

American Isolationism, 1939-1941

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The isolationist tradition in America, as it was manifested from 1939 to 1941, was based on two fundamental doctrines: avoidance of war in Europe and unimpaired freedom of action. Isolationism differs from pacifism (a refusal to sanction any given war), and one could call for strong national defense, seek overseas territories, and demand economic spheres of influence and still be an isolationist. To be sure, isolationists and pacifists often joined forces, and the onslaught of the European war saw a renewal of this tenuous alliance. It was, however, always a marriage of convenience.

Isolationist and pacifist opponents of American entry agreed on one basic premise: participation in war would weaken the United States and indeed place her survival as a free republic in jeopardy. Conservatives saw the capitalist economic system in peril, as full-scale mobilization was bound to bring in its wake inflation, price and wage controls, compulsory unionization, and — in practicality — a wartime socialism that would remain after the conflict ended. Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh was even more apprehensive: "God knows what will happen here before we finish it [World War II] — race riots, revolution, destruction."¹

Liberal isolationists had different fears, ones that were in some ways the reverse of the conservatives'. To liberals, war would not only terminate the New Deal. It would turn the clock back to the days of Coolidge, when big business appeared triumphant. The nation would be engulfed in "armament economics," a sure sign of forthcoming fascism. Soon low wages and farm prices would commence; then strikes would be outlawed. On "M-Day," or "Mobilization Day," a centralized defense force would assume dictatorial powers, including supervising the conscription of at least a million men. After the immediate and artificial war boom ended, the grim days of 1929 would again be at hand. Civil liberties would be terminated, national censorship imposed, and the clampdown would be so severe that the antics of the Creel Committee and the intimidation of the espionage laws of 1917 and 1918 would seem mild by comparison.

Particularly haunting was the memory of World War I. An entire generation had been raised on the revisionist histories of Sidney Bradshaw Fay, Harry Elmer Barnes, and Walter Millis. And, even if one was not an intellectual, the message conveyed by Ernest Hemingway and Lawrence Stallings was quite simple: war

was neither purposeful nor glorious. It was, as one character noted in John Dos Passos's *1919* (1932), "a goddamn madhouse."² Senator William E. Borah cited harrowing battle descriptions ("Chunks of human flesh were quivering on the branches of the trees"). Congressman Daniel Reed told, in frightening fashion, of the gassed troops he saw in a British hospital during the World War.³

And if the horrors of the Great War were not enough, there was the unjust Versailles treaty. More than one isolationist drew a direct connection between the Paris Peace Conference — that "orgy in ink," as Senator Henrik Shipstead called it — and the rise of Hitler.⁴ Because the allies strangled the Weimar Republic, building what Senator D. Worth Clark called "a ring of steel" around Germany, Hitler was inevitable.⁵ The failure of the allies to pay their war debts was simply another example of their duplicity, though one that symbolized European ingratitude. More to the point was the appeasement at Munich, where Britain and France willingly destroyed Europe's only viable democracy. The dispute over Danzig had all the earmarks of a farce. Britain, so Senator William J. Bulow claimed, should have permitted the people of that city ("who were Germans and formerly belonged to the German Reich") to reunite with their mother country.⁶ A week before war broke out, Lindbergh confided to his diary, "Poland is beyond help under any circumstances. The German Army alone will close the Corridor within a few days after it attacks, and there is no other way for England and France to get to Poland."⁷

To many isolationists, Europe was always at war and would always be so. Senator Sheridan Downey began his discussion of cash-and-carry with the Battle of Hastings ("Mr. President, let us begin with 1066"), Congresswoman Frances P. Bolton charted a hundred years of European wars, and Representative Louis Ludlow remarked, "The Almighty created man with the traits of a fighting animal and there will always be wars."⁸ The 1939 war was, to use the language of Lindbergh, simply one "more of those age-old quarrels within our own family of nations."⁹ The fact was, so isolationists maintained, that the allies had no positive war aims. They only sought the defeat and partition of Germany, a Carthaginian peace bound to create more dictators and more wars of revenge. Even the Atlantic Charter, signed by Roosevelt and Churchill in July 1941, and the Four Freedoms, proclaimed by Roosevelt just a year before, were unsatisfactory. Furthermore, so Senator Hiram Johnson argued, "The four liberties for which the President so eloquently appealed . . . would have but a sorry chance of existence if we would rank our enemies from Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand."¹⁰

