THE CRISIS IN THE WHITE COMMITTEE

RICHARD L. MCBANE

In December, 1940, the long struggle in the United States between the isolationists and those who favored aid to the allies was building to a climax. The resources of Great Britain were almost exhausted. The issue of United States aid had become of the utmost importance in the outcome of the European war. The leading force for American aid was the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, commonly known as the "White Committee" after its chairman, William Allen White.

White's committee, and White's leadership in particular, had already been of importance in shaping public opinion and securing Congressional approval for Franklin Roosevelt's "destroyers-for-bases" deal with the British. In December there were indications that the administration was again going to count on the committee to be in the forefront of a battle to secure aid for Britain.[1] But the committee was already in the throes of an internal policy struggle which would affect the nature and degree of influence it could bring to bear. Moreover, it was under attack by the leading isolationist pressure groups. The result was a severe crisis within the committee which culminated in the resignation of White.

William Allen White had attained a rare degree of respect during a lifetime as editor of his own Emporia, Kansas, Gazette. He had a personal following not only in his native mid-west, but throughout the country. In 1940, at the age of 72, there was probably not another man so universally esteemed in the United States. But, in 1940, he was in a position where he would have to exercise every ounce of the esteem he possessed, both within the committee, and without, in order to maintain the influence of the committee.

White was by nature a gentle but outspoken man who had first reached national prominence in the 1896 presidential campaign between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. He had always been intensely interested in the welfare of the people, and of the country. Gradually he moved into more active political roles when he took part in the Progressive Party movement of 1912-1916. In the 1930's he conducted a fight in Kansas against the Ku Klux Klan. Throughout this period he took an enlightened view of America's role in international affairs.[2]

In 1915, when the United States was a much more naive and isolationist nation than it was 25 years later, White was already writing, "War is abroad

in Europe. To ignore it, to declare that we are protected by our geographical position is folly."[3] When war threatened the world a second time in the late 1930's White tried to find an effective way for the United States to protect itself without actually entering the conflict.

In September, 1939, when the war began, White was a member of the Union of Concerted Peace Efforts, an outgrowth of the League of Nations Non-partisan Committee for Peace Through Revision of the Neutrality Law. White was selected to serve as chairman.[4]

This committee did key work in the successful fight for revision of the neutrality laws, and White earned the personal thanks of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. But as the war progressed, and it became painfully obvious that only the determination and dogged courage of the British was holding back a complete Nazi conquest, it was natural that White should again be in the forefront. Like each of the previous committees on which he had served, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies was born to meet the needs of the hour.[5] His leadership was necessary to the committee, and it provided an appropriate culmination to his career.

At the outset White wrote that he feared he was "merely the rooster on the cow catcher," but he was much more than that. He was the central figure in the phenominal growth of the committee, as well as the only real link between the committee and the White House. Under his control the membership of the committee mushroomed. In a month the committee was large and influential enough to exert pressure on Congress, and it grew until it had 750 chapters spread across the country.[6]

But to a large extent it grew like Topsie, and in that lay the seeds of the crisis which overtook it in December, 1940. The ruling body was theoretically the National Committee, but in practice the local chapters were virtually autonomous. They were permitted to carry out National policy as they pleased, as long as they adhered to the policy itself. The local officers were selected locally and the National Committee had no disciplinary power over the local groups.[7]

In most areas this presented no problem, but in New York the situation was different. The National Headquarters and the New York Chapter were independent of one another and they soon began to show signs of working at cross purposes. The New York Chapter was considerably more bellicose than the committee as a whole. It was soon suspected in isolationist circles that the direction of the entire committee was falling into the hands of a small clique which controlled the New York Chapter. The reputable but isolationist and pacifist Christian Century strongly implied in November, 1940, that Herbert Agar and the so-called "Century Group" were the guiding spirits behind the committee. It went on to point out, "But it must be recognized that there is this active pressure toward intervention at the center of the movement--this little group of men who are continually making their influence felt in the committee's policies and program. . . ."

