

Address given by Herbert H. Lehman (17 June 1943)

Caption: On 17 June 1943, the American Herbert H. Lehman, Director of the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, outlines the future tasks of UNRRA, the body which the United Nations wishes to establish to organise relief, rehabilitation and supplies.

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I am honored to appear here tonight to discuss with you some of the problems of the relief and rehabilitation of victims of war and the principles which should govern their solution. I was happy to avail myself of your invitation, since I am deeply convinced that the hour has now arrived for urgent national consideration of such problems and principles. The members of your distinguished organization can do much to direct national thinking toward these massive questions.

The peace which we all seek must be rooted in the first hurried work of rehabilitation and reconstruction. The dimensions of this task can best be measured by the dimensions of the disaster which has overtaken the world. The Axis has extended its despotism over the peoples of some 35 countries and hundreds of islands, the dwelling-places of more than half a billion men, women, and children. Almost all Europe lies under the dark cloud of Nazi rule; Japan has overrun the rich islands of the western Pacific and has penetrated deep toward the heart of heroic China. In occupied Europe and in enslaved Asia the picture is universally the same — starving people, impoverished land, and nations whose whole economies have been wrecked.

Food-condition statistics in the area of Axis occupation are treacherous. But official reports from Europe and Asia leave no doubt that hunger is the general rule, that starvation is commonplace, and that the area enslaved by the Axis is a breeding-place for all the diseases of the body and of the spirit that are born of starvation, suffering, and death.

Agricultural-production in Europe has dropped substantially despite the desperate efforts of Germany to make Axis-dominated Europe self-supporting. As the months roll on, the manpower shortage, the wastage and deterioration of machinery, the neglect of the soil, and the increasing disorganization of the economy will cut even deeper into total food-production.

The once matchless flocks and herds of Europe have declined to figures in some cases a third below pre-war levels. Horses are disappearing at a rate that indicates that a shortage of draft animals may be a problem even more acute than the shortage of manpower in the first harvest of peace. The occupied nations have been systematically drained of their resources, raw materials, and commercial goods to serve a vicious new order. Never before has the world witnessed so ruthless a despoliation of so many in so short a time.

A problem so vast and so world embracing, obviously, does not lend itself to piecemeal solution. The problem is to devise means to harness world production, already greatly taxed by war needs, to total world want during the coming months of tremendous human crisis. We must see to it that relief flows smoothly and swiftly into measures to remove the need of relief, and that rehabilitation measures are so devised as to enable the suffering nations to begin their own reconstruction at the earliest possible moment. Our objective is to help people to help themselves and thereby to help ourselves, by making possible a world in which the four freedoms can have a chance of realization.

We have already made important strides toward meeting these complex problems. Within the last few days the Department of State has placed before the 43 governments of all the United Nations and the other nations associated with us in this war a draft agreement for creation of a United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration through which the productive resources of all the nations of goodwill may shortly be mobilized to bring succor to the victims of war. The governments of the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and China already have agreed to this plan, indicating their readiness to participate wholeheartedly in an historic effort to see to it that no one shall die for the lack of bread, protection from the elements, or the minimum assistance of modern medicine.

There is fortunately a strong disposition among the nations to recognize that this problem is without parallel in history and that its solution must lie in joint and concerted efforts by all nations. It is proposed that each nation, in making its greatest possible contribution to the task, shall within its resources make not only a financial contribution but shall contribute further in the form of supplies, shipping and other transportation, personnel and services. It is, as yet, too early to predict what total amounts or what proportion any government will be called upon to supply to the joint enterprise. There are, however, precedents for action in

this direction. Under the terms of the International Wheat Agreement, for example, Canada and the United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina, and the United States have undertaken to contribute large quantities of wheat for use in a major offensive against starvation. There are supplies in other areas which, when fully drawn upon, will distribute the burden of world relief over many countries. At least 50 percent, and perhaps more, of the total cereals required for European relief can readily come from areas other than the United States, and it should be noted that cereals comprise well over half the total tonnage of any table of relief food shipments.

