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DECEMBER 7, 1941

“The Worst News That I Have Encountered in the Last 20 Years”

by Robert Hagy

PITTSBURGH, PA.

The strangest development here involved America Firsters assembled in Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Hall in Oakland Civic Center, three miles from downtown Pittsburgh. Senator Gerald P. Nye, tall, dark, handsome North Dakotan, spoke to 2500 rank-and-filers (capacity) from a hall-wide platform above which Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is spread in huge dark letters against a dirty buff background. I was assigned to cover it for the *Post Gazette*, and just a few minutes before leaving the office, flashes and bulletins came over the AP wire on the Hawaii and Manila attacks.

I arrived at the Hall at 3:00 p.m., the time the meeting was scheduled to start, and found Nye in a two-by-four room backstage ready to go on with the local officials of the Firsters. I shoved the pasted-up news at him. Irene Castle McLaughlin, still trim wife of the dancer killed in World War I, another speaker, and Pittsburgh Chairman John B. Gordon, clustered around the Senator to read. It was the first they had heard of the war and Nye's first reaction was: "It sounds terribly fishy to me. Can't we have some details? Is it sabotage or is it open attack? I'm amazed that the President should announce an attack without giving details." Cool as a cucumber, he went on to compare the announcement with the first news of the Greer incident, which he termed very misleading.

I asked him what effect the Jap war should have on America First, whether it would disband. He replied: "If Congress were to declare war, I'm sure that every America Firster would be cooperative and support his government in the winning of that war in every possible way . . . but I should not expect them to disband even if Congress declared

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war." Nye and the others then paraded on to the platform as if nothing had happened.

Although the news had come over the radio, apparently nobody in the audience knew anything, and the meeting went on just like any other America First meeting with emphasis on denouncing Roosevelt as a warmonger. Mrs. McLaughlin expressed concern for America's wives and mothers, her voice catching as she referred to Vernon Castle's not coming back; dabbed a tear from her eye as she sat down.

The next speaker was ruddy, ruralish Charlie Sipes, Pennsylvania State Senator, locally famed as a historian. Routine America First stuff until, in the midst of an attack on Roosevelt for trying "to make everything Russian appealing to the U.S.," he cried: "In fact, the chief warmonger in the U.S., to my way of thinking, is the President of the U.S.!" While the hall, decked in red-white-and-blue balcony bunting and "Defend America First" signs, was still full of roaring approval, a white-haired, heavy-set man stood up from an aisle seat well to the rear. The man, although nobody knew him and he was in mufti, was Colonel Enrique Urrutia Jr., Chief of the Second Military Area (Pittsburgh District of Third Corps Area) of the Organized Reserve. "Can this meeting be called after what has happened in the last few hours?" Colonel Urrutia—an infantryman 31 years in the Army—burst out, livid with incredulity and indignation. "Do you know that Japan has attacked Manila, that Japan has attacked Hawaii?"

Apparently the crowd took him for a plain crackpot heckler. They booed, yelled "Throw him out" and "Warmonger." Several men near Urrutia converged toward him. According to Lieutenant George Pischke, in command of a detail of ten policemen assigned to keep down disturbances which usually mark America First meetings here, the committee's blue-badged ushers "tried to manhandle" the colonel. Cops were in quick though, and Lieutenant Pischke escorted Urrutia out of the hall (through a blizzard of "warmonger" shrieks and reaching women's hands) at the latter's own request. "I came to listen," he told me in the lobby, purple with rage. "I thought this was a patriots' meeting, but this is a traitors' meeting." Inside Sipes, a cool hand, tried to restore calm, said soothingly, "Don't be too hard on this poor bombastic man.

He's only a mouthpiece for F.D.R." Then Sipes went on with his speech.

A couple of other people addressed the crowd. Finally came Nye. Still no word from leaders about the war. Nye started at about 4:45 p.m. For nearly three quarters of an hour he went through his isolationist routine. "Who's war is this?" he demanded at one point (referring to war in Europe). "Roosevelt's," chorused the rank-and-filers. "My friends," said Nye callously, "are betting 20 to 1 that if we don't stop in our tracks now, we'll be in before Great Britain gets in." Howls of laughter. A few minutes after this, I was called to the telephone. The city desk had a bulletin on Japan's declaration of war and asked me to get it to Nye. On a piece of copy paper I printed in pencil: "The Japanese Imperial Government at Tokyo today at 4:00 p.m. announced a state of war with the U.S. and Great Britain." I walked out on the platform and put it on the rostrum before Nye. He glanced at it, read it, never batted an eye, went on with his speech . . .

For 15 minutes more, Nye continued his routine, "I woke up one morning to find that we had 50 ships less, that the President had given them away despite laws forbidding it." "Treason," yelled some. "Impeach him," yelled others. Finally, at 5:45 p.m., more than two and a half hours after the meeting started, Nye paused and said: "I have before me the worst news that I have encountered in the last 20 years. I don't know exactly how to report it to you; but I will report it to you just as a newspaperman gave it to me." Slowly he read the note. An excited murmur swept through the packed hall. Nye continued: "I can't somehow believe this. I can't come to any conclusions until I know what this is all about. I want time to find out what's behind it. Previously I heard about bombings in Hawaii. Somehow, I couldn't quite believe that, but in the light of this later news, I must, although there's been many funny things before. I remember the morning of the attack on the destroyer *Greer*. The President went on the radio and said the attack on the *Greer* was without provocation; but I tell you the *Greer* shot first. That was the incident the President said was unprovoked—and that's cheating."

With that, he disposed of the new war, but more or less upset and flushed in the face, he didn't do much more than flounder through five or six more minutes of stuff about America's prime duty being to preserve democracy lest "victor and vanquished alike fall" and communism "grow in the ruins." Loud applause. "Keep your chins up," said Senator Nye and sat down. Benediction, a couple of announcements and the meeting was over.

Plowing through his fanatical followers, I gave Nye a third piece of intelligence—that Roosevelt had called a 9:00 p.m. meeting of the Cabinet and Congressional leaders. I knew he was scheduled to talk tonight at the First Baptist Church (pastor of which is pacifist) and I asked him if he intended to fly to Washington. Flustered, grim-lipped, rosy-faced, sweating, he muttered, "I must, I must try . . ." and strode quickly out of the hall talking to somebody about plane reservations. . . . Whether he couldn't get a plane or what, he nevertheless ended up keeping the church appointment, announcing he would take the train to Washington later tonight. At church, before 600 people, he was grim, bitter, defeated. "I had hoped for long that at least the involvement of my country in this terrible foreign slaughter would be left more largely to our own determination."

Then he reviewed events leading up to the war, accusing Roosevelt of "doing his utmost to promote trouble with Japan." Inferring that we were already at war with Germany, he declared: "I am not one to say my country is prepared to fight a war on one front, let alone two." When several people laughed at a reference (out of habit?) to "bloody Joe Stalin," Nye said coldly: "I am not making a humorous speech." But on the Jap attack he said: "Here is a challenge. There isn't much America can do but move forward with American lives, American blood and American wealth to the protection of our people and possessions in the Pacific."

Leaving the church, another *Post-Gazette* reporter caught him, asked what course he would prescribe for the nation. Finally he gave in completely, the fight gone out of him except for enough to make one more crack at Roosevelt. "We have been maneuvered into this by the President," he

said, "but the only thing now is to declare war and to jump into it with everything we have and bring it to a victorious conclusion."

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