All such manifestoes could only be propaganda, and isolationists warned against Propaganda — with a capital P — as a physician warns against disease. Alert citizens, they claimed, must be able to detect it instantly and thereby be able to quarantine themselves against it. In his article in *Collier's*, printed in March 1941, Lindbergh stressed how the British were deliberately misleading Americans on a number of matters: Germany's air capabilities, France's chances of victory, the desperate condition of Finland, allied successes in Norway, and the potential of German submarines.¹¹ Actress Lillian Gish warned against uncritical accep-

tance of atrocity stories. "I remember," she told an audience in Chicago, "when we got back to America late in October 1917, the people asked us in all seriousness if it were true that the Germans cut off the hands and legs of old people and crucified little children."¹²

The isolationist world differed markedly from that of the Roosevelt administration. Aside from blaming Nazism first on Versailles, then on allied appeasement, the isolationists held no brief for Germany. "No one," said Senator Hiram Johnson, "could wish more ardently than I do for the defeat of Hitler."¹³ Senator Burton K. Wheeler expressed "horror" over Nazi treatment of Germany's Jews.¹⁴ Senator Robert A. Taft found himself detesting every action of the German government since Hitler assumed power.¹⁵ To former president Herbert Hoover, the sufferings of occupied Europe "cry out to the sympathy of every decent man and woman."¹⁶ Even Charles A. Lindbergh, who studiously avoided any public condemnation of Germany, claimed to be "very much opposed to what happened in the German invasion of Poland."¹⁷

Yet, with Soviet Russia lurking in the background, isolationists saw an anti-Hitler crusade as futile. Stalin's dictatorship, so some argued, was even harsher than Hitler's and the apparently ecumenical appeal of communism made it, in a long run, a far greater threat. Francis Neilson, essayist and World War I revisionist, confided to his diary that only Hitler could stop "Red Revolution from the Rhine to the Urals."¹⁸ Once the belligerents are bled white, predicted Representative Hamilton Fish, "the Communist vulture will sweep down on the bloody remains of Europe."¹⁹ Within a week after Hitler invaded Poland, Senator Taft said, "Apparently Russia proposes to sit on the side-lines and spread Communism through the nations of Europe, both the defeated and the victorious."²⁰ Major Al Williams, air columnist for the Scripps-Howard chain, found the Soviet Union "the bloodiest sponsor of mass murder in the pages of history."²¹ When Hitler invaded Russia, forcing her entry into the war, Hoover declared that intervention now would be a "gargantuan jest."²² One should not choose between evils; one should simply stay out of the fracas.

Most isolationists were sympathetic to England and hoped that Great Britain would hold off the Nazi onslaught. Hence, the great majority expressed support, even at times going so far as to boast of British ancestry. As Congressman Harold Knutson put the issue, "There are times when I become so indignant over the way . . . she violates the rights of neutral nations and her disregard for international law, that I could grab the old squirrel rifle off the wall and go on a little war of my own. However, when I think of the stabilizing influence of that mighty empire I realize that its continued existence is necessary to the preservation of democracy and representative government."²³ True, some isolationists — such as Lindbergh and Colonel Robert R. McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* — opposed any aid to Britain, arguing that such aid only encouraged her to seek an impossible victory. Far more isolationists endorsed such aid, provided that the British transported the goods themselves, paid cash for them, and did not buy munitions needed for American defense.

Yet if good business and moral encouragement were one thing, going to war on Britain's behalf was something quite different. In an effort to curb the nation's increasing sympathy for the British cause, isolationists stressed the negative qualities of that nation.

The attack took several forms. One involved criticism of her leaders. Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax were portrayed as the architects of Munich, British ambassador Lord Lothian as a confidant of Hitler. Winston Churchill perhaps received the greatest abuse of all, for the prime minister was quoted as having told William Griffin, editor of the *New York Enquirer*, in 1935 that England had defended the United States in World War I and should therefore be forgiven her war debt. Furthermore, Churchill supposedly had said that United States entry into the war prevented peace early in 1917, a peace which would have prevented the Bolshevik revolution, Italian fascism, and the rise of Hitlerism. In any future war, so Churchill supposedly predicted, "the United States will be dragged in." (Churchill denied all these statements).²⁴

Another attack centered on Britain's government and policies. Isolationists brought up the Dusseldorf agreement, an arrangement by which the Federation of British Industrialists sought to collaborate with powerful German counterparts to capture varied markets, including those of the United States.²⁵ Other isolationists stressed that Britain was no longer a democracy (if it had ever been one). It was a wartime dictatorship with centralized powers equalling those of Hitler.

