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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by GOTTFRIED KELLER

SWISS FOREIGN POLICY UNDER INCREASED DISCUSSION

Ever since the present Swiss Foreign Minister, Federal Councillor Pierre Aubert, has come into office, Swiss foreign policy has become widely discussed on television, in the radio and in the press. This is partly due to Mr. Aubert's dynamic personality, although foreign policy, like any other policy — military, for example, or economic — is and remains the responsibility of the whole Federal Council. Partly, however, this is also due to circumstances unconnected with any particular personality. For many years past the man in the street has had no idea that such a thing as a Swiss foreign policy existed. Switzerland was neutral and was on the whole well served by its policy of eternal neutrality and if it had not been for Mr. Aubert's predecessor, Mr. Pierre Graber, starting to travel abroad frequently, the problem of Swiss foreign policy would probably never have become a topic of general interest and discussion. But then one day the PLO — the Palestine Liberation Organisation —

uttered the wish to open an Information Centre in Geneva, a wish which after due consideration was granted by the Federal authorities. Was this a wise decision to take? Many people think that it was not, since the PLO indulges in frequent acts of terrorism and proclaims as its foremost aim the destruction of a state — Israel — with which Switzerland enjoys and cultivates friendly relations.

The Federal Council, as is well known, would like to lead Switzerland into the United Nations as a full member. But it has to tread warily, since full membership in the UN — as opposed to membership in many of its so-called special agencies — would have to be approved both by a majority of the Cantons and one of the population as a whole. But as long as people like Yassir Arafat are received there with open arms and given a hearing, it would be difficult for any member of the Swiss Government to hold up the UN to the public as a Club which it would be advantageous or desirable for Switzerland to join. To be perfectly frank: the Federal Council fears that a

negative vote on the part of the Cantons or the population would be quite possible and this, of course, would be very embarrassing for the authorities. Hence the decision to make haste slowly, but as a first step to appoint a Commission of Experts to study the problem and to report on their findings.

Several Swiss Parliamentarians have, of late, postulated increased participation in the formulation of Swiss foreign policy. "Our foreign policy", one of them has recently declared, "should have as its prime aim the conservation of the liberty and independence of the country". And he added: "We should always be conscious of the limits set to us and we should be careful not to fritter away our limited foreign political means".

The foreign policy of a democratic country like Switzerland cannot be made in an ivory tower but has to be carried, as it were, by the whole population. It is therefore a good thing that it becomes the object of increased public debate.

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