

What really happened to the League of Nations

David North**20 September 2002**

In the intellectual and moral wasteland that comprises American journalism, there is no part of the territory that is as repugnant as that occupied by the syndicated newspaper columnist, also known as the pundit. His or her specific job is the daily administration of the necessary doses of cynicism, deceit, ignorance, mammon-worship and chauvinism required to stupefy, mislead and incite public opinion.

With countless patrons and friends in the intelligence agencies and the corridors of political and corporate power, with whom they share confidences and intimacies, they translate the far-flung interests of the ruling elite into the appropriate forms of propaganda. Of course, there are a few exceptions—like Paul Krugman of *The New York Times*, who shows flashes of personal courage and has devoted not a few columns to exposing the dubious (he refrains from labeling them criminal) financial dealings of leading personnel in the Bush administration, including the president and vice president. But Krugman is notable only because he is so rare. For the most part, the columns of American newspapers are written by reactionary and unscrupulous scoundrels.

The occasion for this observation is a column published in yesterday's *Washington Post*, written by one of the most unsavory figures in American journalism, George F. Will. For nearly a quarter-century, Will has devoted himself to one supreme cause from which he has never wavered: the defense of the interests of the wealthy. And the service he has rendered on their behalf has been amply rewarded, for Mr. Will has become a very rich man himself.

George Will's column is notable as an example of one of the favorite gimmicks of reactionary pundits—the misuse of historical analogies to justify the actions of American imperialism. A recent article on the World Socialist Web Site noted that the government and the press invariably recall the capitulation of Britain and France to Hitler at Munich in 1938 as an argument for an American war against the “aggressor,” Saddam Hussein, even though the political behavior that most resembles Hitler's at Munich is that of

the leaders of American imperialism [See “The Bush administration wants war”].

During the past week, a new historical analogy between the pre-World War II League of Nations and the United Nations has been discovered by the press. This followed the speech of President Bush before the General Assembly of the United Nations. He warned that the UN would fail, like the League of Nations, if it did not fall in line behind America's war against Iraq. Mr. Bush did not attempt a detailed substantiation of this analogy.

Inevitably, Mr. Will has taken it upon himself to explain what that highly respected student of history—the President of the United States—was actually talking about.

“In Iraq, the United Nations is meeting its Abyssinia,” Mr. Will pontificated. “That is what Ethiopia was called in October 1935, when Mussolini's Italy invaded it and the United Nations' predecessor, the League of Nations, proved to be impotent as an instrument of international order.”

Mr. Will has at his disposal legions of researchers who help him write his columns. But they would have served Will far better had they advised him to stay clear of the League of Nations. When examined seriously, with proper attention to facts and historical context, the events of 1935 speak against the United States.

It should be recalled that the United States never joined the League of Nations. Though President Woodrow Wilson was one of the principal motivators of the League, the US Senate rejected the treaty that had led to its creation.

This rejection highlighted one of the basic weaknesses of the League's political foundation, which was inherent in the realities of an imperialist world system: the absence of any viable means of compelling a major capitalist power to subordinate whatever it considered to be its overriding national interests to an international consensus.

As the world economic crisis that began with the collapse of Wall Street in 1929 intensified in the 1930s, the League of Nations was shattered by insoluble conflicts between the major imperialist powers. When an alleged terrorist incident in 1931 (the destruction of a portion of the track of the South

Manchurian Railway) was seized upon by the Japanese military as a pretext to invade Manchuria, China called on the League of Nations to intervene. But the Japanese—falsely claiming that China had violated treaty obligations—rejected all mediation.

The other major imperialist powers, particularly the British and French (but also the United States, though not part of the League), did not consider it advisable to confront imperial Japan at this point. Unless the interests of one of the other great powers was directly affected to the extent that it was willing to go to war, the League was not prepared to stop another major imperialist power from having its way with a weak, semi-colonial country.¹

The notorious invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in October 1935 was yet another example of imperialist hypocrisy and savagery that prepared the conditions for the outbreak of full-scale world war by the end of the decade. Italy's invasion, which the dictator Mussolini ordered for the purpose of reinvigorating his crisis-ridden regime with the mirage of military glory, would not have been possible without the behind-the-scenes acquiescence of Britain and France. Still hoping to win Mussolini's support against the far more threatening imperialist aspirations of the Nazi regime in Berlin, the French and British governments quietly encouraged Mussolini's ambitions in East Africa. Mussolini was given clear indications that Britain and France would not object to the gradual transformation of Abyssinia into an Italian protectorate.

But Mussolini wanted a military conquest, and his invasion placed strains on his relations with France and Britain—which objected, not to the dictator's territorial objectives, but to the means he had employed to attain them. But Italy insisted that it had the right to take whatever actions it saw fit in Ethiopia, “since this question affects vital interests and is of primary importance to Italian security and civilization.”

Anxious to cover up their own role in abetting Italy's aggression, Britain and France orchestrated a meaningless condemnation of the invasion of Ethiopia by the League of Nations. But nothing was done to translate this toothless condemnation into action, because none of the major imperialist powers had any real interest in defending the independence of Ethiopia. Its leader, the Emperor Haile Selassie, appealed pitifully to the League of Nations for its support in an “unequal struggle between a Government commanding more than forty-two million inhabitants, having at its disposal financial, industrial and technical means which enabled it to create unlimited quantities of the most death-dealing weapons, and, on the other hand, a small people of twelve million inhabitants, without arms, without resources ...”

The League of Nations, the pliant tool of British and French imperialism, did nothing of substance to help Ethiopia. The limited economic sanctions that it had approved did not include an embargo on oil exports to Italy, upon which Mussolini's military machine depended. And who was the principal provider of Italian oil? None other than the United States, which doubled its oil exports to Italy during the Ethiopian war.²

The League of Nations did not “fail” because weak and underdeveloped countries refused to abide by international law. Rather, it collapsed because there did not exist any means by which the major imperialist powers could be compelled to disavow violence in pursuit of their interests.

If an analogy is to be drawn from the events of 1935, the role of Ethiopia is being played by Iraq. That of Italy is being played by the United States. And that of England and France is being played by ... well, England and France.

That, Mr. Will, is your history lesson for today.

Notes:

1. American historian William Keylor provides a concise account of the imperialist response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The US State Department, he writes, 'continued to discourage American trade with and investment in the valuable remnant of China under Kuomintang control. American exports of strategic materials to Japan continued unabated throughout the remainder of the 1930s.' The behavior of British imperialism was not less ignoble. 'Great Britain displayed even less inclination to risk antagonizing Japan by seeking to dislodge it from an area of no particular importance to Britain's national interests. Some officials in London even welcomed Tokyo's increasing military involvement in northern China as a useful diversion from the region of East Asia—which stretched from Hong Kong southward to Singapore—that was of substantial concern to Britain on economic and strategic grounds. Throughout the Manchurian episode British policy toward East Asia was dominated by the aspiration to reach a mutually satisfactory division of the entire region into Anglo-Japanese spheres of commercial and strategic interest.' [*The Twentieth Century World: An International History* (New York and Oxford, 1996), p. 233.]
2. Keylor, p. 151.



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