



# The Myth of American Isolationism

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International relations scholarship often describes America's foreign policy tradition as having isolationist tendencies or an isolationist dimension, a characterization derived most directly from American security policy in the 1920s and 1930s. 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. In short, American isolationism is a myth.

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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 (Adler 1957; Jonas 1966; Tucker 1972). 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 (Faulkner 1950; Fleming 1968: chapter 2) through the turbulent 1920s and 1930s (Divine 1974; Cole 1983; Powaski 1991; Dallek 1995) and right up to the American failure to respond to Nazi aggression (Spanier 1983; Divine 2000:24–25). Only the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, we are typically told, was sufficient to rouse Americans from their insular torpor (for a recent detailed summary see Berinsky 2009:45). Such assertions, both in textbooks and in monographs, can be multiplied indefinitely (Roskin 1974; Holsti and Rosenau 1979; Waltz 1993:72; Gaddis 1997:35–36; Ruggie 1997:90) and persist to the present day (for example, Widmaier 2007: 779, Bolton 2008:25).

Unfortunately, the characterization of America as an isolationist in the interwar period, when isolationism supposedly reached its peak, is simply wrong. The image of American isolationism has persisted in large part due to misinterpretations and misconceptions: the Treaty of Versailles was killed in the Senate by a minority, for example, many of whom were internationalists, and while those who warned of the threat of a rising Germany were clearly correct in hindsight, the available indicators at the time did not warrant an extraordinary response until after the fall of France—when, in fact, one occurred. The United States in the 1920s and 1930s was not uninvolved in security politics in Europe, nor were its citizens unwilling to be involved in European security affairs. This is not to deny that isolationists played a role in the politics of the era; they did. 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”

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(Shepardson and Scroggs 1939:127), in combination with disaffected internationalists of one stripe or another.

The security policy of the 1920s was relatively invisible because, thanks to America's overwhelming strength, it could rely on banks rather than tanks: American financial muscle was more than adequate to manage those security-related quarrels that did arise among war-weary contestants throughout the decade. American neutrality legislation in the 1930s, often cited as evidence of isolationism, was in fact a compromise between isolationists and internationalists. Moreover, Pearl Harbor was simply not the watershed event that it has been made out to be: American commitment to fighting the war if necessary solidified once the Nazi threat became clear, nearly a year and a half *before* Pearl Harbor, and American military actions in the fall of 1941 amounted to undeclared warfare. Both a narrow view of the instruments of American foreign policy and conceptual confusion surrounding the phenomenon of isolation have obfuscated the fact that, viewed objectively and without the benefit of hindsight, the country pursued a fairly ordinary, moderately internationalist foreign policy.

### **Importance for Theory and Policy**

A historical argument over a single case might seem to be of marginal relevance in a discipline in which studies with hundreds of thousands of observations are not uncommon. Its relevance derives from the leverage exerted by this one case: Scholars who fail to question it produce flawed inferences across many areas of research, and analysts who misunderstand the history of the period will misunderstand its relevance for current policy as well (see for example, Rosati and Scott 2007:14–15).

In the press as well as in the academic literature on public opinion and American foreign policy, the interwar period is typically depicted as a deeply isolationist (or "introverted") one, and 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. The academic literature differs regarding whether the interwar period was part of a cyclical trend in American policy (Klingberg 1952; Perkins 1962; Klingberg 1983; Holmes 1985; Schlesinger Jr. 1986; Rosati 1994; Pollins and Schweller 1999) or an example of a more general democratic torpor (Lippmann 1955: chapter 2; Kennan 1984:66; Nincic 1992:8), but the existence and impact of isolationist moods is rarely questioned.

This taken-for-granted character of isolationist sentiment, combined with a lack of conceptual coherence, can produce an unquestioning acceptance of the existence of isolationism in public opinion, with serious implications for policy. A widely-cited recent report from the Pew Research Center, for example, made much of the finding that 49% of the American public agreed with the statement that the US should "mind its own business" in international affairs, even subtitled the report "Isolationist Sentiment Surges to Four-Decade High" (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009:3). Digging deeper, however, only 11% of the respondents replied that the US should play no leadership role whatsoever in world affairs; fully 84% responded that the US should either "play a shared leadership role"—one that involved being "about as active as" or "more active than" other leading nations—or "be the single world leader" (p. 71). The media subsequently reported that "a historic isolationist mood has gripped the country" that "could complicate [the President's] efforts to sell an expanded war" in Afghanistan (Halloran, 2009). By one detailed account (Kull and Destler 1999), this misreading of American public opinion has had a substantial impact in foreign policy areas as diverse as foreign aid, defense spending, and support for peacekeeping efforts.

