6 The triumph of isolationism

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The British statesman Lord Lothian, writing in 1929, underscored the ambivalence at the core of American international attitudes in the aftermath of World War I. The United States, he observed, "wants on the one hand to prevent war, and on the other to retain the right to be neutral in the event of war and to assume no obligation for maintaining world peace."[1]

For the first decade of the interwar years, plagued by this divided mind, the United States settled for what Richard W. Leopold has termed the "interwar compromise" and assumed a posture aptly characterized by Joan Hoff Wilson as "independent internationalism."[2] While pursuing a more stable world order primarily via economic diplomacy, the United States avoided any substantial collaboration with foreign powers in the mechanisms of international peacekeeping. Cautiously, it moved away from its isolationist moorings: first, there was the Pacific treaty system negotiated in the Harding years; then subtle cooperation began with the League of Nations (which it would not join); then there was the circumscribed (and ultimately abortive) adherence to the World Court; and finally, the United States initiated the Kellogg–Briand Pact, which outlawed war as an instrument of national policy (without establishing the means of enforcing that ban).[3] The following decade witnessed the disintegration of the policy of compromise, as the Great Depression and the force of external events undermined these gestures toward international collaboration and bolstered the credo conventionally known as "isolationism."

Confronted by a worldwide collapse, which might plausibly have demonstrated the need for international collaboration, most Americans, as Robert H. Ferrell has noted, found "only additional proof of the folly of participation in the World War of 1917–1918, and the desirability, indeed necessity, of detaching the United States from further vicissitudes of Europe."[4] As if Europe's debt defaults and political instability were not sufficient grounds for maintaining autonomy, it seemed reasonable for the nation to believe that to solve its domestic problems the United States should take refuge from international uncertainties. In the crisis at hand, Senator William E. Borah, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, proclaimed in 1932, "Americans should look after our own interests and devote ourselves to our own people."[5]

In the 1930s, the high priests of American disengagement had a long heritage from which to draw. From George Washington's Farewell Address, through the irreconcilable manifestos of the years after the treaty of Versailles, influential leadership in the United States gave voice to isolationist aspirations, even as the nation never quite fulfilled them.[6] To avoid making the term a caricature of American foreign policy, "isolationism" must be carefully defined. It never signified a posture of hermit-like seclusion; for better or worse – the influential Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg acknowledged on the eve of Pearl Harbor – in the twentieth-century world "literal isolationism" was impossible. As William Appleman Williams and such "corporatist" interpreters of American diplomacy as Carl Parrini, Joan Hoff Wilson, and Michael J. Hogan have demonstrated, the quest for political non-entanglement and freedom from collective peacekeeping arrangements did not preclude active pursuit of conditions favorable to international economic expansion. Still, despite forceful attempts by Williams to suggest that isolationism might best be treated as a "legend," a pronounced isolationist tradition endured in the 1920s and gained strength in the 1930s.[7]

A useful definition comes from Charles Beard, a scholar who disliked the term but understood its meaning. In the postwar context, Beard wrote, isolationism signified:

> Rejection of membership in the League of Nations; non-entanglement in the political controversies of Europe and Asia; nonintervention in the wars of those continents; neutrality, peace, and defence for the United States through measures appropriate to those purposes; and the pursuit of a foreign policy friendly to all nations disposed to reciprocate. An isolationist may favor the promotion of goodwill and peace among nations by any and all measures compatible with non-entanglement in any association of nations empowered to designate "aggressors" and bring engines of sanction and coercion into action against them.[8]

The writings of corporatist historians have not vitiated this definition; by properly insisting that what we have called isolationism did *not* mean full-fledged international withdrawal or diplomatic abstention, they have, perhaps unwittingly, helped to demonstrate the allure and saliency of the isolationists' position.

Support for such a posture had many wellsprings, and historians and political scientists have spent much energy arguing over whether the most important were geographic insularity, ethnic predispositions, partisan politics, or ideological perspectives.[9] In early attempts to delineate the roots of isolationism, such scholars as Ray Allen Billington and Jeannette Nichols called attention to the strength of isolationism in the Middle West and suggested that the insularity, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural makeup of the region might account for a peculiar foreign policy orientation.[10] In fact, the importance once assigned to the Middle West as the bedrock of

isolationism now seems exaggerated, as detailed analyses suggested that the differences between regions were those of degree, that midwestern fervor alone could not have provided isolationism's political strength, and that the Middle West was by no means monolithic in its stance nor always the most intransigent toward international cooperation.[11]

