankments; this incessant patrolling of sentinels; this waving of national flags; this reveille and evening gun; this martial music, and endless playing of marches, and singing of

military and naval songs, seem to us to constitute an imposing actual, which will not yield, in centuries, to the feeble, deprecatory voices of a handful of friends of peace.

Thus always we are daunted by the appearances; not seeing that their whole value lies at bottom in the state of mind. It is really a thought that built this portentous war-establishment, and a thought shall also melt it away. Every nation and every man instantly surround themselves with a material apparatus which exactly corresponds to their moral state, or their state of thought. Observe how every truth and every error, each a *thought* of some man's mind, clothes itself with societies, houses, cities, language, ceremonies, newspapers. Observe the ideas of the present day,—orthodoxy, skepticism, missions, popular education, temperance, anti-masonry, anti-slavery; see how each of these abstractions has embodied itself in an imposing apparatus in the community; and how timber, brick, lime, and stone have flown into convenient shape, obedient to the master-idea reigning in the minds of many persons.

You shall hear, some day, of a wild fancy, which some man has in his brain, of the mischief of secret oaths. Come again, one or two years afterwards, and you shall see it has built great houses of solid wood and brick and mortar. You shall see a hundred presses printing a million sheets; you shall see men and horses and wheels made to walk, run and roll for it: this great body of matter executing that one man's wild thought. This happens daily, yearly about us, with half thoughts, often with flimsy lies, pieces of policy and speculation. With good nursing, they will last three or four years, before they will come to nothing. But when a truth appears,—as, for instance, a perception in the wit of one Columbus, that there is land in the Western Sea; though he alone of all men has that thought, and they all jeer,—it will build ships; it will build fleets; it will carry over half Spain and half England; it will plant a colony, a state, nations, and half a globe full of men.

We surround ourselves always, according to our freedom and ability, with true images of ourselves in things, whether it be ships or books, or cannons or churches. The standing army, the arsenal, the camp, and the gibbet do not appertain to man. They only serve as an index to show where man is now; what a bad, ungoverned temper he has; what an ugly neighbor he is; how his affections halt; how low his hope lies. He who loves the bristle of bayonets, only sees in their glitter what beforehand he feels in his heart. It is avarice and hatred; it is that quivering lip, that cold, hating eye, which built magazines and powder-houses.

It follows, of course, that the least change in the man will change his circumstances; the least enlargement of his ideas, the least mitigation of his feelings, in respect to other men; if, for example, he could be inspired with a tender kindness to the souls of men, and should come

to feel that every man was another self, with whom he might come to join, as left hand works with right. Every degree of the ascendancy of this feeling would cause the most striking changes of external things: the tents would be struck; the men-of-war would rot ashore; the arms rust; the cannon would become street-posts; the pikes, a fisher's harpoon; the marching regiment would be a caravan of emigrants, *peaceful* pioneers at the fountains of the Wabash and the Missouri. And so it must and will be: bayonet and sword must first retreat a little from their ostentatious prominence; then quite hide themselves, as the sheriff's halter does now, inviting the attendance only of relations and friends; and then, lastly, will be transferred to the museums of the curious, as poisoning and torturing tools are at this day.

War and peace thus resolve themselves into a mercury of the state of cultivation. At a certain stage of his progress, the man fights, if he be of a sound body and mind. At a certain higher stage, he makes no offensive demonstration, but is alert to repel injury, and of an unconquerable heart. At a still higher stage, he comes into the region of holiness; passion has passed away from him; his warlike nature is all converted into an active medicinal principle; he sacrifices himself, and accepts with alacrity wearisome tasks of denial and charity; but, being attacked, he bears it and turns the other cheek, as one engaged, throughout his being, no longer to the service of an individual but to the common soul of all men.

