March 16, 1940

My dear Wilson,

I read your letter of February 13 with the greatest of pleasure, for it is really good to have such frank and friendly discussions from abroad, and not least from your country. The capitulation of Finland, of which we have only just heard the news, seems to me the greatest blow the World has yet suffered from a war which may well have other black days. Its consequence will be to make the other Neutrals cringe more than ever, just as the astonishing success of the Finns, until they were strangled from behind by the sympathetic Swedes, was putting some heart into other small nations, quite capable of putting up a fight for their liberties. I suppose the Swedish Government will congratulate itself heartily on having kept the Peace in the Baltic, and democratic Sweden may quite soon be held up as an example to other nations for her peaceful record. Yet I do not think any mere tyranny like Russia or Germany could have done more to betray the cause of Liberty and Independence, and, though it is hateful to think of it, it is difficult to judge that Sweden and Norway do not deserve to lose for themselves the cause they have betrayed in Finland.
As to what you say about isolationism in its aspect of safety against immediate foreign attack, it seems at present that aircraft has been very greatly over-rated. About 50 German aircraft so far, costing not less than 5,000,000 dollars have come to grief on our side of the water, without, apparently, bringing down a single defending aero-plane. All our losses, and some of the enemy's have been on their side of the water. From both points of view this is not very encouraging to the policy of throwing aircraft about in thousands, which seems to have been almost taken for granted as good strategy six months ago. It would, however, be a real mistake to suppose that it was this probably imaginary danger that brought us into the war. That seems to have come quite simply from a gradual realization of the temper of the German Government.

Of course I don't say that, later, air attack may not develop so as to become formidable at a distance. On the whole this might have rather a peace-promoting influence, much as the development of artillery gave law and order to large nations in Europe, previously ruled by rather lawless petty rulers. The situation that actually led to war is interesting in emphasizing the forgotten cardinal of truthfulness. For really I think we are at war for no other reason than that we have decided that the word of a foreign potentate is not to be relied on. What is interesting is that in the circumstances this very simple reason should be so sufficient that we feel we have no option. I infer that rulers in the past have, generally speaking, shown a capacity for keeping faith more than they are usually given credit for.
I agree with you, entirely, in the analogy you draw between British and American Isolationism. In both cases I guess its backbone is a claim to liberty, the right to choose what responsibilities we will undertake and what we will disclaim; and both peoples have, generally speaking, sufficient experience of individual liberty to know that, in disclaiming responsibilities, we disclaim also what would otherwise be rights - power, influence, and, if we must still criticise, we do so without moral weight or the right to be taken more seriously than irresponsible spectators. It was on this principle that in the inter-war period we refused steadily to enter into any engagement guaranteeing E. European frontiers - I should guess now wisely; but, whether wisely or not, unquestionably within our rights. The screams of criticism on both sides of the Atlantic, directed against the Munich Agreement, seemed to be very largely of the irresponsible kind, and to emanate from people entirely unprepared to shoulder the consequences of alternative action. What seems to me a really dangerous element in Democratic countries is that such criticism is capable of undermining faith in steadiness of purpose and justness of principle when these great qualities are really at work, of making people to distrust each other, and frustrate the effects of a real and widespread good-will.

The only reason why we are at war and you are not is that our Government did think it proper to try to prevent the invasion of Poland by undertaking to go to war if that was done. This would, perhaps, have been effective if the German rulers could have believed in the sincerity of our intention. This attempt failed, but it was not made without, in this country at least, a fairly wide realisation of the
possibility that it would fail, and that we should be landed with the expense and injury, the risk of which must be undertaken when any positive good is attempted. Those of us who know the Neutral press could have been pretty confident that both the intention would be vilified and the failure derided. A good recent example of this is the anti-Ally outburst in the press of Holland and Denmark in reaction to the collapse of Finland. I think one can only understand such an attitude as the mental pathology of self-exculpation, an indirect sign that somewhere, far beneath the surface, there is a conscience that needs sheltering. Yet a sadly long way from that sober responsibility of self-help and mutual help which I think you and I would regard as humanly normal and the only solid safeguard of personal and National freedom.

I do not know how much ice is cut, on your side, by the blessed word "Federation" as a solution for our little difficulties. Of course such a word covers a multitude of meanings, some elements of which may be workable. But in Europe I fear it would be a sham. The smaller European nationalities seem to lack the public spirit necessary to make a real federation. They drift, quite supinely into "spheres of influence" under the heel of their nearest or most dangerous neighbour. Had it been otherwise I think they could have made the League a success. I do not see anything in its constitution, even without the U.S., which could have prevented the smaller powers, had they had the spirit, as they had the voting power, from running it as their League. A new great power, levying quotas of troops and money on themselves at need, and a serious ally, or a formidable enemy, which the existing great
powers would have to reckon with. The test case was the Abyssinian War, where a Council of Twelve, representing, I presume, twelve Sovereign States at least, allowed itself to be paralysed because the French Prime Minister had a private agreement with Mussolini. Whether it was done by personal bribery or national intimidation, it was a fair test of the incapacity of the smaller powers to recognise a first class issue and act together in meeting it.

So you see, I am not inclined to blame Neutrals, but you must not think it is all arrogance if we are inclined to ignore some of their chatter.

Yours sincerely,