Pursuing Billington's contention that ethnic traditions might have prompted isolationist predispositions in the Midwest, Samuel Lubell concluded that regionalism itself was no key to explaining isolationism but rather that ethnic attitudes were *the* touchstone. In areas of pro-German or anti-British ethnic prejudices, Lubell asserted, isolationism flourished; in areas of predominantly Anglo-Saxon heritage, it did not.[12] This easy solution to the riddle of isolationism, however, also unraveled in the face of detailed analysis of the interwar years by Ralph Smuckler and myself, while assessments of the persistence of isolationism after World War II have as well failed to support Lubell's neat distinctions.[13]

Partisan politics, too, have been credited with fostering opposition to internationalist projects, and those who study the makers of foreign policy have long recognized that politics do not stop at the water's edge.[14] Still it is hard to make a case that isolationism was rooted primarily in partisan politics; its zenith, in fact, came at the point where the partisan opposition had reached its nadir. While isolationism could sometimes gain support from partisan consideration, true believers like William E. Borah and Hiram Johnson generally made a virtue of shunning the dictates of party loyalty.

Beyond regionalism, ethnicity, and partisanship, isolationism bespoke deeply held convictions about national destiny. Scholars such as Wayne S. Cole and Manfred Jonas, who led the way in taking the isolationists seriously rather than acceding to the mindless stereotypes of their foes, have amply demonstrated that isolationists, whether from "progressive" or "conservative" instincts, clung to a vision of their country in which the distinctive American heritage stood at risk. They feared an eclipse of political and economic liberty and democracy if the United States failed to separate its own interests and values from forces already threatening freedom and stability worldwide.[15]

No single force – regional, ethnic, partisan, or ideological – was, in fact, sufficient to explain the strength of isolationism in the 1930s. In the face of pointed challenges, all were essential to its power. Relentlessly, the champions of the isolationist persuasion shrewdly exploited whatever attitudes could be harnessed to their cause. For almost the entire decade anxieties at home, compounded by bewildering events abroad, provided a milieu conducive to their triumph – a triumph that was by no means foreordained. It resulted from the most concerted and effective sort of crusade on the part of those who propounded it, and the timidity and irresolution of those who sought to deter it.

How adamantly isolationist was the United States in the 1930s and what were the prospects for a more effective American effort at confronting the

challenges to world peace? Answers to these questions are intimately related and together comprise a critical interpretive framework in which to depict the central path of American foreign relations in the turbulent years prior to World War II.

The first standard accounts of the foreign policy debates of those years depicted a Manichean contest: an enlightened, if perplexed, internationalist leadership in the White House and State Department was supposed to have been temporarily vanquished by overwhelming forces of reaction, as the power of isolationist sentiment among the American people was given focus and leverage by their tribunes in the Congress. Works by historians Basil Rauch and William Langer and S. Everett Gleason refined but did not challenge the broad contours of the argument documented in the State Department's compilation *Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy, 1931–1941*. That volume had contended that public opinion in the United States, accepting "the idea of isolation expressed in neutrality legislation," precluded the President and State Department from more vigorous response to mounting external dangers. Rauch wrote of a nation "bogged down in isolationist indifference for twenty years," which would surely have rebuffed earlier and more direct challenges to its assumptions. Langer and Gleason, documenting Roosevelt's convoluted "challenge to isolation," and questioning whether the opposition was always as powerful as the President believed, nonetheless conceded that isolationism was buttressed by a public that "steadfastly shrank from facing the issues."[16]

Early revisionism merely turned the tale on its head: clear-sighted noninterventionists strove, with initial success, to protect the national interest against a purposeful, scheming White House whose efforts would inevitably involve the nation in war. Charles Beard led the attack, contending that Roosevelt, at least outwardly, long adhered to isolationist policy as consistent with the best interests of the United States, only to embark subsequently on a disingenuous course in which he feigned support for non-entanglement while moving toward interventionism. Charles Tansill portrayed an administration quietly determined "to place America in the van of a crusade against aggressor nations," which ended up "moving down the road to war while talking loudly about the importance of peace."[17]

Neither interpretation has worn well. A subsequent generation of scholarship – benefitting from access to enlarged archival materials, greater distance from the emotion-laden debates of the 1930s, and perspective furnished by subsequent foreign policy debates in the United States – has generally come to shun simplistic portraits of heroes and villains. Though echoes of the old controversies persist, we now have the basis for a more subtle interpretation, wherein leaders on both sides of the 1930s debate were plagued by defective vision and flawed judgment and rendered the nation a prisoner of illusion as the world catapulted toward war. Assessing the contest over isolationism thus becomes a more interesting and complex task.

FDR AND ISOLATIONISM: THE CAPTAIN AS CAPTIVE?

