ADDRESS BY LILLIAN GISH AT
AMERICA FIRST COMMITTEE RALLY APRIL 1,1940

Please let me talk to you, not as an actress whom you may know from the films or the theatre, but as an American citizen who is deeply concerned about her country.

I belong to no group, no organization, outside of Actors' and Radio Equity. I was baptized and confirmed an Episcopalian by Bishop Leonard of Ohio. Because we were very poor, I began working at the age of five and have been earning my living in the Theatre or on the stage ever since.

In 1936 I voted for Mr. Roosevelt, wrote and delivered my only political speech for him on "The Women of 1936" program, which Mrs. Curtiss Bob sponsored.

My platform is pro-America and anti-hate. I didn't vote in the last election as I felt both candidates were more interested in other countries than in their own. This conviction is shared by many of my countrymen here in the middle west, where I have been for over a year. Had we had a candidate last November running on an all-American ticket, one who would have settled our own internal problems, who would have armed this country and made it stronger than any other, and used that strength to keep us out of war, I believe he would have been elected.

Naturally, we would like to have England go on ruling the world, as she has done since she seized Canada from the French in 1759, but we still believe that George Washington was right when he said, "The nation which holds toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interests."

This country was founded by a brave people who were willing to suffer untold hardships to escape from the eternal wars of Europe. Take my own average case. My mother's people were French Huguenots who came here in 1632 and settled in Deerfield, Massa - chusetts. They intermarried with the Scotch, English and Irish. By the tim- my mother was born, they had moved as far west as Ohio, and she was christened Mary Robinson McConnell. In 1733, one Mathias Gish left Luxembourg and came to Philadelphia, bought land in Lancaster County, where he settled as a farmer. An interesting thing about Lancaster County: Perhaps many of you have shared my belief that it was the richest county in America because God made it so. But in recently reading "Mathias Gish of White Oaks," I learned it was because farmers who understood the earth had treated it with such care and wisdom that they developed it until that became the most productive county in America.

These people and their descendants helped to build this great land, and have fought for its freedom. This background, I am sure, is similar to the background of all of you who feel a deep respect for our country. And now, for the second time in twenty years, we are being propagandized into a war that is none of our business.

Everyone over thirty remembers how we were screamingly told in 1917 that we were fighting for our liberties to make the world safe for democracy. It was to be a war to end all wars. Just go ask some of our poor wrecks of men in the badly equipped, understaffed and forgotten veterans' hospitals about that. Or let me tell you how I helped to sell the idea of hate to the American people.

When D.W.Griffith was in London early in 1917 with his film, "Intolerance," he was approached by Lloyd George, Lord Beaverbrook and the heads of the British and French Propaganda Departments about making films to interest Americans in fighting for them. They told him that they thought the films were more powerful than the press for spreading propaganda.

Mr. Griffith agreed to undertake the assignment and began assembling his players. Being very young at the time, imagine my surprise to find myself on a boat bound for France, even before the soldiers got there. My mother and I sailed for England on the first camouflaged boat to leave America after war was declared in April 1917. We sailed with the first contingents of doctors and nurses sent from the Presbyterian Hospital in New York. I remember so well that when we got into the war zone all nurses were ordered to spend the night on deck in chairs with their life belts on. Mother and I were the only ones on the boat who could retire comfortably to their cabins. We had no fear as we had never been close enough to war to know what it was all about.

We remained in England and France for six months. We were sent up front with the French. As there were only three in my family - my father having died when we were small children -- mother insisted upon going everywhere with us. She was thirty-six years old at the time, and suffered such a severe case of shell shock that she is an invalid today as the result of it. But we got 86,000 feet of film, with everyone working for us from the King and Queens of England to the French and British soldiers, before we sailed for home, late in October, 1917.

From this material, we made three pictures. Perhaps some of you may recall them. There was a twelve reel film called "Hearts of the World," which was the story of a little girl living in France who is about to be married to a French boy when the war broke out and he became a common soldier. You may recall two of the most effective scenes in this picture. One, after the girl sees her home and mother and grandfather blown to bits before her eyes, goes roaming along the battlefield after losing her mind, hugging all that is left of her wedding veil, when she stumbles upon her fiance, wounded and unconscious, and goes to sleep peacefully at his side . The other scene shows three small children,

left alone with their dead mother in a dugout, digging her grave and buyring her without help. They were most effective scenes, calculated to stir the emotions of the Americans so that they would be willing to fight and die for the cause. "The Great Love" was the story of English bravery while under fire from the Zeppelins. "The Greatest Thing in Life" was the story of an American snob being drafted and finding himself in a shell hole in No Man's Land with a dying American colored soldier in his arms. The colored man, in his delirium, thinks the other man is his mammy, and asks her for a farewell kiss, which our American snob gives him, thereby learning something of the brotherhood of man. These were good stories, and deeply moving ones.

