

ISOLATIONISM REDUX

History and the Current Crisis

A White Paper
by
Ronald Radosh

Executive Summary:

In this paper, leading American historian Ronald Radosh describes how the antiwar protests that emerged during the Iraq intervention revived the slogans and clichés of the isolationist movement in America before the Second World War. In both cases, opponents of military action concentrated on allegations that war was motivated by illegitimate economic interests, that America was abusing its power, that imperialism was becoming the focus of American policy, that militarism and repression were increasing, and that America risked making new enemies in the world. Although claims that Iraq was a quagmire also echo the protest idiom of the Vietnam era, such charges had also, originally, been voiced at the end of the 1930s. Professor Radosh's arguments links these to a dangerous, anti-democratic alliance of ultra-leftists and neo-fascists.

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“THESE are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.”

– Thomas Paine, *The Crisis*, 1776

The isolationism that was employed to undermine American will and self-confidence in fighting the fascist and militarist aggressors in World War II has been revived, this time targeted against our President and our commitment to the liberation of Iraq.

It had to happen. The naysayers opposed to the campaign for liberation of Iraq, and the doomsday scenario they laid out, struck those of us with knowledge of history with an eerie sense of *déjà vu*. The isolationism that was employed to undermine American will and self-confidence in fighting the fascist and militarist aggressors in World War II has been revived, this time targeted against our President and our commitment to the liberation of Iraq.

Let us examine, in this historical context, the isolationist arguments, which we hear repeated time and time again in op-eds, press conferences, and protest statements.

There is a common set of arguments, echoed over and over.

First and foremost: “No Blood for Oil.” The implication is that the United States acts at the behest of its largest corporations, in this case, the ever-greedy oil lobby. We were told that access to Iraqi oil fields alone motivated U.S. policy. Our critics said American boys were going to be sacrificed for wealthy business interests.

Second: Our Enemies are Victims. The opponents of intervention said that people whose identity, livelihood and well-being have been harmed by precipitous American action, including no-fly zones and an embargo on trade, will now face suffering in the hundreds of thousands, including scores of civilian deaths as a result of both the strategic bombing of Iraq and armed invasion. They declared that nothing that Saddam Hussein has done compares to the evil that will be inflicted on the people of the Middle East as a result of U.S. military action.

Third: The Hegemonic U.S. Empire Expands. Our opponents claim a drift to war is a result of the mechanism of the American Empire – acting to thwart the efforts of competing powers to dominate the trade and investment patterns of the world.

The U.S. is merely new imperialism, acting to advance its interests throughout the world.

Fourth: War means militarism and repression at home. This is alleged to include erosion of civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, and the transformation of the United States into a repressive authoritarian regime similar in nature to that of our proclaimed enemy’s regime.

Fifth: The U.S. is the Enemy. Anti-war activists claim the present Bush administration, not Iraq or any other foreign power harms the interests of the American people, as well as that of all peoples around the world. As the International ANSWER group that runs the peace marches, proclaimed: “the real threat of nuclear war and the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction arises within the U.S. administration.” The administration’s goal is described as a simple one, to “conquer the oil, land and resources of the Middle East.” The result will be a “catastrophe,” a “war of aggression” in which social programs will end, as government funds are exclusively used in the attempt to “take control of and profit from the oil of the Persian/Arabian Gulf.”

Sixth: America approached a new Quagmire. The enemies of liberation in Iraq, speaking from U.S. soil, warned that rather than victory, the U.S. would once again be blindly sucked into a useless and unwinnable war turning the rest of the world against our nation. The U.S., as Pat Buchanan so plainly put it, is acting in a “triumphalist” fashion leading to “an imperial war on Iraq.” And, of course, Buchanan argued that the U.S. is fundamentally manipulated by the Israeli government, which hopes that war with Iraq will give Israel an excuse to return to Lebanon and “settle scores with Hizbollah.” The Jews, now as in the past, are projected as the driving force pushing the U.S. to accept their agenda and endanger the peace of the world.

