

# The Myth of American Isolationism

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Draft, version 1.2\*

## Abstract

America in the 1920s and 1930s is often characterized as having been isolationist in the realm of security policy. This article offers a critique of this characterization. American diplomacy in the 1920s was subtle but ambitious and effective. American policy in the years leading up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor was in fact quite responsive to events on the European continent. Isolationists did exist, of course, but they never came close to constituting a majority. In short, American isolationism is a myth.

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\*I am grateful to Christopher Achen, Robert Axelrod, Benjamin Fordham, Paul Huth, Brad Perkins, and William Zimmerman for comments on earlier drafts.

## Introduction

A cottage industry has grown around the subject of American isolationism in the interwar period – so much so that “isolationist” has become the standard characterization of America’s foreign policy between the two World Wars.<sup>1</sup> It is often asserted that American isolationist sentiment was responsible for inaction in foreign affairs from the rejection of American membership in the League of Nations<sup>2</sup> through the turbulent 1920s and 1930s<sup>3</sup> and right up to the American failure to respond to Nazi aggression.<sup>4</sup> Only the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, we are typically told, was sufficient to rouse Americans from their insular torpor.<sup>5</sup> Such assertions, both in textbooks and in the work of some of the finest scholars, can be multiplied indefinitely.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the more useful general works on isolationism include Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth-Century Reaction* (Toronto, Ontario: Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd., 1957), Robert W. Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), and Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Here see Denna Frank Fleming, *The United States and the League of Nations, 1918-1920* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), and Harold U. Faulkner, *From Versailles to the New Deal: A Chronicle of the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover Era*, vol. 51, The Chronicles of America Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ronald E. Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism, and Europe, 1901-1950* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991). For an argument that FDR too was essentially isolationist see Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections, Volume I: 1940-1948* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>See e.g. Robert A. Divine, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), p. 24-25, and John Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II*, 9th ed (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983). Some, a minority, have even claimed that FDR knowingly exposed Pearl Harbor to attack in order to draw an isolationist public into war—see Charles Callan Tansill, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy 1933-1941* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952).

<sup>5</sup>Perhaps the most frequently cited datum used to illustrate this claim is the assertion by Michigan’s Senator Arthur Vandenberg that isolationism died at Pearl Harbor. See Arthur H. Vandenberg, ed., *The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 35-36, asserts that isolationism died once Pearl Harbor happened; Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics”, *International Security* 18 (1993), p. 72, places the isolationist-internationalist cutpoint even closer to the present, in 1945; Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, “Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders”, *World Politics* 32, no. 1 (1979) and Michael Roskin, “From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy”, *Political Science Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (1974) explicitly credit the lessons of Pearl Harbor for having vanquished

This characterization has directly informed three lines of research in the field of political science. The literature on public opinion and American foreign policy very often portrays isolationism as a belief system which, though vanquished by the second World War, found at least a partial resurgence around the time of the war in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Another literature, on cyclic trends in American foreign policy, typically portrays the interwar period as a deeply isolationist (or “introverted”) one.<sup>8</sup> Yet another literature, that having to do with grand strategy in general and American grand strategy in particular, looks to the isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s as an ideal type, though contributors differ on the question of whether it constitutes a usable past to be emulated in some ways or an aberration to be avoided.<sup>9</sup>

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American isolationism.

<sup>7</sup>On the “Wittkopf-Holsti-Rosenau model” see Ole R. Holsti, “The Three-Headed Eagle: The United States and System Change”, *International Studies Quarterly* 23 (1979), Eugene Wittkopf, “On the Foreign Policy Beliefs of the American People: A Critique and Some Evidence”, *International Studies Quarterly* 30 (1986), Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), and Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, “The Post-Cold War Foreign Policy Beliefs of American Leaders: Persistence or Abatement of Partisan Cleavages?”, in Eugene R. Wittkopf, ed., *The Future of American Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); also relevant is Shoon Kathleen Murray, *Anchors Against Change: American Opinion Leaders’ Beliefs After the Cold War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>This literature, which dates back at least to Frank L. Klingberg, “The Historical Alternation of Moods in American Foreign Policy”, *World Politics* 4, no. 2 (1952), is exemplified by Jack E. Holmes, *Ambivalent America: Cyclical Responses to World Trends* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, forthcoming), Brian M. Pollins and Randall L. Schweller, “Linking the Levels: The Long Wave and Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1790-1993”, *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (1999), Jerel A. Rosati, “Cycles in Foreign Policy Restructuring: The Politics of Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy”, in Jerel A. Rosati, Joe D. Hagan and Martin W. Sampson III, eds., *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), Jack E. Holmes, *The Mood/Interest Theory of American Foreign Policy* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), and Frank L. Klingberg, *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods: The Unfolding of America’s World Role* (New York: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>Here see e.g. Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation”, *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997) for elaborations of the former position, Elliott Abrams, *Security and Sacrifice: Isolation, Intervention, and American Foreign Policy* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1995) and Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1996) for advocacy of the latter, and for more balanced discussions, Bruce W. Jentleson, “Who, Why, What, and How: Debates Over Post-Cold War Military Intervention”, in Robert J. Lieber, ed., *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign*

There is a subtle difference in what these literatures mean by isolationism. Research on public opinion and American foreign policy and on cyclical trends in foreign policy portray isolationism as a belief system or “mood” characterized by a desire for unconditional noninvolvement in world affairs.<sup>10</sup> Discussions of American grand strategy, by contrast, focus on the extent to which the United States actually *does* involve itself in foreign affairs in general: isolationist states are those that choose not to do so.<sup>11</sup> The first is a question of preference, the second a question of action.

Regardless of the intended meaning, however, the characterization of America as isolationist in the interwar period is simply wrong. The United States in the 1920s and 1930s was not uninvolved in European politics, nor were its citizens unconditionally opposed to involvement in European security affairs. The battle over membership in the League of Nations was

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*Policy at the End of the Century* (New York: Longman, 1997), William Schneider, “The New Isolationism”, in Robert J. Lieber, ed., *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign Policy at the End of the Century* (New York: Longman, 1997), John C. Chalberg, ed., *Isolationism: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995), Robert J. Art, “A Defensible Defense: America’s Grand Strategy After the Cold War”, *International Security* 15, no. 4 (1991), Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?*, and Alvin Wolf, *Foreign Policy: Intervention, Involvement, or Isolation?* (Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

<sup>10</sup>Holsti, for example, originally characterized the foreign policy beliefs of the American people as a “three-headed eagle,” made up of “Cold War Internationalists,” “Post-Cold War Internationalists,” and “Isolationists.” Wittkopf has taken issue with this classification and suggests a more robust formulation: by classifying individual beliefs about militant internationalism (the utility of force as an instrument of policy) and cooperative internationalism (the utility of more cooperative means of conflict resolution), he broke masses and elites down into four categories—internationalists (those who believe in both types of internationalism), accommodationists (who believe in cooperative but not militant internationalism), hardliners (militant but not cooperative), and isolationists (neither). Similarly, Klingberg, *Alternation of Moods*, p. 239, defines extroversion as “a nation’s willingness to bring its influence to bear upon other nations, to exert positive pressure (economic, diplomatic, or military) outside its borders,” and introversion as the opposite—“when America was unwilling to exert much positive pressure upon other nations.” America in the 1930s is cited as the prime example of introversion.

<sup>11</sup>Art, *Defensible Defense*, p. 6, for example, writes, “I use the term ‘isolationism’ to define a situation in which the United States has no peacetime binding military alliances with other powers and has withdrawn its army and air power to its own territory. . . . I do not, therefore, suggest by the term that the United States is uninvolved politically with the rest of the world, nor that it pursues economic autarky.” Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?*, p. 12, writes, “As a policy, isolationism is above all generally characterized by the refusal to enter into alliances and to undertake military interventions.” Similarly, Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured*, p. 6: “The national strategy is neither naïve nor simplistic. It extends and specifies strategic isolationism’s fundamental maxims: Going abroad to insure America’s security is unnecessary; doing so regularly detracts from it.”

largely one among different groups of internationalists, not between internationalists and isolationists. The security policy of the 1920s relied on banks rather than tanks, and the former were more effective than the latter would have been: American financial muscle was more than adequate to manage security-related quarrels on the war-torn European continent. American neutrality legislation in the 1930s, often cited as evidence of isolationism, was in fact a compromise between isolationists and internationalists. Moreover, American commitment to fighting the war if necessary solidified nearly a year and a half *before* Pearl Harbor, and American military actions in the fall of 1941 constituted undeclared warfare. Only Hitler's unwillingness to provoke formal American opposition kept the U.S. out of the war on paper. Isolationists undeniably played some role in the politics of the era, but they hardly dominated the political scene; they can best be described as "a voluble and vehement minority which on occasion could make its influence effective"<sup>12</sup> in combination with disaffected internationalists of one stripe or another.

