From Legacy to Lethargy:  
The Course and Cause of American Military Neutrality in 1940  

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Wednesday, December 18, 1940, dawned clear and cool in New York City, but these calm conditions belied the turbulent political atmosphere that enshrouded the city and, in fact, the entire United States. The day before, President Franklin Roosevelt outlined a plan that had the potential to provoke an outright war with Nazi Germany because it proposed the expansion of United States military aid to the British government. Sometime after Roosevelt’s announcement, German Führer Adolf Hitler issued his confidential Directive 21 from Berlin, which ordered preparations for the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941.¹ U.S. citizens had been fed a sanitized version of the conflict and were exceptionally naïve about the vast dimensions the war would take on in the coming months. Walking about the bustling streets or suburban neighborhoods of the American homeland, they were blissfully unaware that Hitler was prepared to further escalate the largest conflict in the history of humankind. American popular opinion favored some support to the beleaguered British, but Roosevelt’s proposal on December 17 brought dissenters out in droves. Adding to American hesitancy was the grim specter of World War I, which still loomed large in the public consciousness as a reminder of what could occur if the U.S. meddled in European affairs. The negative legacy of World War I served as a major rallying cry for those who opposed U.S. military intervention in 1940.

Americans today generally accept that the United States’ involvement in World War II had the broad support of the citizenry from the outset, but the outraged reaction of a significant minority to the President’s aid proposal tells a very different story. A majority of Americans were willing to risk a chance of war by aiding the British, but very few favored an outright declaration of war against Germany and Italy. Moreover, strictly anti-interventionist Americans were relatively few in number, but those who supported an immediate declaration of war were even fewer. The vast majority of the population was somewhere in the middle, but contemporary polling data reveals that for America in 1940, only two decades removed from the “War to End All Wars,” that old cry rang all too hollow. Americans were not prepared for another war.

American caution was due in large part to international military developments, which did not favor the Allies. By autumn, small gains had been made against the Italian armies in Greece and Libya by Greek and British forces, but the Wehrmacht had a stranglehold on continental Europe and the Luftwaffe was in the midst of a massive bombing campaign directed against London and the surrounding countryside. Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister of British Aircraft Production, claimed that the Royal Air Force had “wrested daylight superiority in the air from

Germany” over London, but he also warned of an impending aerial assault and invasion of the British mainland by the Germans.²

It requires a great deal of imagination for one to envision the situation in late 1940 without the assurance of an eventual Allied victory, given the accepted result. However, with France overrun and with Britain cowed on her island by the Nazi menace; with the mighty Soviet Union and United States governments taking a wait-and-see approach, the final outcome of the war was very much in doubt. Some in the United States took a dim view of the British ability to survive the winter, fully expecting them to capitulate before spring. An editorial in the Atlanta Constitution effectively captured the prevailing opinion in December 1940: “Nazi Germany is no force to be trifled with, no fire with which we can play as we are now gambling.” In fact, in October 1940, nearly thirty percent of Americans were uncertain about which nation would triumph in Europe.³ Early in 1940, the British government had begun a not-so-subtle search for aid by reminding all free democratic governments that they were under the threat of Nazi aggression. This message was especially powerful in light of the recent German invasions of Norway and Denmark.⁴

President Roosevelt also had doubts about the British ability to cope and proposed that the successful defense of American democracy was dependent on a British victory against Nazism. Therefore, said Roosevelt, “we should do everything to help the British Empire to defend itself.”⁵ Essentially, his new initiative called for the leasing of arms and munitions to Great Britain, without requiring immediate payment for the goods, with the knowledge that they would be returned or replaced as soon as the British were able. Toward the end of the Great Depression, with the U.S. markets in shambles, Roosevelt needed an economically palatable way to present his new plan to the nation. Folksy as always, the President offered the analogy of a man whose neighbor’s house had caught fire. The sensible homeowner would not haggle over the price of the hose his neighbor required; he would simply give it to him and expect it to be replaced if it was damaged. By helping to extinguish the fire next door, the homeowner would protect his own property from potential destruction.⁶