Probably the greatest focus of isolationist attack was the British Empire, and hardly an area dominated by the Union Jack escaped their scrutiny. Although Palestine and Africa were occasionally brought up, India and Ireland were the areas most frequently mentioned. Senator D. Worth Clark cited Edmund Burke's indictment of Warren Hastings, governor general of India at the time of the American Revolution, then went on to claim that the British record in Ireland was ten times as savage as Germany's persecution of minorities.²⁶

As far as the rest of Europe was concerned, isolationists commented sporadically. They often treated France with contempt, portraying her as an inept and decrepit empire. They debated aid to Finland. To some, the cause of the Finns was a noble one. The only nation that had repaid its World War debt to America was facing the bloodiest tyrant of Europe. Congressman Fish, endorsing a twenty million dollar loan to Finland, declared, "If we do not make it, the Communists, 'reds,' fellow travelers, and all subversive elements will rejoice; but the decent, loyal, democratic, peace-loving American people will hang their heads in shame."²⁷ To other isolationists, however, Finland could be the foot in the door, the ploy by which the warlike Roosevelt administration could entice the United States into the European conflict. Congressman John Rankin remarked, "I am in sympathy with bleeding Finland. . . . I was in sympathy with bleeding Poland, and with bleeding Manchukuo, and I am in sympathy with bleeding China. . . . But we cannot begin to send America's money, which ultimately means sending American men into every nook and corner of the world that is threatened with war or revolution."²⁸

Finland was not the only nation subject to eulogy. Until May 1940, such

neutral powers as Belgium and the Netherlands received isolationist praise for successfully avoiding the conflict, indeed for being possible mediators. Isolationists were less appreciative of Greece and Yugoslavia, finding neither nation a genuine democracy. When they fell to Germany, they blamed presidential emissary William J. Donovan for giving Yugoslavia in particular false hopes.

Turning to the Pacific, isolationists responded to Japan in a variety of ways. They often attacked the shipping of American war supplies, claiming that Roosevelt had hypocritically refused to invoke the neutrality acts when profits were at stake. "We have," commented Congressman August H. Andresen in February 1941, "supplied Japan with enough scrap iron during the past 4 years to build 50 warships."²⁹ At the same time, they feared a direct confrontation. For the United States to commit herself to the Dutch East Indies and Singapore, so isolationists maintained, would be a backdoor to war, and European involvements could come automatically into play with Japanese attack. As Congressman Dewey Short commented, "Why enter a war in Europe exposing our west coast to a rear attack from Japan who would certainly fight us . . . ?"³⁰

In their efforts to offer alternatives to administration policy, isolationists stressed military and economic self-sufficiency. Roosevelt and his supporters, so anti-interventionists claimed, were deliberately creating hysteria in order to ripen Americans for war. They opposed a mass army, finding it of necessity too bulky and ill trained to be of help in any conflict. Indeed, unless one envisioned a new Allied Expeditionary Force to fight in France, such a unit could only be superfluous. Isolationists debated the wisdom of a large navy, with some finding large battleships ineffectual.

Far more consensus was developed over air supremacy, and several isolationists — such as Senator Ernest Lundeen — called for a separate air department. Not all isolationists would go as far as Major Williams, who wrote that "the nation that rules by air will rule the world."³¹ Most, however, would agree with two writers for the liberal non-interventionist monthly *Common Sense*. America, said Cushman Reynolds and Fleming MacLiesh, needed "an air power great enough to make the skies untenable for any person who dared to come against us."³²

Isolationists maintained that the hemisphere, properly defended, was impregnable. Hitler, said economist John T. Flynn, would "have to bring at least a million men here, and he would have to send along over a hundred thousand trucks, trailers, tanks, motorcycles, and autos of all sorts, and guns, common munitions, and food piled mountains high."³³ Isolationists also quoted Lieutenant Colonel Thomas R. Phillips, who wrote, "Imagine a convoy of 50 troopships crossing 3,000 miles of the Atlantic. The departure of such a force could not be kept secret. Our defending bombers would start attacking at a thousand miles from the coast. . . . The picture is incredible. What leader would risk thousands of men, packed in transports like sardines, under such bombing conditions?"³⁴ The totalitarian powers could no more transport several million men to the Western Hemisphere than could the United States land such numbers on the European continent.

