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Quietly across the country the veterans of World War II are getting organized. Nobody is paying much outright attention to them, but industrialists, labor leaders, politicians are watching out of the corners of their eyes. After all, twelve million men—

BY WALTER DAVENPORT

Student Veterans, led by Elmo Keel (in light suit), is one of scores of many groups now setting up plans for organization

12,000,000 in search of a LEADER

NO ONE in Washington seemed to be paying much attention to them. No one, that is, except a few apprehensive congressmen who, after consulting together, solemnly agreed that this roomful of sixty-nine honorably discharged veterans of World War II was one of several "clouds no bigger than a man's hand" rising above the horizon. Congressmen always talk like that.

But no one else cared, unless it was the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Disabled American Veterans—all voices of World War I. These wise old organizations who yesterday had but to snap their fingers to fetch one half of Congress to heel and cause the other half to wag tails watched with professional solicitude, silently speculating on their own future as political powers.

That's about all the attention this bewildered little group, groping through the unfamiliar intricacies of organization in a Washington hotel room, were getting—all that you could see, anyway. But observing from afar, from the corners of their eyes, were the American Federation of Labor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the White House itself—all saying nothing, suggesting nothing, merely looking for portents of the future.

On the surface, it seemed a little absurd that long-established power should be regarding these new veterans with anything more than a kindly indulgence; as an isolated group, they didn't, after all, signify anything worth a second thought. It was only when you remembered that they were possibly typical of twelve million men still in uniform that they assumed importance. And it wasn't until one of the kids (how silly the term "veteran" sounds) got mad, that the old-timers present began to take the raucous little gathering seriously.

His voice was almost a scream as he

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bawled his reply to a conservative youth who had timorously suggested that they should go slow, should consider what the future might think.

"Future? Future?" the aroused lad yelled. "Hell, *we're* the future!" As suddenly as he blurted this out, silencing the shy one, his words became the meeting's theme. The visitors from Capitol Hill, themselves veterans of World War I, looked swiftly, knowingly at one another, nodding their heads. These lads, as a group, might be going nowhere in particular, might never get themselves organized. Nevertheless, what the kid tail gunner had blurted out was probably in the minds of twelve million soldiers, sailors and Marines who were still fighting this war. And as far as anyone knew, there was more than a mere suspicion to the same effect in the minds of their brothers in British, Russian, Chinese and French uniforms, too.

Sure, they were the future. They were inheriting. Tomorrow it would be their job to make something workable out of wreckage. As the old-timers present thought of that, these kids grew in stature. And about all the older minds could manage to produce were a few trite comments: "What a spot for a Huey Long," and "It was nothing like this in 1919."

Somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred such groups were meeting in thirty states, some already organized and working smoothly, some just milling around, groping for entity; and more were cropping up daily. The Army and Navy and Marine Corps were honorably discharging men at a rate of thirty to forty thousand a month. Perhaps the attitude of these men toward their elders, toward their lawmakers, their rulers—resentment, suspicion—was temporary and would vanish as they eased themselves back into the old routine, as the pain of their wounds subsided. And maybe not. We may set down only what that attitude is now: a growing conviction that their fathers didn't know how to run a country.

One of the congressmen leaned over our shoulder and whispered, "Twelve million of these guys! Twelve million former servicemen can be wrong. But who the hell's going to stop them from being?"

These lads called themselves the American Veterans of World War II. They claimed to have a potential membership of 51,000. They said they'd actually have that many if only they could organize themselves, produce a leader, find the money. At the moment, they were passing the hat for small funds for postage stamps, for the few dollars a charter would cost. With the stamps, they'd reply to the stack of letters they had received from similar groups from New York to California. We looked through the letters hastily. They were all very much the same—clamoring for leadership, vaguely distrustful of old-established veterans' organizations, eager for a voice to obey.

All Groping for Organization

There were letters from the Student Veterans of World War II, Veterans Incorporated of Los Angeles, World Liberators of New Orleans, American Fighters of Kansas City, Federal Advocates of Chicago, American Guardsmen of Denver, Veterans Club of Cleveland, Veterans Club of Columbia University, and of the University of Michigan and the University of Southern California. That gives you an idea.

