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Letters to the Editor

FUTURE OF THE LEAGUE

QUIS CUSTODIET CUSTODES?

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—If the nations which bound themselves in 1919 to make collective war upon aggression could have foreseen that the first powerful aggressor to arise in Europe would be Italy, under a military Dictator with 5,000,000 armed men behind him, how many of them would have signed the Covenant? It was a rash undertaking, like the vow of Jephthah to sacrifice to the Lord the first living thing that greeted him on his return from the battle. Yet there are those who would perpetuate it.

They speak of restraining the aggressor by international police action. What kind of police have they in mind? Aggressors do not employ police for their deeds of aggression. They employ armed hosts equipped with terrible armaments; they prepare strategic plans; they calculate the opposition likely to be met both from their victim and his friends; they provide for the safety of their lines of communication; they accumulate supplies for the campaign; they secretly fix the hour and the place at which to strike. Obviously those who would restrain the aggressor must be no less prepared than he; their forces sufficiently large and well armed to cope with him; their strategy in readiness; their lines of communication safe. To say they possess a collective preponderance of force is nothing to the purpose if the force has to extemporise its mode of operation or if protracted debates are necessary before it can operate. In that case the aggressor will have done his work before his opponents have made up their minds. What kind of a police is equal to these things? Is the word a mere sop to pacifists?

"A collective preponderance of force" is verbally intelligible. But it lacks precision. Of all the stock phrases in the peace-making vocabulary this is the vaguest, and perhaps the most deceitful. With a view to winning a greater precision for the phrase you allowed me to ask certain questions in your columns about a year ago. As these questions are still seeking an answer perhaps you will now permit me to repeat them.

They related to such practical matters as the composition, discipline, and efficiency of the collective force; the location of its headquarters; the constitution of its general staff; the preparation of its strategic plans; the harmonious action of its component parts; the maintenance of its martial spirit; the responsibility for unreadiness, miscarriages, failure, or defeat. Was it to be a standing force with its component parts permanently assembled on a war footing? Or was it to be a force in reserve, with the component parts distributed, until needed for action, in the countries to which they severally belonged? Was it to include the whole fighting force of every covenanting nation or only a part, and, if the latter, how great a part? Assuming its preponderance to be so great that no aggressor would ever dare to challenge it, might pacifists be invited to enlist in its ranks under the assurance that they would never have to fight, but at most, to threaten? Finally, I ventured to point out that a Covenant binding the nations to create and operate such a force was a highly precarious type of agreement and itself no less in need of safeguarding than anything it might be intended to safeguard. This led on to the question quis custodiet custodes?

Such were the questions you allowed me to ask a year ago and to which no answer has been forthcoming. To them I would now add a further question—one of a more general character.

What circumstances are conceivable in which the Government of a sovereign State will allow a decision that would embroil it in war to pass out of its own hands into those of collective authority? Is there any responsible Government in Europe or elsewhere willing to involve the people it rules over in the unspeakable risks and horrors of modern warfare at the bidding of a resolution taken by an international council at Geneva in which its own voice is no more than one among many? What, to look no farther, would the British people say to a Government which allowed its action, Covenant or no Covenant, to be so determined? Would not a Government which plunged the nation into war within any "framework" other than that of its own independent will and judgment betray its trust, and any statesman who lent himself to that betrayal, deserve, in the words of Alexander Hamilton, to be shot as a traitor? Yet is not that the very situation with which statesmanship might find itself confronted at any moment under Article XVI of the Covenant? Was it not on the point of arising a year ago when the covenanting nations, separately unwilling or unready to make war on Italy, were faced with the obligation to do so under the terms of a common pledge given 16 years before?

Instead of trying to perpetuate such an impossible engagement would it not be wiser to confess it a mistake? Instead of reproaching the Governments for their lack of courage in the crisis, or reading their lectures on the sanctity of treaties, would not wisdom and courage alike be better exercised in frankly admitting that the Covenant of 1919 creates obligations which no Government can possibly fulfil without playing the part of a defaulting trustee? The more one ponders these questions the greater becomes the doubt whether the League of Nations, constituted as a military alliance of the many against the one, can have any other fate than that of collapse in the day of performance.

Does that conclusion bring the League of Nations to an end? As a military alliance, yes. But if wise men are at hand the abandonment of the military basis, by freeing the whole project from its most dangerous element, will quicken the search for a firmer ground of union and peace. "Economic cooperation," now a familiar phrase on the lips of statesmen, but still lacking the precision needed for business-like partnership, points the direction in which search should be made. Yet even the advocates of economic cooperation will find the question quis custodiet custodes? which has never been answered since it was first asked, unanswered to the end. It is unanswerable. Wisdom seems to consist in choosing the ground where the question is least likely to arise and avoiding the ground where it blocks the way.

Yours, &c.,
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