At the same time, isolationists called for hemispheric domination. Senator

Robert Rice Reynolds led one crusade, that of permitting the British to cancel their war debts in return for United States ownership of their Caribbean possessions. Similar sentiments were voiced concerning such French territories as Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guinea. "Quit stalling — just take them," said the *New York Daily News*.³⁵ Former State Department official William R. Castle maintained that the United States might have to use force to "quell disturbances" in Central America and the Caribbean.³⁶ General Robert E. Wood claimed that "no government in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean South American countries will be tolerated unless it is friendly to the United States," and that, "if necessary, we are prepared to use force to attain that object."³⁷

The United States, according to the isolationists, did not lack strategic raw materials. "More than adequate," claimed Hanson Baldwin, military editor of the *New York Times*.³⁸ MacLiesh and Reynolds concurred, saying that the nation possessed abundant aluminum, coal, tin, rubber, nickel, manganese, oil, and cotton.³⁹

Several isolationists, in Congress and out, denied that Germany posed any economic threat. To Senator Gerald P. Nye, German victory might even improve America's trade prospects, as Great Britain, "our chief competitor," would finally be removed.⁴⁰ Senator Taft simply said, without elaboration, that he saw no reason why United States trade would be destroyed "so long as we are at peace."⁴¹ Senator Wheeler was equally terse, declaring at Dubuque on June 21, 1941, "We can do more than compete . . . We can undersell the Nazis."⁴² "After all," said General Wood, "when two nations or two continents each have things the other needs, trade eventually results regardless of the feelings each may have for the other." In "mutual commercial understandings" between the Americas and Germany, the relatively self-sufficient United States would have the natural advantage.⁴³

Yet, though the United States could survive military and economic threats, it could never invade Europe. In World War I, noted Flynn, Germany stood off "two or three million Frenchmen, a million Englishmen, a vast army on her eastern flank by Russia, and Italy on the side of the Allies." Now England was standing alone, and American forces could not make up the difference.⁴⁴ To cross the ocean and land on a fortified continent, said Lindbergh, was a "superhuman task," one that would probably lead to the loss of millions of American lives.⁴⁵

Given Hitler's continued domination of the European continent, America — isolationists argued — must seek a negotiated peace. Some isolationists suggested terms, such as Wheeler, who spoke of restoration of Germany's 1914 boundaries; the return of former German colonies; an autonomous Poland and Czechoslovakia; the restoration of an independent France, Holland, Norway, Belgium, and Denmark; the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France; protection of religious and racial minorities in all countries; internationalization of the Suez Canal; no indemnities or reparations; and arms limitation.⁴⁶

One of the more publicized efforts came from Congressman John Vorys. In

May 1941, Vorys began seeking what he called "an American peace offensive." The United States, he said, should state its peace aims, call for an immediate armistice, and offer to mediate the conflict. Such an effort would not be dictated by a single power; indeed, it would lead to a free European commonwealth. If Hitler refused equitable terms, he would lose his following among the German people. True, the German leader might not be trustworthy, but the terms could be enforced in several ways: impounding arms on both sides, joint or international control of strategic positions, and economic retaliation. In addition, the promise of food, money, and material could be used to keep the peace.⁴⁷

Most of the time, however, isolationists did not deal with wide-ranging speculation but attacked specific administration proposals. The first of these was cash-and-carry. On November 4, 1939, Roosevelt signed a bill repealing the arms embargo and permitting foreign nations to buy munitions for cash, provided that they carried the goods themselves. Isolationists offered a variety of objections. Altering neutrality law in wartime was illegal, or as Fish called it, "changing the rules after the kick-off in a football game."⁴⁸ In addition, the United States was betraying its partisanship, or as Congressman George A. Dondero commented, "If two men are fighting in the street and you are standing nearby and give one of them a knife, are you neutral?"⁴⁹ Isolationists advanced other arguments: such legislation violated international law; American vessels could still be sunk; the arms traffic, with the inevitable accompanying loans, would lead to American participation just as surely as it did in 1917.

When, in the summer of 1940, Congress passed conscription, many isolationists balked. The army and navy, they maintained, should first try voluntary enlistment. To fulfill even more broadened responsibilities, the regular army needed no more than 400,000 men. The German campaign in France did not prove conscript armies to be impressive. Rather, it showed the importance of relatively small cadres of elite troops trained in tank warfare. True, the army needed hundreds of thousands of skilled mechanics, pilots, and technicians. Conscription, however, merely would give millions a year's training in military drills, manual of arms exercises, and bayonet practice. As Senator Edwin Johnson commented, "Minutemen went out of style with the flintlock musket."⁵⁰ Little wonder some of the nations at war — Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — had not adopted conscription for military service outside their own countries.