The image of America as an isolationist country pervades a variety of theoretical literatures as well, and to the extent that American involvement is relevant to each theory, the inaccuracy of this image compromises their conclusions. The most straightforward example is that of political realism, which often refers to American isolationism—typically as an example of Americans' failure to follow the prescriptions of power politics (Morgenthau 1948:36–37; Kissinger 1994:376). Some authors in this tradition recognize that this failing on the part of American politicians also represents a failure of theory: Schweller (1998: 173), for example, notes that structural/systemic realism “cannot explain why the United States did not play a more active mediator or balancer role in Europe; the answer resides at a lower level of analysis.” Similarly, Mearsheimer (2001:254, 354–355) summarizes America's lack of involvement in European politics and concludes that “[t]here were five great powers in the European system between the two wars,” omitting the United States from the subsequent list. In fact, as I will argue below, the United States was not absent from the list of interwar Great Powers, nor was its response to developments in Europe particularly difficult to comprehend from a realist perspective. But the failure to account for its behavior in a realist theory of politics is not unlike the failure to account for the influence of a planet in a model of a solar system—and a fairly large planet, at that.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the literature on grand strategy in general and American grand strategy in particular points to the isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s as an ideal type. In a prominent recent survey, Robert Art (2004:172–173) not only argues that “[i]solationism's grip on the United States was especially strong in the first half of the twentieth century” but that, more generally, “[i]solationism is the grand strategy with the longest lineage in American foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup> When these studies seek to distill the lessons of the past, this belief in a period of American isolationism becomes a red herring. Some argue that isolationism constitutes an aberration to be avoided (for example, Muravchik 1996), others point to it as a usable past to be emulated (Nordlinger 1995; Gholz, Press and Sapolsky 1997), while others offer more balanced assessments (Tucker 1972; Art 1991; Chalberg 1995; Jentleson 1997; Schneider 1997). At best, this confusion constitutes a waste of time and effort; at worst it perpetuates advocacy for a policy that never existed in the first place.

### *Existing Challenges*

The image of American isolationism has been called into question by the revisionist and corporatist schools of historians of American foreign policy, which assert that American attempts to establish economic rather than military empire—an “empire without tears”—give the lie to any characterization of the United States as isolationist.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, revisionist and corporatist arguments, while illuminating, had little impact on the image of an isolationist America that persists in the political science literature. The reason is straightforward: revisionists and

<sup>1</sup> See also the literature on hegemonic stability theory (for example, Kindleberger 1973; Krasner 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Art infers from that history that the central tenets of an isolationist strategy are “to stay out of most wars and to keep a free hand for the United States.” (82) This definition blends inactivity with unilateralism; it is this conceptual looseness that permits Art to argue, descriptively, that isolationism (*qua* unilateralism) dominates the history of American foreign policy.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen (1987). The most prominent revisionist advocate of this position is Williams (1954, 1972); variations on the theme can be found in Leffler (1974) and Cohen (1987), *inter alia*, and a critique in Hogan (1990:157). In a summary of the corporatist position, Hogan (1990:157) argues that “[c]orporatist works put to rest forever what William Appleman Williams called the legend of isolationism. ... [T]hey make it possible to see important connections between the search for order at home and abroad.”

corporatists focus on American *economic* goals and the foreign policy activity that they prompted.<sup>4</sup> Highlighting economic activity, I will argue, is more important than most security scholars have realized. Most of the insights gleaned from this literature are poorly suited to dispel the myth of American isolationism, however, while revisionism's focus is on activity in pursuit of economic desiderata (for example, Williams 1972:121–123), the standard accounts of isolationism describe inaction in the face of political, ideological, and military threats or opportunities.

