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The Hull Program

Tariff debates invariably provide a field play for the extremists. With the Hull program of reciprocal trade agreements coming up again for renewal (unless specifically extended by Congress it would expire June 12) the exaggerations of earlier occasions are being dusted off and dutifully repeated by both sides to the controversy. There is the same old nonsense about the Smoot-Hawley tariff's responsibility for the breakdown of world exchange in the Thirties (which is a little more absurd, if anything, this time when some advocates of the Bretton Woods program are currently blaming the gold standard for that disaster) and the same fantastic claims for the achievements under the reciprocal agreements. On the other side, there are the inevitable warnings of general bankruptcy and unemployment if we "put foreign trade above domestic" and "open the floodgates to the products of cheap foreign labor."

It is not necessary to prove that the Hull program has revolutionized, or will revolutionize, the country's foreign trade in order to make a case for it. What is important is that it represents a philosophy which looks in the direction of reducing trade barriers and provides a mechanism for implementing that philosophy. Since it was set up in 1934 the United States government has entered into agreements with nearly thirty nations and has arranged for reciprocal downward tariff revisions regarded as mutually advantageous. As Mr. Hull pointed out in his letter of last week to Chairman Robert L. Doughton of the House Ways and Means Committee, neither the original act nor this bill contemplates indiscriminate slashing of tariffs. Provision is made for full consultation before action and for public hearings at which any citizen may interpose objections.

There is, of course, the objection that this program calls for the delegation of legislative authority by Congress. The answer to this is that the record of Congress in the tariff field has been all too frequently both unsound and unedifying. On the other hand, Congress has one legitimate complaint. Many members, when they vote for the Hull program, are voting against the wishes of important constituents, and hence are making a substantial political sacrifice in the name of world co-operation. Yet they can point to the fact that the Administration itself, as a matter of political expediency, has repeatedly ignored the spirit of the Hull program by subsidies, currency manipulation and other forms of economic warfare.

Two wrongs, however, never made a right,

and it would be incredibly unfortunate if, at this juncture in the world's affairs, Congress should repudiate the most constructive measure of the Roosevelt administration in the field of world economic co-operation. But both Congress and the nation have a right to demand that the Administration make something more than a symbol of this program—that it be made the pattern for a genuinely comprehensive and consistent post-war commercial policy.