The concept of isolationism hovers like a pall over histories of American political culture between the world wars. Few historians really believe in the term’s utility anymore, and many simply ignore it in their pursuit of new, internationally oriented studies of the period. Yet others continue to use it halfheartedly for want of a better way to explain Americans’ prickly stance toward foreign affairs before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This article assesses the merits and pitfalls of relying on isolationism, as well as its imagined opposite internationalism, to explain popular thought about foreign relations in the 1920s and 1930s. It argues that as historians move transnational actors to the center of their stories, they should not underestimate important currents in American life that have been traditionally subsumed under the heading isolationism. Simply resurrecting the label isolationism, however, will not do justice to these currents. Instead, neutrality—both as a theory in foreign relations and international law and as it was actually practiced by the United States as well as other nations—offers a more useful framework for understanding those fierce debates about what role Americans should play in a dangerous world. The point here is not to relabel people or groups by substituting, say, neutralists (or noninterventionists or unilateralists) for isolationists. Rather, it is to redirect attention toward the central foreign relations problem that consumed Americans across the political spectrum during the interwar years, namely how the old fail-safe strategy of neutrality should be redefined in an age of total warfare.

Textbooks often rely on isolationism to evoke a standard narrative for the period between 1919 and 1941. Beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s failure to ensure the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, this story line highlights...
the maneuvering of the Senate's blustery “irreconcilables,” vigilantly keeping
the United States distant from the League of Nations and the World Court, as
well as the efforts of other nationalists, who, striving to ward off foreign compe-
tition and troubles, pioneered immigration quotas, higher tariffs, and neutrality
acts. Isolationism seems particularly apt for explaining the anxieties of the 1930s. It
appears to fit that decade not only in its narrow, traditional definition of describing
a reluctance to enter into formal alliances with European powers but also in the
broader sense of capturing a national mood. The economic crisis undercut
Americans’ willingness to extend their resources to others, and, by mid-decade,
longstanding annoyance about former allies’ failures to pay their war debts collided
with the publication of a wave of revisionist World War I histories and the sen-
sational findings of the Nye Committee, which brought to an all-time high disil-
lusionments about the ability of foreign interventions to accomplish anything
other than the sinister motives of munitions dealers and unrepentant imperialists.¹
In the crisis-packed years that followed, at least until the fall of Paris if not the
bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Americans had no patience for the problems
brewing abroad, especially for what Charles Beard called the “mazes and passions
of European conflicts.” Antifascist foreign correspondents fought uphill battles to
alert Americans to the dangers of aggression spreading overseas from Manchuria,
Ethiopia, and Spain to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France. What kinds of inter-
national commitments and ambitions, writers like Dorothy Thompson and
Vincent Sheean frequently despaired, could possibly flourish amid such headwinds
of apathy? It was, another journalist marveled, as though Americans had come to
fancy themselves “collectively a nation of Robinson Crusoes.”²

There is something to this image of the interwar United States as a land littered
with the editorials of the “obstreperously isolationist Chicago Tribune,” as David
Kennedy calls it, and populated by those of either “indifference to the outside
world” or else “studied, active repudiation of anything that smacked of interna-
tional political or military engagement.” Even scholars who would never describe
other eras as isolationist find themselves resorting to it to explain the 1930s. In his
sweeping transnational reinterpretation of U.S. history, Ian Tyrrell notes that

¹ Selig Adler, The Isolationist Impulse (New York, 1957); Robert Divine, The Reluctant
Belligerent: American Entry into World War II (1965; New York, 1979); Manfred Jonas,
Isolationism in America, 1935–1941 (Ithaca, NY, 1966); Warren Cohen, The American Revisionists:
The Lessons of Intervention in World War I (Chicago, 1967); Ralph Stone, The Irreconcilables: The
Fight Against the League of Nations (Lexington, MA, 1970); Thomas Guinsburg, The Pursuit of
Isolationism in the United States Senate from Versailles to Pearl Harbor (New York, 1982); Wayne
Cole, Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932–1945 (Lincoln, NE, 1983); Justus Doenecke and John
Wilz, From Isolation to War, 1931–1941 (1968; Arlington Heights, IL, 1991); David M. Kennedy,
fuller bibliography, see Justus Doenecke, Anti-Intervention: A Bibliographical Introduction to
Isolationism and Pacifism from World War I to the Early Cold War (New York, 1987).