Individual members and chapters began to raise the issue directly with White, and replies from the National Committee to the effect that "Many of us feel that a timid policy of only half-hearted aid to Britain is in danger of bringing us into war eventually and then under the most unfavorable conditions," did nothing to settle the unrest in the mid-west.[9]

A new policy statement formulated on November 26 aggravated the situation by coming close to the sore spot of convoys. It said, "The life line between Great Britain and the United States is the sea route to the Western Hemisphere. Under no circumstances must this line be cut and the United States must be prepared to maintain it. The United States should supply Great Britain with all possible merchant vessels to fly the British flag."[10]

By early December a re-organization of the committee could be delayed no longer. Internal differences were too great to be ignored. Accordingly White outlined a nine point plan to Clark Eichelberger, the National Director. He proposed a National Policy Board to formulate the policy which the New York Chapter would be required to follow. The board was to have representation from each chapter, and New York was to have two representatives, Frank Kingdon, a naturalized Englishman, and Herbert Bayard Swope, Director of the New York Chapter. The New York Chapter was still to be autonomous. It was to receive $400 a week from the National Committee, pay its own bills, and institute no general fund raising. Any money which it raised was to be divided equally with the National Committee, and it was to confine its activities to greater New York.[11]

White, because of the illness of his wife and his own failing health, did not feel it possible to go to New York to fight the issue out in person. Instead he entrusted the negotiations to the men in charge of the National Committee and the New York Chapter. The situation was almost hopeless and the first meeting between the two groups only widened the gap.[12] But a week later Swope, the chief New York representative, was more agreeable. He wrote White that the New York Chapter had "voted to accept in principle" the outline of relations as forwarded to the National Committee. In his letter he held out the possibility of agreement with the statement that, "The few points at issue will be resolved, no doubt, by talks to be held with you and the others of your group by Mr. Goldsmith and George Field."[13]

But just when a settlement seemed to be within reach, a new factor was added to the internal difficulties of the committee. White learned that the Scripps-Howard newspapers were preparing an attack on the committee. At just about the same time White also received a copy of a letter from former Congressman Bruce Barton to Roy Roberts of the Kansas City Star. Barton told Roberts that White, because of his prestige, held the power of good or harm for the country. If White really wanted to keep the country out of war, Barton continued, ". . . then he ought to say so far as he is concerned the limit of aid 'short of war' means no American ships and no convoying."[14] White knew that such a statement would come close to contradicting the

November 26 policy of the committee, but he decided to speak out in an effort to forestall the planned isolationist attack until the committee dissension was resolved. To do this he wrote a personal letter to his old friend Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain. Howard wished to publish the letter and White gave his permission. It appeared on December 23, and with it the final crisis was at hand.[15]

White, in his own words,". . . felt it proper to deny the common charges of our opponents that we were in favor of four dangerous proposals: First, deliberately aiming at war; second, espousing proposals that would immediately lead to war, the three proposals being, convoys, sending American ships with contraband of war into belligerent waters, and the repeal of the Johnson Act. I denied that we were in favor of either of these four things [sic]."[16]

White's statement effectively broke the committee into segments. It placed him in direct opposition to the New York Chapter. The National Committee met immediately, and in conjunction with the big city chapters of the east coast made an effort to avert division. They prepared a statement and Swope, in a telegram on December 24, urged White to issue it in an "unqualified manner." "Unless it is," he continued, "I am fearful all good work you have done will go to smash. Scripps Howard papers called your statement repudiation of the White Committee. That is why action is imperative." In a tone verging on the condescending he concluded, "I hate to see you dragooned into position not of opposing war but of seemingly opposing big thing the committee is seeking."[17]

White, of course, was not a person to be dragooned, either by Swope or anyone else. He kept his counsel while the reactions to his statement began to roll in. White, always a recipient of a large volume of personal correspondence, began to hear in increasing numbers from the individual members of the chapters, and from the common people of the country. The flood continued for weeks afterward, and ranged from fanatic devotion to fanatic opposition. It continued with as much support and as much bitterness after White's resignation as before. It was not a directly measurable personal phenomenon, but it must have affected him deeply.[18]

If the private reactions of White cannot be known with certainly, however, the public reactions of the America First Committee can. Strongly isolationist and eventually accused of being pro-Nazi, this committee was headed by General Robert E. Wood.[19] In the newspapers of December 26 he was quoted as saying,". . . national unity will have been achieved" if the two committees should agree to oppose convoys of armaments to Britain.[20] At the same time Charles Lindbergh, most popular of all the American First supporters also issued a statement. With great skill he managed to condemn White's committee, and at the same time praise White.