Certain elements of American society felt that this proposal was a deliberate attempt by the President to remove the neutral status of the United States and thrust the country into war with Germany and Italy. The “America First” committee (AFC) existed prior to Roosevelt’s new plan, which would become known as the “Lend-Lease Act” after congressional alterations. The AFC was joined by the “No Foreign War” committee (NFC), which was formed in direct response to Roosevelt’s new proposal. Both committees strenuously opposed American involvement in World War II, saying that they would fight for “our peace—without infringement

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⁶ Ibid., 354-355.
on the honor, security, and integrity of the United States.”7 Robert E. Wood of Chicago, Illinois
served as chairman of both Sears, Roebuck & Co. and the AFC. The NFC was created and led by
Verne Marshall of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Marshall, a former member of the ambulance corps, was
the editor of the Cedar Rapids Gazette when he founded the NFC in December 1940.8

At the time, these isolationist committees were often incorrectly labeled as pro-Nazi or
anti-American movements. In fact, their prime purpose was to keep America out of the war, but
they fiercely supported strong United States defenses and as much aid to Great Britain as was
allowable under the congressional Neutrality Act of 1939. The legislation severely limited the
extent to which the United States could lend aid to any government proscribed as a “belligerent”
in a foreign conflict by the current U.S. President.9 It is vital to note that not every American
who opposed entering the war may be classified as an isolationist. In December of 1940, nearly
eighty percent of Americans were opposed to an outright military intervention in the European
conflict, but nearly seventy percent favored expanding foreign aid even at the risk of
inaugurating war with Germany.10 For the purposes of this study, isolationists are defined by
their refusal to expand aid because of the growing risk of war.

In July of 1940, a member of the AFC, Kingman Brewster, wrote that his major fears
were of further naval aid to Great Britain, and a “cloud of fatalism that would settle over the land
if conscription would become a fact.”11 These fears are of vital importance because they
underscore the fundamental isolationist position. Isolationists held that the United States’ best
defense was not propping up Great Britain, but investing in its own military technologies and
defenses. Additionally, they foresaw that aiding Britain militarily was certain to provoke
eventual retaliatory military measures against the United States by Germany.12

Despite widespread support for various tenets of the isolationist position, strict
isolationists were a minority in American society. In September of 1940, slightly more than half
of polled Americans favored aiding Great Britain even at the risk of a war with Germany. Dr.
George Gallup, the director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, wrote:

Month by month this Summer, while Great Britain has been warding off
the blows of Nazi Germany, an increasing number of Americans have
come to the conclusion that it is more important to help England win—
even at considerable risk of war—than to concentrate entirely on ‘keeping
out.’13

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7 “‘No Foreign War’ Drive Launched By Iowa Editor,” ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Daily Tribune,
December 18, 1940, (accessed October 20, 2008).
8 Ibid.
Times, December 18, 1940, (accessed October 8, 2008); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Report to Accompany the Neutrality Act of 1939, 76th Cong., 1st sess., 1939, July 17, 1939, Congressional Serial Set
Database (accessed October 26, 2008).
Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-41 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First
13 “Sentiment to Aid Britain is Growing,” ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, September 22,
1940, (accessed October 25, 2008).
The same Gallup poll revealed that the country was divided on the issue of military involvement along geographical lines. In the South, East, and West, the interventionist movement rapidly gained momentum over the course of 1940, but in the Mid-Western regions, the majority pattern was decidedly isolationist. The national percentage of strictly isolationist voters dwindled from sixty-four percent in May, 1940 to forty-six percent in September as a result of German military victories. AFC member Kingman Brewster confirmed this public shift away from isolationism when he wrote that the “eastern tide of participationist feeling is rising” in July of 1940.