² Charles Beard, “We’re Blundering into War,” American Mercury, April 1939, 288–99; 
Dorothy Thompson, Let the Record Speak (Boston, MA, 1939); Vincent Sheean, Not Peace But
a Sword (New York, 1939); Michael Williams, “Views & Reviews,” Commonweal, October 6, 
1939, 536.
European unrest and the economic downturn “compromised the American version of internationalism of the 1920s and drove the United States into the shell of isolation.” George C. Herring similarly finds isolationism fitting for the thirties in his authoritative volume of the *Oxford History of the United States*. As Americans turned “sharply inward under the burden of the Great Depression,” he argues, their “passionate 1930s quest to insulate the nation from foreign entanglements and war fully merits the label isolationist.” This notion has staying power, in short, because it seems to capture a measure of historical truth.

The term isolationism has also endured, however, because of its rhetorical force in foreign policy battles since World War II. Histories of interwar diplomacy written shortly after 1945 commonly emphasized regional parochialism and ethnic tensions as the roots of resistance to FDR’s pro-Allied foreign policy, a portrait that perfectly suited Cold Warriors, who stood ready to levy the charge of isolationism against anyone who questioned their plans to lead the country out of what they saw as a shortsighted, divisive prewar era into one of consensus building and responsible world leadership. “To be called an isolationist in the context of the Cold War,” the historian Michael Hunt recently ventured, “was nearly as bad as being called a communist.” Ever since the Truman years, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have repeatedly raised “the old hobgoblin of isolationism,” as Andrew Bacevich dubs it, in order to discredit those who criticized ballooning overseas commitments.

Not just good for mud-slinging, isolationism has also facilitated a reluctant heroes explanation of Americans’ rise to superpower. Americans had not wanted to throw their weight around, the isolationist narrative implies, but had been forced against their will into the limelight of global affairs. Unlike self-serving European imperialists who grasped for power, Americans had undertaken their benevolent reign only after being prodded out of their shell and only because it was a dirty job that somebody had to do. In the wake of the Vietnam War, interwar isolationists took on the role of sage skeptics, underappreciated in their own day but worthy of rediscovery. Downplaying the prejudices and extremism of some of FDR’s critics, which had seemed so important to scholars after the war, historians began to rehabilitate the reputations of those once maligned as isolationists, portraying them as populist underdogs or well-meaning anti-imperialists, whose

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reservations had come to seem reasonable, even prescient in light of the protracted military campaigns of the late twentieth century. And once again, amid concerns about American “overreach” in the post-9/11 world, isolationism has crept back into public debate. Some think a touch of isolationist spirit would make for a “humbler” foreign policy, while others worry that retrenchment will encourage Americans to back off from important initiatives. Either way, those who keep the term alive take for granted that isolationism existed before 1941 and serves as a lesson to measure contemporary policy against, one way or another.

Meanwhile, running parallel to this enduring narrative is an entirely different literature on the interwar years in which “isolationists” hardly figure if at all. As early as 1954, William Appleman Williams pronounced 1920s isolationism as little more than a “legend.” Rather than fearfully (or cheerfully) cutting themselves off from world politics after the Great War, he argued, Americans busily exerted their influence abroad during a decade “marked by express and extended involvement with—and intervention in the affairs of—other nations.” Foreign policy under the Republican administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, according to Williams and other revisionists in the 1960s and 1970s, continued rather than interrupted a longer history of American empire building on the cheap, through Marine-backed dollar diplomacy in Latin America and open-door strategizing in East Asia, as well as efforts to make postwar Europe safe for American business. To them, such economic expansion was far more significant than any political reticence. In the 1980s, historians brought further nuance to this interpretation, situating formal state action within a wider range of economic and cultural institution building that had enticed Americans out into the world in unprecedented, if ambivalent, ways after World War I. Since then, the interwar years have become


even more “internationalized” by scholars using transnational methods centered on all kinds of people on the move: progressive reformers plying the oceans for policy ideas; capitalists and modernizers striking out across the continents to find markets and testing grounds; poets and tourists alike searching for foreign inspiration. For historians with their eyes trained on the Caribbean, Mexico, or the Pacific, isolationism seems an irredeemably Eurocentric term, an explanatory device whose main function, wittingly or unwittingly, has been to obscure Americans’ forceful participation in the affairs of other parts of the world. For those interested in political economy and global integration, the policy debates of the late thirties—and relics like the neutrality acts—seem less important than the expansion of communication and transportation networks, or the spread of markets and technical expertise.