The characterization of interwar America as isolationist has been challenged before by the so-called "revisionist school" of historians of American foreign policy, who assert that American attempts to establish economic rather than military empire—an "empire without tears," in the words of one proponent<sup>13</sup>—give the lie to any characterization of the United States as isolationist. Adherents to this school have long believed that the idea of American isolationism is problematic. In large part, however, the traditional and revisionist schools have talked past one another on this issue: because of the revisionist focus on the establishment of *economic* empire, each utilizes an implicit definition of "isolationism" that renders the arguments of the other problematic.

The critique on offer here, however, is more fundamental: it addresses isolationism purely in the sphere of international security, where revisionist arguments have yet to tread. Rather than arguing that America was not economically isolationist in the interwar period—a point with which few

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<sup>12</sup>Whitney H. Shepardson and William O. Scroggs, *The United States in World Affairs: An Account of American Foreign Relations, 1938* (Harper & Brothers, 1939), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup>The most prominent advocate of this position is William Appleman Williams, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s", *Science and Society* 18 (1954); variations on the theme can be found in Melvyn P. Leffler, "Political Isolationism, Economic Expansionism or Diplomatic Realism? American Policy Toward Western Europe, 1921-1933", *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974), and Warren I. Cohen, *Empire Without Tears: America's Foreign Relations, 1921-1933* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), *inter alia*, and a critique in Robert James Maddox, "Another Look at the Legend of Isolationism in the 1920's", *Mid-America* 53, no. 1 (1971).

scholars now have substantial quarrels—it will demonstrate that America was not isolationist in affairs relating to international security in Europe for the bulk of the period: in fact, it was perhaps more internationalist than it had ever been.

## What Is Isolationism?

Before going further, the object of study must be defined. Here I will avoid a trap that has snared many authors on the subject: surveying the spectrum of American political beliefs or behavior in the interwar period and describing some subset of that spectrum as “isolationist.”<sup>14</sup> Isolationism so defined will of necessity be uncovered by subsequent investigation, a fact that renders investigation pointless. A definition should at a minimum be informed by comparative analysis and held to the standard of conceptual distinctness.

Other (and better) examples of isolationism do in fact exist. Paul Schroeder makes the case that Britain, at the apogee of its power following the Crimean War, chose to exert remarkably little control over the international system,<sup>15</sup> and Michael Roberts’ careful examination of British foreign policy from 1763 to 1780 shows that isolationist tendencies dominated in that period as well.<sup>16</sup> Japan, under the Tokugawa shogunate, isolated itself almost hermetically for two centuries, permitting only a handful of foreign traders even to set foot on its territory and banning travel to other countries on pain of death.<sup>17</sup> In the decades preceding the early 1960s, Bhutan was

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<sup>14</sup>e.g., Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism, and Europe, 1901-1950*, p. ix: “[I]solationism came to mean the refusal of the United States to commit force beyond the limits of the Western Hemisphere and to avoid military alliances with overseas powers”; or Kim Edward Spiezio, *Beyond Containment: Reconstructing European Security* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 118: “In its classical manifestation, isolationism was characterized by an unwillingness on the part of the United States to: (1) establish peacetime security commitments with other countries, (2) permanently station its military forces outside of U.S.-held territories, or (3) use force in support of the status quo in either Europe or Asia.” Justus D. Doenecke, *Anti-Intervention: A Bibliographical Introduction to Isolationism and Pacifism from World War I to the Early Cold War* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), p. xv, writes that “An isolationist is one who opposes intervention in a European war, involvement in binding military alliances, and participation in organizations of collective security.”

<sup>15</sup>Paul Schroeder, “Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory”, *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>16</sup>Michael Roberts FBA, *Splendid Isolation 1763-1780* (Reading: University of Reading, 1970).

<sup>17</sup>Louis Allen, *Japan: The Years of Triumph* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971); Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (Cambridge,

even more isolated from the outside world;<sup>18</sup> Nepal underwent a brief period of isolation in the late 1940s, and Burma's foreign policy took a dramatic turn toward isolationism in 1963-65. China underwent an isolationist period under the later Ming Dynasty, and another, briefer one under Mao in 1966-69.<sup>19</sup>

Such examples lend empirical perspective. First, isolationism is often limited to a particular sphere, geographic or otherwise. Even the most fervent believers in interwar American isolationism are unfazed by the fact that the United States maintained the tenets of the Monroe Doctrine as they pertained to the Western Hemisphere and showed some interest in affairs in Asia throughout the period. Great Britain was exceptionally busy in Africa and Asia during its period of "splendid isolation" from the politics of the European continent in the late 19th century. At the same time, neither state evinced much in the way of any other kind of isolationism (cultural, say, or economic): few contemporary American commentators even suggested cutting all ties, whether social, economic, or political, with the entire European continent.<sup>20</sup>

Second, isolationism requires not only the unwillingness to act but the ability to do so. Although Burma did not seek to exert influence over the European continent for centuries, it was only deemed isolationist when it withdrew from regional politics. This fact highlights the possibility that states may simply be unable to involve themselves in international relations.

Rogue states—those that violate international norms and are ostracized as a result (for example, South Africa throughout the Cold War and North Korea in the present decade)—are another source of confusion.<sup>21</sup> They are

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Mass.: Belknap Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>The Japanese in the Tokugawa era did maintain some minimal contact with the outside world, usually via Dutch traders and Jesuit missionaries, and occasionally utilized "Dutch learning" in a variety of fields. Bhutan, on the other hand, is a very rare case of virtually total isolation in all areas. They did not possess roads, or even wheels, until the 1960s. See Kalevi J. Holsti, "From Isolation to Dependence: Bhutan, 1958-62", in Kalevi J. Holsti, ed., *Why Nations Realign: Foreign Policy Restructuring in the Postwar World* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup>Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), covers the Ming period in depth; Kalevi J. Holsti, *Why Nations Realign: Foreign Policy Restructuring in the Postwar World* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982) and Michael B. Yahuda, *Towards the End of Isolationism: China's Foreign Policy after Mao* (London: Macmillan, 1983) discuss the turn inward under Mao.

<sup>20</sup>For an exception see Jerome Frank, *Save America First* (New York: Harper, 1938).

<sup>21</sup>For discussions of same see, e.g., Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984) and Eva Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxfam,

typically isolated rather than isolationist. Although an argument could be made that they states have withdrawn from the international system by pursuing odious domestic agendas, I do not classify them as isolationist because they generally display a desire to take part in the system if given the opportunity; they are simply not willing to alter their behavior enough to be allowed to do so. Isolation is not their “first best” strategy.

Conceptual rather than empirical difficulties are no less profound. One school of thought suggests that isolationism entails a long-term policy of rejecting formal alliances.<sup>22</sup> As part of a general definition of isolationism, such a characteristic is problematic. The avoidance of permanent alliances was the form, not the substance, of isolationism. In fact, such a policy could just as well serve the interests of a unilateralist country.<sup>23</sup> Take, for example, the traditional foreign policy of Great Britain, which as early as the 1600s saw “France and Spain [as] the Scales in the Balance of Europe and England the Tongue or the Holder of the Balance.”<sup>24</sup> England’s policy for centuries was to maintain the European balance by siding with the weaker side to deter the stronger. Such a policy necessarily entailed an avoidance of permanent alliances, yet Britain was clearly not isolationist.<sup>25</sup>

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1988).

<sup>22</sup>See Cathal J. Nolan, *The Longman Guide to World Affairs* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1995). Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., among others, notes that American isolationism takes the form of avoiding permanent alliances and deciding from moment to moment where the national interest lies; see Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 58.

<sup>23</sup>This point is made in David A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy In Its Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), and Jeffrey W. Legro, “Whence American Internationalism”, *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (2000), both of whom consider interwar American foreign policy to be unilateralist. Because they focus on the single dimension of unilateralism vs. multilateralism, they would code both highly internationalist and highly isolationist states as “unilateralist” as long as those states avoided multilateral activity. (See e.g. Lake, p. 24, and Legro, p. 256, where each asserts that isolationism is a subset of unilateralism.) Legro goes farther still by associating internationalism with multilateralism. In the present endeavor separating the unilateralist/multilateralist dimension from the internationalist/isolationist one is crucial, lest unilateralists be mistakenly called isolationists.

<sup>24</sup>The passage, from William Camden’s biography of Queen Elizabeth I (*Annales of the History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth, Late Queen of England*, published in 1635), is quoted in Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 144.