The contest took form early in the decade. Even as the domestic economic crisis preoccupied the White House, international challenges demanded attention and presented alternatives. When the Japanese invasion of Manchuria broke the international calm in 1931, the response of the United States – "nonrecognition" of Japanese territorial hegemony – while articulating concern for the crisis, showed a respect for isolationist sensibilities. Secretary of State Henry Stimson, who suggested the possibility of using economic sanctions as a diplomatic mechanism or making a collaborative effort to implement the Kellogg–Briand Pact, was held in check by President Herbert Hoover.[18]

This early episode reveals not that the United States was indifferent to challenges to the international equilibrium but that it continued to believe that symbolic gestures and the use of moral suasion were likely sufficient and all that could be prudently applied to the circumstances at hand. In retrospect, it is beguiling to see it as the first in a domino-like series of events that inexorably led to the breakdown of collective security and inaction in the face of aggression. Yet the triumph of isolationism was far from settled in 1932. When Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency, many hoped that the New Deal in domestic affairs would be accompanied by a new deal in foreign relations – in which FDR, the Wilsonian protégé, would soon redeem the promises made by his former chief after World War I.[19] That expectation was not to be, for reasons that historians continue to debate and that the remainder of this essay seeks to explore.

Franklin Roosevelt came to office confronting both a devastating socioeconomic crisis at home and an international scene filled with uncertainty and potential peril. If the domestic crisis understandably dominated the headlines and the early political agenda, immediate and prospective threats to the stability of the broader international economic and political structure demanded attention as well. Those who have criticized the lack of clarity and effectiveness in American policymaking during the 1930s have the luxury of analyzing each issue separately and abstractly; those with the responsibility for governance had no such freedom from complicating interrelationships and formidable obstacles.

Included in the obstacles that confronted FDR were external events not always susceptible to American influence, domestic priorities that sometimes competed politically and substantively against would-be international stratagems, and opposing viewpoints that were articulated in powerful forums. Students of the era need to recognize the complex domestic and world environments in which the Roosevelt administration groped for a coherent policy, the bureaucratic in-fighting that inescapably accompanied so large and crowded a domestic and international agenda, and the dilemmas of leadership in a democratic society. In this context, the tasks confronting Roosevelt were daunting, errors unavoidable, and steadfastness not fully sustainable.[20]

Strong isolationist leadership, opposing what overall design Roosevelt did pursue, managed until the outbreak of World War II to circumscribe severely the nation's capacity to react politically and militarily to external aggression. Their beliefs and motivations, too, as recent studies have demonstrated, are both more complicated and more justifiable than was assumed by the early commentators who branded them "illustrious dunderheads." As suspicious and fearful of Roosevelt's power as he was of theirs, they understandably lacked a balanced view of their adversary and the advantages of twenty-twenty hindsight. If their successes in the 1930s do not seem worthy of historical celebration, neither do they warrant mindless vilification.[21]

Unquestionably, though, the centerpiece of all assessments of the era is the powerful if enigmatic figure of FDR. "Like a colossus," writes Frederick W. Marks III in a recent reappraisal, "he bestrode American diplomacy for twelve tumultuous years. Sphinx-like, he continues to baffle each generation of historians."[22] Controversies abound concerning FDR's principles and goals in foreign policy, about his consistency in applying them, his honesty in articulating them, and his judgment and leadership in confronting the obstacles to them.

"Most scholars would agree," Marks writes, "that Roosevelt could have done a good deal more than he did to combat isolationist sentiment, especially during his initial term of office."[23] Of course, he *could* have and probably in certain instances he *should* have, but at what risks or costs? Marks's analysis here and elsewhere in his provocative revisionist work begs the question of why Roosevelt shunned the possible alternatives and whether, in the context of the times, commentators then and since should reasonably have expected more boldness in presidential leadership.

Marks, though, goes even further, contending that "isolationism in the mid to late 1930s might have been less of a problem for Roosevelt had he not done so much to foster its growth."[24] Foster its growth? If so, FDR himself stands as a principal architect of isolationism's triumph, and familiar portraits of the era would be chromatically reversed.

Robert Dallek, in his comprehensive study *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945*, takes pains to explore "the constraints under which [FDR] had to work in foreign affairs" and generally sustains the options pursued by the President. But even his essentially admiring overview makes evident that the substance and style of Roosevelt's leadership were confusing: he lacked clarity, coherence, firmness, predictability and a consistent tempo.[25] Roosevelt himself, had he lived to write his memoirs, might have grudgingly admitted as much. When asked by an admirer early in 1934 to articulate long-range planning guidelines for American foreign policy, he conceded his inability to do so and added that even if he had known how to do it he probably would not have pursued such a policy because he had learned from Woodrow Wilson's experience that the public could not be attuned to the highest note in the scale without being discomforted.[26]

