

Debate against Clay Judson

October 14, 1940

Adlai E. Stevenson's remarks in a debate against Clay Judson of the America First Committee, Chicago, Illinois

Excerpt:

I do not think there are any limits to Hitler's ambition short of world conquest, just as there were no limits to the ambitions of Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander. I do not think a world that has obliterated time and space can exist half slave and half free. I do not think that tyranny in four-fifths of the world and freedom in one-fifth can endure.

Background:

Adlai Stevenson never wavered from his belief that the United States needed to be actively engaged in international affairs. He understood that new transportation and communication technologies, such as the airplane and radio, were reducing the distances between peoples and nations. Throughout his career, he opposed those who believed American interests were best served by remaining disengaged from the world's problems. This clash between isolationists and internationalists was never more apparent than during the run up to America's entry into World War II. Isolationists opposed U.S. involvement in world affairs. Internationalists, on the other hand, thought the U.S. should remain active in world affairs.

On September 1, 1939, Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany invaded Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II in Europe. By late summer 1940, France had fallen to the Germans, and German bombers were pounding central London. In Europe, Great Britain remained alone to fight the German war machine.

In 1940, most Americans felt an emotional connection to the English people and their struggle against Nazi tyranny. Even so, many Americans didn't want to become involved in another worldwide conflict. World War I had ended in 1918, just 22 years earlier. The leading influential voice for isolationism was the America First Committee (AFC). This group believed that foreign entanglements would only weaken the United States. Chicago was the center for the U.S. isolationist movement. The AFC was based in the city, and it was led by men such as *Chicago Tribune* newspaper publisher Robert R. McCormick.

Opposing the isolationists were the members of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA). The committee was founded by Kansas journalist William Allen White, and thus was also known as the White Committee. This group believed it was the moral obligation of the U.S. to support Great

Britain. Stevenson served as the head of the CDAAA chapter in Chicago. In a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* published September 14, 1940, Stevenson stated the views and goals of the Committee to Defend America: “We think Hitler is a menace and detests democracy; he has said so. We think Britain is engaged in a death struggle to stop that menace. We think that with our help she can succeed; or, if not, that prolonged resistance will weaken Hitler and give us more time to get ready.”

On October 14, 1940, Stevenson debated Clay Judson, a well-known Chicago lawyer who was a prominent spokesperson for the America First Committee. “I think this is the most critical moment in our history,” Stevenson said. “I think we are witnessing a death-struggle for control of the western world.”

FULL TEXT of Adlai Stevenson’s comments during the October 14, 1940 debate against Clay Judson:

I apologize for using a hastily prepared manuscript—but the League of Women Voters does not have a good reputation among careless, extemporaneous ad libbers!

Much as I dislike to contradict the omniscient *Chicago Tribune* or Mr. Judson, I must, at the outset, challenge the constant imputation of a dishonest motive to the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. It is *not* trying to get us into war by the back door, the front door or even the cellar door. Although 17% of the people favor immediate participation in the war, the White Committee does not. On the contrary it confidently believes that aid to Britain is best calculated to keep us out of war. It believes, in short, that the best way, the only way, to keep America out of war is to keep the war out of America—be it military or economic war.

I am going to tell you as briefly and simply as I can why I favor all possible aid to Britain short of war; why, according to the most recent poll, a majority of all Americans support the principal objective of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies—all possible aid short of war—and, if you will, even at the risk of war.

Why do I believe in this program; why do both candidates for the presidency; why does almost every scholar with distinguished qualifications in the field of international relations who has publicly expressed an opinion; and why do more than *half* the American people favor this program?

The answer is that they believe:

1. That Hitler is a menace to the United States;
2. That Britain is resisting that menace; and
3. That, therefore, in helping Britain the United States is helping itself.

These propositions seem simple and self-evident, but you have just heard a contrary point of view expressed by another American whose motives are certainly as good as mine and who, like many other citizens of unimpeachable patriotism, believe that our mutual purpose of preserving our institutions and economy intact as long as possible can best be served by either no aid to Britain whatever, or no aid except private aid. To determine which of these two points of view is correct one must examine the assumptions underlying them.