These themes are all reminiscent of those offered in the years before the outbreak of World War II, when home-grown isolationists in protest movements and pressure groups, backed by a hardy group of supporters in Congress, argued that a

sound American policy was one that put “America First.” This gave the name to the most wide ranging and representative American isolationist group. Indeed, Pat Buchanan’s demagoguery about Israeli influence calls to mind Charles Lindbergh’s 1941 accusation that the drive to enter the war against Hitler emanated from “the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt administration.” Jewish interventionists (neo-conservatives, Buchanan now says) were powerful, according to Lindbergh, because of their “large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.”

In a fashion strikingly similar to Buchanan, the former conservative, now left-wing writer Michael Lind, has come out with his own virtually anti-Semitic conspiracy theory seeking to explain what lay behind the war against Saddam Hussein. He sees policy being made by “neoconservative defense intellectuals” who are “products of the influential Jewish-American sector of the Trotskyist movement...which morphed into a kind of militaristic and imperial right.” According to Lind, they support “preventive warfare,” which he argues is based on “Trotsky’s theory of the permanent revolution mingled with the far-right Likud strain of Zionism.” They are the center, he argues, of a “metaphorical ‘pentagon’ of the Israel lobby and the religious right, plus conservative think tanks, foundations and media empires.” It is a virtual new neoconservative conspiracy theory, which as political scientist Robert J. Lieber writes, is a “sinister mythology...worthy of the Iraqi Information Minister, Muhammed Saeed Al-Sahaf, who became notorious for telling Western journalists not to believe their own eyes as American tanks rolled into view just across the Tigris River.”

In an analysis similar to that made by Lind, the left-wing journalist Eric Alterman, writing in *The Nation*, has stressed that “the war has put Jews in the showcase as never before;” and like Lind, he asserts that a cabal of Jews, including Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Douglas Feith make up the “neo-conservative” triumvirate who along with

their “media cheerleaders” William Kristol, Charles Krauthammer and Martin Peretz have become the “primary intellectual architects” of war against Saddam Hussein.

On both Left and Right, therefore, we see a new conspiracy theory emerging—one that shows the mindset of classical anti-Semitism; ie, as Lieber puts it, “a small, all-powerful but little known group or ‘cabal’ of Jewish masterminds is secretly manipulating policy.” Under their influence, the nation has supposedly shifted away from a policy based on protecting the people’s interests to one that is subversive of that interest—and that benefits primarily the right-wing Zionist leadership of the Likud in Israel.

A striking parallel between today and the 1930’s is the blending together of opposition to a forceful American foreign policy by remnants of both the Old and New Left and the Old Right. Early in the Cold War, Harry S. Truman advisor Joseph P. Jones wrote that “most of the outright opposition” to Truman’s new bi-partisan interventionist foreign policy came from “the extreme Left and the extreme Right...from a certain group of ‘liberals’ who had been long strongly critical of the administration’s stiffening policy toward the Soviet Union, and from the ‘isolationists,’ who had been consistent opponents of all foreign-policy measures that projected the United States actively into World Affairs.”

Some fifty years later, opposition to a forceful U.S. response to new international threats, comes from the same pair of elements. Once again, Left and Right stand on common ground, active in what some have called “the Red-Brown coalition”—after the creation in post-Soviet Russia of an alliance of extreme nationalists with old Communists. Today, Old Right descendants and imitators gather around Pat Buchanan and his journal, *The American Conservative*, which joins the Left in the fight against so-called U.S. “global hegemony.” Their anti-Americanism has become so visceral and extreme that one of

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the journal's contributors, Dennis "Justin" Raimondo, actually wrote, in the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, that the claim that "America is a civilized country" is false, and, referring to World War II, he argued "the wrong side won the war in the Pacific." And like the conspiratorial anti-Semitic Arab newspapers, Raimondo also writes that "Israel had foreknowledge of 9/11," a claim that puts him in league with the most extremist anti-Semites in the Arab world.