This proposed United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration represents a practical and realistic approach to a problem of great magnitude. America cannot feed the world from its own resources alone. Neither can Britain nor Russia nor China nor any one of the other American republics. Satisfaction of the wants of the millions of suffering men, women, and children can be accomplished only by the concerted action of all the nations whose productive resources were fortunately spared the fire and destruction of modern warfare.

The imperative demands of military necessity will not, however, wait upon international conversations or protracted conferences. It may well be that in the immediate future our fighting commanders will call upon us to move in behind a front line in Europe to provide relief to newly liberated peoples. In anticipation of such a possibility, the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations is proceeding with plans as an American organization, confident that the other nations of goodwill will step forward to assist and that this practical United Nations mechanism will become a reality.

The common dislike of the concept of "relief" on the part both of nations that receive and nations that give is certain to have a deep influence on the nature of these operations. In an era when political stability is dependent upon economic stability as never before, no nation will casually become a recipient of a dole. Similarly, no nation, nor group of nations, will casually commit their resources to a tremendous relief undertaking without striving to make certain that simultaneous measures are instituted to make possible the cessation of relief expenditures at the earliest possible moment.

There should be no basic misconception of the idea of relief in the minds of Americans. Relief operations in Europe after the war of 1914–18 by no means entirely took the form of gift. Where governments had cash or assets, they were required in some cases to pay cash and in other cases to pledge assets as security for loans. In other instances, governments which had no assets which could reasonably be regarded as good security, were nevertheless provided with relief and required to pay by means of loans advanced to them under conditions where the commercial soundness of the credit was highly questionable. Most of these loans were subsequently defaulted, and our government thus was no better off than if the loans had been outright gifts. On the other hand the country receiving relief suffered an impairment of its credit and was less able to borrow for sound projects of reconstruction so long as these loans still complicated its finances. Economic recovery was thus impaired, and one of the forces was put into motion which headed the world toward the tragic cycle which led first to a gigantic depression, then to the rise of Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese militarists, and finally to global conflagration.

To avoid the danger of permitting relief to cause fundamental economic derangements which might generate a third world war, a careful balance must be maintained between relief by outright gift and relief by sale or exchange. None of the liberated nations will be seeking the charity of this country. But in some instances it certainly will be the course of prudence and wisdom to advance the goods for relief and rehabilitation as outright gifts. To do otherwise under some conditions would be to impair the credit and economy of the liberated nations and thus make it difficult if not impossible for such nations to procure essential credit and exchange when the initial emergency has passed and the time arrives for sound, long-term reconstruction. In other instances, however, the liberated nations will quickly re-establish governments capable, ready, and willing to purchase the foodstuffs and goods necessary for relief and rehabilitation, and operations of the relief and rehabilitation agency can and should proceed on a commercial basis. In still other instances, the operation undoubtedly must be an admixture of both procedures. But in all situations, the technique of salvage and rehabilitation must constantly be oriented toward the objective of reconstituting the economy of the recipient nation. That is the way to put an end to relief. That is what we want. That is what the suffering

peoples of the liberated nations will have richly earned.

For these reasons, the President, pending the creation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, has assigned my office the task not alone of establishing “soup kitchens” and carrying on direct relief, but also of assisting war-stricken peoples in reviving their own production of essential goods and services as rapidly as possible. In each liberated area which the President may designate, the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations is to distribute relief goods and goods to facilitate the production of basic civilian necessities, whether those goods be given away, sold, or bartered. In such way we achieve a single supply line to each liberated area and avoid inconsistency and confusion in policy and administration.

The lessons learned in the quarter century during which this war was in the making demonstrate beyond question that the United States and the United Nations have no alternative but to undertake this task. The motives that impel us to this work are readily demonstrable, even without reference to the deep moral motives which of themselves alone would be a justification for assisting those who are suffering and dying.

In the initial stages, our activities are so closely integrated with the military that relief operations actually are conducted by the army itself or under its close supervision. The work will, of course, be subject to the approval of the military commander so long as military operations require. The importance of civilian supply behind the lines was clearly demonstrated by the North African campaign where the provision of the essentials of life to civilians in the war theater was a military and political necessity, closely related to the whole campaign strategy. What was true in North Africa will be equally true, in magnified scope and under much more urgent conditions, on the continents of Europe and Asia.