<sup>25</sup>In fact, Washington’s warnings against “permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others” could easily have been used in support of either a balance of power or a collective security policy. Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 44 and Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance*



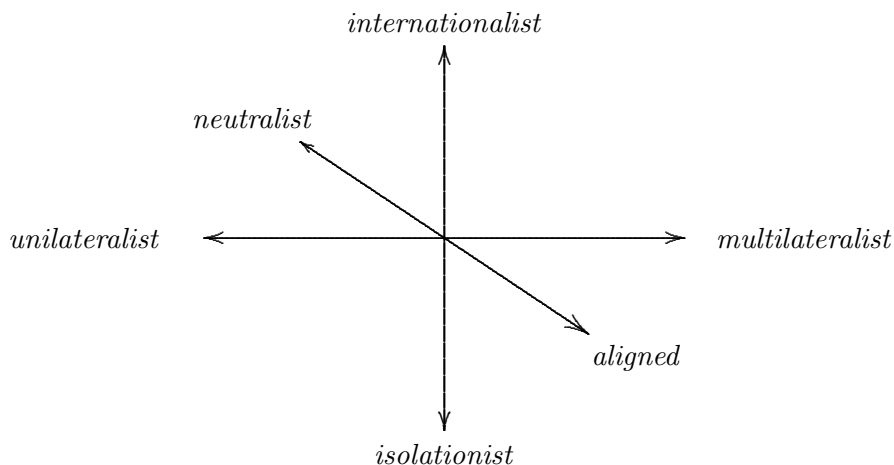


Figure 1: Often-conflated dimensions of foreign policy

Neutral states provide another source of confusion. They need not be uninvolved in the politics of a region; their pledge not to aid one side or the other in a dispute does not bar them from acting in a neutral capacity. Groups of states may do so—as in the cases of the United Nations peace-keeping forces<sup>26</sup> and the Nonaligned bloc—and may even form alliances in order to do so. Neutrality refers to the direction of a state’s foreign policy rather than to its magnitude.<sup>27</sup>

The main source of confusion in all of the above examples is a failure to appreciate the fact that these foreign policy activities are to a considerable degree *substitutable*: each can, to some degree, perform the task of the

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*of Power* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1955), p. 67-70 link nonentanglement to balance of power systems, and William C. Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) makes this point with regard to Lodge’s objections to the Treaty; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 164 and Inis L. Claude, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 129 point out that it inheres to both. Claude provides a more extensive discussion of the similarities and differences of balance of power and collective security systems in general; see *idem*, pp. 123-133.

<sup>26</sup>Such countries may not be neutral in general, but under U.N. auspices they act in a neutral capacity.

<sup>27</sup>I am indebted to Karl Mueller for this precise formulation.

others.<sup>28</sup> Morrow and Sorokin, for example, demonstrate that a state's decision to ally or increase its capabilities is determined in large part by the relative costs and benefits of each, both domestically and internationally.<sup>29</sup>

Because foreign policies are substitutable, attempts to define isolationism as the avoidance of a particular policy or policies runs the risk of confusing it with other “-isms” that eschew the same forms of activity. Unilateral states do not ally. Multilateral states may or may not; the actual piece of paper is often a mere formality. Neutral states are on the whole less likely to involve themselves in ways that imply taking sides, though they are not necessarily more or less likely to become involved in other ways, and alliances and interventions do not necessarily imply taking sides. Isolationism cannot be recognized by the particular form that noninvolvement takes because no particular form of noninvolvement is unique to isolationism.

The definition of isolationism that I will utilize is this one:

*Isolationism* is the voluntary abstention by a state from taking part in security-related politics in an area of the international system over which it is capable of exerting control.

This abstention may, of course, need not be absolute, but the more partial it is, the less the policy of the state can reasonably be called isolationism.

An *isolationist*, accordingly, is a principled and unconditional advocate of a policy of isolationism. The insistence that the advocacy of isolationism must be unconditional ensures that internationalist opponents to a proposed policy—those who argue against sending combat troops but would be in favor of sending peacekeeping troops, for example—will not be miscategorized as isolationists.

These definitions avoid the difficulties mentioned above. By specifying that abstention from politics is voluntary, it avoids miscategorizing rogue states as isolationists. By specifying as a precondition that the state be capable of involving itself, it avoids miscategorizing weak states as isolationist. By focusing on the substance of isolationism rather than on its particular form, the definition captures forms of internationalism that might otherwise be missed while avoiding confusion with neutrality and unilateralism.

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<sup>28</sup>See Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) for a discussion of foreign policy substitutability.

<sup>29</sup>James D. Morrow, “Arms versus Allies: Trade-offs in the Search for Security”, *International Organization* 47, no. 2 (1993); Gerald L. Sorokin, “Arms, Alliances, and Security Tradeoffs in Enduring Rivalries”, *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (1994).

Now that the definition of isolationism has been established, I will seek to demonstrate that American interwar foreign policy and public opinion do not remotely conform to it. Americans were attentive to European politics, and when debates arose they typically involved the question of *how*, not whether, the United States should be involved in European affairs.

## Interwar Foreign Policy

### American Internationalism in the 1920s

Few scholars now portray the well-known struggle over the League of Nations as a fight between internationalists and isolationists.<sup>30</sup> Given the emphasis placed by a large number of Senators on the requirements of Article X and their willingness to join the League absent those requirements, it seems more reasonable to portray it as a conflict between unilateralists and multilateralists. In a recent and influential reinterpretation, Thomas Knock has emphasized the importance of two strands of internationalism—progressive and conservative—in the history of the League.<sup>31</sup> Other interpretations suggest that the League fight was actually a clash among *three* strands of internationalism: conservative and progressive unilateralists, on one hand, and centrist multilateralists on the other.<sup>32</sup>

In this debate, there were very few genuine isolationists—people who were unwilling to take part in international relations on any terms—either in the Senate or in the nation as a whole. It is worth noting, for example, that neither major party had thought isolationists to be worth courting in 1916, when American entry into the war was still at issue.<sup>33</sup> The public at large was very much in favor of League membership, if not of Article X.<sup>34</sup> A survey of 174 newspapers and 35 magazines prior to the votes of November 1919 suggests that the majority favored American membership in the League.<sup>35</sup>

Of the opponents to the League in the Senate, only the so-called Irrecon-

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<sup>30</sup>*cf.* Adler, *Isolationist Impulse*.

<sup>31</sup>Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Lake, *Entangling Relations*, p. 92-96.

<sup>32</sup>See [manuscript omitted for review].

<sup>33</sup>Knock, *To End All Wars*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup>On this point see John Chalmers Vinson, *Referendum for Isolation: Defeat of Article Ten of the League of Nations Covenant* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961).

<sup>35</sup>James Dill Startt, "American Editorial Opinion and the Main Problems of Peacemaking in 1919", Ph.d. dissertation, University of Maryland (1965).

cilables consistently voted against it in any form,<sup>36</sup> and even they were not opposed to internationalism in general—a fact evidenced by the support of some for an immediate Anglo-American defensive treaty with France<sup>37</sup> and of others for an international judiciary to keep the peace.<sup>38</sup> Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson’s principal opponent on the League issue, specifically denied that “when Washington [sic] warned us against entangling alliances he meant for one moment that we should not join with the other civilized nations of the world if a method could be found to diminish war and encourage peace.”<sup>39</sup> The Senators on the whole were in favor of membership, on the final vote, by a margin of 49 to 35—seven conversions short of the two-thirds required for passage.<sup>40</sup>

Despite its rejection of formal membership in the League, America in the 1920s was hardly inactive in the European political arena. The first attempt to redress the perils of the European situation (as well as that of the Asiatic) was the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22. The Conference serves as another illustration that genuine isolationists were lacking: it was initiated by Senator William Borah, lion of the Irreconcilables,<sup>41</sup> and promoted most vigorously by precisely those Senators who had most passionately opposed

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<sup>36</sup>See Ralph A. Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight Against the League of Nations* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), and Herbert F. Margulies, *The Mild Reservationists and the League of Nations Controversy in the Senate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989).

<sup>37</sup>Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 108, 213.

<sup>38</sup>See p. 17, below.

<sup>39</sup>Ruth J. Bartlett, *The League to Enforce Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1944), p. 50-51, cited in Claude, *Power and International Relations*, p. 137. See Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge*, for an argument that the question of how, not whether, the United States should become involved in European affairs was what separated Wilson and Lodge. Lest a popular misperception be perpetuated, I should note that Jefferson, not Washington, used the phrase “entangling alliances.”

<sup>40</sup>Clement Atlee may have been essentially correct when he noted that the American Constitution was designed for an “isolationist state.” Adler, *Isolationist Impulse*, p. 114.

<sup>41</sup>Borah’s resolution requesting that the Administration begin disarmament negotiations with Britain and Japan passed unanimously in the Senate (May 26, 1921) and with only four votes against in the House (June 29, 1921). That such a fierce opponent of the League should appear as one of the strongest proponents of a disarmament conference might lead one to conclude that Borah was, as Warren Cohen put it, “a bundle of inconsistencies on foreign policy issues.” (Cohen, *Empire Without Tears*, p. 14.) The conclusion is unwarranted: although Borah was a stalwart Republican who never flirted with bolting to a Progressive party, his voting record indicates that he was one of the most consistently progressive Senators in the Republican party—see Claudius O. Johnson, *Borah of Idaho* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), p. 150-151. The fact that he both loathed the League and championed disarmament, therefore, should come as no surprise.

the Treaty.