Sure, their members were individually joining the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. But if these letters advanced any one common idea, it was this: That the writers wanted their own national organization, as veterans of all our wars have had their own. They regarded the World War I organizations as stale, rigid, bartering. They thought that twenty-five years had dulled their edges, substituted the cynicism of the tired and conservative for the aggressive liberalism of youth.

This came especially from the student groups—the lads who were back in the classrooms from which the Army and Navy had

drafted them, who were being rehabilitated on college campuses under the G.I. Bill of Rights (which is already under attack and which is pretty sure to be amended and broadened by Congress) and under the rulings of the United States Veterans Bureau, which presently is going to be the official godfather of more than seventeen million veterans of this and past wars. At least twelve million names on the bureau's rolls will come out of this war. If you're poking around for something to think about, try that.

As these groups form, they come in for something more than casual inspection by the F.B.I. We are assured that this does not indicate governmental nervousness. Rather, we learned, it was to protect the new veterans from rackets. After World War I, when there was no F.B.I. to shoo off the rowdydow outfits, more than two hundred associations, clubs, guilds and whatnots broke out with drives for veteran membership.

No Better than Booby Traps

The War Department's files contain the names of 176 of which about 150 were either proved phony, or were so far on the grab-and-run side that they were no better than booby traps. A few were frankly Communistic. But only a handful of these two hundred-odd organizations survived. A number of them fetched up in the courts, sued by disillusioned members, and several racketeers running such bingos went to jail.

Not that a few won't appear—or reappear—now. At this borning meeting of the American Veterans of World War II, two of the lads told us that they had had offers of financial assistance from a politically radical group and from a powerful conservative organization—both of which were rejected. The kids added that the F.B.I. seemed particularly interested in these. For what it's worth without proof, they told us, too, that several of the World War II clubs already formed were at least Pink, if not Red. However, we shall have to wait for dependable evidence of all that.

Both the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars are sending missionaries into the field. The Legion is the more active, its scope being wider. The V.F.W. accepts only men who have served overseas, just as the smallest of the three old agencies, the Disabled American Veterans (membership about 35,000) is limited to men with service-incurred disabilities.

The Legion with its $100,000,000 worth of property, its fifty-eight departments and 13,000 posts, its scores of welfare, rehabilitation, Americanization and auxiliary activities, has given membership to about 350,000 veterans of World War II. Many of these were brought in by Legionnaire fathers. Some were members of Sons of the American Legion, one of the organization's auxiliaries.

When we got into this war, the Legion had a membership of 1,300,000. It expects that the new veteran members will presently far outnumber the old. Like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Legion concedes that its control will be taken over in due time by the kids. Its officers go further than that. They predict that out of the 12,000,000 will rise leaders who will sit in Congress and doubtless control that body; that to a degree never dreamed of by the old veterans, the new veterans will become governors, mayors and legislators, that they will write and adopt national legislation, that presently they will elect a President, that they will control the political destinies of the United States for many years to come.

The Legion, a conservative body, sees in all this a tremendous task for its current setup. It is convinced that it is up to the Legion to steer the youngsters away from both Fascist and Communist influences, to keep ever before the young eyes old-fashioned Americanism.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, making no pretense to the wealth and activities of the Legion, claims to have already increased its prewar membership of 230,000 by the addition of 400,000 veterans of World War II. Thousands of the new veterans have joined both old organizations.

Neither the Legion nor the V.F.W. believes that its current drives for young membership will discourage the formation of a World War II organization. Both of them profess to believe that there should be one. But in the meantime they are working hard to maintain their own influence socially and politically. Between them they wrote the G.I. Bill of Rights, which is the foundation on which future legislation for veterans will be built. Legislation for World War I veterans fills an oversize book of almost eight hundred pages, and none of these concessions to old servicemen are in danger of being written off by anything short of the death of these veterans.