Since the peace question has been before the public mind, those who affirm its right and expediency have naturally been met with objections more or less weighty. There are cases frequently put by the curious,—moral problems, like those problems in arithmetic, which in long winter evenings the rustics try the hardness of their heads in ciphering out. And chiefly it is said,—Either accept this principle for better, for worse, carry it out to the end, and meet its absurd consequences; or else, if you pretend to set an arbitrary limit, a "Thus far, no farther," then give up the principle, and take that limit which the common-sense of all mankind has set, and which distinguishes offensive war as criminal, defensive war as just. Otherwise, if you go for no war, then be consistent, and give up self-defence in the highway, in your own house. Will you push it thus far? Will you stick to your principle of non-resistance when your strong-box is broken open, when your wife and babes are insulted and slaughtered in your sight? If you say yes, you only invite the robber and assassin; and a few bloody-minded desperadoes would soon butcher the good.

In reply to this charge of absurdity on the extreme peace doctrine, as shown in the supposed consequences, I wish to say, that such deductions consider only one half of the fact. They look only at the passive side of the friend of peace, only at his passivity; they quite omit to consider his activity. But no man, it may be presumed, ever embraced

the cause of peace and philanthropy, for the sole end and satisfaction of being plundered and slain. A man does not come the length of the spirit of martyrdom, without some active purpose, some equal motive, some flaming love. If you have a nation of men who have risen to that height of moral cultivation that they will not declare war or carry arms, for they have not so much madness left in their brains, you have a nation of lovers, of benefactors, of true, great, and able men. Let me know more of that nation; I shall not find them defenceless, with idle hands springing at their sides. I shall find them men of love, honor, and truth; men of an immense industry; men whose influence is felt to the end of the earth; men whose very look and voice carry the sentence of honor and shame; and all forces yield to their energy and persuasion. Whenever we see the doctrine of peace embraced by a nation, we may be assured it will not be one that invites injury; but one, on the contrary, which has a friend in the bottom of the heart of every man, even of the violent and the base; one against which no weapon can prosper; one which is looked upon as the asylum of the human race, and has the tears and the blessings of mankind.

In the second place, as far as it respects individual action in difficult and extreme cases, I will say, such cases seldom or never occur to the good and just man; nor are we careful to say, or even to know, what in such crises is to be done. A wise man will never impawn his future being and action, and decide beforehand what he shall do in a given extreme event. Nature and God will instruct him in that hour.

The question naturally arises, How is this new aspiration of the human mind to be made visible and real? How is it to pass out of thoughts into things?

Not, certainly, in the first place, *in the way of routine and mere forms*,—the universal specific of modern politics; not by organizing a society, and going through a course of resolutions and public manifestoes, and being thus formally accredited to the public, and to the civility of the newspapers. We have played this game to tediousness. In some of our cities, they choose noted duellists as presidents and officers of anti-duelling societies. Men who love that bloated vanity called public opinion, think all is well if they have once got their bantling through a sufficient course of speeches and cheerings, of one, two, or three public meetings, as if *they* could do anything: they vote and vote, cry hurrah on both sides, no man responsible, no man caring a pin. The next season, an Indian war, or an aggression on our commerce by Malays; or the party this man votes with, have an appropriation to carry through Congress: instantly he wags his head the other way, and cries, Havoc and war!

This is not to be carried by public opinion, but by private opinion, by private conviction, by private, dear, and earnest love. For the only hope of this cause is in the increased insight, and it is to be accomplished by the spontaneous teaching, of the cultivated soul, in its secret

experience and meditation,—that it is now time that it should pass out of the state of beast into the state of man; it is to hear the voice of God, which bids the devils, that have rended and torn him, come out of him, and let him now be clothed and walk forth in his right mind.

Nor, in the next place, is the peace principle to be carried into effect by fear. It can never be defended, it can never be executed, by cowards. Everything great must be done in the spirit of greatness. The manhood that has been in war must be transferred to the cause of peace, before war can lose its charm, and peace be venerable to men.