The Conference itself demonstrated quite clearly that the United States was willing to utilize its capability to arm and expand to achieve the goal of disarmament. Though perhaps not the most obvious manner in which capabilities can be converted to power in security affairs, it nevertheless qualifies, and both the capabilities wielded and the power exerted (judging by the results) were impressive.

The foremost achievement of the Conference was the Five Power Naval Treaty, “the first agreement in modern history by which major powers undertook disarmament of any kind.”<sup>42</sup> The Treaty embodied a 10-year commitment on all sides to cease production of capital ships (non-aircraft carriers which either displace more than 10,000 tons of water or possess eight-inch guns) and to scrap existing older ships. Of America’s 48 capital ships either in the water or under construction, 30 would be destroyed. Britain would go from 45 ships to 20, and Japan from 27 to 10. In geopolitical terms, the Treaty achieved another prime American objective: an Anglo-Japanese treaty of alliance, first signed in 1902 and up for renewal in 1921, was abolished, further reducing Washington’s potential defense requirements.<sup>43</sup>

These agreements were greatly facilitated by the application of American financial muscle. The British were pressured into accepting a far more radical proposal than that which they had originally desired, largely because the Americans could credibly threaten to outbuild them if they did not agree.<sup>44</sup> The United States induced the Japanese to agree to the inferior position in a 5:5:3 tonnage ratio by including an article which foreswore additional fortifications and naval buildups in the Pacific (Hawaii being the main exception). By making the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance a condition of the conference, the United States succeeded in rupturing it.

More applications of American financial muscle in the pursuit of security abroad were soon to come. In early 1921 the Reparations Commission’s first assessment, 150 billion gold marks, had been made, and a brief German revolt led to the occupation of three German cities and capitulation by both

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur S. Link and William B. Catton, *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since 1900. Volume II: The Age of Franklin D. Roosevelt 1921-1945*, 4th ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 86.

<sup>43</sup> Akira Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945*, vol. III, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 76-77. France and Italy were the fourth and fifth of the five powers, but their naval forces were minor in comparison to those of the others.

<sup>44</sup> For an argument that historians have tended to overstate the success of American coercion, see Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

sides. By May 1921 a debt of 132 billion gold marks (\$30 billion)<sup>45</sup> was agreed upon, and yearly payments began, but it soon became clear that the combination of Germany's inability to pay and France's insistence upon compensation left no middle ground.

Accordingly, on January 11, 1923, French and Belgian troops moved into the Ruhr with the goal of occupying it and using the proceeds as reparations. The occupation constituted the greatest threat of war to occur in Europe in the 1920s. The German policy of passive resistance held until August, at which time a governmental upheaval which only narrowly averted a right-wing dictatorship produced a Chancellor (Gustav Stresemann) more willing to negotiate. Moreover, Rhenish separatist groups were growing in strength, and by the end of September French Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré had initiated a policy of stonewalling Stresemann while quietly encouraging the separatists to seek greater autonomy at the expense of the Reich.<sup>46</sup> The political unity of Germany itself was in danger, as a surge in Communist support in Saxony and Thuringia led to insurrection and Stresemann's termination of passive resistance prompted an attempted putsch in Bavaria.<sup>47</sup> The French negotiating position, it seemed, was getting better and better.

At this juncture,

[a] curious result ensued. Having won a clear victory, France in a sense surrendered it. Instead of securing political or far-reaching economic arrangements between herself and Germany, ... [France] allowed the intrusion of Anglo-American influence by agreeing to the constitution of two committees, one for the restoration of the German currency, the other... to review the whole matter of Reparation.<sup>48</sup>

Albrecht-Carrié attributes this outcome to France's abrupt realization that its reparations policies had been shortsighted. This explanation misses a deeper and more fundamental point: the French had little choice. French attempts to control the region's industry and set up a "revolver republic"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Peter Pulzer, *Germany, 1870-1945: Politics, State Formation, and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>46</sup>Marc Trachtenberg, "Poincaré's Deaf Ear: The Otto Wolff Affair and French Ruhr Policy, August-September 1923", *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 3 (1981).

<sup>47</sup>See Hans Mommsen, *The Rise & Fall of Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. ch. 5, for details.

<sup>48</sup>René Albrecht-Carrié, *A Diplomatic History of Europe Since the Congress of Vienna* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 397.

<sup>49</sup>That is, to establish a separatist government at gunpoint. The moniker comes from

had failed, and the trillionfold hyperinflation which occurred as a result of Germany's desperate resort to the printing presses made France's already-marginal gains virtually worthless. By the end of 1923 the franc had fallen by 40% and France, far from profiting from the occupation, found itself in desperate need of loans to balance its budget and continue postwar reconstruction. Even if complete German political collapse could be averted, which was by no means certain, success was impossible and failure would be a domestic disaster.

The Anglo-American intervention may well have averted a German civil war, a Franco-German war, a general European war, or all three. This feat was achieved with dollars rather than bullets. The American government, officially disinterested in the matter of reparations because of its rejection of the Versailles settlement, nevertheless asked a committee of bankers headed by Charles Dawes to go to Europe and assist in resolution of the matter. They managed to resolve the situation by rescheduling German debts, avoiding a concrete total for the time being, and arranging for a loan of \$200 million to Germany for the purposes of reparations payment and currency stabilization.

Had this been the extent of the American contribution, its relevance to European security would be debatable. The United States in fact accomplished quite a bit more. The French had received an emergency loan of \$100 million but needed additional funds. Secretary of State Hughes had already expressed privately his conviction that occupation would lead to war;<sup>50</sup> communicating through Ambassador Herrick, he quietly made it clear to the French government that the initial loan was conditional upon French support at the upcoming London Conference, where the Dawes Plan would be implemented. In London, the French were forced as a condition of the Dawes loan to renounce their right to implement military or territorial sanctions against Germany, although they were permitted to delay evacuation of the Ruhr for a year.<sup>51</sup>

American intervention in Germany was also critical in ensuring the success of the Dawes Plan. Ambassador Alanson B. Houghton convinced Stre-

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Allan Nevins, *The United States in a Chaotic World: A Chronicle of International Affairs, 1918-1933*, vol. 55, The Chronicles of America Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 89.

<sup>50</sup>Merlo J. Pusey, *Charles Evans Hughes* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1951), p. 581.

<sup>51</sup>On American use of financial muscle to defuse the Ruhr crisis see Cohen, *Empire Without Tears*, p. 32-33, and Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion*, p. 120-122; on the terms of the Dawes Plan see e.g. Raymond J. Sontag, *European Diplomatic History 1871-1932* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1933), p. 360-361.

semann, now Foreign Minister, and his government to approve the Dawes Plan; he even provided a draft of a letter of acceptance, which the Germans used verbatim. He also provided the necessary swing votes when he convinced the leaders of the Nationalist Party (DNVP) that a “no” vote would so sour American public opinion that no future loans would be forthcoming.<sup>52</sup>

American influence also played a major role in the establishment of the European security structure that replaced the unstable Versailles arrangement and lasted into the 1930s. Early in 1925 Germany, cognizant of continued French insecurity and wary of a potential Franco-British security pact, proposed a multilateral agreement to alleviate its neighbors’ concerns via arbitration treaties and guarantees of borders. The following months witnessed a series of exchanges between the French, the Germans, and the British, each of the first two offering conditions unacceptable to the other and the third attempting to mediate. For months, nothing came of the discussions.

At that point, President Coolidge issued what has been called “America’s Peace Ultimatum to Europe.” Coolidge again used the fact that, with British loan markets closed, America was the only source of the loans that were needed to fuel reconstruction. American government officials in Europe made it clear that, absent peace and security on the continent, further loans would be discouraged. The result, the Treaty of Locarno, was signed by Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain and Italy and constituted a mutual guarantee of the German-French and German-Belgian borders and demilitarized the Rhineland.<sup>53</sup> In so doing, it replaced the inherently unstable Versailles security structure in Western Europe.

The most well-known accomplishment of the decade was the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which famously “outlawed” war by renouncing the use of force as a tool of foreign policy among the signatories. Popular enthusiasm for the Kellogg-Briand Pact in the U.S. was considerable, and to some extent it was based on more than just wishful thinking about peace.<sup>54</sup> In fact,

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<sup>52</sup>Kenneth Paul Jones, “Alanson B. Houghton and the Ruhr Crisis: The Diplomacy of Power and Morality”, in Kenneth Paul Jones, ed., *U.S. Diplomats in Europe, 1919-1941* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1981), p. 36-37.

<sup>53</sup>Michael Hogan, *Informal Entente: The Private Structure of Cooperation in Anglo-American Economic Diplomacy, 1918-1928* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977), p. 213; Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion*, p. 120-122.

