

The Vandenberg Flip

It was late in World War II. Up until the moment he spoke, Sen. Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan, the Republican party's senior voice on foreign affairs, seemed to be what he long had been—a hard-line isolationist. However, the senator, whom one critic called “a big, loud, vain, and self-important man,” had had a change of mind. He was forsaking isolationism—dropping the idea of going it alone and supporting a major US role in the postwar world. The speech cleared the way for a bipartisan foreign policy. If you want to know where America's postwar internationalism began, this is the place.

There are critical moments in the life of every nation which call for the straightest, the plainest, and the most courageous thinking of which we are capable. We confront such a moment now. ...

We still have two major wars to win. I said “we.” That does not mean America alone. ... We not only have two wars to win, we also have yet to achieve such a peace as will justify this appalling cost. ... Otherwise we shall look back upon a futile, sanguinary shambles and—God save the mark—we shall be able to look forward only to the curse of World War III. ...

The ... thing we need to do ... is to appeal to our allies, in the name of reason, to frankly face the postwar alternatives which are available to them and to us as a means to preserve tomorrow's peace for them and for us. There are two ways to do it. One way is by exclusive individual action in which each of us tries to look out for himself.

The other way is by joint action in which we undertake to look out for each other.

The first way is the old way which has twice taken us to Europe's interminable battlefields within a quarter-century. The second way is the new way in which our present fraternity of war becomes a new fraternity of peace. I do not believe that either we or our allies can have it both ways. They serve to cancel out each other. We cannot tolerate unilateral privilege in a multilateral peace. Yet, that seems to be the fatalistic trend today.

I think we must make our choice. I think we must make it wholly plain to our major allies that they, too, must make their choice.

I hasten to make my own personal viewpoint clear. I have always been frankly one of those who has believed in our own self-reliance. I still believe that we can never again—regardless of collaborations—allow our national defense to deteriorate to anything like a point of impotence.

But I do not believe that any nation hereafter can immunize itself by its own exclusive action. Since Pearl Harbor, World War II has put the gory science of mass murder into new and sinister perspective. Our oceans have ceased to be moats

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which automatically protect our ramparts. Flesh and blood now compete unequally with winged steel. War has become an all-consuming juggernaut. If World War III ever unhappily arrives, it will open new laboratories of death too horrible to contemplate. ...

I want maximum American cooperation, consistent with legitimate American self-interest, with constitutional process, and with collateral events which warrant it, to make the basic idea of [a United Nations peacekeeping organization] succeed. I want a new dignity and a new authority for international law. I think American self-interest requires it.

But ... this also requires wholehearted reciprocity. In honest candor I think we should tell other nations that this glorious thing we contemplate is not and cannot be one-sided. I think we must say again that unshared idealism is a menace which we could not undertake to underwrite in the postwar world. ...

I propose that we meet this problem conclusively and at once. There is no reason to wait. America has this same self-interest in permanently, conclusively, and effectively disarming Germany

and Japan. It is simply unthinkable that America, or any other member of the United Nations, would allow this Axis calamity to reproduce itself again. ...

The Commander in Chief should have instant power to act, and he should act. I know of no reason why a hard-and-fast treaty between the major allies should not be signed today to achieve this dependable end. ★



Sen. Arthur Vandenberg (l) with Secretary of State George Marshall in 1947, just before the unveiling of the Marshall Plan.