This explanation could be viewed as a rationalization by a leader who had

himself retreated from an internationalist to an isolationist stance, seeking peace at almost any price.[27] Certainly Roosevelt's faith in the League of Nations had, by the time of his presidential campaign of 1932, withered to the point of his abandoning public support for its work. But it is going too far to conclude that Roosevelt and the isolationists occupied much of the same ground, apart from that which led them to seek a peaceable resolution of international tensions. Roosevelt's retreats, as Dallek suggests, were due less to philosophical conversion than to "calculation about what he could achieve at home and abroad," including the task of maintaining what Cole has delineated as an "uneasy alliance" between himself and the group of influential western progressives in Congress, many of whom supported isolationism.[28]

Recent scholarship, whatever its disagreements, shows a president who was, from the outset, actively interested in foreign policy questions.[29] If Roosevelt pursued "first things first," it was not that he set aside foreign policy goals. Rather he pursued those objectives in such a way as to avoid making a hostage of his important domestic initiatives. Given the importance of the New Deal agenda, and the isolationist fervor of the progressives in Congress whose support was necessary to its passage, Roosevelt shied away from boldly leading the United States in the direction of international collaboration. Dallek sees Roosevelt's strategy as a series of necessary and prudent trade-offs; Marks regards them as pusillanimous. Both are too fixed in their judgments.

It is impossible, even for Dallek, to rehabilitate Roosevelt's torpedoing of the London Economic Conference. FDR built up expectations only to dash them and exalted international collaboration only to sacrifice it abruptly to "intranationalism." In so doing he demonstrated a misplaced confidence that a residual effect of the Conference would be "continued international discussion of perplexing world problems," despite the bitterness that its failure had evoked. In reality, as the columnist Walter Lippman noted, he had "failed to organize a diplomatic instrument to express" his excellent purposes.[30] There were indeed instruments available to Roosevelt had he chosen to throw American influence behind collaborative efforts at maintaining peace. Roosevelt did make some use of these, but only in a manner that avoided the risk of a head-on collision with isolationist adversaries; he refused to jeopardize his domestic objectives or to escalate fears of American involvement in war.

To the consternation of more dedicated internationalists in the State Department, while Roosevelt made gestures of undertaking initiatives aimed at deterring aggression, he caved in when the going got tough. In 1933 the White House approved administration sponsorship of an arms embargo bill that would have allowed the president to designate particular countries to which the embargo applied. Shortly thereafter, FDR authorized a proposal promising that, if a general disarmament treaty could be arrived at, the United States would be willing to consult with other states in the event of an

international conflict and, if it concurred in the designation of an aggressor, that it would "refrain from any action tending to defeat collective effort" to restore the peace. Together, these propositions marked a high point in the professed willingness of the United States to cooperate with the League of Nations in a peace effort.[31]

Immediately, isolationists sounded the alarm. Several members of the Foreign Relations Committee – notably Hiram Johnson of California, William Borah of Idaho, and Robert La Follette, Jr of Wisconsin – unfurled the argument that international consultations, coupled with the power to discriminate among combatants, provided the president with a catapult to further action that might lead to direct involvement; they amended the bill to require a mandatory embargo against all participants in a conflict. The State Department persuaded Roosevelt not to accept the amendment, and the bill died in committee.[32]

With Senate isolationists on the rampage at the same time that their support for the New Deal remained essential, and with disarmament foundering because of European insecurity, one can understand why Roosevelt backed away on this issue. But his quick capitulation signaled an exaggerated caution and a lack of willingness to use his fabled powers of persuasion. Most importantly, the triumph of the isolationists represented Roosevelt's failure to recognize that, without countervailing efforts on his part, isolationism would carry the day – not merely in 1933 but in the years to follow.

If isolationism were to be combatted, the White House would have to do more. As the prospect of disarmament collapsed and combustible problems smoldered, fears of an international conflagration began to grow. Apprehensions about a future world conflict were nourished by the sentiment, fed by popular revisionist accounts of World War I, that US intervention in 1917 had been a grave mistake. With only slight exaggeration, Senator Homer Bone of Washington exclaimed in 1935 that "everyone has come to recognize that the Great War was utter insanity . . . and we had no business in it at all."[33]

Focusing on such apprehensions and rhetoric, historians have tended to share Roosevelt's perspective that isolationist sentiment was too powerful to combat in any direct way. Recent studies, however, have begun to cast doubt on the intensity of isolationism in the nation at large and on the likelihood that isolationist leaders in Congress would have been successful *if* the proponents of internationalism had been as committed, energetic, and resourceful as their foes. Even the Middle West's commitment to isolationist orthodoxy appears to have been exaggerated. Furthermore, there was no omnipotent isolationist "bloc" in Congress or among opinion-makers, but rather a disparate aggregation of leaders – including many paragons of progressivism like La Follette and George W. Norris, as well as conservatives like Vandenberg and Hamilton Fish, old-fashioned nationalists as well as international-minded pacifists – who were able to band together effectively because they succeeded in donning the mantle of peace and security while their adversaries lacked effective leadership.[34]

Only in the fall of 1939 did FDR grasp what had happened when he declared: "Let no group assume the exclusive label of the 'peace bloc.' We all belong to it."[35] Ironically, by making this plea the president, perhaps unwittingly, recognized that the isolationists had successfully seized the initiative, captured public opinion and placed the administration in a position where its leaders felt unable to move purposefully either to deter aggression or to strengthen the forces opposing it.