<sup>54</sup>Progressives used the existence of the Pact to argue against higher appropriations for the Navy, and part of the appeal of a pact outlawing war had to do with the fact that would establish a legal precedent for protesting the suppression of imperial subjects; see Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (Cam-



an early advocate of the “outlawry of war” who introduced a resolution to promote it in 1923—the same Senator Borah, it should be noted, who opposed the League—argued for a strong international judiciary to serve as an alternative to war. It was resolved that

a judicial substitute for war should be created (or if existing in part, adapted and adjusted) in the form or nature of an international court, modeled on our Federal Supreme Court in its jurisdiction over controversies between our sovereign States, such court . . . to have the same power for the enforcement of its decrees as our Federal Supreme Court.<sup>55</sup>

However naïve the outlawry movement and the Pact may seem in retrospect, therefore, they reflect an interest in playing a role in international affairs. Their advocates may have been many things—idealistic, perhaps—but they were not isolationists.

The last major accomplishments of the period, the London Treaty and the Young Plan, were less ambitious initiatives than their predecessors in that they modified existing solutions rather than implementing new ones. The Washington agreement, though it had taken care of the largest and most dangerous ships, had failed to make provisions for smaller craft (cruisers and submarines, for example). An earlier attempt to rectify this deficiency at the Three-Power Conference in Geneva in 1927 had failed.<sup>56</sup> The London Naval Conference of 1930, initiated by President Hoover, was only a moderate success. The London Treaty succeeded in establishing ratios for the remaining categories of ships, but only by papering over some of the distinctions between them, and the parity which it established between London and Washington involved an American buildup rather than British disarmament. In part, the success of the Washington Treaty undermined the London conference: had the signatories to the former not substantially reduced their armament levels, they might have proven more willing to make deep cuts later. As it was, the London Treaty should probably be seen as a modest success, given that disarmament may have been approaching its limits.

Throughout this period, American participation in League of Nations conferences was frequent. Before long, it had even come to be *expected*. A

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bridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 177-178.

<sup>55</sup>February 14, 1923; *CR* 64-4-3605.

<sup>56</sup>“Either the British Navy has gone mad,” fumed Kellogg, “or Great Britain has felt compelled to continue ship building to furnish employment.” *FRUS* 1927, i, 158.

dispatch from the American representative sitting in on the First Session of the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference in Geneva is illustrative: the delegate had been instructed by Secretary of State Kellogg not to make any statements about a Soviet proposal for complete disarmament but finally did so because, as he put it, “continued silence on my part was becoming more conspicuous than a speech [and] I was constantly questioned informally as to America’s attitude.”<sup>57</sup>

All in all, the United States did not withdraw from the European scene in the 1920s. It may be true that the foreign policy of the 1920s was never as internationalist as was the foreign policy of the Cold War. Nevertheless, America initiated and responded to such a broad range of international events that it could scarcely be called “isolationist” in this period. As one leading scholar points out, “until the 1980s, when nuclear disarmament agreements were to be concluded, the 1920s was the only decade in recent history when arms reductions actually took place.”<sup>58</sup> The United States was in large part responsible for these initiatives. Its ideological diversity prompted it to pursue a range of goals—in particular, stability, openness, and disarmament—and the agreements that it arranged went a long way toward furthering those goals. The lack of formal participation in the League of Nations is only one indicator of America’s involvement in Europe; given her informal participation and wide range of security-related activities outside of the League framework, it is not an especially good one. Warren I. Cohen sums up the period neatly:

A generation aware of the tendency of post-1945 America toward overcommitment might see the policy of the 1920s as timid, but what is really striking is the increased participation of the United States in major developments around the world, compared with the role the nation played prior to 1917.<sup>59</sup>

### **Depression, the Neutrality Laws, and the Rise of Germany**

The early years of the Great Depression mark a period of increasing American participation in European affairs and decreasing efficacy. While Herbert Hoover remained in office, some attempts were made to stabilize Europe by (for example) implementing a one-year moratorium on debt payments, but little was accomplished. The opening of the World Disarmament Conference

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<sup>57</sup> *FRUS* 1928, i, 252.

<sup>58</sup> Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945*, p. 78.

<sup>59</sup> Cohen, *Empire Without Tears*, p. 17.

under League auspices in Geneva marked the decisive entry of the United States into League discussions in the political realm as well as an increased willingness on the part of the U.S. to take part in collective measures to prevent conflict. Unfortunately, talks dragged on for years without reaching agreement. The second London Conference in 1935 lasted only a week, and the only agreement to emerge from it concerned only the United States and Great Britain and served only to set quite generous limits for naval rearmament. The London Economic Conference, prompted by Roosevelt's urgings, soon foundered.<sup>60</sup>

Also at this time, the first of the Neutrality Laws came into existence. The first Neutrality Act, passed in 1935, prohibited the shipment of arms to belligerents. The second Neutrality Act (1936) extended the range of the first to include loans and credits, while the third (1937) extended the prohibition to states involved in civil wars. The effect of these laws was to preclude precisely the kind of American internationalism which had proven invaluable in maintaining the European status quo in the 1920s. Langer and Gleason wrote that the last of the Neutrality Acts was "the very epitome of American isolationism, embracing every conceivable device to protect the country from the dangers to which it had been exposed in 1914-1917."<sup>61</sup>

Contemporary commentators, however, noted that the purpose of the Neutrality Acts was not nearly as clear-cut as subsequent analyses have assumed. Some members of the public and Congress sought noninvolvement in foreign affairs; others sought to use economic embargo as a weapon against aggression. One group sought to weaken the President and thereby avoid war, while another sought to strengthen the President's ability to sanction aggressors. Both, confusingly, did so by advocating neutrality legislation.<sup>62</sup> Documents from the period support this dual interpretation; for example, a minority report on HJR 242, the Neutrality Act of 1937, objected to the Act on the grounds that it could be used as a weapon by the President, who by involving the United States in such a manner would thereby rob Congress of its ability to make war.<sup>63</sup> Only in November of 1939 did this uneasy

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<sup>60</sup>Philip C. Jessup, *International Security: The American Rôle in Collective Action for Peace* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., 1935), p. 58; Richard W. Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament: Naval Rivalry and Arms Control, 1922-1933* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), pp. 133-134, 149ff.; Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, p. 35-54.

<sup>61</sup>William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation: The World Crisis of 1937-1940 and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 232.

<sup>62</sup>Shepardson and Scroggs, *United States in World Affairs 1938*, p. 159-160.

<sup>63</sup>United States House of Representatives, *American Neutrality Policy: Hearings before*

compromise between internationalists and isolationists finally break down: because prevention of war was no longer an option, the internationalists insisted on (and won) the “cash and carry” provisions, which could only favor the British given the latter’s control of the seas.

The Neutrality Acts, without a doubt, make the best case possible for American isolationism in the interwar period, but the case is not a very good one. They were a compromise, disliked by true isolationists who wished to stay the President’s hand. They constituted a financial and material weapon, one that was used repeatedly in such places as Ethiopia, Spain, and the Far East. Finally, whatever impartiality they might have possessed (and therefore their utility to isolationists) was soon undermined by the progress of events in Europe.

It was also at this time that the Nazi threat to Europe was germinating. Threat is a combination of malign intent and capabilities. In Europe in the early 1930s, neither was apparent. The absence of American activity in this early period, therefore, tells us little about American internationalism or isolationism. The first of these prerequisites was only met as the nature of the Nazi regime became clear. The second was met following the fall of France in 1940.

The initial reactions of American officials to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany demonstrated only relatively minor concern about the possibility of a dictatorship and virtually none about the rise of an ideology fundamentally incompatible with liberalism. In fact, the American Chargé d’Affaires in Berlin, reporting on the substantial Nazi gains in the September 1930 elections, specifically noted the party’s apparent lack of any ideological coherence; their promises seemed to depend most on what the listeners wanted to hear. Quoting a Nazi pamphlet, the diplomat reported that the group was formed “without a definite goal, without a program and only the one desire of emerging somehow or other from the muddle of the times.”<sup>64</sup> Once Hitler came to power, his goals became clearer, but not transparent: foremost among them, it seemed, was the reestablishment of Germany as a Great Power, perhaps even the dominant power in Europe.<sup>65</sup>

For some time after his ascent to power, therefore, Hitler seemed to many Americans to possess goals no more or less morally repugnant than those of his neighbors. To some extent this was by design: Hitler’s speeches regarding peace and noninterference in his neighbors’ affairs were designed

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*the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-Fifth Congress, First Session* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), p. 174-177.

<sup>64</sup> *FRUS* 1930, iii, 85.

<sup>65</sup> John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 131.

to nullify American opposition.<sup>66</sup> The absence of any moral issue other than imperialism meant, to an America in a progressive state of mind, that there was no overlap of interests between the United States and the Western democracies: “America might favor their form of government but, it was argued, had no valid reason for aiding them in the preservation of their imperial domains.”<sup>67</sup> Since experience had proven that taking sides in a war among empires did nothing to slow the spread of imperialism, European conflicts seemed irrelevant to American interests.

