

If such are our peace aims and if, perhaps more important, that is the spirit in which we would wish to see them realised, it is perhaps not difficult to see the answer to another question that many people pose, which is perhaps the same question in other words.

What are the precise terms, it is asked—the noble Viscount opposite this afternoon came near to asking this question—what are the precise terms upon which this country would be willing to stop the war to-day? His Majesty the King the other day, in answering the peace proposals of the King of the Belgians and the Queen of the Netherlands, said that it was not his wish nor that of his Government for the war to continue a day longer than was necessary. On what conditions, then, would this country lay down arms? The answer to that question was given by M. Daladier in the speech he made a few days ago. He said that France—and he might have added the United Kingdom—would lay down her arms when she could treat with a Government whose signature could be trusted. She would treat when the wrongs caused to weaker nations could be righted and lasting security established. And he went on to indicate that France must have confidence that this security would endure.

A great many people write to me, as no doubt to many of you, suggesting that an armistice should be proclaimed and a conference summoned. They say: "You will have to have a conference some time, why wait till after the war? Why not have it before you have to pay all the price that war exacts?" The success of any conference depends upon the conditions of its meeting. The conference method was followed in September 1938. We were willing to follow it again immediately before this war, if Germany would abandon her intention of invading Poland and would withdraw her troops. Why, in fact, did not the Munich Conference secure lasting peace in Europe? Agreement was reached, the most solemn assurances were given, but only six months afterwards Herr Hitler changed his mind, and, as he has so often shown, he can always find excuses satisfactory to himself to justify action which completely contradicts assurances given earlier. That kind of right-about-turn after such solemn undertakings does show that no conference can be securely counted successful unless that habit of disregarding assurances is abandoned. That is a fundamental reversal of what has hitherto been German policy, and it is little use deluding ourselves with wishful thinking about the results to be achieved by conference until the primary lesson has been learnt by those who would take part in it—namely, that force is a bad plan. There is no evidence yet that the German Government have learnt that primary lesson.

Therefore, my Lords, I suggest to you that the two prerequisites for a conference are, first, evidence that the German Government were willing to accept terms which would correspond to the purposes for which we took up arms—and everybody knows what those were—and, secondly, security that any settlement reached would be respected. On any other basis a conference, in my judgment, would achieve nothing and would be only likely to enable the leaders of Germany to make their people believe that on the whole the old method of force had not worked too badly. What Lord Noel-Buxton suggested about the importance of showing that aggression had failed would not have been achieved, and the world would, in consequence, be left in the same precarious and intolerable suspense as we have all known during these last years.

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Extracts from Speech by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the House of Lords on December 13, 1939.

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We have always been prepared to negotiate. We were prepared before the war, as I said the other day, and we have never closed the door on negotiation in anything that we have said or done since the war began. We have, indeed, as the noble Lord, Lord Noel-Buxton, I think, perhaps had in mind, emphasised on more than one occasion that, provided the essential conditions of any international order in Europe could be secured, we would be prepared to call Germany into full co-operation with ourselves in trying to build that—so far were we from the desire to crush Germany and to deprive a great nation of its rightful place. Every one of us is perfectly conscious—of course we are—of what are