He said, "Many of us have felt in the past that Mr. White's committee was intentionally leading us to war. We knew that certain supporters of the

committee have discussed what steps 'short of war' would lead to war most quickly." Then he concluded, "The important thing is that we unite on the destiny of America; on the necessity of building strength at home and keeping out of war abroad. In this Mr. White has today given us an example of true leadership."[21]

On December 26 White had still not acted, although he was preparing a public letter of a conciliatory nature addressed to Lindbergh.[22] The Committee was desperately attempting to get White to issue another public statement. A committee telegram to Roosevelt pledging ". . . full support in your policy of lending all aid necessary to Great Britain" had appeared in the same newspaper editions as the statements of Wood and Lindbergh, but it was likely to be meaningless unless a supporting statement by White was immediately forthcoming.[23] In desperation Eichelberger wired White, "In the light of almost twenty years friendship and my loyalty to you please believe me when I say misunderstanding over your Howard interview having national repercussions and unless we can agree quickly on statement sent you our movement is threatened with disaster."[24]

Meanwhile the New York Chapter, with a membership of 16,000, had done with delay. They issued a statement announcing, "We will not be intimidated by the word 'war-monger.' " In a second statement four members of the executive committee announced a policy meeting for the following Monday with the comment that the November policy statement was expected to be "reaffirmed and strengthened." As the New York Times remarked, signs of ferment seemed evident.[25]

But while the New York Chapter was going its own way White was writing a letter of explanation to Lewis Douglas about the whole affair. After stating exactly what he had done, he said, "I did not consult the Executive Committee or the Policy Committee because I supposed and still think, I was entirely inside of the intentions of the Committee as expressed by the policy of November 26."

He commented on the support for his position in the middle west, and then, for the first time, brought up resignation. He wrote, "My resignation seems inevitable if even a minority of the Committee feel that this policy is unwise. My one earnest wish is that in giving out the news of my resignation we save our Committee from embarrassment and from harm. I have asked Mr. Eichelberger to let the matter ride until I come to New York in late January when The Churchman will honor our Committee by giving me an award for the work the Committee has done. That will be a good springboard from which to announce that a younger man is needed in this place; that a year's strain has taken its toll upon my mind and body and that I want to be relieved from the work."[26]

White concluded that, "I earnestly hope that no statement or commitment will be made which will force this issue at this time," but he was to be immediately disappointed in that hope. Eichelberger tried to do his part

by denying on December 28 the reports of "growing differences among some groups of William Allen White's Committee. . . ." His effort was completely unavailing as a new explosion engulfed the entire committee.[27]

Major Fiorello LaGuardia of New York, a committee member, and a friend of White, publicly aligned himself with the radical New York Chapter members by issuing to the press a letter he was sending to White. A bitter document, it almost seemed composed in the heat of passion. It read:

My dear and good friend:

I read your statement saying what the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies would not do. Strange, when the going was good for the Allies, you and others were strong in saying what you would do. Now that the going is bad, you are doing a typical Laval.

It occurred to me that the committee had better divide. You could continue as chairman of the "Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies with Words" and the rest of us would join a "Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies with Deeds." That would at least identify the division which I am sure your statement will cause.

If you will send me the addresses of the members of the advisory committee as contained on your letterhead, I will be glad to send them each a copy of this letter.