As the Neutrality Laws were being passed and implemented, Americans started to revise their image of Europe. It was clear from the onset that Hitler’s ideology was non-democratic, and his soothing words aside it was not too difficult to discern that it was even anti-democratic. The extent of the Nazi regime’s illiberalism, however, came as a considerable surprise.<sup>68</sup> Refugees’ stories became increasingly horrific. In late July of 1935, the New York *Times* ran a story arguing that the Nazis were “in the midst of a violent campaign to eliminate Jews from Germany’s cultural and political life.”<sup>69</sup> By 1936, John Gunther was able to amass enough information to write *Inside Europe*, a book that detailed Hitler’s early atrocities; the book became a bestseller in the United States.<sup>70</sup> The worst was still far off—available evidence points to some time in 1941 as the point at which Hitler made the decision to implement the Final Solution<sup>71</sup>—but as the 1930s progressed Americans became increasingly aware that Nazism was anathema. By early 1939, when Hitler was named Man of the Year by *Time* magazine, the nature of Nazism was hardly in doubt: breaking with its tradition of depicting the Man of the Year in a somber and respectful light, the magazine chose as a cover a painting by a Catholic emigré of the Führer as a mad organist in a

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<sup>66</sup>See Selig Adler, *The Uncertain Giant: 1921-1941* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1965), p. 169.

<sup>67</sup>Jonas, *Isolationism in America 1935-1941*, p. 112.

<sup>68</sup>On the willingness of the West to accommodate a “normal” state and Germany’s failure to meet the criterion see Pulzer, *Germany, 1870-1945: Politics, State Formation, and War*, p. 140-141.

<sup>69</sup>Robert H. Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), p. 47.

<sup>70</sup>Adler, *Uncertain Giant*, p. 198.

<sup>71</sup>Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 147, claims that the decision was made in late 1940 or early 1941; Christian Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews”, *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4 (1998), argues that the decision was not made until December 1941.

desecrated cathedral, his victims dangling from a Saint Catherine's wheel.<sup>72</sup>

At first, despite increasing recognition of the nature of Hitler's regime, America did little if anything to oppose it. Military spending increased, but it did so in response to the situation in the Pacific, and it failed to keep pace with the Japanese buildup. The American reaction to the *Anschluss* was virtually nonexistent. As the crisis in Czechoslovakia worsened, Roosevelt wrote to his European counterparts that the United States "has no interest in Europe and will assume no obligations in the present negotiations."<sup>73</sup> At the same time, Americans thought Hitler a vicious barbarian.

This peculiar mix of disgust and inaction is the hallmark of American foreign policy in the late 1930s. Its source is not difficult to discern: although Americans realized that Hitler was evil, they believed that American intervention was unnecessary because the democratic states of Europe were in no immediate danger. The same issue of *Time* noted that British control of the seas was incontrovertible and that "[m]ost military men regard the French Army as incomparable." Extensive eastward expansion seemed possible but unlikely. The widely-cited statistic that 95% of Americans thought that America should keep out of the war<sup>74</sup> reflects the belief that the democracies were in little danger even without formal American participation.<sup>75</sup>

Absent hindsight, the conclusion that Germany's military was not to be feared, especially on the high seas, was a reasonable one at the time. Impressive German aircraft production figures mask the fact that the majority of the aircraft produced through mid-1937 were trainers, and most of the bombers and fighters were obsolete.<sup>76</sup> Germany was deficient in nearly every category of strategic raw materials except coal: its shortages in such obviously crucial materials as iron ore and petroleum, as well as in nickel, manganese, and molybdenum (all important for the production of steel),

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<sup>72</sup>*Time*, January 2, 1939. A Saint Catherine's wheel consists of four large wheels, each turning in a different direction and each armed with serrated blades, knives, etc. It was among the most ghastly of the instruments of martyrdom, which says quite a bit.

<sup>73</sup>Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *From Wilson to Roosevelt: Foreign Policy of the United States 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 255.

<sup>74</sup>The figure remains constant across a variety of surveys from February, 1937 to October, 1939; see Hadley Cantril, "Opinion Trends in World War II: Some Guides to Interpretation", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1948).

<sup>75</sup>On this point see David Reynolds, *The Creation of an Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Cooperation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

<sup>76</sup>Richard J. Overy, "German Air Strength 1933 to 1939: A Note", *The Historical Journal* 27, no. 2 (1984), reviews the state of the *Luftwaffe* and concludes that "During the period 1933-8 offensive operations against a major power could not be seriously contemplated."

were critical. A shortage of hard currency ruled out the option of trading for sufficient quantities of these commodities to make up the shortfall. In the period between September of 1937 and February of 1939, no more than 58.6% of German armament orders could be met by industry due to shortages of material and capacity.<sup>77</sup> Truman Smith, American Military Attaché in Germany, reported on February 20, 1939, that German military action in the West “is recognized as an absurdity by all Germans, whether military or of the party”; the American Embassy in Germany, relying on an informed and confidential source, reported that German plans involved not invasion but rather the formation of a customs union with the states to its southeast and east.<sup>78</sup>

Germany’s economy, moreover, was operating very nearly at full steam even during peacetime. The *Wehrmacht*, therefore, had to achieve victory very quickly, before war could become a competition in mobilization (as it eventually did), and the overtaxed German economy seemed unlikely to be able to sustain the strain to which it had been put for very long.<sup>79</sup> The strains on the German economy produced numerous reports that coups, either popular or military, were likely.<sup>80</sup> A recent appraisal of Roosevelt’s assessment of German strength in the late 1930s is illustrative: “While he recognized that the Nazis were clearly acquiring the power to do some damage beyond their borders, he detected numerous signs below the surface that Hitler’s rearmament program was engendering political and economic difficulties.”<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, however debatable the German threat on land and in the air, its surface navy was in abysmal shape. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the ability of Germany to project power over water as late as 1939 was virtually nil. The entire fleet consisted of a total of 102 vessels, 57 of which were U-boats. Only two battleships were in service (although the massive *Bismarck* would

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<sup>77</sup>John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), p. 273-274; Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>78</sup>*FRUS* 1939, i, 24, 11.

<sup>79</sup>For a detailed review see Mark Harrison, “Resource Mobilization for World War II: The U.S.A., U.K., U.S.S.R., and Germany, 1938-1945”, *Economic History Review* 41, no. 2 (1988); Table 4 demonstrates the inelasticity of Germany’s economy.

<sup>80</sup>On September 25, American Ambassador Joseph Kennedy reported that Lord Halifax anticipated an increase in popular unrest and a military coup; *FRUS* 1939, i, 453-4. When Sumner Wells toured Europe in early 1940, he met with Hjalmar Schacht, former President of the Reichsbank, who told him of an impending military coup (*FRUS* 1940, i, 57).

<sup>81</sup>Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 8.

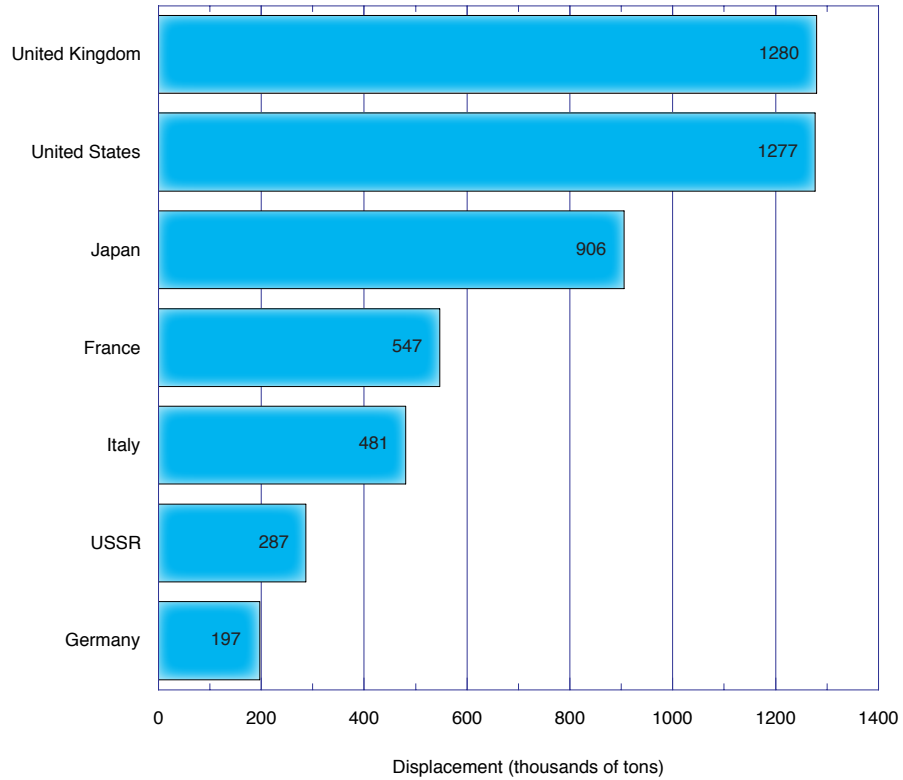


Figure 2: Naval Strength of Major Powers, 1939

soon be launched—and sunk). The Navy possessed no aircraft carriers. The German experiment with superheated steam engines for larger vessels had produced little success and mechanical difficulties were commonplace. These factors limited the range of the larger ships to about 1,000 nautical miles; even if Germany had had aircraft carriers, therefore, it would not have been able to bring air power to within striking distance of the American mainland. Although Nazi U-boats were capable of disrupting a considerable amount of sea traffic, they were useless for transporting equipment or troops in any significant number. Admiral Raeder remarked of his country’s surface fleet that “even at full strength, they can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly.”<sup>82</sup> Given that the United States had, in the previous