The pivotal contest had been fought four years earlier, in 1935, over the proposition that the United States should enter the World Court. The isolationists began the contest by recognizing that the platforms of both political parties, as well as public opinion, favored US entry, that the Senate was more than 70 per cent Democratic and contained only a scattering of opponents who were known to be against the proposition. Hiram Johnson claimed, with some exaggeration, that he was practically "alone" when the debate started – but he and Borah dominated the debate and conducted a superb campaign. As FDR refused to send a message urging approval at the outset of the contest, and as he personally joined the fray only toward the end, senators on both sides of the aisle perceived a breakdown in leadership. Twenty Democrats joined sixteen Republicans in defeating the measure.[36]

Roosevelt afterwards complained about twelve or fourteen senators who would not commit themselves, and he blamed the abnormal times for making people "jumpy and very ready to run after strange gods"; he failed to acknowledge that his own stand might have made a difference.[37] Again, the argument can be made that there were critical battles ahead on the domestic scene and that Roosevelt's strategy enabled him to avoid alienating insurgent Republicans on whom he might have to rely for support. But since he did not disarm the progressive isolationists by his passive stance and since it is not certain that many of them would have taken vengeance against the reform measures of 1935–6, would it not have been better to have prevented the ensuing demoralization of the internationalist ranks, a strengthening of the isolationist grip on public opinion, and vastly increased prospects for intransigence on foreign policy in the Senate?

As it was, having failed to use his leverage and gain the advantage early, Roosevelt was now forced to yield center stage to the isolationists. By the mid-1930s the Special Committee to Investigate the Munitions Industry, headed by Senator Gerald P. Nye, riveted attention to the evils of arms sales and the virtues of neutrality.[38] FDR's prospects for acquiring discretionary powers worsened, even as the fears of conflict abroad mounted. The isolationists strove, with renewed intensity, to set the terms of the debate and seize the advantage, and on the issue of neutrality the president was persuaded to avoid a "head-on collision with the Nye Committee."[39]

Diversity and rivalry among the isolationists as to the wisest sort of neutrality legislation did not prevent them from uniting against the administration. Roosevelt preferred no legislation at all to a mandatory law that would tie his hands or to a vehement, protracted controversy that would impede his domestic agenda. But the isolationists were by then – with the aid of a filibuster – able to obstruct presidential conduct of neutrality policy either via discretionary legislation or the absence thereof. "We hold the whip hand," Nye boasted, "and we intend using it to the fullest."[40] So, indeed, they did, time and again. The neutrality legislation of the 1930s, as Hiram Johnson gleefully proclaimed, signaled "the triumph of the so-called 'isolationists'" who "stood firmly for maintaining America's pristine glory and keeping out of every foreign entanglement and every European war."[41]

Not until after the outbreak of World War II could Roosevelt reclaim effective leadership of the foreign policy of the United States in the midst of the conflagrations in Europe and Asia – and even then he often succeeded only by guileful indirection. Concerned with his own political fortunes and the fate of his domestic programs, frustrated by the collapse of the League of Nations and the indecisiveness of America's allies, Roosevelt capitulated time and again to isolationist sentiment. He was, moreover, himself uncertain of what politically acceptable steps the United States could take to influence events, and he was overconfident about Congress's willingness to alter the fundamentals of neutrality policy once in place. Efforts at changing neutrality policy to provide more opportunity for US leadership, despite intensive back-stage maneuverings by the administration, failed to withstand isolationist assault.[42]

THE LEVERS OF ISOLATIONIST POWER

The great advantage enjoyed by the isolationists was that they knew what they wanted. Part of the problem for FDR was that neither he nor anyone else knew precisely where the world was headed and what the appropriate US response would be. In this sense, "internationalism," especially within the foreign-relations bureaucracy, was too diffuse to provide a coherent policy, and those who espoused it could by no means agree on how it was to be put into practice.[43] Isolationism, on the other hand, whatever divergences there might be on particulars, had the much simpler task of upholding political and military non-entanglement, a time-honored tradition that one advocate likened to "a north star, constant and steady, which will hold us true to our course."[44]