Is isolationism merely an outmoded myth that should be replaced by more sophisticated, transnational histories? Or, by focusing so much on international story lines, are scholars overlooking the degree to which so-called isolationist impulses remained a force in American life? One approach to reconciling this conflicted picture is simply to concede that both currents were vibrant and influential, with internationalism having more weight during the 1920s, only to be temporarily eclipsed by isolationism in the 1930s. But attempting to weigh the waxing or waning impact of two “sides” of debate, or substituting some other dichotomy, will not solve fundamental problems with the internationalist-isolationist rubric. The following analyzes the inadequacies of these terms for understanding the interwar years and most especially for disentangling those foreign policy disputes during isolationism’s supposed high watermark between 1935 and 1941. Historians should not overlook trends in American thought that have been called isolationism, but they do need more precise analytical tools to take account of American attitudes about Europe’s problems at this particular moment. Framing the interwar years as a period of neutrality rather than isolationism places attention squarely on what was actually new—and deeply problematic—in this era. Americans have always been divided over foreign policy. They had long worried about the unintended consequences of economic expansion overseas, and they had wrestled with imperialist ambitions and temptations to


become embroiled in European politics before. What was different in the decades after World War I, and what lent this debate its special urgency and potency, was a sense that one important option in the traditional conduct of international relations—neutrality—had become unhinged from its moorings. Charting this development offers a new way to narrate the turning points and political alliances of the interwar years.

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The most obvious pitfall of using isolationism and internationalism to explain this period derives from the alliances these labels misleadingly imply. Even scholars who rely on them often concede at the outset of their studies that such sobriquets conflate too readily distinct ideas and dispositions. Talking about internationalists as a group ignores crucial differences between antifascists, who were often highly critical of empire—both in its European and American varieties—and expansionists, who wanted to exert American influence abroad for the purpose of advancing personal or national interests. It encompasses, for example, the principles of cosmopolitan intellectuals such as Jane Addams, Crystal Eastman, and Dorothy Detzer who championed peace and arbitration during and after World War I. But it also describes the desires of others for whom connections abroad were as much about power and profit as about cooperation. Entrepreneurs like Henry Ford, carving a plantation out of the Amazon and erecting industrial plants across Europe, missionaries proselytizing in the Far East, and American Legionnaires commemorating the Armistice and wreaking havoc while on vacation in Paris were all interwar internationalists of complicated kinds. 10 Even those who celebrated the idea of “Fortress America” on the eve of World War II had been leading internationalists in their own way. Herbert Hoover, after all, was a world-renowned humanitarian, who had lived and traveled abroad extensively, spoke some Mandarin, supported the League of Nations, and spearheaded numerous relief campaigns from Belgium to Soviet Russia. Charles Lindbergh was an adventurous aviator, who shrunk the distance between New York and Paris and helped Pan American Airways stretch its routes across the oceans. 11


The term isolationism, bringing to mind that proverbial ostrich burying his head in the sand, is likewise misleading. So-called isolationists were usually far from apathetic or ill-informed; they were well-versed in current events and knew their European history. More important, what is now labeled isolationism was almost never an argument for actual isolation. The so-called isolationist position, it is important to remember, was not about keeping the United States out of the world. It was about keeping it out of war. It was about severing trade or alliances with “warring” nations not all nations. Even the America First Committee—“isolationists” par excellence who rose to prominence in late 1940—advocated aggressive action overseas, if the right kind in the right place. One of their platform’s lesser-cited planks demanded that Americans “develop Mexico and, if need be, use force to assure friendly governments there.” Many members likewise endorsed the seizure of European possessions in the Western Hemisphere for repayment of war debts or for hemispheric security after their metropoles had been overrun. Lots of Americans fancied themselves internationalists, but almost no one, including the America First chairman Robert E. Wood, or the senators who dubbed themselves the “peace bloc,” wanted to own the distorting title of isolationist.12 Calling someone an isolationist was a smear, just as antiwar Democrats had been derided as “copperheads” during the Civil War, and thus hardly an ideal moniker for historians to take up.