<sup>82</sup>Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. 246. The remark referred to an Anglo-German conflict, but the numbers suggest that German prospects in a naval war with the United States were little better.



year, decided to increase its fleet by 20% to include a total of 21 battleships, 7 aircraft carriers, 40 cruisers, and 252 destroyers, Germany simply had no hope of being able to wage any sort of war in the Atlantic in the foreseeable future. Even if the United States stood still, Germany would need twelve to fifteen years to catch up.<sup>83</sup>

Even under these conditions, the United States was already cooperating substantially with the European democracies. On January 23, 1939, investigation of the crash of a new American bomber, the Douglas DB-7, during a test flight revealed that one of the passengers, Captain Paul Chemidlin, was an official of the French Air Ministry. The crash brought to light Franco-American collaboration in the production of military aircraft: France, concerned at the growth of the *Luftwaffe*, both ordered as many aircraft as the United States could produce by the end of 1939 and invested \$10 million in the United States in order to double American production of aircraft engines. Despite the Neutrality Laws, American airplanes were being transported to Great Britain via Canada, and American ships laden with supplies ran the German blockade.<sup>84</sup>

## American Reaction to the Fall of France

The recognition of Hitler's odious program fulfilled the first prerequisite for American internationalism: politics on the European continent became relevant to American goals. Only later, when the perceived balance tipped heavily and abruptly in favor of Germany, was the second prerequisite fulfilled: the threat to those goals became a serious one.

The *Anschluss* had done little to ease Germany's chronic shortages; nor did the Munich agreement, though it left Czechoslovakia defenseless. The seizure of Prague on March 15, 1939, was a different matter. Czech in-

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<sup>83</sup>Bernd Stegemann, "Germany's Second Attempt to Become a Naval Power", in Klaus A. Maier et al., eds., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). If the Germans had managed to capture the British fleet, of course, the story would be entirely different, but to do so they would have had to fight their way through the fleet and probably would have destroyed the bulk of it in the process. If their experience with the French fleet was indicative, moreover, conquering Britain would do little to aid their Navy. See Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. ch. 16 for a rather chilling account of the fate of the French fleet.

<sup>84</sup>John McVickar Haight Jr., *American Aid to France, 1938-1940* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, pp. 48, 222. One case of the smuggling of aircraft across the Canadian border—ironically, in the home state of isolationist Senator Gerald Nye—is documented by Terry L. Shoptaugh, "Borderline Neutrality: The Transport of Military Aircraft near Pembina, North Dakota, 1940", *North Dakota History* 60, no. 2 (1993).

dustries had stockpiled raw materials, Czech armament factories were well-supplied and were not difficult to utilize, existing Czech munitions were quite substantial, and plunder from the Czech national bank combined with profits from the sale of some Czech arms alleviated Germany's hard-currency problems. Germany's capabilities had also been amplified by doctrinal innovation in the use of air power and, as Poland soon discovered, mechanized land power.<sup>85</sup>

Nevertheless, in early 1940 it seemed likely that Germany's bid for hegemony had run its course. The Allied blockade, though imperfect, nevertheless cut Germany off from vital strategic supplies. Germany immediately lost access to 43% of its imported iron ore, and in the nine-month *sitzkrieg* following the invasion of Poland Germany's petroleum reserve fell by a third. Combat operations for any substantial period were inconceivable. A review of American diplomatic communications during this time mostly reveals discussions of a European settlement, the form that such a settlement should take, and the problems to be dealt with in the postwar period.<sup>86</sup>

Although some may have anticipated Hitler's westward gamble, therefore, few anticipated the speed or the extent of its success. The events of May and June 1940, especially the surrender of France on June 22, produced a drastic change in American perceptions of the European balance. By the end of June the number of Americans who thought France and Britain could prevail barely exceeded 30%.<sup>87</sup> The fall of France fulfilled the second prerequisite for American internationalism: the threat to American ideals became a serious one.

Accordingly, the turning point in American public opinion occurred in mid-1940—nearly a year and a half before Pearl Harbor. In the public at large, non-interventionist sentiment melted away. In April of 1939, 28% of respondents in a national survey had been willing to help England win even if it meant running the risk of American participation in the war (the alternative option being "Keep out of war.") That percentage drifted slowly upward until June of 1940, when it reached 36%. Following the French surrender, the percentage that preferred aid to Britain over noninvolvement rose abruptly: by August the figure had risen to 39%, opinion was divided

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<sup>85</sup>Murray, *Change in the European Balance*. Murray (292) puts the Czech munitions totals at "1,231 aircraft (with material for the construction of another 240), 1,966 antitank guns, 2,254 pieces of field artillery, 810 tanks, 57,000 machine guns, and 630,000 rifles. . . . The equipment was sufficient to equip nearly thirty divisions."

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 328-330; *FRUS* 1940, i, 1-135.

<sup>87</sup>Cantril, *Opinion Trends*. The percentage subsequently rebounded, though the later estimates may have reflected the greater likelihood of American assistance.

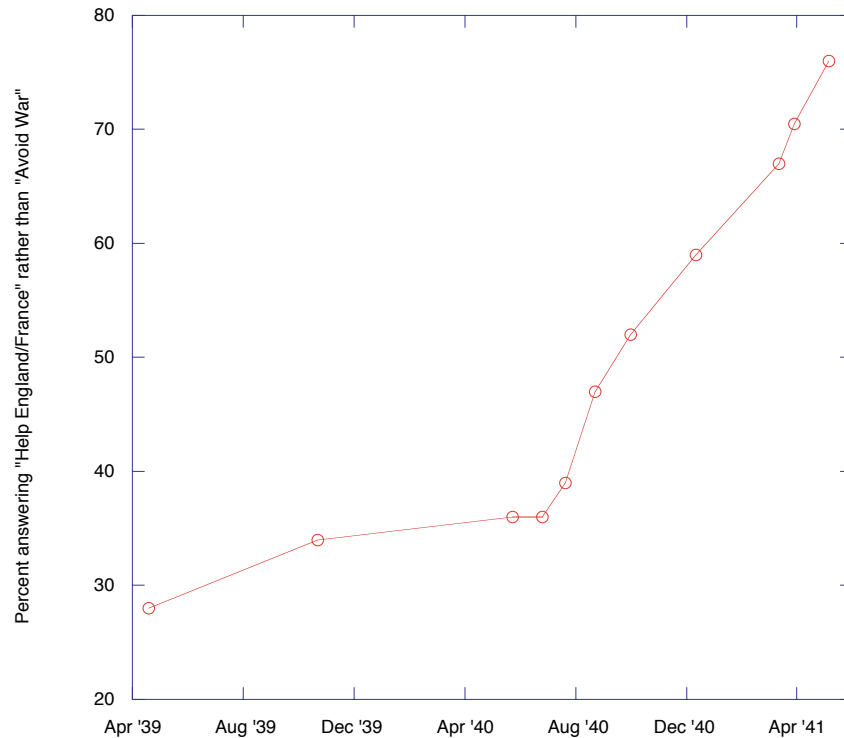


Figure 3: Public Opinion on Aiding England/France vs. Avoiding War

almost 50/50 in late August and September, and by December 59% of the respondents chose aid to England over staying out of war. More than a year before Pearl Harbor occurred, a majority of Americans were willing to prevent German victory by armed force if necessary. By mid-1941, an overwhelming majority (76%) preferred aid to noninvolvement. Figure 3 illustrates this trend. Far from being the internationalist leader of an isolationist public, Roosevelt found himself lagging *behind* public opinion on the issue of stopping Germany.<sup>88</sup>

Americans still thought that the war could probably be won without their participation. One trend illustrates this fact: although the percentage of people responding that the U.S. should enter the war immediately never passed 30%—it remained below 10% prior to the invasion of France, hovered in the high teens through September of 1940, and with few exceptions

<sup>88</sup>Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. 505.

remained in the 20-30% range thereafter—, the percentage of respondents who replied that we should enter the war if there were no other way to defeat Germany was much higher: 72% in late September of 1940, 68% in early April of 1941, and 70% in November of 1941.<sup>89</sup> The unwillingness of Americans to enter the war immediately is therefore a rather misleading indicator. By November of 1941, 72% of Americans agreed with the statement that the country's most important task was "to help defeat the Nazi government."<sup>90</sup> "Keep out of war," by contrast, netted a meager 2%.