Let us look more closely at the claims outlined herein as they appeared in the years before U.S. entry into the Second World War, when isolationist sentiment was overwhelming, and the advocates of a forceful U.S. response to fascist and militarist aggression were fighting a rearguard battle. Just as the opposition to war with Iraq called for lifting the sanctions imposed against Saddam Hussein — sanctions he successfully mitigated by business deals with nations like Russia and France — pre-World War II isolationists argued that sanctions against Japan did not

have the effect of forcing a cessation of Japanese aggression, but rather — as the historian Charles Beard wrote at the time — the "application of sanctions to Japan... would end in war" and represented a move by the President to seek "war in the Pacific." Isolationists then opposed sanctions as a step in the road to war, used unnecessarily by an administration hell bent on military action. When Japan finally attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, Beard and others saw that attack as an act to which Japan had been driven by an intransigent American policy. Even Pearl Harbor, to the isolationists, was America's fault. And as today, the isolationists argued that the U.S. was approaching war because of the dire influence of big business. There was, in other words, no legitimate interest in protecting our nation's national security.

There are so many similarities, in the

pre-World War II arguments of the opponents of interventionism, to those made today by opponents of any military action against Iraq. Let us take up the argument that waging war means the onset of fascist repression at home. Lindbergh's statements appear eerily similar to many made today. We are frequently warned that if we go to war against Saddam Hussein, we will be saddled with an endless commitment to Iraq, in effect a permanent occupation. Speaking in 1939, Lindbergh argued "if we enter in the quarrels of Europe during war, we must stay in them in time of peace as well." Substitute Middle East for Europe, and the concept is the same. He went on: "If we enter the fighting for democracy abroad we may end by losing it at home;" or, as many argue today, the result at home of war with Iraq will be increased militarization, repression and an end to all individual liberty.

There was, of course, a desire for oil. Contrary to the protester's current chant, "No War for Oil," the oil industry wanted to continue with its purchases of Iraqi oil, and favored an end to sanctions which harms the flow. And just as nations like France and Russia desired to maintain their cozy business relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq—including access to its oil—in the period before World War II Japan was set to strike against Dutch and British possessions in East Asia, because of its desire for Indonesian oil. Indeed, the Roosevelt administration let Japan occupy Indo-China. But it drew the line at a takeover of the Dutch East Indies and Malaya—much as George W. Bush has drawn the line with his insistence that Saddam Hussein must seriously disarm.

Then, as now, there were polls. In Europe a large majority of the public recently favored peace over resistance to tyranny—just as they did before the Second World War, when the young and the brightest signed the Oxford Union Pledge that they would not fight "for King and country." In late 1940, the U.S. faced a similar situation. Gallup polls showed that while 60 percent of the American public

avored aid to Britain, less than 13 percent were willing to see the U.S. go to war with Nazi Germany, even if it meant that Britain would lose. *FDR acted against the tide, daring to show true leadership by advancing policies that would deal with the actual threat, while skillfully avoiding the wrath of the isolationist lobby and Congress.* Today, George W. Bush showed his ability for comparable leadership, by moving ahead to do what was necessary, taking the nation with him, and ignoring the protestors, the disgruntled opposition anti-war Democrats, and the fierce opposition of the French and German governments.

One difference between then and now, however, was that a large portion of the intellectual community then formed committees in favor of intervention against the Nazi menace. These groups countered large and influential anti-war lobbies exemplified by the American First Committee. And just as today, opponents of war smeared the President, arguing, as Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana did, that the President sought to “plow under every fourth American boy,” since his aim was to get the U.S. into war, and not to keep it out. To the isolationists, Franklin D. Roosevelt was not a democratically elected President, but a virtual dictator, who if the U.S. went to war, as Senator Robert A. Taft put it, would become “a complete dictator over the lives and property of our citizens.” Like the left today, Taft claimed that the President was presiding over a state that allegedly had become fascist, and in which the President showed “a complete lack of regard for the rights of Congress,” and in which he was making policy “in violation of the people’s will.” Today, George W. Bush is accused by his opponents on the far Right and far Left of being an unelected President, a virtual dictator who seeks wars to validate his Presidency.