The characterization of American isolationism has also been challenged by a small number of scholars (generally, historians), who do address isolationism in the realm of security policy, mostly by pointing out that American foreign policy could more reasonably be characterized as unilateralism<sup>5</sup> or that it was a more rational response to objective circumstances than the conventional wisdom would have us believe.<sup>6</sup> Though these critiques speak most directly to the points raised here, they still miss the mark: even accepting the larger point that isolationism equates to unilateralism leaves open the question of how actively unilateralist the state was at various times. Moreover, as the above examples demonstrate, in the absence of a concerted conceptual and empirical reassessment the conventional wisdom remains just that. These scattered attempts have had no appreciable impact on any of the major strands of political science research outlined above.

The critique on offer here is an attempt to fill this gap. It addresses isolationism purely in the sphere of international security, where revisionist and corporatist arguments have yet to tread. Rather than arguing that America was not economically isolationist in the interwar period—a point with which few scholars now have substantial quarrels—it will demonstrate that America was not isolationist in affairs relating directly to international security in Europe for the bulk of the period. The United States did far more than espouse the pious hope that the pursuit of prosperity would bring an end to war: it used legal, economic, and military instruments in the direct pursuit of specific and ambitious security goals throughout the period between Versailles and Pearl Harbor.

### What is Isolationism?

Understandings of isolationism vary substantially (for a comprehensive overview see Doenecke 1987). 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>7</sup> Discussions of American grand strategy focus on the extent to which the

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<sup>4</sup> This fact undercuts bold statements like Hogan's (previous footnote). In fact, on the previous page Hogan himself demonstrates that corporatist understandings of the “order” brought about by American economic policy have little to do with traditional security politics: “Republicans saw international economic growth as the way to eliminate autarky and to integrate national economies into a world capitalist order. Growth could be achieved by unleashing private initiative and normal market forces, steps best arranged through most-favored-nation treaties, convertible currencies, the reduction of international indebtedness, and the export of private capital and technical know-how.”

<sup>5</sup> On these points see especially McDougall (1998), who argues that the concept should be rejected in its entirety, and Herring (2008), who concludes that its utility is greatest in the 1930s.

<sup>6</sup> Here see especially Zahniser (1992) and Russett (1972).

<sup>7</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 (1952:239), 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.

United States actually *does* involve itself in foreign affairs.<sup>8</sup> As already noted, corporatist and revisionist understandings of isolationism are largely economic and come closer to what political scientists think of as autarky.

In attempting to untangle this conceptual mess it is important not to survey the spectrum of American political beliefs or behavior in the interwar period and describe some subset of that spectrum as “isolationist.”<sup>9</sup> Isolationism so defined will of necessity be uncovered by subsequent investigation, a fact that renders investigation pointless. In fact, other (and better) examples of isolationism 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, and Michael Roberts’ careful examination of British foreign policy from 1763 to 1780 shows that isolationist tendencies dominated in that period as well (Roberts FBA 1970; Schroeder 1994). 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 (Allen 1971; Reischauer 1988). In the decades preceding the early 1960s, Bhutan was even more isolated from the outside world;<sup>10</sup> Nepal underwent a brief period of isolation in the late 1940s, and Burma’s foreign policy took a dramatic turn toward isolationism in 1963–1965. China underwent an isolationist period under the later Ming Dynasty, and another, briefer one under Mao in 1966–1969.<sup>11</sup>

Such examples lend empirical perspective. First, isolationism is often limited to a particular sphere, geographic or otherwise. Rosati and Scott (2007: chapter 2), for example, systematically dismantle the popular notion that “US foreign policy was isolationist until World War II and internationalist thereafter” and argue that it must be assessed on a regional basis, in contrast to its earlier (continental) and later (global) periods. 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 nineteenth 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.

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.

Third, isolationism cannot be recognized by the particular form that noninvolvement takes because no particular form of noninvolvement is unique to isolationism (see Figure 1). Foreign policy activities are to a considerable degree *substitutable*: each can, to some degree, perform the task of the others (Most and Starr 1989: chapter 2). 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

<sup>8</sup> Art (1991:6); Tucker (1972:12). Nordlinger (1995:6) is a succinct description of “isolationism’s fundamental maxims: Going abroad to insure America’s security is unnecessary; doing so regularly detracts from it.”

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Powaski (1991:ix), Spiezio (1995:118), or Doenecke (1987:xv).

<sup>10</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 Holsti (1982a:22).

<sup>11</sup> Waldron (1990), covers the Ming period in depth; Holsti (1982b) and Yahuda (1983) discuss the turn inward under Mao.

