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WASHINGTON, Sept. 30th. . . The shift in objectives on which the eyes of the White House are focussed in this world crisis was disclosed in a startling and deeply significant way at the President's press conference on September 24. The President on that occasion wisecracked sarcastically at a statement issued the day before by a member of the National Advisory Defense Commission. As many of the correspondents said in talking about it afterwards, "He sure slapped Miss Elliott down!" Miss Harriet Elliott, Dean of Women at the University of North Carolina, an economist, is the member of the Defense Commission appointed by the President to protect and serve the interests of the consumers of the country.

For labor this episode has particular meaning because of the substance of Miss Elliott's statement. The meat of it was in these words of hers: "Hungry, undernourished people do not make for strong defense. We have the lands, machines and hands it takes to produce and move and market all the food we need to assure everyone an adequate and safe diet. Let's get to work and see that everyone gets at least that." She had previously pointed out that 45 million people in the United States are living below the "safety line" in diet, that this large proportion of our population is, in short, suffering from undernourishment. She told of methods by which this condition might be alleviated — extension of the school lunch program, widening of the food stamp plan, watching of profit margins, increase of cooperatives.

So when the President was asked to comment on Miss Elliott's plea for "concerted action to make America strong by wiping out undernourishment and malnutrition," he wisecracked. He started severely enough by insisting that he was trying to keep the phrase, "national defense", restricted to matters connected directly with national defense. But then he quickly moved into what seems to be one of his favorite moods — that of cavalier jokester tossing out funny analogies with barbs on them. He proposed, for instance, that someone might maintain that the question of whether women should be admitted to the White House Correspondents' dinner is a matter of national defense. Or, he added agilely, whether you or I have a good time with our Christmas trees this year.

He reverted to the more serious manner by citing the shortage of housing facilities at Bridgeport, Conn., during the last war for the workers in the munitions plants there. There were not enough doctors there, nor schools, nor transportation facilities, he pointed out and then asserted that the Defense Commission is directed to guard the wellbeing of the children of all workers directly employed in defense industries.

But he gaily sidestepped with his pot shots the basic economic and social problems inherent in Miss Elliott's earnest summary of facts. That's why labor and the common folk of the country—among whose ranks fall all of the 45 million people living below the "safety line" in diet—will look at this badinage between the President and the newspaper correspondents, with foreboding.

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No Wisecracks Intended

In that attitude, moreover, there cannot justly be attributed any element of unpatriotism. Nor, by the same token, can it be fairly regarded as disrespect for the President or the office of President. No responsible labor leader has anything but genuine concern over the tremendous problems with which the President has to deal. No responsible leader fails to appreciate the intensity and complexity of the pressures which center on the White House in this era of world upheaval.

Furthermore, no true labor leader, no matter of what affiliation, has other than the deepest desires that this country be adequately prepared to defend itself against enemies of its democratic aspirations both foreign and domestic. And with that desire goes a firm intention to contribute to such defense preparation. What is so for the responsible labor leaders is so for the membership of their organizations. There is no more patriotic an organized movement in the country than the labor movement. It is the most numerous and the fate of this country's institutions consequently has a wider real meaning to it than to any other part of the population.

But it has deep within it a conviction, born of experience, that fundamental in any preparation for military or other defense is the steady facing of the very economic and social problems implied in Miss Elliott's statement — a facing of those problems coupled with the determination to maintain that freedom of thought and action requisite for tackling them on something more than the level of verbal promises. The militarization of a nation through the mobilization process — a process upon which our country is now embarking — is a certain kind of answer to the problems. It is the kind of answer the totalitarian powers of Europe — enemies of this country's democratic progress — have given. It is the kind of answer labor cannot accept because labor recognizes it as a death knell.

At the risk of being boresome we want to repeat that the building of a great military machine in itself does not solve either the economic or social or political problems of a nation. The economic boom involved in the rapid expansion of defense industries may appear to be a solution at first blush and while the boom is developing capital and labor may experience sensations of wellbeing. But a look at recent European history proves the fallacy of those sensations. The maw of the military machine gets ever and ever bigger. It sucks in more and more money, energy and men for its ultimate objective — destruction.