It is not military necessity alone, however, that compels us to undertake relief and rehabilitation measures. Millions of people have been plundered, despoiled, and starved. Unless the United States, in concert with the other United Nations, extends a helping hand to these peoples, we can anticipate with certainty that the liberated areas for decades will suffer from disrupted economies, crushing burdens of unemployment, shattering inflations, and the internal turmoil which adds up to chaos.

If we have learned anything from the decades just behind us it is this: That we cannot, even if we would, make ourselves secure in a world in which millions of men, women, and children are dying of want or by epidemic. Let us recognize frankly that freedom from want is a basic component of any enduring peace and that if America is to have any hope of lasting peace and a stable world economy it must help see to it that the liberated peoples of the world are restored as rapidly as possible to a self-sustaining basis.

That is merely enlightened self-interest.

We cannot live with security in a world half rich, half pauperized. International trade cannot flourish or sound economic expansion take place in a world tormented by expectations of the violence that is born of suffering and misery. And the United States, in the period after this war, will need the outlets of a total world market unless our economy is to face a terrific contraction in a shattering post-war depression. We in America must not lose sight of the fact that, once this war has ended, we again will be the greatest producers in the world and will want world markets for our grain, our cotton, our tobacco, and other agricultural staples as well as our steel, our automobiles, and the thousands of products of our mills and factories.

The relief and rehabilitation of war-stricken nations is the necessary first step toward a balanced economy in which a high level of consumption will prevent the piling up of those great stocks of surplus goods which would otherwise be quickly accumulated after this war in all the primary producing countries. Relief and rehabilitation is but the opening phase of the post-war era. The long-range reconstruction which follows this phase must be conducted on the basis of world trade. By emergency relief and rehabilitation measures now we can make it possible for the liberated peoples of Europe and Asia to become in succeeding years the customers for our goods. Thus by restoring the basic economic equilibrium of these peoples we can hope to create demand which will provide jobs for the millions of fighting men who will be streaming home from our victorious armies to take jobs in an industry converting back to production for peace.

The costs of such a program will be great, even though they will be diminutive when projected against the total costs of this war or the total costs of another depression. The outlays will represent an investment for a new world in which productive facilities will have an opportunity to operate to make possible prosperous conditions at home and to diminish suffering and want abroad. This war right now is costing the American taxpayer about a billion dollars every three days. The cost in life and spiritual value is incalculable. The knowledge that America and other United Nations are prepared to extend relief and rehabilitation to the victims of war and to sustain the spirit of resistance among the down-trodden people of Europe and Asia when the hour of freedom strikes, will help to transform those people into a cohesive group, ready and willing to cooperate in the battle of liberation. Should America's readiness to bring relief to the weary peoples of Europe and Asia shorten the war by but a week or two, the United States will have saved far more on war costs than the total outlays which can be anticipated in the field of relief and rehabilitation.

The deepest aspiration of the peoples of Europe and Asia will be for an opportunity to rebuild their own lives toward a system of stability and order. Unless they are helped in the initial stages to help themselves, this opportunity for sound reconstruction may be lost. It would be folly for this country and the United Nations to pour out their total substance in a complete effort for victory and hesitate to expend the final dollars which would make possible the realization of the objectives for which they fought — the establishment of a stable world economy and of a peace that will endure.

The cry of nations and their peoples for assistance in the first hours of liberation will present democracy with a supreme test. The fate of all United Nations' attempts to insure banishment of these global wars may well be determined by the success of the first joint action in relief and rehabilitation administration. This work of binding up the wounds of those who suffer, of preventing and halting death by starvation, exposure, disease, and neglect, transcends the realm of political allegiances and can give full expression to the highest principles and instincts of all peoples. If the nations of the world should fail to work in mutual cooperation for these high principles, what hope could we hold for political cooperation to banish war? If it is true that nations learn to work together by actually working together, then the joint effort of the United Nations to help the liberated peoples of the world may well provide the experience which will make possible the more gigantic enterprises to come.

It is given to us, twice within the span of a lifetime, to attempt to devise a peace in which all men can live in freedom from fear and want. We failed last time. We dare not fail again.