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XVII. The British Fleet

Exchange of Notes Between the Secretary of State and the British Ambassador

(Dept. of State Bulletin, Vol. III: No. 63, September 7, 1940)

On August 29, 1940, the Secretary of State, the Honorable Cordell Hull, sent the following communication to the British Ambassador, the Right Honorable the Marquess of Lothian:

"The Prime Minister of Great Britain is reported to have stated on June 4, 1940, to Parliament in effect that if during the course of the present war in which Great Britain and the British Commonwealth are engaged the waters surrounding the British Isles should become untenable for British ships of war, the British Fleet would in no event be surrendered or sunk but would be sent overseas for the defense of other parts of the Empire.

"The Government of the United States would respectfully inquire whether the foregoing statement represents the settled policy of the British Government.

C. H.

"DEPARTMENT OF STATE,

"Washington, August 29, 1940."

The British Ambassador replied on September 2, 1940, as follows:

"In his *Aide-Memoire* of August 29th, 1940, the Secretary of State enquired whether the Prime Minister's statement in Parliament on June 4th, 1940, regarding the intention of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom never to surrender or sink the British Fleet in the event of the waters surrounding the British Isles becoming untenable for His Majesty's Ships 'represents the settled policy of His Majesty's Government'.

“His Majesty’s Ambassador is instructed by the Prime Minister to inform Mr. Secretary Hull that this statement certainly does represent the settled policy of His Majesty’s Government. Mr. Churchill must however observe that these hypothetical contingencies seem more likely to concern the German fleet or what is left of it than the British Fleet.

L.

“BRITISH EMBASSY,

“WASHINGTON, D. C.,

“*September 2nd, 1940.*”