The only trouble with them, however, that we could find when we ran them six or seven years ago, was that the Hunns, as the Germans were then called, and the Beast of Berlin, the favorite title those days for the Kaiser, the man who was destroying civilization and our liberties, were so villainous and dastardly that the audience, looking at the pictures, screamed with laughter, Every time a Hunn came near me, he knocked me down, kicked me or beat me with a cat-o-nine tails. Now, with propagandized hysteria at its present peack, who knows but what the audience that shrieked with such glee then might not take these films seriously again? The minute war was over, the people would no longer come and look at these pictures. It was as if a curtain had dropped on the whole episode, they lost interest so completely.

We were in many air raids in London. I remember the first day light raid. When the planes came over, flying so high that even with binoculars they seemed but little specks in the sky, 18,000 feet high, they hit a school in White Chapel. The bombs, coming from such height, went through the building to the ground floor and kintergarten classes before it exploded, killing ninety-six children between the ages of five and six. We arrived on the scene to watch the mothers and fathers as they looked for the arms, legs or bits of their children. I couldn't attempt to describe what we saw.

Mr. Griffith gave us orders that when we were not actually engaged in rehearsing or working on the films that we were to spend our time at Waterloo or Victoria Stations to watch the farewells of the people or the wounded arriving. He said, "You want to be an actress? There never was a time in history of the world when you could have a better chance to study human emotions offguard, and you must take full advantage of it."

I think it is safe to say we learned more of life in those six months than we could have learned in a lifetime of average living. Curiously enough, when we were in France, within easy range of shelling, we didn't suffer from fear as much as we had expected, as there the bombardment was constant, night and day. Somehow, you got used to it after a few hours, and unless shelling broke very close, you didn't seem to mind. Then, too, there were dugouts. We were billeted in the deep cellar of an old destroyed house, and living on flagaloy, the baby lima bean of France. Too, we had the constant interest of getting unbelievably real and exciting scenes for our pictures. Perhaps, had we been older, it would have taken a greater toll of our health, as it did of our mother's.

One thing we noticed above all else in England and France, was what seemed to us a lack of hatred for the enemy. The English papers were full of editorials about the bravery of the Germans. They were burying with full military honors the airmen brought down over England, as we were told they were paying equal respect to the British airmen brought down over Germany because they admired bravery over all else. The only voice of hatred we heard lifted against the Germans was during an air raid. An old Cockney woman, deep in her cups, in the middle of the street, was shaking her fists at the sky, saying, "Ye divvils!"

We felt that a country with such sportsmanship could never be whipped, as they made every effort never to underestimate the strength of their enemy. I remember when we got back to America late in October, 1917, the people asked us, in all seriousness, if it were true that the Germans cut off the hands and legs of old people and crucified little children. If you remember Sir Phillip Gibbs' book that was published in the early twenties, you will recall his admission that these stories were sent out for propaganda purposes. It was no wonder that the great propaganda machine had made our own people talk and think like idiots.

After six months reading and hearing of the healthy respect the English and French felt for their enemy, we were ashamed of the point of view of our own people. But in Europe, war is part of life; the people have always had it, they accept it and don't get hysterical as we do.

I am not proud of the part I played in spreading hatred. Hate is an unhealthy and impratical thing. It has a way of acting as a boomerang to those doing the hating. Since that time, I have lived and worked in Europe for eight years. I saw history made in Italy. Mussolini marched into Rome October 22nd, 1922, with his bloodless revolution, and we arrived in Italy the last of November to make Marion Crawford's "The White Sister" and George Eliot's "Romola."