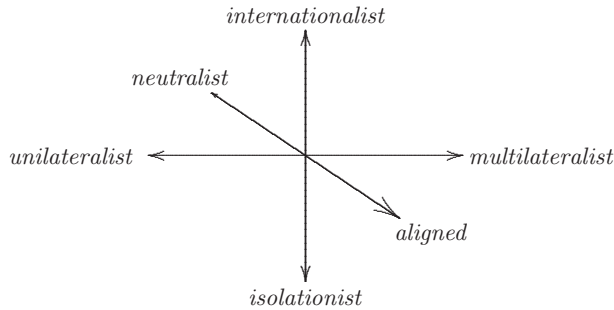


FIG. 1. Often-Conflated Dimensions of Foreign Policy

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.

Therefore, defining isolationism as a long-term policy of rejecting formal alliances<sup>12</sup> is problematic, because the avoidance of permanent alliances is not unique to isolationism: such a policy could just as well serve the interests of a unilateralist country.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, neutral states 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, as in the cases of the United Nations peacekeeping forces. While uni-/multilateralism refers to the state's propensity to act alone or with others and neutralism/alignment refers to the direction of a state's foreign policy, isolationism/internationalism refers to the intensity with which it pursues its goals.

Isolationism, therefore, is best thought of as the voluntary and general abstention by a state from security-related activity in an area of the international system in which it is capable of action. This abstention, of course, need not be total, though it should be substantially greater than circumstances would warrant: the state's reactions to security-related developments within the area should be greatly curtailed. The insistence that isolationism must be general, that is, not limited to specific kinds of behavior or conditions for action, 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.

This definition avoids the difficulties mentioned above. It allows for the possibility of limited geographic scope. 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.

Now that the definition of isolationism has been offered, 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.

<sup>12</sup> See Nolan (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 Schlesinger Jr. (1986:58).

<sup>13</sup> This point is made in Lake (1999) and Legro (2000), both of whom consider interwar American foreign policy to be unilateralist.



## Interwar Foreign Policy

### *American Internationalism in the 1920s*

America's failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles has, understandably, dominated scholarly evaluations of American foreign policy activity in the early interwar period. Unfortunately, it is a very misleading indicator, for two reasons. The first is that the Treaty had majority support but fell victim to the Senate's requirement of a supermajority for international treaties: the Senators were in favor of membership, on the final of three attempts to ratify the Treaty, by a margin of 49 to 35, seven conversions short of the two-thirds required for passage.

The second reason, related to the first, is that the considerable majority proved willing to envision engagement with Europe. Only a small group of so-called Irreconcilables consistently voted against the Treaty in any form, (Stone 1970; Margulies 1989) 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 (Ambrosius 1987:108, 213) and of others for an international judiciary to keep the peace (p. 12, below). 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>14</sup>

The public, too, was very much in favor of League membership, if not of Article X (Vinson 1961). 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 (Startt 1965). And it is worth noting that neither major party had thought isolationists to be worth courting in 1916, when American entry into the war was still at issue (Knock 1992:100).

Accordingly, America in the 1920s was hardly inactive in the European political arena. The first attempt to redress the perils of the European (and Asian) situation was the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922. The Conference serves as another illustration that genuine isolationists were lacking: it was initiated by Senator William Borah, lion of the Irreconcilables,<sup>15</sup> and promoted most vigorously by precisely those Senators who had most passionately opposed 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." (Link and Catton 1974:86) 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

<sup>14</sup> Bartlett (1944:50–51), cited in Claude (1962:137). See Widenor (1980), 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>15</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). These votes may make Borah seem inconsistent (Cohen 1987:14), but in fact his voting record indicates that he was one of the most consistently progressive Senators in the Republican party (Johnson 1967:150–151). The fact that he both loathed the League and championed disarmament, therefore, should come as no surprise.

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>16</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. 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 rapturing 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 sides. By May 1921 a debt of 132 billion gold marks (\$30 billion) was agreed upon (Pulzer 1997:106) 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 (Trachtenberg 1981). 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 (Mommsen 1996: chapter 5). 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. (Albrecht-Carrié 1958:397)

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" 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

<sup>16</sup> Iriye (1993:76-77). 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.