Lend lease undoubtedly caused the greatest debate of all, for after its passage the United States was overtly committed to allied victory. Signed by Roosevelt on March 11, 1941, the law permitted the president to lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of property of the United States to nations defending themselves against aggression. It encompassed broad powers indeed, and ones that the isolationists little liked. Some isolationists found the powers both too sweeping and too warlike. As Senator Burton K. Wheeler noted, " 'Defense articles' under this bill embrace all articles from battleships to bath powders, from bombers to the billions of gold buried in old Kentucky, from cannon to Willkie buttons . . . on the sinister side they include crutches and artificial limbs and books in Braille type

and identification tags and coffins and crosses for the countless future victims of our folly.”⁵¹ Other anti-interventionists stressed that besieged Britain still possessed numerous resources. Furthermore, so claimed such isolationists as Fish, no such bill could be effective without convoys, and Roosevelt himself was frequently quoted to the effect that convoys would lead to war. Spending too was a factor, with such individuals as Congressman Frederick C. Smith claiming that lend lease would ruin the American economy.

Another major debate came with draft renewal, approved by Roosevelt on August 18 after having passed the House six days before by one vote. True, the leading isolationist body, the America First Committee did not — as an organization — oppose it, for its leadership feared accusations of disloyalty and found the issue too tangential from the wider intervention problem.⁵² Some isolationists claimed that the world situation had improved over the past year. With Russia now in the conflict, Britain had a far greater chance of survival. Isolationists again saw an AEF in the offing. Congressman Reed was particularly caustic, declaring, “If this is an army for an expedition abroad, then we should be beginning now to lay out our hospital program.”⁵³ Anti-interventionists noted that army morale was already bad enough, without breaking faith with young men who assumed that their term of service would only be one year. In any case, the isolationists argued, such massive troops were not needed.

The last major debate concerned repealing the primary features of the neutrality act of 1939. On November 17, 1941, Roosevelt signed a bill permitting American merchant ships to carry goods of any kind, including implements of war, to belligerent ports. Furthermore, it removed the prohibitions on arming American merchant ships. Again, isolationists saw an administration effort to maneuver the nation into full-scale combat, although several isolationists claimed that the United States had already long been acting as a belligerent. Armed convoys, some argued, were quite unsafe, being unable to respond to submarine attack. As Congressman Paul W. Shafer remarked, “To send our merchant seamen out into the ocean in armed vessels would be comparable to sending a 10-year-old boy out into the jungle to hunt ferocious tigers with a slingshot.”⁵⁴ Representative Dewey Short presented the issue differently: “When you put guns on a merchantman and send it into dangerous war zones, you might as well put boxing gloves on Eddie Cantor and put him in the ring with Joe Louis.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, claimed the isolationists, as British shipping was recovering, the administration proposal was not only dangerous; it was unnecessary.

Throughout all these individual debates, isolationists accused the administration of deliberately fostering hysteria. In October 1939, Senator Rush Dew Holt noted that the supposed submarine menace was merely “snapping turtles striking their heads out of the water looking for air.”⁵⁶ “It won’t be long now,” said Wheeler a year later, “before we will be spying on each other and seeing German U-boats in the Great Lakes and enemy airplanes over the Rocky Mountains.”⁵⁷ During the debate over lend lease, Fish warned that the administration soon “will be asking for submarines in the Dust Bowls.”⁵⁸ Even the more sober Robert

Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, accused Roosevelt of "conducting a war of nerves . . . against his own people."⁵⁹

The isolationists possessed various assets upon which they could draw. One was ideological. They could point to a host of statements, ranging from George Washington's Farewell Address to Roosevelt's Chautauqua speech of 1936, each warning against foreign involvements. They could draw upon majoritarian sentiment, for advocates of full-scale intervention were always in a clear minority. Their course, isolationists claimed, was the only way one could implement the will of the 83% of the populace which, even at the height of prowar sentiment, opposed direct American entry in the conflict.

Within the population, certain elements were particularly militant. If congressmen at all reflect their constituency, one can point to a substantial cadre of anti-interventionist sentiment, based in particular in the Old Northwest and Great Plains states, but extending as well to the Border states, Pacific coast, rural Northeast, and even parts of some northern cities. Then, despite defections by presidential candidate Wendell Willkie and various prominent eastern Republicans, the preponderance of Republican party sentiment remained isolationist.