We think that Hitler is a menace to us. The record is clear. You can *never* believe Hitler when he says anything reassuring; but his record for fulfillment of what we thought were fantastic, chauvinistic threats is fearful! A world revolution started in 1914 and is still going on. Its objective is *world domination*, and there is no secret about it. The superior race heresy did not start with the Versailles Treaty. It has been going on for three generations. In 1868 Professor Lasson, of the University of Berlin, said that the state could reach the full fruition of its destiny only through the destruction of other states. In 1895 a German wrote: "Germans alone will govern.... Let no man say every people has a right to existence. They may live only as long as they do not stand in the way of a mightier one. If they stand in our way to spare them would be folly." Bismarck labeled the Monroe Doctrine as an international impertinence. A member of the German Center Party, in 1897, said that the task of the new German navy would be to *end* the Monroe Doctrine. Thereafter, surveys were made of the American coastline and much was written about the prospects for successful invasion. In 1900 Von Schlieffen, of whom you have heard so much, was indignant not because the Von Edelsheim plan for conquest of the United States was *prepared* but because it was *published*. The Kaiser told King Edward that the German navy was aimed not at England but at the United States. Early in this century Theodore Roosevelt, writing to Senator Lodge, said that Germany was "the only power which may be a menace to us in anything like the immediate future." It serves no purpose to multiply quotations. As recently as 1938 the *New York Times* published a report of a survey made by German engineers, naval and air officers of Anticosti Island at the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

But let us see what the dictators have said more recently. Mussolini has frequently expressed his contempt for democracy. His favorite metaphor is something about Fascism trampling on the putrid corpse of individual freedom; and more recently, speaking of the aims of the Axis, he said that the pluto-democracies must and would be destroyed. Which democracy was or is the most "pluto"?

Rauschnig [Herman Rauschnig, anti-Nazi politician and writer] quotes Hitler as saying:

"The present government of the United States...is the last disgusting death-rattle of a corrupt and outworn system which is a blot on the history of this people. Since the Civil War...the Americans have been in a condition of political and popular decay.

"We shall soon have storm troopers in America. We shall train our youth. We

shall have men which degenerate Yankeedom will not be able to challenge. National Socialism alone is destined to liberate the American people from their ruling clique and give them back the means of becoming a great nation.”

“I shall undertake this task simultaneously with the restoration of Germany to her leading position in America.... The German component of the American people will be the source of its political and mental resurrection.”

“I guarantee that at the right moment a new America will exist as our strongest supporter when we are ready to take the stride into overseas space. We have the means of awakening this nation in good time. There will be no new Wilson arising to stir up America against us.”

And Hitler wrote these words, of dreadful and prophetic accuracy, in *Mein Kampf*: “Each country will imagine that it alone will escape. I shall not even need to destroy them one by one. Selfishness and lack of foresight will prevent each fighting until it is too late.” Raushning adds, “In the National Socialist view the political situation in America is unstable and can be developed into an outright revolution; to do this is both a tactic [al] aim of National Socialists, in order to hold America aloof from Europe, and a political one, in order to bring both North and South America into the new order. National Socialism is preparing to occupy the key possessions for colonial domination; for domination of the great sea routes, and for the domination of America and the Pacific.”

Yes, I believe Hitler is a menace, though perhaps the destroyer trade for British bases in the Atlantic has, at least in part, forestalled this last mentioned intention. And I remind you that the isolationists in and out of Congress opposed the destroyer deal—including, I believe, General [Hugh] Johnson, the first radio sponsor for Mr. Judson’s America First Committee. In this connection I must add that it is now abundantly clear that if the Embargo Act had not been repealed last November, six months after the President asked for it, Britain might have been defeated already. The isolationists vigorously opposed *that* also.

But perhaps the *Tribune* is right and I am just a “cookie-pusher,” a “war monger,” and a “professional bleeding heart” to believe any of these boastful things that the dictators say. But I do believe them. I do believe that if Britain and her navy fall, somewhere, sometime, we cannot escape a frontal impact with the triumphant National Socialism. I do not think that the centrifugal dynamism of dictatorship *can* stop, even if it wanted to. I do not think there are any limits to Hitler’s ambition short of world conquest, just as there were no limits to the ambitions of Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander. I do not think a world that has obliterated time and space can exist half slave and half free. I do not think that tyranny in four-fifths of the world and freedom in one-fifth can endure.

But you will say these are mere surmises, and General [Robert E.] Wood and others have confidently assured us that the British fleet cannot be destroyed, though in the same breath they seem to admit the possibility because they propose an impregnable defense for America and endorse the appropriation of more than 12 billion dollars in a single

session of Congress to commence militarization of this country and the building of a two-ocean navy; which can only be necessary if Britain *is* defeated. Some of us who never shared the pathetic faith in the Maginot Line feel the same about the British navy. We do not think it will surrender, but we *cannot* be sure. We know that Britain confronts a mighty drive on Suez, on Haifa, and the Near East oil fields and on Gibraltar. The Mediterranean may be closed. The battle of Britain is not over. With Europe and North Africa consolidated Britain may yet be defeated, and how can we be sure that the British fleet will not follow the French. Threats of brutal reprisal and extermination of the families of soldiers and sailors is an ancient device. It has worked before. It may work again. If the opportunity comes no one can seriously believe that humane considerations will deter the author of concentration camps, pogroms and Polish slavery from trying it.