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 uninterested 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 (Pusey 1951:581); 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>17</sup>

Moreover, American influence is the key to the mystery of the Dawes Plan's passage in Germany. Because it had to be accepted by a two-thirds margin, the plan required votes from members of the German National People's Party (DNVP). This fact made passage unlikely, because the DNVP was unrelentingly hostile to the idea. Nevertheless, as German historian Eberhard Kolb writes, "[u]nexpectedly, on August 29, 1924 about half of the DNVP votes in the Reichstag were cast for the plan." Kolb attributes the change of heart to pressure from domestic industrial and agricultural interests, but in fact the eleventh-hour conversion owed much to the fact that American Ambassador Alanson B. Houghton convinced the DNVP leadership that a "no" vote would so sour American public opinion that no future loans would be forthcoming. Houghton even went so far as to provide a draft of a letter of acceptance, which the Germans used verbatim (Kolb 1988:61; Jones 1981:36-37).

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. The discussions were promising but continued to be dragged down by such issues as Germany's eastern borders and its friendship with the Soviet Union.

At that point, Ambassador Houghton, giving the keynote address at the Pilgrim Society in London on May 4, 1925, issued what has been called "America's Peace Ultimatum to Europe." Houghton, whose address was broadcast via radio, made it clear that America was the only source of the loans that were needed to

<sup>17</sup> On American use of financial muscle to defuse the Ruhr crisis see Cohen (1987:32-33) and Costigliola (1984:120-122); on the terms of the Dawes Plan see for example, Sontag (1933:360-361).

fuel British reconstruction, and that, absent peace and security on the continent, further loans would not be forthcoming. The *New York Times*' headline captured the essence of the speech succinctly: "Houghton Demands Peace In Europe Or Our Aid Ceases." (Matthews 2004:121) Coolidge himself reemphasized the message in a public speech 2 months later. 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 (Costigliola 1976:497–498; Hogan 1977:213; Costigliola 1984:120–122). 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 US was considerable, and to some extent it was based on more than just wishful thinking about peace.<sup>18</sup> In fact, 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. (February 14, 1923; CR 64–4–3605)

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—legalistic, perhaps, or idealistic—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>19</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 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

<sup>18</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 Johnson (1995:177–178).

<sup>19</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).

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." (*FRUS* 1928:I, 252.)

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 active as was the foreign policy of the Cold War, but the environment of the 1920s provided no danger comparable to the post-1945 Soviet threat. America still initiated and responded to a broad range of international events 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." (Iriye 1993:78) The United States was in large part responsible for these initiatives. The lack of formal participation in the League of Nations is only one indicator of America's involvement in Europe—a misleading one, in that it happens to be far more visible than America's informal participation and wide range of security-related activities outside of the League framework.

*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 1-year moratorium on debt payments, but little was accomplished. The opening of the World Disarmament Conference 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 US 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 *re*armament. The London Economic Conference, prompted by Roosevelt's urgings, soon foundered (Jessup 1935:58; Dallek 1995:35–54); Fanning 1995:133–134, 149ff.

In addition at this time, the first of the Neutrality Laws came into existence. 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. 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 (Shepardson and Scroggs 1939:159–160). 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 (United States House of Representatives 1937:174–177). Only in November of 1939 did this uneasy 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." (*FRUS* 1930:III, 85) 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 (Lukacs 1998:131).

For some time after his ascent, therefore, Hitler's goals still appeared, to Americans, to be relatively standard ones for a European Great Power. To some extent this was by design: Hitler's speeches regarding peace and noninterference in his neighbors' affairs were designed to nullify American opposition (Adler 1965:169). The apparent absence of any moral dimension beyond those normally involved in European balance-of-power politics 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." (Jonas 1966:112). 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 nondemocratic, 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>20</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." (Abzug 1999:47). 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 (Adler 1965:198). 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>21</sup>—but as the 1930s progressed Americans became increasingly aware that Nazism was anathema. By early 1939, when Hitler was named Man of the

<sup>20</sup> On the willingness of the West to accommodate a "normal" state and Germany's failure to meet the criterion see Pulzer (1997:140–141).

<sup>21</sup> Goldhagen (1996:147) claims that the decision was made in late 1940 or early 1941; Gerlach (1998) argues that the decision was not made until December 1941.