Isolationism also derived strength from the very domestic circumstances that deterred more purposeful initiatives on the part of the Roosevelt administration. Tangible efforts abroad could be perceived as detracting from greater accomplishments at home: was entering the World Court more important, Huey Long asked, than putting clothes on people's backs?[45] Nor, as Wayne Cole and Ronald Feinman have shown, can progressive concerns about the political structure at home be dismissed as isolationist rhetorical camouflage.[46] Amidst the menace to liberty abroad, it was not unreasonable to ask whether the nation wanted to take the risk of delegating authority to the president – responsibilities that might tip the scales toward undue centralization of power at home. Early fears of Roosevelt's appetite for power

gained reinforcement when he proposed to pack the Supreme Court and reorganize the executive branch. These initiatives did more than strengthen the determination of the isolationists to trammel Roosevelt in making foreign policy: they broadened distrust of the president to include many who were not necessarily opposed to his leadership in foreign affairs; and they bolstered, prior to World War II, arguments that Roosevelt the diplomatist had to be held in check.[47]

Comprehension of isolationism's strength in the 1930s can be clouded by emphasizing its regional and ethnic underpinnings. While it is true that it was strongest in the West and Middle West and that it gained significant support among Americans of German, Scandinavian, Irish, and Italian extraction, it is also important to note that these sources by themselves were insufficient to sustain the nationwide success of isolationism in the 1930s. Ethnic prejudices alone, bereft of a broader credo of American distinctiveness, certainly could not have mounted an argument as compelling as that offered by the isolationists. Furthermore, if the anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism had been as prevalent among isolationists as their foes charged, would their appeal have been as magnetic as it was? In any case, scholars like Cole and Jonas have demonstrated that, with occasional exceptions, anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi sentiments were confined to the extreme edges of the isolationist movement.[48]

What we find in examining the isolationist success is, in fact, the power of a dedicated and able minority, espousing a vision of the nation's destiny consistent with the popular reading of its past, fervently urging their program as vital to democratic liberty, and taking full advantage of the American political system to implant their position as policy. Within the legislative arena, the two-thirds rule for the passage of treaties, such as the World Court protocol, or for bringing closure to debate in the Senate, meant that isolationist leaders had the capacity to triumph despite their small numbers. Opportunity for protracted debate gave them the time they needed to trumpet their case and mobilize additional support; the threat of filibuster gave them the chance to exact concessions from an administration anxious to avoid battle or to pursue other priorities.

The Senate's Foreign Relations Committee provided a vehicle that enabled dedicated isolationists like Borah, Johnson, Vandenberg, and La Follette to enhance their following and build a stronghold, because those on the committee that supported the administration – including the chairman, Key Pittman – lacked a similar fervor. Isolationists succeeded in exploiting legislative hearings to boost support, bottling up a number of measures and intimidating the president into proceeding with great caution and making critical concessions. With the White House hesitant and with internationalist sentiment muted within Congress and across the nation, a determined minority continued to "hold the whip hand" and have their way.[49]

The triumph of isolationism in the 1930s thus depended less on the power of the abstract credo than on a complicated political process, about which facile judgments should be avoided. In examining Roosevelt's encounters

with the isolationists, we should now phrase our central question more precisely: did *this* president, under *these* circumstances at home and abroad, faced by *these* adversaries, in *this* political system have a reasonable chance to move the country more purposefully toward collective security in the name of peace? Without indulging in the sort of "iffy" history that FDR himself justly derided, we cannot be at all sure.

FDR'S STEWARDSHIP: WHAT PRICE PRUDENCE?

We can speculate that greater resolution between 1933 and 1935 might well have altered the results of an early contest or two, especially that over the World Court. Yet there are no assurances that, ultimately, such a victory would have made much of a difference, or that the eventual ramifications on international affairs would have been more satisfactory.[50] Furthermore, earlier, more strenuous, exertions on Roosevelt's part might only have thrown the spotlight sooner on the issue of the expanding power of the president, with the consequent backlash that we now know emerged. Finally, with no guarantees of a more successful outcome, can we be sanguine about would-be initiatives that might have jeopardized Roosevelt's effort, in Dallek's words, "to meet worldwide attacks on democracy by preserving it in the United States," in maintaining the United States as a symbol of progressive change in a world desperate for such an example?[51]

Still, even as we avoid overly simplistic second-guessing of Roosevelt's stance in challenging isolationism, we can express some legitimate concerns. For if constraints on his leadership limited his ability to win the contests at hand, could he not at least have done more to encourage his countrymen to be more skeptical about isolationist dogma? A president who elsewhere showed a stunning ability to make the office what his cousin Teddy had dubbed it, a "bully pulpit," FDR left the American people to be educated first by the isolationist reading of events and then by the all-too-brutal reality of events.[52]