And in the 30’s, as today, the proponents of intervention are labeled the forces of big business and oil, those who seek profits above all. Taft argued in 1941, “the most conservative members of the [Republican] party – the Wall Street bankers...the plutocratic newspapers, and most of the party’s financial contributors,”

who favor “intervention in Europe.” On the other hand, it was “the common people, the farmer, the workman...the small business man—who are opposed to war.” Then, it was the “big business interests of the East” who feared “destruction of our foreign trade” who sought war; now, in the 21st Century, the same arguments are being made, and we hear again and again how the business interests desire war, while the common people—millions through Europe demonstrating in the streets—want peace.

Today, we hear the argument that the American cannot and should not be global policemen, intervening the long and bloody European wars. It is also a familiar argument. Speaking in 1939, historian Charles A. Beard told Congress that “the Orient from Siberia to Singapore is not worth the bones of one American soldier,” and that Americans were not “smart enough to solve the problems of Europe which are encrusted in the blood rust of fifty centuries of warfare.” Although Beard acknowledged that a threat existed from Germany and Italy—much as those opposed to war with Iraq argued that Saddam Hussein is a threat but could be dealt with by avoiding war—Beard argued that the rest of Europe outnumbered the fascist states by three to one, and were superior in both armed forces and material. Moreover, like those who today condemn the United States as no better than many dictatorships—essentially regarding the U.S.A. as evil itself and our President as the equivalent of Saddam Hussein—Beard claimed that the Western nations opposed to Hitler were quarreling “over the spoils of empire.” It is a refrain echoed today in the claim of the antiwar protesters that America’s reason for wanting to disarm Saddam stems from its own imperial goals—particularly oil for American firms. As for freeing those who live under the rule of a monstrous tyrant, the argument today is that such action is not America’s

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business—much as Beard argued that it was not the job of the U.S. to suppress all opponents of democracy and peace.

We are now at a stage in which many wish to emulate the discredited policy of appeasement—as defined by the British during the Chamberlain era—and in which opponents of war against tyranny argue that the old isolationist arguments were essentially correct. Then and now, their

claim was simple; the U.S. should seek peace by only narrowly defending itself against direct attacks; it could and should not allow any President to use his power to maneuver the nation into war; nor should it seek to try and spread democracy elsewhere in the world, no matter how tyrannical a government that has challenged the U.S. may be.

Just as Neville Chamberlain called the Munich treaty the essence of “peace in our time,” a sentiment shared by all the would-be “progressive” and “right-thinking” people in Europe, who saw handing over to Hitler the territory he sought

as a strategy that would satisfy the dictator and guarantee the peace—today’s leftwing and rightwing isolationists—the Red-Brown coalition—argue that the Bush administration with its bellicose behavior ignores popular sentiment. The British journalist Alistair Cooke, a young man at the time of Munich, recently recalled that almost 11 million British subjects had signed a “peace ballot” expressing their opposition to war and confrontation with Hitler. Their noble slogan was “Against War and Fascism;” almost eerily similar to the cry of today’s left-wing opponents of war. When they use the term Fascism, they are referring to the U.S. Government—and they remain silent about the monstrous regime and practices of Saddam Hussein. No wonder Alistair Cooke says today “so many of the arguments mounted...today...are exactly what we heard in the House of Commons

debates and read in the French press” in the 1930’s. Even after Hitler began his invasion of Europe, the British and French peace advocates called only for “negotiation.” They were so successful, Cooke quips, that the French ended with “their whole country defeated and occupied.” As for the British, each advance by Hitler’s armies produced only a new call for disarmament and for leaving any response to the League of Nations.