By late 1940, however, AFC member Douglas Stuart believed the pendulum had begun to swing back in favor of isolationism. He wrote to a colleague on December 4, 1940: “You have no idea how much support is suddenly appearing on the horizon. People are waking up to the fact that we have drifted terribly close to the brink of war. Britain is about at the end of her rope.” Stuart’s optimism was buoyed by the recent creation of three new chapters of the AFC (in Kansas City, Washington, and Cincinnati). In fact, with a hefty publicity campaign, the AFC might have grown dramatically. “The trouble is,” said Stuart, “we just don’t have the dough.”

The truth of this statement is confirmed by Stuart’s two letters to AFC Chairman Robert Wood on December 5 and December 8, 1940, imploring Wood to seek out several wealthy financiers who had shown interest in supporting the committee.

Stuart’s claim that isolationism was gaining rapid support late in 1940 was not necessarily borne by the available data, though it was not directly refuted either. The following data graphs from the fall of 1940 represented national responses to two questionnaires regarding the escalation of American involvement in the war. The first survey, asking whether Germany’s defeat was more important than staying completely out of the war, found that between fifty-five and sixty-five percent of those surveyed consistently deemed Germany’s defeat to be the priority issue. The second question raised the issue of aid to Britain versus total military isolation, and found similar results. Between fifty and sixty percent of those polled consistently supported some aid to Britain, though the data tended to fluctuate at a higher rate than for the previous question.

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14 Ibid.
Due to a limited number of surveys that posed these specific questions, it is difficult to establish a positive correlation between public support for the war and significant military events or with political happenings in America. The data did provide sufficient results to establish the prevailing opinion of American white males, but non-Caucasians and females were underrepresented. In each and every poll that raised these questions, the percentage of male respondents exceeded sixty-six percent, and less than four percent of all respondents were persons of color. Such biases do not necessarily disqualify the data, but a proportionally representative sample is obviously more useful in terms of establishing the national perspective on this issue.

The available data and correspondence with regard to American voters and several major isolationist committees revealed strong evidence that the anti-interventionists were significant as a minority in American society, but a minority nonetheless. Often, this leads to the obvious, simplistic conclusion that a majority of U.S. citizens were always prepared to involve the country in a European war should the need arise. The reality is far more complex than the simple dichotomy of war versus peace or aggression versus defense, and the contention that each American fell neatly on either side of the issue based on a decisive factor is illusory.

Philip Jacobs, an instructor of politics at Princeton University in the 1940s, proposed that there were five basic determining factors in the question of neutrality in March of 1940: personal, commercial, military, financial neutrality, and which branch of government controlled neutrality policy. In discussing the findings of his studies about the latter two factors, Jacobs wrote:

A large and relatively constant majority has favored a policy of “financial neutrality” for the U.S., opposing the granting of loans and credits to countries at war, at least to those which still owe us money from the last

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18 Gallup Polls 209, 210, 213, 216, 224, 226, Gallup Brain. “Decade 1940-1949”.
19 Ibid. Polls 210, 213, 224, 226.
20 Ibid. Polls 209, 210, 213, 216, 224, 226.
war. The American public, in the second place, has consistently preferred Congressional to Presidential control of U.S. neutrality policy.²¹

The issues of personal and commercial neutrality were intimately related, as the United States’ lack of impartiality (personal neutrality) was clearly shown by its eschewal of commercial neutrality. The U.S. boycotts on German and Japanese goods and increased aid and trade with Great Britain eradicated any notions of economic impartiality by the United States government.²²

In the two months before the German invasion of France on May 10, 1940, public sentiment in favor of extending credit to Britain and France for the purchase of American goods hovered at just over thirty percent. In a poll taken on May 14, after the invasion began, that number jumped to forty-eight percent.²³ Several surveys taken in September of 1940 are illuminating in terms of the American economic sentiment toward Japan. When asked whether they approved of President Roosevelt’s ban on scrap iron shipments to Japan, over eighty-eight percent of those surveyed answered in support of the ban. The same survey queried whether the U.S. should forbid the “sale of arms, airplanes, gasoline and other war materials to Japan,” and eighty-three percent of voters assented.²⁴ Such heavily weighted figures invalidated any ideas that the U.S. was neutral in a commercial, financial, or personal sense; clearly the majority of Americans supported the Allies.