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 desecrated cathedral, his victims dangling from a Saint Catherine's wheel.<sup>22</sup>

Although Americans increasingly realized that Hitler was evil, they still believed that American intervention was unnecessary because German weakness meant that 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>23</sup> reflects the belief that the democracies were in little danger even without formal American participation (Reynolds 1982).

Accordingly, 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 remilitarization of the Rhineland and the *Anschluss* were 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." (Duroselle 1963:255)

Absent hindsight, the conclusion that Germany was not to be feared was a reasonable one at the time. Germany's economy was operating very nearly at full steam even during peacetime, and the failure of the bond market and near-depletion of foreign reserves in late 1938 indicated that the overtaxed German economy would not sustain the strains of mobilization for long (Harrison 1988; Tooze 2006: chapter 9). 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), 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 (Murray 1984:16; Ellis 1993:273–274). A recent summary 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" and felt that it "brought with it the high probability of bankruptcy." (Casey 2001:7–8)

German land and air forces reflected this disarray. The *Luftwaffe* was the most impressive branch of the service numerically, but its numbers mask the fact that the majority of the aircraft produced through mid-1937 were trainers, and most of the bombers and fighters were obsolete. At the time of the invasion of France, Germany could only muster 2,439 tanks against the 4,200 fielded by the French, British, Belgians and Dutch—nothing near the usual 3:1 ratio recommended for success in offensive operations. Nor were German tanks qualitatively superior; in fact, quite the opposite (Tooze 2006:371). The fact that Germany's unorthodox gambit through the Ardennes worked to devastating effect and most likely saved

<sup>22</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>23</sup> The figure remains constant from February, 1937 to October, 1939 (Cantril 1948).

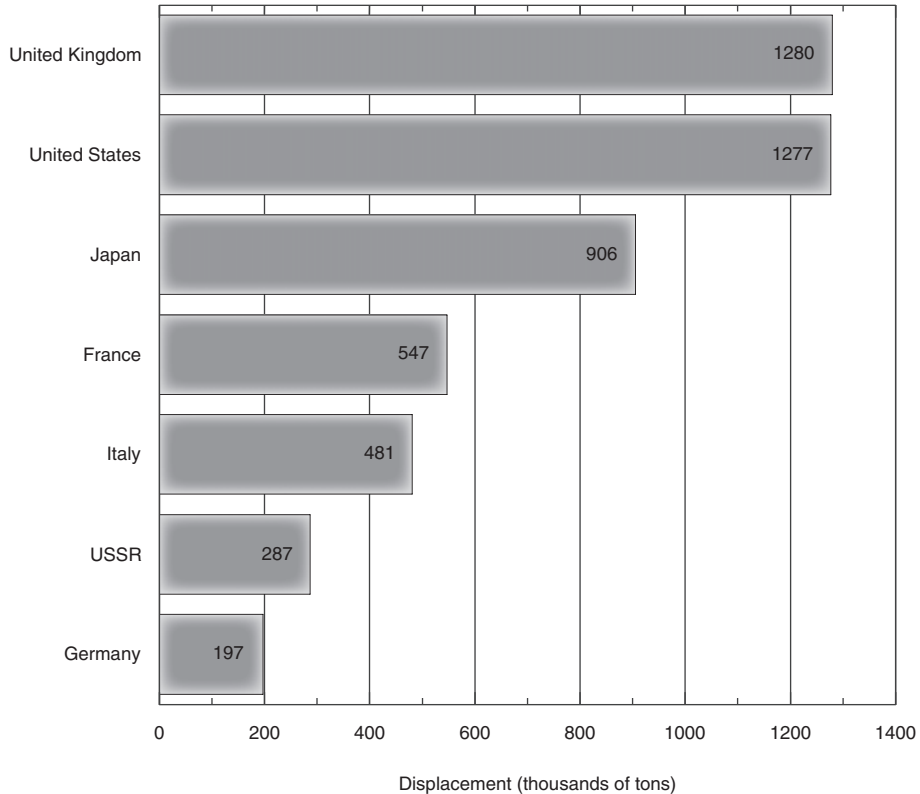


FIG 2. Naval Strength of Major Powers, 1939

them from collapse should not obscure the fact that no sober observer at the time on either side thought it could succeed.

Of more direct relevance to the US, perhaps, Germany's 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 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>24</sup> Given that the United States had, in the previous year, decided to increase its fleet by 20% to include a total of 21 battleships, seven 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 12–15 years to catch up (Stegemann 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Langer and Gleason (1952:246). 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.