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Caskets for Whom, When and Where?

Quite by accident there slipped out the fact the other day that the U. S. Army is making a survey of the supply of caskets in the country and is checking up on the production facilities of casket manufacturers. This announcement did not come, of course, from the Army officers themselves. No, indeed. When the story of the survey was brought to them by newspapermen they tut-tutted it as of no moment whatever.

The fact came out at a meeting of the Board of the Advertising Funeral Directors of America at the Hotel Mayflower in the Nation's Capital. Major A. Robert Ginsburgh in the office of Assistant Secretary of War was asked about it. Major Ginsburgh has long had the role in the Army of handling ticklish and embarrassing problems with the press. When Patrick Hurley was Secretary of War back in the dim distant Herbert Hoover days it was Major Ginsburgh who skillfully wove the Irish wit into Pat Hurley's speeches for which they became famous. Discovery of that service by Major Ginsburgh to the debonair Irishman, Mr. Hurley, caused many a chuckle in official circles but the Major came through the kidding unscathed.

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So when a newsman was directed to him on the casket survey story, Major Ginsburgh was equal to the occasion. Why, said the Major as reported in The Washington News of September 20th, "We haven't stopped surveying the casket industry for 20 years. It is just part of our routine survey of army necessities. We have surveyed caskets as we have artillery, airplanes and other materials of war."

Then, apparently realizing the reporter was not falling for that line, the facile officer moved a little closer to the actualities of the situation. "After all," he said, "if you have one million men under arms, even in peacetime you are going to have some casualties; some men are going to fall off trucks and have other accidents and illnesses." Enough fall off trucks to warrant a survey of the casket supply, Major? Surely now, Major, you don't expect us to swallow that one, do you?

Pressed in this manner Major Ginsburgh finally popped out the truth. "Then, too," he admitted, "when you have an army you have to figure that it's going to fight some day. Fighting means casualties and casualties call for caskets. That's all there is to it. Just a simple matter of being prepared with essentials. We survey everything from armor plate to underwear." So there it is, perfectly simple, as the Major says — "when you have an army you have to figure that it's going to fight some day." That's the whole military philosophy in a nutshell. That's one of the basic reasons why labor — CIO, Railroad Brotherhoods and most of A.F. of L. — was so earnestly opposed to the setting up of a conscript army — that and the fact that no substantial evidence has ever been presented of possibilities of military invasion of this country.

What labor and the common people of the land want to know is where and when the Army officers expect this big conscript army to fight. There have been solemn assurances from the President that no American soldier will be sent to Europe soil to fight. These assurances have been repeated often in Congress. Then, where? Latin America? The Orient? Labor has grounds to be worried and should keep asking questions and insisting on answers.

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Taxes vs Caskets

As it looks at this casket story labor opens its New York Times of September 27th and sees on the front page the story of the agreement of the House and Senate conferees on the defense taxation measure. And labor reads that under the urging of National Advisory Defense Commission (itself composed among others in personnel of 73 dollar-a-year men, millionaire representatives of defense industry corporations) the House conferees yielded to the Senate conferees so that more liberal amortization privileges are granted to defense industry. Labor reads further that "the Treasury-sponsored language by which the government would maintain a continuing control over peacetime disposition of such plants (new plants in many instances to be financed by government capital)" was materially weakened. And labor, sharing the deepest anguish of all decent citizens over the destructive horror sweeping the world and sharing the profound desire that Hitler and all the forces playing his game be wiped off the earth, cannot help thinking of lives versus dollars, caskets versus taxes.

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Straws

"Bata Shoe Plant Tie-Up With Hitler Bared By U.S." says a headline in the Washington Herald, September 27th. Thus the indefatigable, brilliant and patriotic work of Leo Goodman, Research Director of the United Shoe Workers, CIO, bears fruit after months of rebuffs.

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