Some occupational groups were centers of antiwar sentiment, and until well into 1940, one could find anti-administration sentiment disproportionately centered in students, farmers, and industrialists. Even when the Congress of Industrial Organizations veered towards Roosevelt's foreign policy, its founder and most prominent member, John L. Lewis, staunchly opposed intervention. Protestant and Roman Catholic clergymen differed among themselves on the issue, but the bulk of church periodicals and religious assemblies remained suspicious of intervention. Certain ethnic groups housed strong isolationist sentiments — in particular Germans, Irish, Italians, and blacks.

In addition, isolationists had significant vehicles with which to rally sentiment. Several giant newspaper chains remained isolationist until Pearl Harbor, including the Hearst and McCormick-Patterson syndicates. True, the Scripps-Howard chain defected during the lend lease debate, but — as later with the *Saturday Evening Post* — the conversion always appeared halfhearted. To the very eve of American entry, *Reader's Digest* welcomed isolationist articles as much as it did interventionist ones, and some of the most strident isolationist essays — such as Freda Uteley's "Must the World Destroy Itself?" — appeared there. If the network commentators and newscasters tended to be interventionist, isolationists presented their message through various radio forums and through an occasional commentator, such as Boake Carter or the far more urbane Quincy Howe. As far as individual leaders went, Lindbergh could match the charisma and magnetism of Roosevelt. Such isolationist legislators as Wheeler, Nye, and Vandenberg could never gain a congressional majority for their position, but — particularly in the case of Wheeler — they could offer articulate and impassioned arguments for their position. There was no lack of isolationist visibility.

A wider point can be made concerning Congress. If, in the House and Senate, isolationists lost every significant battle, they could find compensation in two

factors. First, they could take comfort in close votes, as witnessed in the house by the one-vote margin on draft renewal and by the ten-vote margin on repeal of the neutrality act. In the latter vote, congressmen casting isolationist votes represented about fifty percent of the voters, and inroads were made in the normally pro-administration South. Second, organized isolationist opposition undoubtedly forced the president to slow down the pace of interventionist activity, particularly on such matters as convoys and the sending of draftees outside the hemisphere.⁶⁰

As far as support among intellectuals went, the isolationists were soon in a minority, though it was not a hopeless one. They possessed in their ranks two internationally respected jurists (John Bassett Moore and Edwin M. Borchard), the dean of American historians (Charles A. Beard), the most publicized of the university presidents (Robert M. Hutchins), the nation's leading architect (Frank Lloyd Wright) — and other prominent intellectuals as well. If *Newsweek*, the *New Republic* and *Look* had defected from isolationist ranks by the end of 1940, *Common Sense* still remained. The Socialist Party adopted an isolationist platform (though one that caused the defection of many members), and its leader Norman Thomas was one of the most respected proponents of anti-interventionism.

For at least a year after the Danzig incident, the isolationists lacked the organizational bases interventionists possessed in a variety of organizations: the Non-partisan Committee for Peace through the Revision of the Neutrality Law, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, and the Fight for Freedom Committee. They had to rely upon various pacifist groups, with Frederick J. Libby's National Council for the Prevention of War having the widest appeal. There were, of course, a number of other anti-interventionist bodies, such as the pacifist Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Communist-backed American Peace Mobilization, and the pacifist-socialist Keep America Out of War Congress. In December 1940, Iowa editor Verne Marshall sought to organize the No Foreign War Committee, but the founder's volatile personality caused the group to fold up within four months. A year before, a group of college students had organized the American Independence League to blanket the campuses, but it took no stand on cash-and-carry and disbanded within the year. It was only when the America First Committee was launched in the fall of 1940 that the isolationists possessed an organization that could secure a mass base, and by the time of Pearl Harbor, the AFC had 450 units and up to 850,000 members.

Such strengths could by no means compensate for the handicaps under which the isolationists were operating. From the beginning, the isolationists were put on the defensive. Even the label "isolationist" — which, for better or worse, has remained with us — was a perjorative one, one that connoted blindness, imperviousness, and indeed moral callousness to a crumbling world. Initially, almost every party to the debates pledged to do nothing that would entice the nation in war. Yet, by late 1940, there were notable conversions to interventionism, particularly in the press, business, and labor circles.

If today some historians find Roosevelt weak and vacillating, the president

was still a most skillful maneuverer. As Wayne S. Cole notes, "He could be relied upon to choose no grounds which would give the non-interventionists a serious chance to defeat him."⁶¹ To the frustration of the isolationists, Roosevelt never presented the issue as one of "peace or war." At first he claimed that the measures he proposed were the best means of avoiding conflict. By the middle of 1941, the president was asserting that circumstances thrust upon the United States were forcing it to take such defensive measures as the "shoot on sight" order issued on September 6, 1941.