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 (Langer and Gleason 1952; Haight Jr. 1970:48, 222).<sup>25</sup>

*American Reaction to the Fall of France*

The recognition of Hitler's odious program fulfilled the first prerequisite for American involvement: politics on the European continent became relevant to American values. Only later, when the perceived balance tipped heavily and abruptly in favor of Germany, was the second prerequisite fulfilled: the threat to those values 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 industries 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>26</sup>

Nevertheless, in early 1940 it still 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 9-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 (*FRUS* 1940:I, 1-135; Murray (1984:328-330).

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>27</sup> The fall of France fulfilled the second prerequisite for American involvement: 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 February of 1939, 30% of respondents in

<sup>25</sup> One case of the smuggling of aircraft across the Canadian border—ironically, in the home state of isolationist Senator Gerald Nye—is documented by Shoptaugh (1993).

<sup>26</sup> Murray (1984:292) 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>27</sup> Cantril (1948). The percentage subsequently rebounded, though the later estimates may have reflected the greater likelihood of American assistance.

a national survey had been willing to help England and France in the war. When the question was phrased differently and respondents were asked specifically whether they would be willing to go to war for England and France, between March and August of 1939 the percentage responding in the affirmative never exceeded 20%. Another question, asking whether we should go to war *if* England and France were to lose, produced 29% in favor of doing so in both August and November of 1939. Finally, a fourth question, which was to be put into the field repeatedly throughout the rest of 1940 and into 1941, asked respondents whether helping England and France was more important than avoiding war with Germany; in late May of 1940, with the German invasion underway, the question netted a still-meager 33.6% in favor of aiding England and France.<sup>28</sup>

That percentage trended abruptly upward following the French surrender: by August the percentage that preferred aid to Britain over noninvolvement had risen to 43%, opinion was divided almost 50/50 in September and October, and after October it never dropped below 50% again. By 1941 almost two-thirds of the respondents (66.1%) chose aid to England over staying out of war; twice—in March and October of 1941—the number passed the 70% mark. In short, more than a year before Pearl Harbor occurred, a majority of Americans were willing to prevent German victory by armed force if necessary, and that majority seems to have solidified and stabilized sometime in early 1941. Figure 3 illustrates this trend. The increased perception of American vulnerability trended upward at the same time: The percentage of Americans who believed that they would be personally affected by the war, which had been at 48% in March 1940, jumped to 67% in July and remained there (71% in January of 1941) (Casey 2001:24), and while 75% of those who favored aid to Britain even if it meant risking war also responded that they thought that Germany and Italy would attack us within 10 years if they defeated the British, only 33% of those who did not favor aid to Britain said they feared such an attack (Bruner 1944:24).

Official reaction to the invasion of France was abrupt. Berinsky (2009:87–89), examining statements in the *Congressional Record*, documents an abrupt increase in the percentage of pro-war statements beginning in the summer of 1940, especially among Democrats. Moreover, deeds matched words. 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, 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. The destroyers-for-bases deal, in which the US transferred 50 warships to Great Britain, followed in September; 70% of the public was in favor. Lend-lease was proposed by the President in December and passed both houses with broad popular support within 3 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

<sup>28</sup> Given the quality of public opinion polling in this era, it is reasonable to wonder about the quality of these numbers. Adam Berinsky has engaged in a long-term project involving reweighting public opinion data from this period, including the last of the four questions described above, and his conclusions with regards to these data were, first, that underrepresentation of women and people with low education (who are less hawkish) is canceled out by underrepresentation of Southern states (which are more hawkish), and, second, that correction for non-random respondent selection has little if any impact (personal communication). In the end, the trajectory of his corrected series matches that of the reported series to within a few percentage points. Berinsky has kindly offered his data, for which I am grateful. The earlier series are uncorrected, but given his results error of sufficient magnitude to warrant revision of these conclusions is exceptionally unlikely.

