

Notes for Thomas Guinsburg, “The Triumph of Isolationism”

Isolationism is not best understood entirely as a function of ethnicity, region, or partisan politics.

Ideologically, it is an understanding of “national destiny” – a vision of the country as unique, having a distinctive national heritage that was at risk and under attack by corrupting values and influences from the outside.

Isolationists believe that the US would lose its political and economic liberty as well as democracy unless it distances itself from forces already threatening stability and freedom worldwide.

All four – ethnicity, region, partisan politics (Democrats vs Republicans), and ideology were contributing factors to isolationism’s strength; the leaders of the isolationists were focused whereas the interventionists were, Guinsburg says, “timid and irresolute.”

Regarding the debate among historians over the road to World War II, the original debate mirrored the policy debate of the 1930s – interventionists and isolationists saw themselves as rational and their opponents as nefarious.

Isolationists see FDR as power hungry (fascist?)

FDR sees his opponents as Nazi sympathizers (fascists?)

KEY INTERPRETATIVE QUESTION:

FDR could have and should have fought isolationist sentiment BUT at what cost?

FDR had no long term strategic policy or vision. He believed the public wouldn’t stand for it.

FDR was not philosophically committed to isolationism; he may have been strategically committed or politically committed to it.

FDR would not jeopardize his domestic agenda by pursuing foreign policies, however legitimate, if they threatened to stir up anti-war sentiment at home – he needed the votes of anti-war progressives in Congress to pass New Deal legislation and did not want to alienate them by pushing a for a foreign policy that got the U.S. involved in the European and Asian crises.

In 1933, Guinsburg says, FDR capitulated quickly to isolationist sentiment, failed to use his fabled “powers of persuasion,” and showed “exaggerated caution.”

This set a tone for the years to come. If FDR didn’t push back, the isolationists would carry the day.

FDR never took the initiative or the risks necessary to pursue a coherent policy in Europe or Asia.

Power of isolationist bloc has been exaggerated, says Guinsburg. They were a disparate collection from various political perspectives who unified under “peace and security.”

Their internationalist adversaries – including FDR – never provided effective leadership, and so they lost the debate almost by default.

WHAT ADVANTAGES DID THE ISOLATIONISTS HAVE IN THE DEBATE?

Isolationists know what they want (uphold political and military non-entanglement). Internationalists can’t anticipate events and therefore can’t offer a clear vision or a coherent policy; they can only react to “crises.”

Isolationists have political mood on their side – do we really want to cede the President that much power? Look at what’s happening in Europe (Hitler, Mussolini, etc.)

FDR’s court packing scheme made those who didn’t necessarily oppose his foreign policy initiatives hesitate and grow suspicious of the President.

Why isolationists succeed:

- able leadership
- clear and popular vision consistent with America’s past (“no entangling alliances”)
- claim their program preserves liberty and democracy
- play the system well – 2/3 rule for treaties; filibusters (exact concessions)
- political process works for them

Why FDR’s failure?

- fails to educate the public about the problems associated with isolationism until 1937
- accepts isolationist victories, 1935-1937, without complaint
- lack of coherent planning – central weakness for FDR – government of improvisation

Ironies?

Power of the isolationists leads FDR to engage in secretive and questionably legal tactics to get around their opposition.

Smear campaigns to discredit isolationists – brown scare; IRS; wiretapping

Isolationists had warned about abuse of presidential power, but their own triumphs had pushed FDR in that direction.