In addition to actions taken by Roosevelt with congressional majority support, he took certain initiatives on his own. Included were the destroyer-bases deal, sending American troops to Iceland, placing Greenland under temporary United States guardianship, proclaiming an unlimited national emergency, freezing Japanese assets, and pledging American armed support if Japan attacked Dutch or British colonies in the Pacific. Isolationists were able to challenge him, but to no real avail, on several occasions. They called his bluff on such things as administration duplicity in the *Greer* incident, the "secret" German map to reorganize Latin America into five vassal states, and the supposed plan to replace all religions with an International Nazi Church.⁶²

Isolationists railed against selected administration figures. When, for example, American Minister of Canada James H. R. Cromwell called upon his nation to join the allies, Representative Martin Sweeney told him to "get the hell out of this Republic."⁶³ Anti-interventionists were particularly hard on Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, two Roosevelt appointees who were always pressing him to greater militancy. Both men, claimed Wheeler, had always opposed domestic reform and their entry into the administration did not make them any the less reactionary: "The minute the Democrats take a man from Wall Street he becomes a liberal, and the minute he does not come along with us he is a reactionary. A leopard does not change his spots that quickly."⁶⁴

Such invective mattered little, however, for the administration — usually secure in its congressional majorities — dominated the terms of the debate. Much of the Republican party consistently opposed Roosevelt's proposals, even attacking its own interventionist standard-bearer Wendell Willkie. However, as late as 1941, party wheelhorses still found Willkie the most popular Republican in their ranks, and there was always enough dissent in party ranks, particularly in the East, to prevent a united front.⁶⁵

Polls consistently showed that Americans would *risk* war to aid the British and defeat Germany, and for the administration this was the important thing. Isolationists might deplore such canvassing as the Gallup poll, with Senator Lundeen claiming, "This man may have the name of 'Gallup,' but I have never heard him galloping around getting anybody's opinion about anything."⁶⁶ Many sought an advisory war referendum, but as the crusade received little general support, polls remained the fundamental indicator of public opinion.

Despite the efforts to mobilize mass sentiment, most agencies of what is now

called the media opposed the isolationists. The *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and the Luce and Cowles publishing empires were all interventionist, as were such mainstays of American liberalism as the *Nation* and *New Republic* (the latter by the summer of 1940) — both journals possessing such strength as the isolationist counterparts, *Common Sense* and the *Progressive*, could never hope to match. Almost any movie dealing with international themes, even if the setting was ostensibly the Napoleonic wars, took an interventionist position. Though many newscasters and correspondents were not interventionist, the reports of German blitzkriegs were by themselves bound to alarm Americans. Administration efforts to create “national unity” under the aegis of “defense” could therefore capitalize on fears already prevalent among many citizens.

In comparison to the America First Committee, William Allen White’s Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies was always better organized and possessed far more chapters. Its offshoot, Fight for Freedom, similarly benefited from professional leadership drawn particularly from the fields of finance and communications. And while America First had some prominent sponsors, the interventionists had many more. Anne Morrow Lindbergh saw the interventionists as “the East, the secure, the rich, the sensitive, the academic, the good”; on her side were those “not smart, not rich, not intellectual, dowdy, hard-working good people, housewives, shopkeepers, etc.”⁶⁷

Of course, the debate was vitriolic on both sides, but the isolationists in particular faced harassment. Several isolationist columnists were dropped from newspapers and magazines, including such liberals as Harry Elmer Barnes, John T. Flynn, and Oswald Garrison Villard. Isolationists, from Yale assistant football coach Gerald Rudolph Ford to actress Lillian Gish, felt economic pressure,⁶⁸ and civil liberties were occasionally violated, including the denial of speaking engagements in such places as Miami, Atlanta, Oklahoma City, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon.

