

THE FIFTH COLUMN ON THE COAST

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 12.—The enemy alien problem on the Pacific Coast, or much more accurately the fifth column problem, is very serious and it is very special. What makes it so serious and so special is that the Pacific Coast is in imminent danger of a combined attack from within and from without. The danger is not, as it would be in the inland centers or perhaps even for the present on the Atlantic Coast, from sabotage alone. The peculiar danger of the Pacific Coast is in a Japanese raid accompanied by enemy action inside American territory. This combination can be very formidable indeed. For while the striking power of Japan from the sea and air might not in itself be overwhelming at any one point just now, Japan could strike a blow which might do irreparable damage if it were accompanied by the kind of organized sabotage to which this part of the country is specially vulnerable.

This is a sober statement of the situation, in fact a report, based not on speculation but on what is known to have taken place and to be taking place in this area of the war. It is the fact that the Japanese navy has been reconnoitering the Pacific Coast more or less continually and for a considerable period of time, testing and feeling out the American defenses. It is the fact that communication takes place between the enemy at sea and enemy agents on land. These are facts which we shall ignore or minimize at our peril. It also is the fact that since the outbreak of the Japanese war there has been no important sabotage on the Pacific Coast. From what we know about Hawaii and about the fifth column in Europe, this is not, as some have liked to think, a sign that there is nothing to be feared. It is a sign that the blow is well organized and that it is held back until it can be struck with maximum effect.

REALISM NEEDED

In preparing to repel the attack the Army and Navy have all the responsibility, but they are facing it with one hand tied down in Washington. I am sure I understand fully and appreciate thoroughly the unwillingness of Washington to adopt a policy of mass evacuation and mass internment of all those who are technically enemy aliens. But I submit that Washington is not defining the problem on the Pacific Coast correctly and that therefore it is raising insoluble issues unnecessarily and failing to deal with the practical issues promptly. No one ever can hope to get the right answer unless he first asks the right questions.

The official approach to the danger is through a series of unrealities. There is the assumption that it is a problem of "enemy aliens." As a matter of fact it is certainly also a problem of native-born American citizens. There is the assumption that a citizen may not be interfered with unless he has committed an overt act, or at least unless there is strong evidence that he is about to commit an overt act. There is the assumption that if the rights of a citizen are abridged anywhere they have been abridged everywhere. The effect of assumptions has been to precipitate legalistic and ideological arguments between the military authorities out here and the civil authorities in Washington, and between the aroused citizenry of the Coast and their fellow countrymen in the interior.

A much simpler approach will, I believe, yield much more practical results. Forget for a moment all about enemy aliens, dual citizenship, naturalized citizens, native citizens of enemy alien parentage and consider a warship in San Francisco Harbor, an air plant in Los Angeles, a general's headquarters at Oshkosh and an admiral's at Podunk. Then think of the lineal descendant, if there happened to be such a person, of George Washington, the Father of his Country, and consider what happens to Mr. Washington if he decides he would like to visit the warship, or take a walk in the airplane plant, or to drop in and photograph the general and the admiral in their quarters.

He is stopped by the sentry. He has to prove who he is. He has to prove that he has a good reason for doing what he wishes to do. He has to register, sign papers and wear an identification button. Then perhaps, if he proves his case, he is escorted by an armed guard while he does his errand and until he has checked out of the place and his papers and his button have been returned. Have Mr. Washington's constitutional rights been abridged? Has he been denied the dignity of the human person? Has his loyalty been impugned?

PROOF NEEDED

Now, it seems to me that this is in principle and in general the procedure which ought to be used for all persons in a zone which the military authorities regard as open to enemy attack. In that zone, as in the corridors of the general's headquarters or on the deck of the warship or within the gates of the airplane plant, everyone should be compelled to prove that he has a good reason for being there, and no one should be allowed to come and go until he has proved that his business is necessary and consistent with the national defense.

In the vital and vulnerable areas it should be the rule that residence, employment, communication by telephone, telegraph, automobile and railroad are confined to licensed persons who are fully identified and whose activities are fully known to the authorities and to their neighbors. The Pacific Coast is officially a combat zone; some part of it may at any moment be a battlefield. Nobody's constitutional rights include the right to reside and do business on a battlefield. And nobody ought to be on a battlefield who has no good reason for being there.

What Washington has been trying to find is a policy for dealing with all enemy aliens everywhere and all potential fifth columnists everywhere. Yet a policy which may be wise in most parts of the country may be extremely foolhardy in a combat zone. Therefore, much the best thing to do is to recognize the western combat zone as territory quite different from the rest of the country, and then to set up in that zone a special regime. This has been done on the Bataan Peninsula, in Hawaii, in Alaska, in the Canal Zone. Why not also on the threatened West Coast of the United States?

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Suspense

"Yes my wife gets more out of a novel than anybody."

"How's that?"

"Well, she always starts in the middle so she's not only wondering how it will all end but how it began."—[Exchange]