The remaining issue is whether public opinion supported military neutrality. The American Institute of Public Opinion took eleven national polls over the course of 1940, which posed this question: “Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and send our army and navy abroad to fight?”²⁵ Unfortunately, a majority of the surveys were administered prior to the autumn of 1940; only four were directed between September 1 and December 31. The following graph tracks the responses to all eleven questionnaires.

²² Ibid., 49.
²⁴ Ibid. Poll 213.
²⁵ Ibid. Poll 191.
As stated above, it is difficult to establish a definite correlation with significant events because of a lack of data, especially in the last half of the year. However, conservative speculation might suggest that public support for military intervention began to rise with the German invasion of France in May, and fell with the advent of the German bombing campaign in England, which began in September. Regardless of the reason for the fluctuations in public opinion, the data put forth the contention that Americans, even when Britain was on the precipice of annihilation, were terribly reluctant to commit the U.S. military to what was seen as a European problem.27

Americans viewed Europe as a continent in perpetual turmoil. Several members of the U.S. Congress expressed this perception through legislative debate during the war. In a chronological timeline, which contained over sixty individual military incidents, Republican Representative Frances Bolton outlined a brief history of warfare in Europe and Asia between only 1801 and 1941. Senator Sheridan Downey dug far deeper into European history, beginning in 1066 C.E. with the battle of Hastings and the subsequent British subjugation of Scotland and Ireland. Downey ended his speech with a lengthy discourse on the destructive nature of the Hundred Years’ War that concluded dramatically: “yes…a war that persisted one full century.”28

This perception of constant European strife was critical to the arguments of those opposed to America’s entry into the war, but one war in particular was used as a justification for isolationism. As the most recent U.S. war, World War I (U.S. involvement in 1917-1918) left the American military and public feeling jaded because of the relatively light punitive steps taken toward the defeated Central Powers after the war. The general sense among the American citizenry was that little had been accomplished by World War I and, in fact, according to a national poll taken in November of 1940, nearly forty percent of Americans thought the U.S. should not have involved itself in “the Great War.” During the same speech in which he explored and castigated Europe’s history of warfare, Senator Downey spoke about the ill effects of America’s most recent war. He said, “in the last war our American eagle endeavored to mother the British lion: we lost all our tail feathers and almost our wings... if we again become involved in the big-league conflict over in Europe we will lose not only our wings but, perhaps our head this time.”29

Downey’s analogy was an articulate expression of the fears of the U.S. public, and these fears had a great deal to do with American reticence toward entering what was widely viewed as a second, larger version of the original conflict. Despite being on the winning side of World War I, “we [the U.S.] left Europe in disillusionment when power politics reared its ugly head at Versailles.”30 In 1935, several years before the onset of World War II, this sentiment was echoed by the Christian Century magazine, based in Chicago:

27 See pp. 2-3, 5.
The ultimate inevitability of war remains the obsession as well as the major premise of European thinking and political action. Ninety-nine Americans out of a hundred would today regard as an imbecile anyone who might suggest that, in the event of another European war, the United States should again participate in it.\footnote{A Peace Policy for 1935.} The Christian Century. January 9, 1935, 40. (Emphasis Added)

As previously revealed, the isolationist faction in U.S. society was somewhat less than ninety-nine percent of the population, but the inherent premise that war in Europe was considered an inevitability by Europeans is of critical importance to the American reaction to the war. Such a statement demonstrated what Americans believed about European nations: they sought out the wars in which they were constantly embroiled.