Some intimidation went further, for — as Richard W. Steele notes — Roosevelt sought “to silence or discredit the critics of his administration’s foreign policy.” Steele has found incident after incident: use of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to wiretap isolationist labor leader John L. Lewis; Roosevelt’s public accusation, made on November 1, 1940, that Republican leaders were in an “unholy alliance” with both communism and Nazism; the forwarding — in the spring of 1940 — of names of opponents of the president’s defense policy to the Justice Department; an order for an FBI investigation of America First; Roosevelt aide John Franklin Carter’s investigation of Senator Wheeler. In addition, Steele writes, Roosevelt “ridiculed those reporters with the temerity to challenge his policy.” Furthermore, Roosevelt claimed that “if it [radio] proves to be a bad child, there would be a disposition to teach it some manners, correct it, and make it behave itself.” Steele concludes, “What the president battled . . . was not disloyalty but the doubt of a minority of Americans concerning the origins and purposes of the war. Instead of tackling these misgivings head on, admittedly a difficult task of education, FDR chose to discredit and dismiss them.”⁶⁹ Obvious-

ly, as Wayne S. Cole has observed, a calculated effort was made to link isolationism to Nazism.⁷⁰

With the administration acting the way it did, it is little wonder that much of what we now call the media was most unfair, using words such as "appeaser," "pro-Nazi," and "anti-Semitic" with abandon. One historian notes that administration defenders ignored the sincere motives of the isolationists; instead, they treated isolationists as "a deliberate conspiracy aimed at circumscribing the President's freedom of action."⁷¹ The accusation, immediately proven false, that Senator Lundeen was being followed by federal agents at the time of his death was just one example of this approach. It is true that Lindbergh exposed himself to charges of anti-Semitism by singling out Jews as a group and indeed warned that Jews possessed "large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our Government."⁷² Wayne S. Cole notes that the general tone of Lindbergh's remarks, made in Des Moines in September 1941, was one of sympathy and understanding towards Jews. Yet to raise any such issue at all was to court intensive attack, one that — in Cole's words — "dealt America First and the noninterventionist movement a staggering blow."⁷²

To evaluate the wisdom of the isolationist perspective is essentially an ahistorical task. There are too many intangibles. Bruce Russett argues that by the end of 1941, lend lease and convoys assured British survival. Germany, continues Russett, was hopelessly bogged down in Russia and therefore had no chance of dominating the European continent. Hitler might rave of ultimately fighting the United States, but he lacked the capacity to wage such a war successfully.⁷³ Yet Russett's thesis can be challenged. It was, for example, debatable whether, late in 1941, Britain and Russia could have survived without American help. And had either or both countries been defeated, how much would the global strategic balance have been altered? Had Hitler been able to create an intercontinental empire, could the Western Hemisphere have been able to resist?

A far more fruitful task is to evaluate isolationist tactics in light of their goals. From one standpoint, isolationists did surprisingly well, for they undoubtedly slowed down Roosevelt's drive for intervention. The nation could well have been in full-scale war much sooner had not the isolationists mobilized as they did.

From another standpoint, however, they faced far too many handicaps. As pointed out earlier in this article, isolationists were on the defensive from the outbreak of the European war, and their own position possessed ambiguities that could only weaken them. Isolationists never clarified what was essential and unessential in national defense and hence wavered on draft renewal. The call for a negotiated peace appeared at best utopian, particularly as Germany wanted a peace that would permit it to dominate Europe. Although one can find frequent, offhand comments concerning Japan, most isolationists neither realized the precariousness of American negotiations nor thought through what the nation's Pacific policy should be.

In terms of effectiveness, Lindbergh was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he was the only isolationist leader who could match the charisma of FDR, and he

bore an image of integrity that Roosevelt often could not duplicate. But on the other hand, Norman Thomas made telling points when he asked the prominent aviator to emphasize his opposition to fascist tyranny, demand the continuance of Britain and her self-governing dominions as absolutely independent nations, and clarify his position on American "cooperation" with any victor, be that victor Germany or Britain.⁷⁴ Lindbergh's refusal to return the Order of the German Eagle, when he could have returned all his foreign decorations once war broke out, needlessly exposed him to villification. In a sense, the Des Moines speech was simply the culmination of these events.

The isolationists' story, however, still has contemporary significance. Their warnings against presidential duplicity remain timely, as does their critique of messianic policy pronouncements. They continued their fight while knowing the degree to which both the administration and the establishment media were against them, thereby showing that one did not have to knuckle under to "irreversible tides." Years after Pearl Harbor, few isolationists regretted the battle, no matter how much their reputations were ruined. For them, the crusade was always one of highest patriotism — and wisdom as well.

NOTES

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4. Henrik Shipstead, *ibid.*, October 16, 1939, p. 451.
5. D. Worth Clark, *ibid.*, February 24, 1941, p. 1295.
6. William J. Bulow, *ibid.*, October 12, 1939, p. 313.
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29. August H. Andresen, *ibid.*, February 19, 1941, p. 1185.
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