The attractiveness of war shows one thing through all the throats of artillery, the thunders of so many sieges, the sack of towns, the jousts of chivalry, the shock of hosts,—this namely, the conviction of man universally, that a man should be himself responsible, with goods, health and life, for his behavior; that he should not ask of the State, protection; should ask nothing of the State; should be himself a kingdom and a state; fearing no man; quite willing to use the opportunities and advantages that good government throws in his way, but nothing daunted, and not really the poorer if government, law, and order went by the board; because in himself reside infinite resources; because he is sure of himself, and never needs to ask another what in any crisis it behoves him to do.

What makes to us the attractiveness of the Greek heroes? of the Roman? What makes the attractiveness of that romantic style of living, which is the material of ten thousand plays and romances, from Shakspeare to Scott; the feudal baron, the French, the English nobility, the Warwicks, Plantagenets? It is their absolute self-dependence. I do not wonder at the dislike some of the friends of peace have expressed at Shakspeare. The veriest churl and Jacobin cannot resist the influence of the style and manners of these haughty lords. We are affected, as boys and barbarians are, by the appearance of a few rich and wilful gentlemen, who take their honor into their own keeping, defy the world, so confident are they of their courage and strength, and whose appearance is the arrival of so much life and virtue. In dangerous times, they are presently tried, and therefore their name is a flourish of trumpets. They, at least, affect us as a reality. They are not shams, but the substance of which that age and world is made. They are true heroes for their time. They make what is in their minds the greatest sacrifice. They will, for an injurious word, peril all their state and wealth, and go to the field. Take away that principle of responsibility, and they become pirates and ruffians.

This self-subsistency is the charm of war; for this self-subsistency is essential to our idea of man. But another age comes, a truer religion and ethics open, and a man puts himself under the dominion of principles. I see him to be the servant of truth, of love, and of freedom, and immovable in the waves of the crowd. The man of principle,

that is, the man who, without any flourish of trumpets, titles of lordship or train of guards, without any notice of his action abroad, expecting none, takes in solitude the right step uniformly, on his private choice, and disdaining consequences,—does not yield, in my imagination, to any man. He is willing to be hanged at his own gate, rather than consent to any compromise of his freedom, or the suppression of his conviction. I regard no longer those names that so tingled in my ear. This is a baron of a better nobility and a stouter stomach.

The cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice. If peace is sought to be defended or preserved for the safety of the luxurious and the timid, it is a sham, and the peace will be base. War is better, and the peace will be broken. If peace is to be maintained, it must be by brave men, who have come up to the same height as the hero, namely, the will to carry their life in their hand, and stake it at any instant for their principle, but who have gone one step beyond the hero, and will not seek another man's life;—men who have, by their intellectual insight, or else by their moral elevation, attained such a perception of their own intrinsic worth, that they do not think property or their own body a sufficient good to be saved by such dereliction of principle as treating a man like a sheep.

If the universal cry for reform of so many inveterate abuses, with which society rings,—if the desire of a large class of young men for a faith and hope, intellectual and religious, such as they have not yet found, be an omen to be trusted; if the disposition to rely more in study, and in action on the unexplored riches of the human constitution,—if the search of the sublime laws of morals and the sources of hope and trust, in man, and not in books,—in the present, and not in the past,—proceed; if the rising generation can be provoked to think it unworthy to nestle into every abomination of the past, and shall feel the generous darings of austerity and virtue; then war has a short day, and human blood will cease to flow.

It is of little consequence in what manner, through what organs, this purpose of mercy and holiness is effected. The proposition of the Congress of Nations is undoubtedly that at which the present fabric of our society and the present course of events do point. But the mind, once prepared for the reign of principles, will easily find modes of expressing its will. There is the highest fitness in the place and time in which this enterprise is begun. Not in an obscure corner, not in a feudal Europe, not in an antiquated appanage where no onward step can be taken without rebellion, is this seed of benevolence laid in the furrow, with tears of hope; but in this broad America of God and man, where the forest is only now falling, or yet to fall, and the green earth opened to the inundation of emigrant men from all quarters of oppression and guilt; here, where not a family, not a few men, but mankind, shall say what shall be; here, we ask, Shall it be War, or shall it be Peace?

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