Strong Belief in Their Right

Nor is there any sign that today's servicemen have lost any of their determination to have their own organization. The youngsters believe that their own association will come into being much as the Legion had its birth in Paris in February, 1919. Led by the late Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, then a lieutenant colonel, twenty National Guard and Reserve officers founded it at a dinner at the Allied Officers' Club. It lost no time in overshadowing the already existing Veterans of Foreign Wars, just as, by sheer numbers and political activity, it made the nation forget that there were such outfits as the Spanish-American War Veterans.

The new veterans are not yet coherently thinking or talking politics. They still have founding troubles to keep them busy. No Theodore Roosevelt has appeared to be their rallying point. Some are talking of Commander Harold E. Stassen, who left the governorship of Minnesota to join the Navy. This may be news to Stassen. He is a

Republican liberal and an internationalist.

We were told that in the West there was some talk, too, of Colonel Phil La Follette, who once was governor of Wisconsin and is now on General MacArthur's staff. This may be news to Colonel La Follette, too. He was a leader of Wisconsin's Progressive Party, now all but defunct. Unless the war has changed his mind—as it has so many others—he is a nationalist. But someone of the caliber of these two men—someone now in uniform—has yet to appear to be the Ted Roosevelt of the new veterans. There is plenty of time. The war is far from finished.

However, that's all background stuff. In this meeting of sixty-nine men who called themselves the American Veterans of World War II—leaderless, all but aimless—there were just about sixty-nine conflicting ideas. A young giant whose reconstructed face refused woodenly to show the emotion within him said that he had joined the Global Veterans, a New York outfit. He didn't seem to know much about the Global Veterans, but he had sent them three dollars because the name had reflected his ideals. He told what his theories were: National organizations were apt to be only that—national. Nationalism, he said, led to war. Hitler and Mussolini preached the kind of nationalism he meant. If there were to be no more wars, the veterans of this one would have to see to that. He wasn't very clear about it, but it was not too hard to read his thoughts. Peace negotiated by diplomats, by politicians, by financiers, by industrialists, was sure to be nationalistic, selfish, vengeful, hate-breeding and war-planting. He was for a league of world or global veterans—common men who did war's dirty work, who would dictate a common people's peace.

A tall, thin sailor who looked as though he had not yet got out of his blood the chill of the cold waters of the mid-Pacific on which he'd been adrift for seven nights and days announced that he belonged to the American Veterans Committee, another New York organization which was asking veterans of World War II to be Americans first and veterans second. He got attention for longer than his predecessors because he had mentioned a group which had organized itself, which was growing slowly and without hysteria. A few jeered the committee, called it a group of intellectuals for intellectuals, starry-eyed, snobbish.

The tall, thin sailor didn't seem to mind, bothering neither to deny, defend nor protest. The American Veterans Committee offered him something that he could hold with. He was asking this meeting of the American Veterans of World War II what they stood for, what they had to offer to many thousands of men to whom the world tomorrow meant "something more than bonuses, pensions, government grants and privileges."

From his pocket he drew a copy of the Bulletin of the American Veterans Committee. He was warmly in favor of its sentiments and of its editor, who is also chairman of the committee, Charles G. Bolte. Mr. Bolte, twenty-five years old, enlisted in the British army soon after leaving Dartmouth College in June, 1941. He lost a leg at El Alamein, was returned to his native America, worked for a while for the OWI.

New Veterans Seek Broader Ideals

His committee was formed in January, 1943, because, he says, none of the existing veterans' organizations offered ideals broad enough to satisfy him and his co-founders. There are more than two thousand members. There is no initiation fee, no dues, and there may be no assessments. He who signs up pays four dollars a year for The Bulletin, issued every two weeks.

Mr. Bolte says that members of the A.V.C. are committed to only two propositions: The statement of the committee's intentions and "a free conference after demobilization, when the Planning Committee will pass out of existence, and the association will be in the hands of all the members."