Roosevelt, with little circumspection, seems to have sloughed off any opportunities to educate the American public until at least 1937. Instead, though he groused privately, he accepted the isolationist victories from 1935 through 1937 with almost no public remonstration. Because it did no immediate damage, he could term the neutrality act that set the precedent of limiting his powers "entirely satisfactory." And in the midst of the 1936 election campaign, in which he would triumph overwhelmingly, he could not resist talking about his commitment to "isolate" America from war.[53] It was not until the fall of 1937, in the famed quarantine speech, that Roosevelt felt free to begin to launch a public education effort. But even then the isolationists, having severely limited his options, prevented FDR from moving confidently and steadily along the path of international responsibility.[54]

This failure to educate relates to another shortcoming of Roosevelt's leadership: lack of coherent planning. Again acknowledging that the kaleidoscope of circumstances abroad and at home could not have produced a fixed

or consistent grand design, when one reads the presidential papers and the diaries and memoirs of a variety of State Department officials, one feels a little like Alice in Wonderland searching for stable moorings. The Roosevelt foreign policymaking apparatus, Justus Doenecke and John Wilz have concluded, "appeared to make an absolute virtue out of government by improvisation . . . The president moved by fits and starts; there was little cohesion."[55] That sort of leadership not only confounded the nation's allies and adversaries; it left a void in public comprehension that the isolationists were quick to fill.

Had Roosevelt made a greater effort earlier on in his administration to achieve consistency in foreign policy and to educate the public in the realities of international affairs, it is possible that he might have been able to lead the nation at least a little more effectively through the agonies of 1939–41. As it was, the dominance of isolation came to an end slowly and painfully. That phase of Roosevelt's leadership goes beyond the scope of this essay, and is itself fraught with controversy.[56] Here we can merely ask if, in ceding early some of the responsibilities of leadership, did Roosevelt not in some measure add to his difficulties in the period prior to American entry into the war?

Whatever our answer, we know that even after the outbreak of war, the foundations of isolationism did not suddenly crumble. Public opinion had shifted from strict neutrality to an aid-short-of-war sentiment, but FDR nonetheless struggled to find a politically acceptable means of satisfying that sentiment without inciting fears of intervention. Though willing to challenge the isolationists directly for limited objectives such as repeal of the arms embargo and passage of the selective service and lend-lease measures, Roosevelt had to resort, simultaneously, to a campaign to discredit the isolationists and secretive and deceptive overseas initiatives, both of which sometimes transgressed constitutional scruple.[57]

The isolationists, of course, had long warned of Roosevelt's abuse of power and that the effort to save democracy abroad would threaten it at home. In 1940–1 they believed their forecasts were coming true, without ever understanding the degree to which their earlier triumphs had helped to make their prophecies self-fulfilling.[58] For his part, Roosevelt, as even his admirers concede, "in his determination to save democracy from Nazism . . . contributed to the rise of some undemocratic practices in the United States."[59] Thus, while the great debate between isolationism and internationalism ended at Pearl Harbor, troubling residual issues endure, and the challenge of historical interpretation continues unabated.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Roland N. Stromberg, *Collective Security and American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1963, p. 60.
2 Richard W. Leopold, *The Growth of American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1962, chaps 31–5; Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, Boston, 1975, p. 168.
3 See, in addition to the previous chapter and Leopold, *Growth*, the incisive synthesis by Warren I. Cohen, *Empire without Tears: America's Foreign Relations, 1921–1933*, Philadelphia, Pa, 1987.

4 Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy in the Great Depression*, New Haven, Conn., 1952, p. 18.
5 Borah to M. H. Brownell, 3 January 1932, William Borah Mss, Library of Congress, Box 332.
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19 See F. H. Simonds, "A New Deal in Foreign Policy?," *Harper's*, vol. 166, 1933, pp. 514–20.

20 A superb examination of the challenges of assessing FDR's foreign policy leadership is J. Garry Clifford, "Both Ends of the Telescope: New Perspectives on FDR and American Entry into World War II," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 13, 1989, pp. 213–30.

21 Efforts to avoid pejorative stereotyping and to understand the isolationists include Cole's monumental *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*; Jonas, *Isolationism in America*; and Guinsburg, *Pursuit of Isolationism*. For the epithet, see Rex Stout, *The Illustrious Dunderheads*, New York, 1943.

22 Frederick W. Marks III, *Wind Over Sand: The Diplomacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Athens, Ga, 1988, p. 1.

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25 Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945*, New York, 1979. The quotation is on page 529.

26 Letter of 30 January 1934, cited in Edward M. Bennett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Search for Victory*, Wilmington, Del., 1990, p. xxi.

27 Robert A. Divine, *Roosevelt and World War II*, Baltimore, Md, 1969, chap. 1, "Roosevelt the Isolationist."

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29 See Marks, *Wind Over Sand*, pp. 13–39, and Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 23–58.

