

Chapter I

From Isolationism to Internationalism

This topic is important for the study of American civilization as it explains the course of United States history in the critical period between the two world wars and also can be used as a reference point to understand the drastic change that occurred in the country's foreign policy in the post-World War II years. In fact, the topic of isolationism is even more sensitive in higher studies for the M.A. and PhD degrees where its theoretical substance remains a hot issue for debate and research. To simplify and abbreviate the matter for B.A. students, the topic can be formulated in the simple definition that the interwar years from 1920 to 1940 was a period of great home concern when the American government had to focus on national issues more than foreign problems. Hence, European quarrels over First World War reparations and ongoing civil wars in far away dynastic China or the rise of Japanese imperialism in Asia were not considered an American priority. On the contrary, while the 1920's America was preoccupied with the 'Return to Normalcy' and post-war adjustment programmes, most of the 1930's was consumed in New Deal legislation and the search for a way out of the Great Crash of 1929. One major consequence of that unhealthy home situation was a marked American tendency to adopt isolationism -also called non-interventionism- in world affairs. And although many American pressure groups campaigned for a shift towards internationalism to assert United States presence in the world, the internationalist crusade failed to achieve anything. Actually, it wasn't until the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 and more particularly the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 that Americans decided to involve themselves anew in foreign problems. This chapter reviews the rise and fall of isolationism in the years leading to the Second World War.

American isolationism backdates to the beginning of the twentieth century when sections of the society voiced their opposition to United States involvement in the affairs of foreign countries, notably in the Caribbean where civil wars and coups d'état were common practice. In the 1910's, American interventionism next door on the continent was labelled as 'gunboat diplomacy' for its naked use of military power to dictate to other countries. Then, isolationism grew into a quasi-national reaction in the wake of the Great War due to the continuation of political misunderstandings and secret alliances between European countries. Hence, the United States Congress voted against American membership of the League of Nations in spite of President Wilson's recommendation to the contrary. In addition to the political drawback, the League was a costly project in financial terms and required great American contributions.

But, after the First World War, the United States had to face its own economic difficulties. The new concerns ranged from urgent troop demobilization and the reconversion of industries to the recovery of European debts. To crown it all, by 1929, the country sank into the worst economic crisis the world has ever seen. The Great Depression –as the crisis became known- closed the banks, the factories and the businesses leaving tens of millions of American workers jobless. In expressing the need to look for a solution to the financial crisis, President Warren G. Harding said: "Call it the selfishness of nationality if you will, I think it an inspiration to patriotic devotion....to safeguard America first....to think of America first....to exalt America first..." Thus, isolationism as a political orientation was largely justified even though reflective of American egotism in the eyes of the outside world.

In practical terms, isolationism was not implemented until the mid-thirties when President F.D. Roosevelt decided to adopt neutrality laws towards developing conflicts abroad. Beginning in 1931, Japanese imperialism targeted parts of China's territory for occupation. In Europe, in the decade 1923-1933, the Italian Fascist

regime of Benito Mussolini set on annexing neighbouring Albania, Greece, Libya, and in 1935-1936 Ethiopia. But the greatest threat came in 1938 when Hitler's Germany invaded Austria as a starting point towards colonizing the rest of Europe.



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This rapidly expanding warlike situation with its perceptible catastrophic consequences for the world scared many Americans into seeking refuge into a nationalistic home-centred isolationism. One Congressman, namely: Louis L. Ludlow - Democrat from Indiana- spoke for all when he told the House of Representatives: "...There is only one way the neutrality of America may be guaranteed, and that is to break off trade relations entirely with foreign countries at war". Some isolationists used history to argue their points of view to the effect that the United States failed to stop wars when it joined the First World War in 1917 and so needed not engage into outside problems anymore. Others still argued that their country could not even face the Great Depression at home to dare consider stopping wars abroad.

In fact, the isolationist trend affected varied social strata and political groups of the American society. Leading congressional figures such as Senators William E. Borah and Robert A. Taft were right wing Republicans. They came respectively from Idaho and Ohio indicating that a section of the Midwest identified with isolationism. Senator P. Nye represented the strong lobby of

American farmers and so had a large isolationist appeal. The Nye Committee in the Senate included members such as Bennett C. Clark of Missouri and Homer T. Bone of Washington. Both were leading Radical Democrats. In preaching his isolationist doctrine, Clark said in a nationwide radio address: "...The United States would win the greatest moral victory in the history of civilisation if actually it keeps out of war". In 1935, *The Christian Century* magazine wrote: "Ninety nine Americans out of a hundred would regard as an imbecile anyone who might suggest that in the event of another European war, the United States should again participate in it". In other words, liberals like conservatives and radical Americans, east and west of the country accepted the isolationist movement in spite of their specific economic and political differences.