This Statement of Intentions reads thus: "We look forward to becoming civilians, making a decent living, raising a family and living in freedom from the threat of another war. That is what most Americans wanted from the last war. They found that military victory does not automatically bring peace, jobs or freedom. . . . Therefore, we are associating ourselves with American men and women regardless of race, creed or color, who are serving with or have been honorably discharged from our Armed Forces, Merchant Marine, or our Allied forces. . . . Our aims will include: Aid for every veteran and his family during demobilization; a job for every veteran, with private enterprise and government working together to provide full employment; thorough social security; free speech, press, worship, assembly and ballot; disarmament of Germany and Japan and the elimination of the power of their militarist classes; continuance of the United Nations as partners, acting together to stop any threat to peace."

And to this Mr. Bolte adds that it will be the intention of the A.V.C. to further its program by "political and social action within the community, state and nation as well as on the international level through an international veterans' council. . . ." His committee has no enthusiasm for the Legion, particularly, he says, for its labor policies.

Dissenters Speak Their Pieces

All of which was moonlight and roses to a couple of youngsters who lost no time in saying so, making themselves heard by sheer aggressiveness. One had had his legs crushed while in training in Louisiana. The other had been stitched across the shoulders by a machine gun in Italy. They were both realists from the big city, both were isolationists and, neither holding nor seeking political office, said so boldly. Both were for anything that would prevent another war, although they were sure that another was bound to come. But the Italy veteran said that he was against entering into international combinations even if it were done in the name of peace preservation because "it will cost us more to keep them quiet than to let them fight."

What he wanted to know was: "What are we veterans going to get for fighting and getting shot up? What is this outfit going to demand of the country—jobs, dough, or what?"

And his pal said, "Yeah, what are we here for—to kid ourselves?"

To what extent all this new veteran activity reflects the opinions, the theories, the political and social aspirations of the twelve million, nobody can possibly know now. But if you want any further evidence that the new veterans will come forth with an organization of their own, accept the fact that more than a dozen groups of American servicemen have formed after a fashion in various foreign parts. They have got together on the northern tundra, in the Pacific jungle, in London, in Rome, in India. They talk of organizing as veterans of this and that campaign, veterans of this and that service arm. They write idealistic and usually ponderous declarations of principles. Some declare that they will include the women—the Waves, Wacs, Spars, the girl Marines.

At least one—as yet unidentified by name—has made itself heard from the Pacific. This group, through its appointed spokesman, Lieutenant (jg) William F. Quinn of the staff of Fleet Air Wing One, has adopted a lengthy and solemn platform. It professes itself to be "dissatisfied with existing veterans' organizations, anxious to unite to further the peacetime purposes of this war." It has offered its own views to a number of infant organizations at home (such as Mr. Bolte's), hoping "to stimulate discussion and promote a permanent association of all new veterans."

The platform contains six "fundamental tenets." Boiled down, they are: That the United States shall maintain armed forces powerful enough to compel peaceful arbitration of disputes between nations; that we retain alliances formed in this war "with world powers whose foreign policies are not antagonistic to those she (the United States) has formulated"; that the United States favor a world organization for arbitration; freedom of enterprise; that we shall "avert class consciousness by giving full aid and co-operation to capital, labor, agriculture and other similar groups"; to extend the Bill of Rights to all minority groups dwelling within the borders of the United States.

Lieutenant Quinn says that the six tenets have had wide acceptance by our Armed Forces in the Pacific and are their answer to their eternal question: "What are we fighting for?" He wants it noted, too, that "there is no mention of bonuses, pensions and other fuels of the gravy train." Veterans already back in civilian life regard these final words of Lieutenant Quinn with a touch of skepticism. They ask him to observe that the preamble to the constitution of the Legion, written just after the close of World War I, was scarcely less idealistic than his six tenets: "For God and Country, we associate ourselves together . . . to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one hundred per cent Americanism; . . . to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation; to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy. . . ."

Of course, there was no direct mention of global co-operation to preserve peace. The Legion's constitution was adopted in November, 1919. The Senate had rejected the League of Nations in June of that year. In 1920, by an overwhelming majority, the United States was to repudiate Wilson and internationalism, and retreat to isolationism. This time, the young veterans say, it will be different. Perhaps it would be just as well to wait until the whole twelve million are heard after Japan has been licked—say in 1947.

