Truth, Justice, and the American Way

Lawrence Watt-Evans

“Damn!” said the Secretary of State.

His aide looked up, startled by the outburst. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“It’s this man Rosenman,” the Secretary said, flinging down the telegram. “The Japanese say they won’t recognize him as our ambassador.”

The aide blinked at him in astonishment. “Can they do that?”

“Well, why the hell not?” his superior said, swiveling his chair about so he could glare out the window more easily. The cherry trees were in full bloom on the Mall, but he couldn’t see them from this particular window, which added to his frustration. “What are we going to do about it, go to war again? We did that already, nineteen years ago, and it doesn’t seem to have done us much good, does it?”

“Maybe we should have done it more thoroughly the first time,” the aide suggested. “I mean, if they keep making trouble like this, we may wind up fighting them again eventually.”

“Oh, we might someday,” the Secretary agreed. “But not today. And not over this Jew, Rosenman. No one’s crazy enough to go to war over the Jews.”

“Why should the Japanese even care?” the aide asked. “I mean, Japan isn’t a Christian nation.”

“Oh, they’ve been listening to the damn Germans again,” the Secretary growled. “Or the British, going on about Zionism as a threat to world peace. World peace, ha! It’s a threat to their damn Empire, that’s what it’s a threat to. They just want to make sure there’s nobody in Palestine who knows how to point a gun.”

He lapsed into moody silence. The aide picked up the telegram; it was signed by Under-Secretary Sumner Welles, and dated April 4th, 1953.

“Damn!” the Secretary said again, under his breath.

\* \* \*

“It’s all Stimson’s fault,” the Secretary told the President. “If he hadn’t gone so easy on the Japanese back in ’37 they wouldn’t dare do this. They took it as a sign of weakness.”

The President sighed. “I suppose you think he should have gone ahead with the invasion of the Home Islands, and dragged the war out another year or two, and lost another million men? Fine shape we’d be in now if he’d done that. Look, you know as well as I do that Henry Stimson only started the war in ’34 to get the country out of the Depression, since Hoover’s programs weren’t doing the job. He wasn’t looking to stamp the Japanese into the ground.”

The Secretary leaned back in his chair. “And I suppose that it didn’t matter that the Japs were killing our people in China, and walked out of the peace conference and repudiated the naval treaties?”

“Not much,” the President replied. “If they really were.”

“Oh, they were, sir—no doubt about it.”

“Well, I don’t think anybody here at home really cared—or at least they wouldn’t have if Stimson hadn’t stirred them up. Old Bert Hoover didn’t think any of that was enough to start a war, did he?”

“No, sir, but Herbert Hoover was a Quaker pacifist. He wouldn’t have started a war until the Japs were bombing Hawaii. If then.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing that Stimson and the Congress hated him enough by then to declare war anyway, isn’t it?”

The Secretary shifted uneasily in his chair. “I don’t think Stimson hated Hoover. He was just trying to distract everyone.”

“Or get himself elected president in ’36,” the President suggested sourly.

“How could he know Egg Curtis was going to drop dead a month before the primaries started and leave Hoover without a veep?”

The President almost sneered. “You think anyone would have voted for Curtis?” he asked. “You may know foreign affairs, but you don’t know shit about getting elected—and I do, Mr. Secretary, I do. I may not know what’s happening in every third-rate country in the Balkans or wherever the hell you’ve been sending people, but I know the American people. Roosevelt would have won easily against Curtis. Hell, Hoover only beat Roosevelt by two electoral votes in ’32 as it was, even with Al Smith’s third party messing up the Democrats, and Stimson didn’t exactly get a landslide in ’36.”

“Nobody wants to change parties in the middle of a war, though,” the Secretary ventured.

“Ha!” the President replied.

The Secretary thought he saw a long lecture on domestic politics approaching, and he spoke quickly to head it off. “We’re getting off the subject, sir,” he said. “About this man Rosenman. The Japanese won’t take him as our ambassador. So do we just apologize to him and tell him to go home?”

“No, damn it, we don’t. He’s earned a post somewhere—the man’s brilliant, and he’s been a good party man for years. He worked on all three of Roosevelt’s campaigns, as well as both of mine, and damn it, we owe him a post.” The President sat back in his chair, thinking. Then he leaned forward and said, “Look, you find him a place. It’s your baby—do it.”

“Yes, sir,” the Secretary said, unhappily.

\* \* \*

His wife gave a puzzled little frown. “I don’t understand,” she said. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is,” the Secretary said, “that there’s nowhere to send him.”

“Oh, that’s silly. There must be. Where are there vacancies?”

“Nowhere,” the Secretary said, slumping into the chair by the radio. “We’ll have to recall someone if we want to make Rosenman a full ambassador. Or more likely we’ll just send him along as plenipotentiary somewhere, and let him make up the job to suit himself. I don’t want to recall anyone, though.”

“Well, then, just make him a what-do-you-call-it.”

“Okay, fine, maybe that’ll do—but where do we send him?”

“I don’t know,” his wife said, throwing up her hands. “You’re the Secretary of State.”

The Secretary grimaced. “Well,” he said, “I don’t know, either. That’s the problem.”

“Well,” his wife suggested, “his people came from Germany, didn’t they? Can’t you send him to Germany?”

“Oh, God, no! Of course not!”

His wife glared. “Why not?” she demanded. “They shot that idiot Hitler back in ’38, and those generals are still running things?”

“Yes, of course they did—but the Nazis are still the biggest single party, and the generals don’t want any trouble with them. Besides, the Nuremberg Laws are still on the books. I wouldn’t dare send a Jew to Germany under any circumstances—not even for a day, let alone a regular posting.”