With kind personal regards and hoping to have the pleasure of seeing you soon, and with best wishes for as happy a New Year as is possible by simply Aiding the Allies with Words, I am

Sincerely yours,

F. H. LaGuardia, Mayor[28]

White had a high regard for LaGuardia, and for his political integrity. LaGuardia had been among those urging White to take the Committee chairmanship. It was unfortunate, therefore, that White had to learn of LaGuardia's letter through the press. The Mayor had sent the letter to White through the National Committee, and that body, thinking that LaGuardia would not release it to the press, held it. Not until December 31 was it sent to White.[29]

In the meantime, Swope took the opportunity provided by LaGuardia to further widen the gap between the New York Chapter and the rest of the committee. In a telephone interview on December 29, he said he was ". . . convinced the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies is bigger than any single individual." In sympathy with LaGuardia, he stated he could ". . . understand the impatience of many who resent the confusion produced by what we might call Mr. White's indiscretion."[30]

But despite the fact that letters condemning LaGuardia came to him, and despite the fact that he had the sympathy and support of practically all of the chapters outside of New York, White decided that the issue had, in fact,

been forced. On January 2, 1941, he announced his resignation as chairman of the committee.[31]

In a personal letter of April 2, 1941, White attributed his resignation to the illness of Mrs. White, because that made it impossible to go back to New York to "fight out a proposal which seemed to me important and upon which I and the Committee disagree."[32] This was, of course, the interventionist spirit of the New York Chapter, and even in his resignation, White attempted to quell it, as he wrote feelingly in the Gazette on January 2, that ". . . I have never heard war as an alternate objective seriously discussed by any official group of our organization at any time." And he concluded "Any organization that is for war is certainly playing Hitler's game."[33] In both explanations the common factor is the interventionist element in New York. White reacted to it.

W. L. White, in finishing his father's autobiography, characterized his father as representing a sort of average public opinion. If he seemed confused, or ambivalent, it was because the public itself was confused.[34] He considered both the mass of letters he received and the reasoning of men he respected. His sense of public reputation and of duty to the hundreds of thousands of people who placed their trust in him impelled him toward the resignation. White added a postscript to the Douglas letter. It read, "For the last six weeks I have been receiving letters from intelligent people who were members of our committee, or its supporters, deploring the fact that we were going too far and too fast toward war. These came from men whose judgement I respect. They were not appeasers. They just didn't see the new phase of our activity."[35]

White might also have added that he respected the judgement of some of the men who opposed his committee, notably Roy Howard, Roy Roberts of the Kansas City Star, and Bruce Barton. He respected and had a long friendship with Oswald Garrison Villard who wired him on December 30, "Deeply concerned your situation in regard to your committee and profoundly eager that your splendid standing in the country should not be clouded. In friendly spirit urge your resignation."[36]

Likewise, he had great admiration for LaGuardia, and for many of the other committee members who attacked him for taking a moderate stand. Among this number was Philip Wylie, founder of the Miami committee chapter, who wired him on the same day as Villard, "Because I feel that your recent statements have impugned the dignity of your committee members and shown a gross incomprehension of world affairs and our own peril, I do now resign from your committee."[37]

Possibly all of these men influenced White in the direction of his natural tendencies. When these last two wires were sent, White's choice had probably already been made. On December 28, he had been thinking of resignation if agreement were impossible. LaGuardia's outburst made the extent of disaffection clear. White had either to defeat the committee radicals or to

witness the joint destruction of the committee and his own reputation in the execution of their policies. The fact that he could not go to New York was irrelevant to the main issue. After the negotiations of late November and early December; after the back-handed near-insults of Herbert Bayard Swope; and after the LaGuardia letter there was no question about the New Yorkers listening to reason. They were as fanatic as the isolationist radicals of the America First Committee. The only weapon White could use against them was his reputation, and the only way he could use it was to resign.[38]

Whether or not the resignation served the purpose intended by White was not immediately clear. The newspaper reaction was thoroughly mixed. The isolationist papers tended to claim that it only proved what they had thought all along, and columnist Boake Carter said as much outright. The more moderate St. Louis Post-Dispatch said, "If the ex-White Committee has become too radical for its creator, it has become too radical for the American people." The Los Angeles Times, normally at least a luke-warm supporter of the committee, missed the mark entirely with, "He is too forthright a man to keep on with a committee with which he was fundamentally at odds. If there were disagreements, they evidently were on relatively minor questions."[39]

It is significant, however, that White retained among his papers an editorial from the Illinois State Register which apparently reflected his point of view accurately, and indicated the end he hoped to achieve. It read:

> Foremost, America must keep the life line open between the United States and Great Britain, and must give the President every encouragement and support in his policy of aid to Great Britain. WE MUST IMPRESS UPON CONGRESS THE NEED TO BACK HIM.
>
> That is a firm basis for the committee's future program. It sweeps away any inconsistencies attributable to Mr. White in the past and provides common ground for committee action in the future through a policy group authorized by the entire membership and known to the public.[40]

At the time this editorial was written the reorganization which White had previously attempted was already underway. On January 4, just two days after his resignation, the plan for selection of vice-chairmen from different sections of the country, and the establishment of a policy board was discussed at an executive committee meeting. Moreover, the New York Chapter itself was forced to retract, and Frank Kingdon was authorized to convey to White "...the high esteem in which we hold you personally and the keen appreciation that we have of your statesmanlike leadership...." A measure of the distrust generated within that Chapter is the fact that another New York Chapter member also wrote to White to tell him the same thing, and to underline the words, "Dr. Kingdon was authorized at our last meeting to convey all this to you."[41]

White privately endorsed control of the committee by a group of men who had closely supported him while he was chairman. On January 10 he received the thanks of Clark Eichelberger, Fred McKee, and Hugh Moore for his support and learned that they seemed to have the situation under control. White, himself, was elected honorary chairman, Lewis Douglas, chairman of the board, and Ernest W. Gibson, former Senator from Vermont, chairman of the committee.[42]

This leadership was strictly moderate and, although it lacked some of the raw dynamism displayed on occasions by the America First Committee, it was also above attack. Its reputation was virtually unquestioned, and it played an important role in gaining popular support for the lend-lease bill in early 1941. White was consulted throughout, and the factions of Swope and Kingdon never seriously threatened the purposes of the committee again. In this sense White's resignation was a success.[43]

Franklin Roosevelt summed up this success when he wrote to White in July, 1941, ". . . I think it sobered certain elements within the committee to such an extent that they have been watching their step ever since." [44] More could not be expected.

Marietta (Ohio) Daily Times

Footnotes:

[1] Livingston Hartley to William Allen White, December 4, 1940, reporting a conversation between Hartley and Herbert Feis at the State Department. William Allen White Collection, Box 318, Library of Congress. Hereafter, unless otherwise cited, all letters in the footnotes are from this source.

[2] David Hinshaw, A Man From Kansas, The Story of William Allen White (New York, 1945), 238; William Allen White, The Autobiography of William Allen White (New York, 1946), 424-528, 630-634.

[3] Hinshaw, A Man From Kansas, 266.

[4] Ibid., 274, 278-279.

[5] Ibid., 281; Selected Letters of William Allen White 1899-1943, ed., Walter Johnson (New York, 1947), 399-400.

[6] Hinshaw, A Man From Kansas, 281; William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, The Undeclared War, 1940-1941 (New York, 1953), 505-506.

[7] Walter Johnson, William Allen White Defends America (Chicago, 1945), 10.

[8] "Driving The Propaganda Engine," The Christian Century, November 6, 1940, 1367-1369.

[9] Harold R. Holmes to William Allen White, December 3, 1940; Roger Greene to Harold R. Holmes, December 7, 1940.

[10] Johnson, White Defends America, 16.

[11] William Allen White to Clark Eichelberger, December 6, 1940.

[12] Herbert B. Swope to William Allen White, December 11, 1940.

[13] Herbert B. Swope to William Allen White, December 17, 1940.

[14] Bruce Barton to Roy Roberts, December 16, 1940.

[15] Hinshaw, A Man From Kansas, 284-285.

[16] William Allen White to Lewis W. Douglas, December 28, 1940.

[17] Postal telegram, Herbert B. Swope to William Allen White, December 24, 1940.