"We have no thought," said Lieutenant Quinn, "of a new organization immediately. But we want to make our ideas known. We want to challenge the existing veterans' groups to take a farsighted view of our post-war affairs."

Entertained at the White House

At least two young veterans active in organizing the men and women of World War II have been entertained at dinner by Mrs. Roosevelt at the White House—Mr. Bolte and Mr. Elmo Keel. They were invited by Mrs. Roosevelt with her assurance that she was very interested in their future welfare as well as that of all the twelve million. Neither of these guests has her permission to quote her directly, but most of the talking was done by them—setting forth their ideas which, incidentally, are not far apart.

Mr. Keel, a master sergeant in the Army Air Forces in Burma and China, is now a G.I. student (electrical engineering) in George Washington University at Washington, D. C., where he helped organize the Student Veterans of World War II. He is now its president and is temporary chairman of the American Veterans of World War II, which we saw in the throes of organizing. In December, 1942, Mr. Keel was badly wounded by shrapnel in the head and chest.

The aims of the Student Veterans of World War II are somewhat narrower than those of the American Veterans Committee and less comprehensive than those of the Pacific group. The students, according to the preamble of their constitution, aim "to secure mutual benefits, to aid and supplement one another through co-operation, to guide and assist returning veterans in their problems of readjustment."

If he achieves national organization, he adds, however, his outfit's objectives will not suffer in liberalism in comparison with those of Mr. Bolte's and Lieutenant Quinn's groups.

In the meantime, industrialists, labor leaders and politicians are watching with solicitude, plus a touch of anxiety. The question of who shall guide the twelve million, of what voices shall rally them, of what counsel will prevail among them when they meet to become the country's most powerful political influence, has promoted a number of solemn gatherings in the Army's vast Pentagon Building and elsewhere. They have been unofficial meetings, but important Army and Navy executives have attended. The voices of labor and of management have been heard. The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have lent their ears. No minutes were kept, no policies arrived at, no suggestions offered to any of the early leaders of the prospective organization of new veterans. All very casual.

Labor Eyes Problem Quizzically

But the C.I.O. and the A. F. of L., for example, while eager to sign up new membership from the ranks of the many thousands of soldiers and sailors who have been made into expert craftsmen by modern mechanized warfare, are just a trifle puzzled by what they will do with them and for them. Great numbers of these service-made craftsmen were, before the war, mere handymen or completely ignorant of mechanics.

From many camps and war theaters comes the assurance that few of these new machinists, electricians, radio technicians and such have any will to return to their former unskilled and poorly paid occupations. If they are all to have skilled jobs in industry after the war, industry will have to swell its pay rolls considerably. And this is not taking into account the thousands of civilians whom the war has also converted into skilled mechanics and technicians, and who will not return to the farms and store counters if they can help it.

Industrialists and other businessmen are taking an even broader view. Without assuming to know what *will* happen, they are quietly concerned with what *may* happen if by chance there should be considerable unemployment. At the head of all the declarations of principles thus far adopted by the early spokesmen of the twelve million is the demand for jobs. Very few employers are neglecting to speculate on what could happen to the country's commercial and industrial pattern if there should be considerable unemployment, and some first-class demagogue should rear himself into the leadership of a vast army of disillusioned men.

It's all very interesting, isn't it?

Official Washington is either too occupied with more immediate problems or prefers to do no speculating at all on all this. The few officials and politicians who will discuss it insist that their opinions be "off the record." They recognize, however, the danger of a demagogue-led mass of unemployed. They know, too, that the new veterans, well organized and capably led, would be able to take matters political into their own hands.

Judge Edward N. Scheiberling, newly elected National Commander of the American Legion, has this to say about it:

"It is clear that those returning from the Armed Forces will dominate political trends in the nation for many years to come. It is almost certain that they will elect a President in the not too distant future.

"They will be called upon to give their individual support to new economic, social and political movements, some of which will be good, others bad. Upon the direction in which they move, especially if there should be severe depression at any time, may hinge the continued existence of America.

"It is imperative, therefore, that they choose able leadership which is both responsible and clear-sighted. Their problems will be complex and difficult."

THE END