30 Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 35–57, explains the delicate balancing act of Roosevelt's diplomatic and economic goals but without much persuasiveness. On the inherent self-contradictions of the administration's stance see Elliot Rosen, "Intranationalism vs. Internationalism: The Interregnum Struggle For the Sanctity of the New Deal," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 81, 1966, pp. 274–92.

31 Cordell Hull, *Memoirs*, New York, 1948, vol. 1, p. 228; Robert A. Divine, *The Illusion of Neutrality*, Chicago, 1962, pp. 43–51.

32 Robert A. Divine, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Collective Security, 1933," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 48, 1961, pp. 56–9.

33 *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 13779.

34 See the works cited in note 21, above, and Kuehl, "Midwestern Newspapers and Isolationist Sentiment."

35 *New York Times*, 22 September 1939.

36 The defects of administration handling of the World Court proposition have been analyzed in Guinsburg, *Pursuit of Isolationism*, pp. 155–76; and Gilbert N. Kahn, "Presidential Passivity on a Nonsalient Issue: President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the 1935 World Court Fight," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 4, 1980, pp. 137–60. "Roosevelt can bulldoze Congress and he can hypnotize the people," Chester Rowell had written earlier to his internationalist co-worker Esther Lape. "He will not need reason or logic for either of these purposes. But he will need intensity." Rowell to Lape, 2 January 1934, copy in Franklin D. Roosevelt Mss, Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, Official File 202.

37 Roosevelt to Elihu Root, 9 February 1935, and Roosevelt to Henry Stimson, 6 February 1935, in Elliott Roosevelt (ed.), *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters, 1928–1945*, New York, 1950, vol. 1, pp. 450–1.

38 See John E. Wiltz, *In Search of Peace: The Senate Munitions Inquiry, 1934–36*, Baton Rouge, La, 1963.

39 Memorandum from Cordell Hull to Roosevelt, 14 March 1935, File 811.113/582, Dept. of State Mss, Archives of the United States.

40 Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, pp. 97–114; Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, pp. 166–79. Nye's statement is found in Cole, p. 179.

41 *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 14430.

42 Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, pp. 223–319; Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 122–91.

43 See Howard Jablon, *The State Department and Foreign Policy, 1933–1937*, Lexington, Ky, 1983.

44 Ernest Lundeen, radio address, 6 April 1938, National Council for the Prevention of War Mss, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

45 *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 1047.

46 Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*; Ronald L. Feinman, *Twilight of Progressivism: The Western Republican Senators and the New Deal*, Baltimore, Md, 1981.

47 For the role of reactions to Roosevelt's "grabs for power" see especially Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, pp. 211–22, and James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, Lexington, Ky, 1967.

48 Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*; Jonas, *Isolationism in America*.

49 Guinsburg, *Pursuit of Isolationism*, pp. 143–217 and 289–92.

50 Gerhard Weinberg's penetrating studies conclude that Hitler's formulation of foreign policy was undertaken with remarkably little consideration of policies and initiatives emanating from Washington. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933–1936*, Chicago, 1970; and *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II*, Chicago, 1980.

51 This point has been emphasized by Dallek (*Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 530), citing the eloquent contemporary views of the economist John Maynard Keynes and the philosopher Isaiah Berlin.

52 See James MacGregor Burns's *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, New York, 1956, whose assessment did not have the advantage of all that we know today about Roosevelt's dilemmas but which retains an eloquent persuasiveness, especially on p. 262.

53 Though Dallek rarely faults Roosevelt directly, his account itself points up instances where Roosevelt's attempt to placate the isolationists may have gone too far. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 108–22. See also Marks, *Wind Over Sand*, p. 20. Beard, *Policy in the Making*, cites more examples in order to demonstrate that Roosevelt's earlier isolationist-oriented exclamations were betrayed by his later interventionism.

54 Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 147–52.

55 Justus D. Doenecke and John E. Wilz, *From Isolation to War, 1931–1941*, 2nd ed., Arlington Heights, Ill., 1991, p. 157.

56 For a thoughtful assessment of much recent scholarship, see Clifford's article "Both Ends of the Telescope," cited in note 20 above.

57 Roosevelt's devious maneuvers are discussed from widely different perspectives, in William Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War*, New York, 1953; and Tansill, *Back Door*, Marks, *Wind Over Sand*, and Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*. The sometimes over-zealous efforts to discredit the isolationists and stifle debate are documented in Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, chap. 30, and Richard E. Steele, "The Great Debate: Roosevelt, the Media, and the Coming of War, 1940–1941," *Journal of American History*, vol. 71, 1984, pp. 69–92.

58 Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, pp. 409–55; Guinsburg, *Pursuit of Isolationism*, pp. 241–74, 293.

59 Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, pp. 312–13.