We watched that country where Florentines hated Romans, Romans hated Florentines, all of them hated Neopolitans and so on, change from a divided nation of bad roads, where trains scheduled to leave at two o'clock were lucky to start at four, telephone service so slow that it was quicker to send notes by hand, gradually unite and become efficient. There was the great Catholic Church on the one hand, and we had the good fortune to go over on the boat with Monsignor Bonzano, who was on his way to be made a Cardinal at the Vatican. Knowing we were going to film a Catholic story, he threw the great clock of the Catholic Church around us and helped us in every conceivable way, even to inviting us to the great ceremony at the Vatican when the Pope consecrated him Cardinal.

On the other hand, there was the Italian Royal Family. Many mornings we passed the Little King of Italy on his way to work as we were on our way to the studio. For two years we watched the gradual change in Italy, and when I was last there, not long ago, I found it has become united and as efficient as any other modern country.

I was to watch history being made again. This time in Germany. By 1928, the propagandized hysteria had been forgotten and Americans were

flocking to Germany and Austria, some as tourists, some as students. I went there with my mother and her nurse, hoping to find superior medical aid, as she was, and is still, an invalid from the last war. Also to work on a story for the films based on the life of Theresa Newmann (of whom you may have heard,) the peasant girl of Konnesreuth, with a stigmata, who suffers through the Crucifixion every Friday that isn't a Feast Day. Hugo von Hoffmann, the Austrian poet, was to write the story, and the great impresario, Max Reinhardt, was to direct it. I had not been in Germany long before I was struck by the sense of sadness and age in the people. When I asked about it, a Roumanian friend, Dr. Kommer, explained that the people were so heavily taxed for the next fifty-six years that they felt there was no hope for them, their children and their unborn children, and all because they had made a peace when not an inch of their soil had been invaded, and had been promised a just peace.

I watched this for six months, after which I returned to work in America. My mother remained in Germany for a year, then went on to England for six months. But we both know now that the finest medical aid is to be found here at home.

I returned to the center of Europe nearly every summer for the next ten years. By 1930, in Germany, I saw shoulders straightening, young men looking hopeful and heard strange words like "anti-Semetic," which were not in our vacabulary.

In 1932, the change was so apparent to an outsider that I was begging some of my good friends to come to America, which was freer from racial prejudices. But they laughed at me and said that it couldn't happen there.

I was in France and saw that great country grow soft, demanding more and more while working less and less. I was there during their sit-down strike. In fact, I was in Chanel's being pinned into a dress with a thousand French pins, when the order came. I looked around and everybody sat down. I won't bother you with the details of extricating a thousand French pins, but I might add that the dress was never finished. Many of my French friends told me at that time that only the Spanish Revolution had saved the French from the same fate.

In 1938 I was in Czechoslovakia where the Czechoslovakians told me not to worry about their little country -- it had too many friends to let anything happen there. Now I see my own country marching to civil war and there are still people saying it can't happen here. We won the last war and what did we get out of it? 346,000 dead and wounded, an over-all cost of not less than forty-five billion, prohibition with its attendant hypocrisy, lawlessness and gangsters, ten thousand bank failures and a depression from which we have not yet recovered.

If there were any good that came to us out of the last war, I would like to know what it was, and we won that war! Mr.Wilson had a triumphal tour through Europe as savior (and he certainly was their Santa Claus) but we, the people, paid with blood and tears and suffering. The late F.Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that France was a land, England a people and America a willingness of heart. Everyone who has ever lived in Europe knows that an Englishman has only one real love affair, and that is with England.

Of course, if what Major Al Williams said a few weeks ago is true, that you cannot get the American people to think, we may, with all this concentrated pressure, be forced into war, but if there is any foresight or justice in Washington, they will put it to a vote and let people who have to pay for it decide.

If you were to believe what you hear and read, you would wonder if America is concerned at all with the problems a world war would bring her own country. Why not bring freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear and freedom from want to our own land before we set out to bring it to those of other lands? It seems to me that the only sane voice coming out of Europe at the moment is that of Pope Pius, the Twelfth, who believes that a peace is better for the world today than a peace next week, next month or next year.

Surely, now is the time when every American citizen over twenty-one years of age must go deep into his conscience and decide for himself if he loves some other country better than he loves America or hates Germany more than he loves America or loves the United States most of all. If he loves some other country, my advice would be to go to that country and offer his or her help. If he hates Germany more, I cannot advise him, but if he loves this great land most, let him today, while there is still time, be a citizen worthy of the name and do something to keep us out of ruinous war, even if it is only a penny postal card of protest to his congressmen and senators. Or perhaps you may follow me, and join this committee so appropriately named: AMERICA FIRST.

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