This popular trend was bound to affect the government's behaviour especially in foreign policy. As early as 1932, President Roosevelt indicated he knew where he stood in the developing debate over the issue of isolationism vs. internationalism. On 2 February 1932, talking about the League of Nations, he said: "...The League of Nations today is not the League conceived by [President] Woodrow Wilson [in 1919]....American participation would not serve the highest purpose of the prevention of war....". Soon afterwards, the government began formulating and implementing isolationist policies that became known as 'the neutrality laws'. To begin with, in 1934, Congress ratified one first such legislation under the name of The Johnson Act which made it illegal for United States citizens to lend money or buy securities of governments owing war debts to the American government. On 31 August 1935, the second Neutrality Law, moved by Senator Nye's Committee, made the shipment of weapons to belligerent countries illegal activity. The third Neutrality Law on 29 February 1936 extended the embargo to include all loans to belligerent nations. The fourth Neutrality Law on 1 May 1937 extended the arms embargo indefinitely and imposed on the potential buyer the cash-and-carry provision for agreed sales. The following year,

Congressman Ludlow even introduced a bill to amend the Constitution of the United States making American participation in future wars conditional on a national referendum. In fact, Ludlow had been the promoter of all the neutrality legislation and he could lead Congress in his wake. At this point, it was clear that isolationism was so well entrenched in America to the point of challenging the president's war powers.

The Second World War



Poster invoking American nationalism for the cause of war as 'Civilization'

The problem was that by 1938, war was already raging in parts of Europe, Asia and Africa. Italy and Japan were acquiring new colonies while Germany had finalized its plans to take over all of Europe by force. Thus, American isolationism was becoming a controversial movement and proving unrealistic as the outside world began to sink gradually into a global conflict. The countdown for American participation in the Second World War in fact went as fast as the tempo of events on the war theatres of Europe and Asia. In the autumn of 1938, Austria and Czechoslovakia fell to Hitler's control. On 1 September 1939, it was the turn of Poland to submit to German domination. In

reaction, on the same day, Britain and France declared war on Germany and thereby started off the Second World War.

The year 1940 saw the rest of Western European countries fall one by one before the German war machine. There was also the signing of military alliances and friendship pacts between aggressive totalitarian regimes. For example, on 27 September 1940, a tripartite agreement was signed by the Axis Powers; namely: Germany, Italy and Japan, to coordinate their war efforts against the Allies. The new world situation required a new approach of the American government in preparation for eventual Axis Power challenges to the country's national security. Hence, by 1940, it was obvious that isolationism had had its day in the face of the widening international conflict.

Actually, by then, President Roosevelt had already begun preparing the nation for the eventuality of war despite his continued isolationist statements. On 16 September 1940, he instituted the military service for all American adults. Starting on 11 March 1941, he authorized supplying the wartime needs of the Allies through a lend-lease trade programme to help them resist the Axis aggression. Undoubtedly, by so doing, the United States was moving away from a position of neutrality to one of gradual involvement. Ultimately, when on 7 December 1941, the Japanese launched a preventive strike on Pearl Harbour to cripple American military forces at home, the United States was automatically drawn into the war. There followed four long years of unlimited warfare terminated by the use of two American atomic bombs on Japan. The war left the world utterly destroyed and in need of complete reconstruction. However, the United States came out of the war as the new leading world power. Its economy was the strongest after four years of full industrial productivity and the country was unharmed by the war for being naturally protected from invasion by two great oceans.

In reviewing pre-World War II America, one finds that the country reached a situation of stalemate. First, there were the ongoing effects of the Great Depression. Secondly, there was the political malaise of the debate between isolationists and internationalists about the country's foreign policy. Concerning the economy, the New Deal went a long way towards alleviating the impact of the crisis, but there was not a full recovery until the outbreak of the Second World War. Regarding the question of isolationism, Americans accepted this strategy reluctantly in the hope to save their country from entanglements in foreign problems. However, neutrality was no guarantee of national safety if a global conflict should break out again. Therefore, the stalemate persisted until December 1941 when finally the decision to go to war against the Axis Powers became not only a matter of survival but also one of national pride and honour. In the outcome, internationalism imposed itself due to war considerations and remained the only option for the United States because of her new role in the world from 1945 onwards.

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