His wife considered. “Pardon a stupid question,” she said, “but if the Nazis are still the biggest party in Germany, then what on Earth did the Germans shoot Hitler for?”

“For invading Czecho-Slovakia,” the Secretary explained. “Nobody in Germany except that one lunatic wanted a war—once Chamberlain and Daladier stood up to Hitler’s threats the generals knew the Czechs and the French and the British would beat the pants off ’em, even assuming the Soviets didn’t get into it. I think France and Britain were almost looking for an excuse to fight—we’d made ’em look bad by whipping Japan and getting China back on its feet while they all just stood on the sidelines watching, and they’d probably have loved a chance to whip Germany.” He paused. “But we might have had a second World War if they hadn’t. Even so, the Nazis are still popular—while they were in power they got the economy going, pulled off the Anschluss with Austria, all the rest of it. The generals don’t want any trouble with them. The Nazi leader’s Hermann Goering now—a lot brighter than Hitler ever was, even if he’s not half the orator.”

“And they still don’t like Jews?”

“Anti-Semitism is basic to their whole philosophy.”

“And the Czechs and the French didn’t do anything about it in ’38?”

“No. Why should they?” asked the Secretary. “Roosevelt tried to make something of that in the 1940 campaign, actually—said it was our duty to fight the spread of Fascism, or some such thing—but nobody paid much attention. Didn’t help him any at the polls, either. We’d had our war with Japan, and that was enough; nobody was about to go to war over the Jews!”

His wife thought for a moment, her fingers busy with her crocheting, then asked, “I suppose the other Fascist countries are all out, too?”

The Secretary hesitated.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think any of the rest are as bad as Germany, but in general, yeah. Which eliminates Italy and Spain and Hungary and Rumania and Portugal in Europe, and Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil in South America.”

She nodded. “And I guess I know why you don’t want to send him to Russia or Poland or Lithuania or Latvia.”

“It’s not so much that he’d be in trouble himself, really,” said the Secretary, “but we don’t want him making a fuss, protesting the pogroms. Wouldn’t do any good, and it would just stir up a lot of ill feeling.”

“If the Communists had stayed in power in Russia maybe things would be better—weren’t a lot of them Jewish?”

“I don’t really know,” the Secretary admitted. “Hitler used to talk a lot about the Jewish-Communist conspiracy, but I don’t know if there was anything in it. Doesn’t seem like anybody knows much of anything about what Communism was really about, not since they kicked Stalin out. No one but the Russians ever tried it—though there were rumors that Roosevelt was a Communist. Maybe we’d have found out if he’d gotten elected.”

“Maybe that’s why he was so anti-Fascist, if there really was some connection between Communists and Jews, and he was a Communist.”

“Maybe—but he sure wasn’t Jewish.”

His wife nodded, and asked, “What about Estonia, or somewhere in Scandinavia? Nobody seems to mind Jews much there.”

“They might do,” her husband admitted. “But the idea is to reward Rosenman, not freeze his ass off.”

“Scandinavia’s supposed to be very pleasant...” she began.

“I don’t think so,” he said, cutting her off. “But maybe, if we can’t find anything else.”

“What about England, then? They even speak the same language.”

“Well, sort of, they do,” the Secretary admitted. “But they’ve got the whole anti-Zionist thing. They’re obsessive about Jewish plots against their empire in the Near East.”

“But Rosenman’s not a Zionist, is he?”

The Secretary shrugged. “Not that I know of,” he said, “But I don’t think it matters. He’s definitely a Jew.”

“Maybe France?”

The Secretary sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “It might be all right. But they’re still talking about the Dreyfus affair, after all this time.” He hesitated. “I wonder if we really need to send him overseas at all, though? Maybe we can find him something in another department.” He sighed. “At least it would be out of my hands, then!”

\* \* \*

“Sir,” he asked, “couldn’t you find him something here in the States? It’d be a lot easier.”

The President swiveled his chair around to stare at the Secretary.

“Come on,” he said at last, his voice cold, “You know better than that!”

“I didn’t mean here in the White House, sir!” the Secretary said hurriedly. “I was thinking of a job with Interior, maybe, out west somewhere...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the President snapped. “A Jew out west?”

“I guess not,” the Secretary admitted.

“If there were some way to keep him in New York, I suppose that would be workable,” the President said. “But I don’t have anything for him to do there. And for that matter, I’m not sure I want him where he’s got so many of his own kind around to stir up.”

“No, sir,” the Secretary agreed, “I suppose not.”

“And I sure don’t want him here in Washington, where he might take it into his mind to come around every so often.”

“Would it really be...”

“It would be a bad precedent, is what it would be,” the President interrupted. “Rosenman’s all right; I’ve talked to him now and then—but I don’t want any of his people getting the idea they belong here.”

“Yes, sir.”

For a moment, both men were silent. Then the president spoke. “You can’t find him anything?”

“Not very easily, sir.”

“Well, neither can I,” the President said. “Why do you think I waited this long before trying to post him to Japan? You need to pay more attention to domestic affairs, instead of spending all your time worrying about Europe and Asia. I did try to find him something stateside.” He sighed. “I do have one possibility, but I don’t like it. We could post him to the Philippines, on the governor’s staff.”

“That sounds fine, sir,” the Secretary said, puzzled. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Oh, nothing really—it’s just that the governor there’s a good man, and I hate to do this to him. But I guess the rest of the world’s got plenty of Jews without taking any of ours.”

“Sure,” the Secretary said. “And with all this fuss down South the last year or two, you can tell the governor to look on the bright side—at least we aren’t sending him a nigger.”