In short, with the multiple lessons of the past so fresh, we must not let over-confidence and complacency suddenly confront us with the horrifying spectacle of a Nazi Britain. A year ago few of us foresaw a Nazi France. I'm sure Mr. Judson didn't. Responsible men are constantly reminding us in General M[a]cArthur's tragic words "too little and too late"; that if we don't *help* Britain enough we may have to *fight* Britain, as well as Germany, Italy and Japan.

Another assumption that deserves scrutiny is that even if Britain falls we are in no danger of attack, that German difficulty with the English Channel multiplied 100 times is the short answer; that when this phase is over Germany will be exhausted, her allies even more so, and all this talk of possible invasion is "fantastic hysteria"—to borrow General Woods' words or "impossible" in Mr. Judson's. If it is fantastic hysteria, then it is even more fantastic to be spending 12 billion dollars to merely *commence* preparation for the defense of this continent and this hemisphere against such an attack. There is something tragically inconsistent about all this.

But the paradox is easily explained; for *if* Britain falls the Axis' naval power will at once outclass us, and if the British fleet falls into their hands—as the French navy has in part, and would have in whole had it not been for Britain's decisive action—they will outclass us 2 to 1, and in addition to that they will have naval shipbuilding facilities exceeding ours from 5 to 8 times! Will they stand by like good sportsmen and give us the necessary five years to double our naval strength? *Of course* a successful invasion requires bases; but the answer to bases is sea power, and there is, as I have said, a real possibility of predominant Axis sea power if the British navy is surrendered or even destroyed. But, notwithstanding, the isolationists say, to use General Woods' words, "There is absolutely *no* danger of an invasion of the United States even if Germany is completely victorious."

I am disposed to agree that an immediate invasion of our continental area is quite unlikely. But how about South America and our outposts where we would be as far from home as they are? It is only 1600 miles from Africa to the bulge of Brazil; it is 3400 miles from the United States. And General Wood also says, "I would unhesitatingly throw everything we have into a war to defend the North American continent and part, if not all, of the South American continent." Now consider this problem of hemisphere defense a moment. With our fleet divided in the Atlantic and the Pacific, with Japan

pressing from the west and superior naval forces from the east, with the Panama Canal threatened from both sides, and perhaps from Nazi air fields in Latin America; with no absolute certainty that Canada will not follow the mother country into the Nazi orbit; with no certainty that Hitler cannot do what Napoleon III did in Mexico and do it better; with no certainty that there will be time to get ready to defend *ourselves*, let alone the Monroe Doctrine, I cannot share their confidence that military danger can be dismissed. Two million Americans crossed the same ocean in 1918; perhaps Germans and Italians can cross it too. At all events we are, with almost undivided national approval, preparing feverishly against that very possibility. And every day that Britain holds out on the island and in the Mediterranean gives us that much more time to get ready. Furthermore, I have yet to hear any military expert say that partial defense of South America is practical. Maybe it is, but when the time comes I suspect we will try to defend all or none of it. Let us not forget, moreover, that the coastline of this hemisphere is 43,000 miles; that there are some three million Germans in Brazil, Uruguay [and] the Argentine; that the cultural affinities of South America are European; that the percentage of literacy is not high, and that the mass of people share but little of our heritage of individual liberty and democracy.

But let us adopt the assumption that there is *no* military threat to this hemisphere. The export trade of South America outside the United States was one billion dollars in 1937 and vital to the economy of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. If the British blockade is broken and these countries want to trade with Hitler's Europe, as they must, what are we going to do? If we permit it, have you any doubt that Nazi political control will follow Nazi economic control attained by the barter system? Suppose we decide that we will have to wage economic war to defend the Monroe Doctrine which we have considered essential to our security for 100 years. How can we do it? We can buy up their export surpluses. That will cost us about a billion a year, which can be added to our own foreign trade loss outside the American continent of three quarters of a billion. What will our farmers say about buying all this wheat and meat, etc. We may find it too expensive or politically impossible. The other alternative is to *enforce* South American cooperation—enforce economic misery in S. A. When that time comes, do you think we will be any more eager to risk our boys' lives in the jungles of Brazil or the pampas of the Argentine than we are in Europe? There is still another consideration which seems to be imperfectly understood. If this war ends in a stalemate with the domination of all Europe Hitler will still lack four essential raw materials—petroleum, grain, cotton and copper. But if he subjugates the Near East, the petroleum shortage is eliminated; if the Axis squeezes Britain out of the Mediterranean and takes Africa, the copper shortage is eliminated. Africa and a reluctant Russia will in time fill the grain and cotton shortages. With this prospect do you doubt for a moment that South America, producing surpluses that we can't use and won't buy, will not be begging to trade with Europe? Of course she will, and probably we will, too!

