

Levi Pennington

People

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Pennington to Elsie Hoskins, January 23, 1948

Levi T. Pennington

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January 23, 1948.

Dear Friend:--

Your inquiry about General Holdridge's address Wednesday night deserved a better reply than I was able to give you over the 'phone, and I am glad to go into the matter more fully on paper.

You probably know that General Holdridge is a graduate of West Point, taught there for some time, taught in Columbia University, served in the army for thirty years, including both world wars, and is therefore no tyro, but a man able to speak from the viewpoint of a military man as well as that of the civilian, since he is now a retired officer.

He mentioned the fact that the situation which the world including our own country is in frightens him, as he places himself in the position of a target for all those who for any reason are favoring this proposal that the United States adopt universal military training. He declared that UMT is the greatest question facing America today, but that it is only a part, just one angle, of the bigger question of militarism and war.

He declared as his first premise that there is no security in UMT. Everybody is talking war, as if war were inevitable, but if war comes, he asked, what kind of a war will it be? Not a war in which great masses of soldiers would be effective, but a war of swift horror and mass destruction. He declared that the atomic bomb which destroyed Nagasaki as already obsolete, as we have bombs ten to fifteen times as powerful already. If we were attacked, there would be no possibility of mobilizing a great army in time for it to be of the slightest use. He attacked the statement that "wars are always won by infantry in the mud", and pointed out especially that even without the atom bomb that is not the way that the war against Japan was won. Japan was defeated before ever a footsoldier set foot on Japan. (Incidentally he stated that America had no need whatever of the atom bomb, as Japan was already defeated, and said that since we showed no mercy then in the use of this weapon of horror, we need expect no mercy from any opponent if we become involved in another war.)

He then attacked the argument that we should need a great army of invasion after we had defeated our enemy with atomic bombs, bacterial warfare, etc. He pointed out the fact that we cannot yet permit entrance to the vicinity of the Bikini experiment, and said that it would be impossible and suicidal for us to enter the territory that we had destroyed by atomic energy, as the death-dealing radio activity would be fatal to our own forces as the bombs had been to our enemies.

Then he took up the argument that a great army would be needed to pull things together and get life started again if we ourselves were attacked by atomic bombs and other modern agencies of destruction. He pointed out the fact that the army and navy have no provisions for this sort of training, and that if they had this work would not be done by 18-year-olds, but by mature men and women who had had civilian, not military training.

He denied that this is a movement for peace. "The army does not train men for peace, it trains them for war" he said. And even the training that they propose to give would be utterly futile from the standpoint of modern war. If that war comes, it will be fought by experts with the finest techniques, and this mass training does not train in techniques.

He declared that our military leaders are making the same sort of mistakes that they made when they proposed to use cavalry in World War I -- they found that cavalry was completely out of date in that war; when they "crucified" Billy Mitchell for his advocacy of air force, only to find that Mitchell was years ahead of them, and they were living in the past. He mentioned the crumbling of the Maginot line and the preparations which France had made for World War II on the basis of what would have been good for World War I. He declared that from the military standpoint, UMT would be a worse blunder than that which brought about the horror of Pearl Harbor.

Having disposed of UMT, as a measure that would not be effective from a military standpoint, he turned to the advantages claimed for it as a "youth movement", and took up the claims of its proponents as to its social by-products. "Universal military training will mean less democracy", declared the speaker. "The army has a rigid caste system that is far from democratic. It will develop a different kind of citizen. Our youth will be trained to 'think like soldiers', as the proponents of this bill themselves declare. The army does not train leaders but learners. Men in the lower ranks are not developed to think for themselves and act on their own judgment, but to let somebody else do the thinking while they do as they are told; from the time they get up in the morning till the time they go to bed at night their life is determined for them."

He then attacked UMT from the standpoint of its moral effect on the soldiers. "The army is no place to develop morals" he declared. He paid his respects to the "show window display" at Fort Knox, declaring that UMT never could be carried out on that basis, and if it could the cost would be absolutely prohibitive, since there are five overhead men for every ~~one~~ soldier taking training.

"If this is put on as a youth movement, it will be the kind of youth movement that Hitler had", declared the speaker. "We fought the British" he said "because we would not have military men forced upon us. It will be vastly worse than it was then if we have UMT."