Official reaction to the invasion of France was abrupt. At the beginning of the year President Roosevelt had asked for just under \$2 billion for national defense, up only slightly from the previous year. After the invasion of the Low Countries, the President asked for an additional billion; Congress gave him \$1.5 billion. At the end of May, Roosevelt asked for and received another billion. On July 10, following France's surrender, he asked for and got an additional \$5 billion. In all, appropriations for national defense reached \$10.5 billion in 1940,<sup>91</sup> an impressive figure compared to previous years—\$500-\$700 million in the early Depression years of 1931-1935, \$1.12 billion for 1939, and an initial \$1.77 billion for 1940.<sup>92</sup> The destroyers-for-bases deal, in which the U.S. transferred 50 warships to Great Britain, followed in September; 70% of the public was in favor.<sup>93</sup> Lend-lease was proposed by the President in December and passed both houses with broad popular support within three months. Top-secret military collaboration began as well: by September 1940 a group of American scientists had begun to work with their British counterparts in a secret laboratory at MIT on the development of high-frequency radar, an asset that greatly aided the Allies during the war.<sup>94</sup>

The domestic political landscape, too, was transformed. The Republican Convention, meeting two days after the French surrender, bypassed

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<sup>89</sup>These are the only three occasions on which the question was asked. See Hadley Cantril, ed., *Public Opinion 1935-1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 966-973 for these and preceding figures.

<sup>90</sup>The question asks respondents whether or not they agree that the defeat of the Nazis is the country's most important task, rather than simply asking what the country's biggest task is; the percentage, therefore, should be taken with a grain of salt, as the question was rather loaded. See *Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>91</sup>Robert A. Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 86.

<sup>92</sup>Whitney H. Shepardson and William O. Scroggs, *The United States in World Affairs: An Account of American Foreign Relations, 1940* (Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 330.

<sup>93</sup>Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup>Jennet Conant, *Tuxedo Park: A Wall Street Tycoon and the Secret Palace of Science That Changed the Course of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

its strongest Presidential contenders—Senators Robert A. Taft of Ohio and Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan and New York’s Governor Thomas Dewey, all isolationists to varying degrees—and instead nominated a political novice and former Democrat, Wendell Willkie, who had the advantage of being a staunch internationalist.<sup>95</sup> Isolationism was a dead issue in the Presidential election. A sea change occurred in Congressional elections as well; to take a single example, Cooley reports that the Maine delegation to the House of Representatives was transformed by the 1940 elections. Only one isolationist remained, Rep. James C. Oliver, and “[b]y 1941 [his] isolationist stand . . . was an albatross around the congressman’s neck.”<sup>96</sup> The people and the Government made the commitment to win the war even at the cost of fighting it.<sup>97</sup>

The case that many 1930s isolationists were not “head-in-the-sanders” but rather people who initially saw no threat in the rise of Germany is bolstered by the fact that defectors from the isolationist coalition were overwhelmingly from the left. By the summer of 1940 the remaining isolationists were conservative, with fascists and communists hanging on. As Adler noted, “[t]he word ‘isolationist’ was henceforth to be associated with ‘reactionary’ rather than with ‘progressive.’ ”<sup>98</sup>

American involvement moved rapidly from benevolent neutrality to armed and active belligerency. On March 15, 1941, as the Battle of the Atlantic intensified, the Atlantic Fleet was ordered to return to port, don camouflage paint, and prepare for active duty. On April 10, FDR outlined plans for four task forces to patrol the Atlantic; if U-boats were found they were to be tracked and their locations broadcast for the benefit of the British. In mid-1941, American ports began the regular repair of British ships, first military, then merchant; over the last nine months of the year the tonnage of British ships repaired in American shipyards averaged 430,000 per month. On May 21, the *Robin Moor*, an American freighter, was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine in the South Atlantic. In June, American ships helped search for the German cruiser *Prinz Eugen* after it escaped the battle in which the massive battleship *Bismarck* was sunk. On July 1 the U.S. agreed to defend Iceland and sent troops outside the Western

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<sup>95</sup>On the relationship between Willkie and the Republican isolationists see Donald Bruce Johnson, *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).

<sup>96</sup>Francis Rexford Cooley, “From Isolationism to Interventionism in Maine, 1939-1941”, *Maine History* 37, no. 4 (1998), p. 217.

<sup>97</sup>Duroselle, *From Wilson to Roosevelt*, p. 266; Adler, *Uncertain Giant*, p. 243.

<sup>98</sup>Adler, *Isolationist Impulse*, p. 272.

Hemisphere for the first time since World War I. In August, Churchill and Roosevelt proclaimed via the Atlantic Charter their mutual goal of the destruction of the Nazis. Finally, on September 4 the inevitable occurred, and a German U-boat, U-652, fired on the American destroyer *USS Greer*. By the middle of the month FDR had given the authorization for the American Navy to fire on sight at any German or Italian warships encountered anywhere in the west Atlantic—*casus belli* if ever there were one.<sup>99</sup> On October 17, the American destroyer *Kearny*, responding to a distress call from a convoy under attack, was torpedoed by a German submarine. This was not, as Bailey and Ryan point out, a chance encounter, but rather “deadly and prolonged combat between German submarines and American warships.”<sup>100</sup> The sinking of the destroyer *Reuben James* thirteen days later served only to confirm America’s status as a silent belligerent.

It should be emphasized that American involvement was neither secret nor unpopular: a Gallup poll taken after the President announced the “shoot on sight” order found 62% of the public in favor and only 28% against.<sup>101</sup> The figleaf of noninvolvement was held in place only by Hitler’s determination not to bring the United States formally into the war.<sup>102</sup>

Before December 1941, American public opinion was overwhelmingly committed to defeating Germany and the American Navy was waging undeclared war on Axis ships. Senator Vandenberg wrote that isolationism died at Pearl Harbor; rumors of its demise, unlike those of Mark Twain’s, were long overdue.

## Conclusion

Was the United States isolationist in the interwar period? That is, did it voluntarily abstain from taking part in security-related politics in Europe between Versailles and Pearl Harbor? An affirmative answer seems difficult if not impossible to support.

The argument in favor of American isolationism following World War I rests primarily on non-membership in the League of Nations—a thin reed

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<sup>99</sup>See Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 31, 47-48, 80-81, 109, 110, 166-168.

<sup>100</sup>Thomas A. Bailey and Paul B. Ryan, *Hitler vs. Roosevelt: The Undeclared Naval War* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 197.

<sup>101</sup>Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 168.

<sup>102</sup>See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler in History* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1984), p. 74.

at best, and one that will not support an isolationist interpretation. The League had substantial popular support, and the controversy in the Senate revolved around how, not whether, the United States should take part in world affairs. Were it not for the two-thirds requirement for Senate ratification, the final vote on the League treaty with reservations would have passed by a substantial margin. America sent representatives to the League who took part in its deliberations and in general played a substantial role in European security politics in the 1920s and 1930s. The fact that banks, not tanks, were the instruments of American influence does not lessen the degree to which influence was successfully exerted. It has, however, lessened the degree to which it has subsequently been noticed by scholars.

Similarly, in the pre-World War II period the isolationist interpretation has two solid facts, but only two, unambiguously in its favor: America did not actually declare war on Germany, and Americans consistently did not favor doing so. That is all, and it is not very much. The absence of a declaration of war was a formality. Americans found Nazi Germany odious and resolved to defeat it long before it could have posed a threat to them<sup>103</sup>—though, regrettably, only after the threat that it posed to the continent became manifest. The Neutrality Acts were seen as protection against involvement by some and as potential economic weapons against aggression by others, and in practice they served best in the latter capacity. Americans favored, and America engaged in, security-related activities short of war from a very early date, and after the fall of France Americans rapidly and overwhelmingly concluded that the defeat of Germany was a higher priority than noninvolvement in the war. In the event, America did far more than supply Great Britain: in order to maintain its sea lines of communication, it engaged in naval warfare with Germany well before Pearl Harbor.

Why has the myth of American isolationism persisted? Perhaps because, in hindsight, America should have acted more quickly and more decisively to stop Hitler—but in underestimating Nazi Germany, America was far from alone. Perhaps because opponents of a given action are too easily confused with those who would oppose any action at all. Perhaps because bitter domestic political fights invite caricature. Perhaps for all of the above reasons.

In any event, a more reasonable and accurate interpretation of American foreign policy in the interwar period would conclude that the image of a nation huddled ostrich-like with its head in the sand, oblivious to events in

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<sup>103</sup>For more detail on this point than the current article can provide see Bruce M. Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of U.S. Entry into World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

the world around it, does gross violence to the facts.