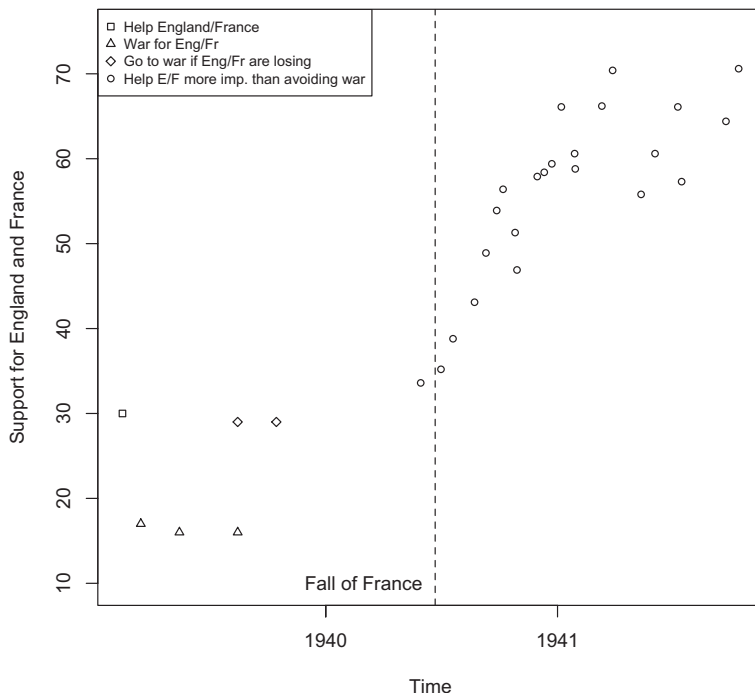


FIG. 3. Public Opinion on Aiding England and France

development of high-frequency radar, an asset that greatly aided the Allies during the war (Shepardson and Scroggs 1941:330; Divine 1979:86, 91; Conant 2002).

The domestic political landscape, too, was transformed. The Republican Convention, meeting 2 days after the French surrender, bypassed 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, on record as having opposing involvement in the European conflict, and therefore dangerous liabilities—and instead nominated a political novice and former Democrat, Wendell Willkie, who had the advantage of being a staunch internationalist.<sup>29</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.” (Cooley 1998:217) The increased security of Senate seats combined with that institution’s staggered turnover made it slow to change (to take the most extreme examples, George W. Norris was defeated in 1942, Gerald Nye in 1944, and Burton Wheeler never made it past the primary in 1946, while Hiram Johnson died before he could stand for reelection and Taft won by a razor-thin margin in 1944)—not a trivial fact given that only Congress can issue a formal declaration of war. Nevertheless, the people and the Government made the commitment to win the war even at the cost of fighting (Duroselle 1963:266; Adler 1965:243).

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

<sup>29</sup> On the relationship between Willkie and the Republican isolationists see Johnson (1960).

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 9 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 US agreed to defend Iceland and sent troops outside the Western 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 (Heinrichs 1988:31, 47–48, 80–81, 109, 110, 166–168). 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.” (Bailey and Ryan 1979:197) The sinking of the destroyer *Reuben James* 13 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. Nevertheless, while Americans believed that the war was worth fighting, many believed that Germany could be defeated without an American declaration of war. One comparison illustrates this fact: although the percentage of people responding that the US 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 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>30</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>31</sup> “Keep out of war,” by contrast, netted a meager 2%.

Despite the dwindling popularity of their position, political leaders like Taft, Norris, Nye, and Wheeler continued to oppose any actions that might result in American involvement in the war. The fact that some in government and society continued to advocate unconditional inaction demonstrates that isolationism has not been defined so narrowly that no person or state could ever be isolationist: there were American isolationists, but the growing German threat demonstrated that they were in the considerable minority (Casey 2001:24).

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.

<sup>30</sup> These are the only three occasions on which the question was asked. See Cantril (1951:966–973) for these and preceding figures.

<sup>31</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 Cantril (1951:503).

### 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? Surely America was not totally inactive, but total inactivity is something of a straw man; the harder and more interesting question is whether America was substantially less activist than circumstances warranted. 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 at best, and one that will not support an isolationist interpretation. The League had substantial popular support, and the United States did actually take part in it, albeit unofficially. 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>32</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 the world around it, does gross violence to the facts. The United States was aware of and interested in events in Europe throughout the period, and it exerted as much influence as it deemed necessary in order to shape them to its liking. In retrospect, it underestimated Nazi Germany, but it was hardly alone in doing so.

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<sup>32</sup> For more detail on this point than the current article can provide see Russett (1972).



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