He urged a non military man for Secretary of State. General Marshall, he said, knows how to make war, but not how to make peace.

He declared that the leadership of the American Legion is one of the most dangerous things in the United States today. Not the rank and file of the Legion, but those who are leading that organization.

He referred to the illegal propaganda work of the War-Department, a thing definitely forbidden by law, but carried on with the full knowledge of all in authority in Washington. "Somebody ought to go to jail for this", he said, "but of course

nobody will." Reference was had to the report of the Congressional committee definitely pointing out this violation and defiance of the law by the War Department.

General Holdridge paid his compliments to the press, declaring that they do not give the people the truth on this matter, but continually play up the "brass hats" and their arguments, giving little or nothing on the other side of the question.

He declared that Congress does not want to know the truth, pointing out the fact that the committee that was conducting hearings on the bill refused to hear many representatives of great organizations opposing the measure, after giving much more time to the proponents of UMT.

He declared his hope that if UMT does go into effect so many will resist and refuse to take this training that all our jails and prisons will overflow, and that there will not be enough judges to handle all the cases that will come up.

He dwelt on the effect of American adoption of UMT on the rest of the world, which would follow us in the mad race of war preparation, not Russia only but all the other great powers. "This movement of the military can lead us only over the precipice" he declared. "They are thinking only in terms of war; we must think in terms of peace. We must find the way to live in a world with Russia, even with our widely different ideologies. You cannot encircle an idea with armed forces. The way to insure America against communism is to set our own house in order and make our life in America so strong and successful that communism cannot grow here."

"We must build a strong world government", he declared, "and turn over to it the means of terror which we now have, and which Russia and other powers will presently have if they do not now. We must lead the world to disarmament, as we have the power to do now if we will, because of our great superiority now in our preparedness for modern warfare."

He urged that citizens put pressure on members of the national senate and house urging them to fight UMT. He said that many of them would like to do it, but are afraid of the opposition that it would arouse. "Let them know", he said, "that if they stand for UMT you'll work against them at the next election and defeat them if it is at all possible." Let your newspapers know where you stand, by communications that they will not find it easy to refuse. Support the National Council Against Conscription, and all other organizations that are opposed to UMT."

In the question period many interesting matters came up. One had to do with the claim that Switzerland and Sweden were saved during World War II by universal military training. "We could have blasted them off the earth in thirty days time if we had wanted to do it", he declared. "It was convenient for everybody concerned to have those countries as neutrals." He pointed out the ineffectiveness of Switzerland's archaic armaments, which would have been little more effective than wooden guns in modern warfare.

He scouted the idea of danger at this time from Russia, after the terrible losses in men and material during the recent conflict. "And how do the military know that Russia has a vast army in training? They are always complaining of the iron curtain which conceals everything in Russia from the view of the rest of the world. And if Russia is training an army of millions, we ought not to follow her in that mad mistake. If she masses great armies, it will only be the easier for us to destroy them if war does come."

He said that Russia had unquestionably obstructed the work of the United Nations, but pointed out the fact that we had by-passed the United Nations again and again, and he gave instance after instance. He declared his doubt that America would be willing to give up the veto power now if Russia would surrender it. He referred to our treatment of contracts which other powers had made with Russia, our attitude in Greece and Turkey where we have diverted most of the funds appropriated for relief to military purposes, and other acts of America which did not look at all good from the Russian standpoint, nor would they look good to us if Russia had done what we have done.

He expressed regret that Eisenhower has gone over to the militarists -- he said that the ideal and the natural thing would have been for Eisenhower to have taken the lead in America in the war against war and war preparation.

He said that there is in his mind at least the possibility that MacArthur may make a dramatic entry into the United States and take the lead in opposition to UMT, the futility of which he knows as well as any man on earth. If that occurs, however, he said we'd have to be on our guard against MacArthur. His admiration for MacArthur's ability as a soldier and strategist was very great. He thinks he made only one mistake, and that right at the first, but after that his skill as a strategist was superb. He had a far lower opinion of some of the other army leaders who stand high in the general opinion.

Well, that's the substance of what the general said, as I caught it for my notes. Hope it will not try your patience, the reading of it.

Sincerely your friend,

Miss Elsie Hoskins,
902 East Third St.,
Newberg, Oregon.