In October 1939, Congressional Representative Daniel Reed summarized the prevailing American view of Europe, using the words of Major George Eliot, a former U.S. military intelligence officer:

> The affairs of Europe can be settled only when the peoples of Europe have made up their minds that war is not worth while. But we cannot convince them of that. They will have to convince themselves. The only policy for the American people to adopt may be stated in these words: The affairs of Europe and Asia must be settled by the peoples who live there; the affairs of the Americas shall be settled by the people who live here, and by no one else.\footnote{U.S. Congress, Congressional Record, vol. 85, 478.}

Reed’s words were met with raucous applause in the chamber, which indicated the mood in Congress toward intervention. As in the Christian Century article above, Major Eliot made a key point when he intimated that the European powers thrived on the existence of war.

Historian Michael Adams argues that, in light of a massive recent immigration from Europe, “many Americans had a legitimate distrust of European political stability. Many had recently left Europe to find a new life in America, and they didn’t want entanglements with the Old World.”\footnote{Michael C. C. Adams, The Best War Ever: America and World War II, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 25.} When the French and British governments declared war on Germany in September 1939, following the German invasion of Poland, the looming political instability to which Adams refers became a tangible reality. In 1941, one anti-war pamphlet in particular raged against the European powers, saying that Britain and France provided war material to Germany (and vice-versa) in an effort to extend the war until America became involved. The same pamphlet also claimed that Britain had plans to return the United States to its empire by creating a united North American state: “AMERICANADA.”\footnote{Great Britain, France, British Colonies Declare War on Hitler: Guns Roar In Europe As Answer To Germany Hitler Informs Nation He Is Headed for Eastern Front; Year 1914 Virtually Duplicated, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World, September 4, 1939 (accessed December 6, 2008); Oscar Brumback, A Manual of The Citizens No Foreign War Coalition, Inc., (Washington: The Citizens No Foreign War Coalition, 1941), 64-65.} Perhaps neither claim was widely
believed, far-fetched as they were. However, the fact that the anti-war faction attempted to
foment dissension by feeding on these fears demonstrated that the American people already
distrusted the political leviathans of Europe.

This is not to say that the haunting memories of World War I or a European history
fraught with conflict were the decisive factors in keeping America out of World War II until
December of 1941. However, one or both of these justifications for a peaceful approach were
found in virtually every written or verbal attempt to rationalize and support the United States’
absence from the war before 1941. Whether America’s memory played a larger role in the peace
movement than nationalistic, economic, or security concerns in the public consciousness is a
matter that requires more extensive study.

Beyond debate, however, was the fact that a decided majority of the population opposed
direct military intervention throughout 1940. Nevertheless, Germany’s defeat and a British
victory were both considered a higher priority than total isolation. Americans were increasingly
willing to become involved in various ways, short of a declaration of war, due to considerable
German military triumphs in 1939 and 1940. Significantly, the percentage of Americans who
couraged immediate military intervention nearly tripled in 1940, but the final figure still barely
exceeded fifteen percent of the population.35 Hearkening back to Philip Jacob’s theory about the
nature of neutrality, one might speculate upon the reasons for the gradual shift toward
intervention. Especially crucial was the lack of commercial impartiality shown by the U.S.,
which was openly demonstrated by President Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease proposal on December 17,
1940. The U.S. spent the latter portion of the Great Depression constantly increasing its
investment in a British victory. It is only logical that American support for that investment
should have grown as the danger to British survival increased.

Modern scholarship and memory often overlook 1940 because it served as a lull between
the inauguration of the war in 1939 and the 1941 entrance of the United States and Soviet Russia.
The signal contribution of 1940 was that the U.S. campaign to intervene in Europe, though
limited, found its base and experienced significant growth after France fell to the Germans.
Despite this growth, the extant evidence refutes any contention that the United States was unified
either in support or opposition to entering the war so early. The America First and No Foreign
War committees, along with others, proved to be tenacious in pursuit of their mission. Heavily
influenced by the well organized isolationist minority, America rode the fence until 1941.

35 See Figure 3.
Bibliography


“Great Britain, France, British Colonies Declare War on Hitler: Guns Roar In Europe As Answer To Germany Hitler Informs Nation He Is Headed for Eastern Front; Year 1914 Virtually Duplicated.” *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World*. September 4, 1939 (accessed December 6, 2008).


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