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Monitoring Hitler Stories and Selecting Draft Boards

Excerpts from John D. Zug's Memoirs

John Zug's observations about the coming world war were based on wide experience: as the Iowa-Nebraska manager of the International News Service (INS), as the governor's assistant, and as Iowa news manager of the Iowa Daily Press Association. In October 1945 Zug (front row, left) represented the Des Moines Register and Tribune on a tour of industry reconversions with the National Association of Manufacturers. Note the war bond message on the plane. Next page: Zug's ration books. Zug was also Des Moines Register city editor (1953-1969). In 1994 he donated his papers to the State Historical Society of Iowa. He died in March 1995. —The Editor

World War II Ahead

At the INS [International News Service] office in Des Moines, we opened the telegraph wire to the subscribing Iowa daily papers at 7 a.m. every day except Sunday. The first stories would be from the

national INS wire and soon the Iowa wire would become a mixture of national, international, and Iowa stories. I could not help noticing that many 7 a.m. stories were about Hitler's Nazis (short for the National Socialist Party). Adolf Hitler achieved power in January of 1933, and he never made any secret of his determination to arm Germany and go to war.

INS often reported speeches by Hitler, and it was not unusual when I arrived at the INS office at 6:45 a.m. to check the national wire and find an exclusive story by Kingsbury Smith or some other INS writer who had interviewed Hitler. Hitler would state that soldiers in his rapidly growing army were carrying wooden sticks, but that he was stepping up the production of guns and the troops would have them soon. He would tell of massive production of tanks, warplanes, submarines, and ships, and commit himself to warfare des-

tinued to "right the wrongs that had been done to Germany" as a result of World War I (known then as the World War).

After seeing such stories from time to time, we asked if anybody was taking this news to President Roosevelt. The INS Chicago bureau people asked New York and relayed to us that these correspondents had been to the White House. They said the problem in the United States and in other countries, such as England and France, was that the leaders did not believe Hitler, that his boasts were so outrageous that they could not be taken at face value. We in Des Moines wondered whether the Hearst-tainted INS messengers were also disbelieved, as a replay of the shoot-the-messenger philosophy.

We often also opened the Iowa wire with the latest news on Mussolini's war in Ethiopia. The timing was perfect for our use, as darkness was

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beginning in Ethiopia as we were opening our wire at 7 a.m. Iowa time. But no one in authority in the big powers ever took Mussolini very seriously, either.

Leaders of other nations, including the United States, France and Britain, seemed unworried about Hitler in the 1930s. In 1939, with Hitler's invasion of Poland, they became warlike, but by that time Hitler was way ahead in military build-up. . . .

On Sundays in the 1930s I would go horseback riding with Emery Ruby. Sometimes we went to Fort Des Moines, on the south side of the city. We rented privately owned horses, but we saw many barns and many government horses. Military men, such as reserves, exercised the U.S. horses by riding the trails or in polo games on the vast field. These riders honestly felt that these horses would be needed in the event of war, to pull the materials of war to the troops who would be fighting it (in the trenches, no doubt). There were government horses in similar forts all over the nation, "proving" the readiness of the United States to do battle if needed. No one was shouting that the horses were, even then, obsolete for warfare.

The World War II Draft

The draft took effect in 1940, a year and a half before Pearl Harbor. . . . [As assistant to Iowa governor George A. Wilson] I was in the midst of getting a draft board selected for each of Iowa's 99 counties. Nobody had planned it that

way. What happened was this:

The governor of each state was to name the county draft boards with the approval of President Franklin Roosevelt. Taking a page out of the World War I experience, Wilson asked the generals and colonels of the Iowa National Guard to develop the list. Taking a page from the same experience, they chose draft boards that included elected county officials. There was an obvious reason not to do this, but no one had thought of it—not even [Governor] Wilson, until he saw the list.

"That was a wartime draft," he told them. "This is a peacetime draft. You can't put elected officials on these boards. They should not have to take the heat."

Time was running short. The way to get changes made in a hurry was to put the job in the hands of one person. I was chosen. To get away from the office, the governor had me take a room at the Savery Hotel and I spent each day there, phoning people in each county, including those who had helped the generals find local leaders willing to serve as draft board members. My instructions from the governor were that each board of five members would include at least one World War I veteran, a union man in each urban county, and a farmer in each

rural county. Each board was to be 3 and 2 politically if possible.

About a week and a half later, I was able to present the governor with a revised list. His guidelines had been followed in each of the 99 counties. In addition, I was able to assure him that each person on the list had agreed to serve, and that each person whose name was removed from the initial list had been informed of the reasons and had agreed with the changes that were being made.

This was not the end. Both the governor and the President approved the list, but among nearly 500 draft board members, there were more vacancies than had been expected, and I was asked to handle the filling of these vacancies. Resignations had nothing to do with the draft. One member would die; another would have major surgery; another would enter the armed forces; another would move out of the county, etc. It was a rare day when I was not trying to fill at least one vacancy. □

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