And that brings me to the most important reason for supporting Britain. Have the dictators still another weapon? I think so. I refer to the dislocations and readjustments that we will suffer in this country as the result of a Hitler victory. If the Nazi system is a menace to our way of life, it is a menace after, as well as before, the killing stops in

Europe. So what will our military expenditures have to be? Possibly one-quarter of our national income. Will we be economically blockaded? Will we have to ration strategic materials like rubber and tin? Will Germany reverse the tables and will we be forced to develop substitutes at great cost and inconvenience? Will conscription become permanent and after 150 years of blessed peace will we become an armed camp like Europe? What happens to our civil liberties? Much is being written and said on that score and it is not reassuring. I have already suggested some of the problems that will arise in preventing Nazi economic penetration in South America. Walther Funk, the Reich Minister of Economics, tells us that Germany will organize the economy of all Europe on a continental monopoly basis, and insolently adds that it will not deal with any other unit similarly organized. How can our individual competitive system compete economically with totalitarian Europe on one side and totalitarian Asia on the other? What happens to the little independent in a chain store town? Will we be able to sell outside Canada and the Caribbean precisely what the masters want us to and no more? After their temporary deficiencies are satisfied *we* will still have to get many important raw materials from the totalitarian monopolists. On whose terms—theirs or ours? To wage economic war against not merely government but continental monopoly will we have to adopt similar controls? Will all our foreign trade inevitably pass under government control, or, perhaps, “pass out?” What happens to the standard of living as foreign trade contracts and more and more production goes not into goods, but arms? What has happened to the standard of living in Germany in the seven years of her great effort for guns instead of butter? And how will we make our arms pay dividends as she has? How do we finance coincident arms expansion and trade contraction? How much debt can we stand before inflation and repudiation begin? And when in this process will we begin to hear demands for “a strong man?” When will people begin to ask, “Can’t we get along with this new order in Europe, in Asia?” When will someone suggest a halt to the defense spending? And will others say, “No, we can’t play with Hitler and survive?” In a two-party system will one inevitably become the party of appeasement? Where then is our unity, our faith in the American way of life, our passion for freedom, truth and justice?

Pragmatism is central to our philosophy: we believe in what works. The derogation of values which has characterized the age of applied science and industrial society has established performance as the criterion. The values of American life have, I’m afraid, only a modified appeal to many people in various groups: pragmatic industry, cynical youth, those to whom property outranks principle, and, conversely, the unemployed. Combine the prestige of Nazi success with the prestige of Nazi technique, and how many of these people will conclude that Nazi society cannot be so bad after all?

Frankly, if Britain falls, it is the development of this tolerant attitude nourished by economic pressures and the 5th column from within (and one can detect signs of it already), that concerns me most.

I think this is the most critical moment in our history. I think we are witnessing a death-struggle for control of the western world, a death-struggle between our traditions and pagan traditions never disciplined by the Roman Empire in the West or Christendom in the East. It is only as we believe the western tradition worth preserving, *at any price*, that

we will as a nation have the counter-dynamic required to meet and defeat the Nazi outthrust if Britain falls. Division, cupidity and treachery are Hitler's deadliest weapons. He has said so! He may be right. We cannot be sure that the economic and social controls which must follow British collapse will not themselves ultimately betray us. We cannot be sure that in trying to save freedom we will not embrace slavery, either in or out of war.

I have attempted to suggest the shape of things to come and why Britain plays a strategic role in our defense, both military and economic—why if Britain falls we face incalculable dangers from within and without—why there is everything to gain and little to lose by helping Britain to stop Hitler now! I have said nothing about our racial and lingual heritage, our common traditions, our 100 years of peace and prosperity and unarmed security, thanks to the British navy. Nor have I mentioned the moral effect of American aid on the British Dominions against the day when we may desperately need friends. I have in short said why, in America's self-interest alone, we should help Britain; why, if you will, we should defend America to the last Englishman!

And now in conclusion let me read you some prophetic words of Winston Churchill to the House of Commons on February 22, 1938—seven months before Munich: “I predict the day will come when at some point or other, on some issue or other, we will have to make a stand, and I pray God that when that day comes we may not find that through an unwise policy we are left to make that stand alone.” We too can pray God that through an unwise policy we may not be left to suffer or to fight, alone!

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the Monroe Doctrine? Do you believe Stevenson would say that the Monroe Doctrine has expanded, shrunk, or grown extinct today?
2. Did Stevenson view potential German aggression as an American problem only, or did he take a broader perspective? How did his view fit into his overall opinions regarding isolationism and anti-isolationism?
3. What was the “economic” war with Germany that Stevenson described? Are there commodities today that are targets of economic war and terrorism?

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