[18] The following quotation extracts represent a cross-section of the letters White received during this period: "I am thrilled by your statement. . .": William Leicester Bowers, Philadelphia, December 28, 1940; "I was shocked by the statement. . .": William T. Long, Westfield, New Jersey, December 28, 1940; ". . .you have until now been the most misused of men": Upton Close, Valhalla, New York, December 29, 1940; "I had hoped this morning to find a denial from you. . .": J. Lionberger Davis, St. Louis, December 29, 1940; "I wish to congratulate you. . . upon your courageous interpretation. . .": Carl B. Eimer, New York, December 30, 1940; "I have the greatest respect for you. . .": Lincoln Miller, Indiana, Pennsylvania, January 1, 1941; ". . . keep this country from going too far. . . I beg of you": Elmer Guy Cutshall, Lincoln, Nebraska, January 2, 1941; "In this war Britain is eternally right": Charles R. Mabey, Salt Lake City, January 3, 1941; ". . . I suggest Wendell Willkie as your worthy successor": Alexander and Mary Chatin, Miami Beach, January 3, 1941; ". . . form the 'William Allem White Committee Against Repetition of the Folly of 1917,": W. E. Carter, San Francisco, January 3, 1941; ". . . let England and Greece have everything we have . . .": Bliss Isely, Wichita, January 4, 1941; "Please accept my sincere sympathy.": L. E. Creasy, Monroe, Wisconsin, January 7, 1941; "We mothers of sons curse your name . . .": Alicia T. Carter, Minneapolis, January 8, 1941.

[19] Walter Johnson, William Allen White's America (New York, 1947), 540.

[20] New York Times, December 25, 1940.

[21] Ibid., December 25, 1940.

[22] This letter from White to Charles A. Lindbergh, dated December 26, 1940, was apparently never made public.

[23] New York Times, December 25, 1940.

[24] Telegram, Clark Eichelberger to William Allen White, December 26, 1940.

[25] New York Times, December 28, 1940.

[26] William Allen White to Lewis W. Douglas, December 28, 1940.

[27] Ibid.; New York Times, December 29, 1940.

[28] New York Times, December 29, 1940.

[29] Roger S. Greene to William Allen White, December 31, 1940; The original text of the LaGuardia letter, however, is not in the files with the covering letter.

[30] New York Times, December 30, 1940.

[31] Ibid., January 3, 1941.

[32] Gil Wilson, Letters of William Allen White and a Young Man (New York, 1948), 95.

[33] Emporia Gazette, January 2, 1941.

[34] White, Autobiography, 641-642.

[35] William Allen White to Lewis W. Douglas, December 28, 1940.

[36] Telegram, Oswald Garrison Villard to William Allen White, December 30, 1940.

[37] Telegram, Philip Wylie to William Allen White, December 30, 1940; White's correspondence between January 2 and January 8 also included letters or telegrams from Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Thomas W. Lamont, Herbert Hoover, Conrad Hobbs, vice-chairman of the New England committee headquarters, and Adlai Stevenson, chairman of the Chicago committee chapter.

[38] In general, the fictious reason which White proposed in his December 28 letter to Lewis Douglas, that is, the need for a younger man in the job, has been accepted as the more or less genuine cause for the resignation. White gave it as a reason in his resignation statement, and it was picked up over the country. Walter Johnson very nearly repeats it in his William Allen White Defends America (Chicago, 1945), 19, when he says, ". . . Mr. White decided to resign in order that a younger man, who could stay in New York to curb the Century Club 'hot-spurs' might be appointed at once." Yet, the essential point, which Johnson touched on, and which White himself always mentioned either directly or indirectly, was the so-called war-mongering or interventionist spirit which was becoming evident in the committee.

[39] Chicago Daily Tribune, January 4, 1941; Akron Beacon-Journal, January 3, 1941; Boston Globe, January 8, 1941; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, January 3, 1941; Los Angeles Times, January 4, 1941.

[40] Illinois State Register, January 5, 1941, White Collection, Box 318.

[41] Frank Kingdon to William Allen White, January 6, 1941; Christopher T. Emmet, Jr., to William Allen White, January 6, 1941; New York Times, January 4, 1941.

[42] Telegram, Hugh Moore to William Allen White, January 10, 1941.

[43] Walter Johnson, The Battle Against Isolation (Chicago, 1944), 208.

[44] Franklin D. Roosevelt to William Allen White, July 16, 1941, White Collection, Box 324.