We all know what happened. The League was incapable of responding to violations of its own rule of law, and sat idly by as Japan invaded China and Italy, massacred the Ethiopians and as the mechanized brutes summoned up by Hitler marched through Europe. The League did nothing to protect the fragile Spanish Republic, as its civilian men and women bared their breasts to the bombs of the Nazi Luftwaffe. The fate of the League was sealed, and its irrelevancy led to its final collapse. When the Bush administration and Tony Blair in Britain, supported by the gallant Spanish and Portuguese, sought to move the United Nations against Saddam Hussein, and thus to hold him to account for the requirements the UN itself mandated—instead, its members and the European public argued that must be avoided above all, and that the Iraqi dictator should be given more time. Each obfuscation and avoidance of compliance led the antiwar opponents not to support tough measures that might affect Saddam Hussein, but to counsel avoidance of war above all else. As Cooke points out, when Churchill warned that Hitler had built a giant army and superior air force, the peace movement retorted—“But he’s not used them.” The British Left and the American isolationist Right stood together against intervention.

And so, as Cooke says, “the voices of the 30s are echoing through 2003.” This was made most clear in the speech presented to the U.S. Senate given in late February by Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia. The new antiwar movement was so impressed with Byrd’s presentation that they e-mailed it to their supporters throughout the country. Evidently they find it the most eloquent statement of

their current beliefs and arguments. Yet it is strikingly similar to a speech given by Robert A. Taft in May 1940—a speech correctly disdained at the time as the epitome of isolationism.

The essential problem is that the new isolationists not only emulate and imitate their 1930's predecessors, but in some cases, acknowledge this and are proud of those who preached appeasement in that earlier era. Thus Pat Buchanan, in a forum held on Frontpagemag.com, argued that “there was nothing immoral, or unwise, about the isolationists' position of 1940-41.” Calling the effort made by the discredited America First Committee as helping the U.S. “stay out of the war” until late after it had started, which Buchanan calls “courageous.” Thus those whose actions would have prevented the U.S. from readying itself for a necessary fight against that generation's evil, are today praised by the new isolationists, who seek as they did in the 30's, to build an antiwar movement uniting the left-wing and conservative opponents of military action.

Of course, the left-wing opponents of intervention have their own agenda. When Bill Clinton was President, and acted unilaterally against Saddam Hussein—however weakly and ineffectively—many on the political Left either supported Clinton's brief attempts to deflect terrorism—such as threatening Iraq and bombing a purported chemical factory in Sudan—or remained silent. Approve or disapprove, they favored the Democratic President, and said not a word. In the 1930s, one saw formation of a united front of pro-Soviet groups with “progressive” isolationists like Senator William Borah of Idaho. Indeed, the draft—introduced in Congress as the Selective Service Act of 1940—almost did not pass. The Roosevelt

administration's victory was achieved by only one vote.

In the 1930s, isolationists sought to protect the U.S. by naively believing that America could stand aside as totalitarianism swept the globe, and make pragmatic alliances with evil dictators that would keep our homeland out of the war. In Britain the result was the Munich Pact; in America it was congressional obstruction of measures sought by the President to aid our British ally.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st Century, a new form of totalitarianism—Islamist extremism—threatens the security and well-being of our people. The danger is that our nation will be unable to meet the challenge facing it, if the protestations of the new isolationists are heeded.

When the remnants of the Old Right and the ever diminishing political Left unite against American “global hegemony” and American “imperialism,” even their language is the same. Secretary of State Colin Powell's logical and devastating account of Saddam's evasions and acquisition of banned arms—so similar to the secret re-armament forbidden by the Versailles Treaty and carried out by Hitler with the West's acquiescence—put an end to any chance that the American government would pursue the policy advocated in the 1930s by Neville Chamberlain. After Pearl Harbor, the anti-interventionist movement collapsed overnight. Will our military action against Iraq lead today's “peace movement” leaders to cease nattering and scurry off into the darkness? Not any time soon.

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