Historians’ reliance on “isolationism,” moreover, is largely anachronistic. Americans employed it far less regularly during the early twentieth century than now assumed. Even though the doctrine supposedly traced back to George Washington’s farewell address, “isolationism” did not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1922, nor in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, or *New York Times* until the year after that. Commentators resorted to the noun “isolationist” sparingly during the Spanish-American War and World War I, but they did not use it as an adjective until the early 1920s, and then typically with negative connotations. In fact, American newspapers invoked isolationism only sporadically and not in their headlines until the 1930s and not with any regularity before the outbreak of World War II. “Isolationism” first appeared in the titles of major magazine articles only in the 1940s, and then usually in the context of postwar planning (when its “resurgence” was to be guarded against). This was, in other words, an approach to foreign affairs that policy makers and critics invented during World War II primarily so that they could declare it “bankrupt,” a value system to be “spurned” in hindsight as “America’s great mistake,” as

Walter Lippmann put it. Isolationism was a cautionary tale for the post-Pearl Harbor future, not an accurate description of the past.\(^{13}\)

Thus, there is a remarkable disconnect between historians’ reliance on the term and the keywords Americans actually used before 1941. For example, in Manfred Jonas’s extensive primary source bibliography for *Isolationism in America* (1966), “isolation” appears in only one entry (*Common Sense* put it in quotation marks in the name of a 1939 essay). Instead, the pamphlet and article titles brim with references to “war,” “peace,” and “neutrality,” the latter invoked no less than twenty-five times.\(^{14}\) Typing “isolationism” into a research library catalog will likewise turn up a healthy number of books written since the 1950s, but proves less useful for mining primary source databases. Indexers never selected “isolationism” as a subject heading for the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* (but between 1919 and 1941 they filed 544 articles under “United States—neutrality”). Nor does isolationism show up in the online abstracts for Congressional reports published during the same period (neutrality appears 113 times). Widening out to a full-text search and combining “isolationism” and “isolationist” does turn up 115 congressional sources. With the same parameters “neutrality” yields 1,514 results.

Some have proposed that these terminology problems can be rectified by renaming the categories. More and more scholars rightly advocate calling the doctrine that began with Washington’s farewell address “unilateralism” rather than isolationism, in order to emphasize independent agency, rather than passive abstinence, as one of the driving convictions of American foreign policy. Differentiating between “multilateralists” and “unilateralists” also better delineates Americans’ varied approaches to international engagement.\(^{15}\) But these terms do less to illuminate what was at stake in the debates on the eve of World War II. Those who did not want to support the Allies were indeed unilateralists, but so were many who did. While antifascist idealists made multilateralist arguments that Americans had to be involved because they were part of the stream of human history, fated to stand or fall together with the other free peoples of the world, others, such as some businessmen and military planners, remained committed to American independence but argued that joining the war effort was strategically


necessary or simply advantageous. The war was one of history’s “creative opportunities,” Henry Luce rhapsodized; Americans had only to seize the mantle of world leadership and the postwar world would be theirs to command.\footnote{16}

Recasting the debate as a battle between “interventionists” and “non-interventionists” is likewise an improvement for describing American viewpoints between the outbreak of European hostilities in September 1939 and the American declaration of war in December 1941.\footnote{17} But this dichotomy, too, obscures some fault lines even as it illuminates others. There was an important distinction between interventionists who advocated helping Britain by all means “short of war” and a minority of hawks who wanted to immediately enter the “shooting war.” This issue seriously strained collaboration between Allied supporters, especially after April 1941, when activists who championed military participation broke off from the leading interventionist organization, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA) and formed the more militant group, Fight for Freedom, Inc. (FFF).\footnote{18} Anti-interventionism, too, makes strange bedfellows out of Charles Lindbergh and Charles Beard. It lumps pacifist students together with German-American Bundists who were perfectly willing to glorify war, provided it was the right one. Moreover, in a modern, integrated world, not intervening, as everyone plainly understood from the fate of Ethiopia and Republican Spain, was in effect a form of intervention, which would throw weight to one side of a conflict. That label, too, is too much of a misnomer.

Binaries simply cannot encompass the confounding issues Americans faced during these years nor properly illuminate the solutions they entertained. They cannot capture the back-and-forth between FDR’s administration and an intractable Congress, nor reveal the competing visions of world leadership emanating from the State Department, nor explain the opposing goals of Henry Morgenthau’s Treasury Department and the President’s top military advisors.\footnote{19} Their utility falters, moreover, when people and positions are traced over any length of time. Those who advocated joining the League of Nations in the wake of World War I might be labeled internationalist or multilateralist, but many of those same people, FDR foremost among them, ensured the passage of neutrality legislation in the mid-thirties, which would earn them the opposite labels of isolationist or unilateralist.\footnote{20} By contrast, Senator William Borah (R-Idaho)
vigorously opposed participation in the League of Nations, earning him a spot on anyone’s list of top isolationists, but then also shepherded the Kellogg-Briand Pact through committee and criticized the ever-expanding provisions of the neutrality acts for violating international law and constraining American action abroad. Exasperated by this “new Borah,” Hiram Johnson (R-CA) privately worried in the early thirties that his onetime ally against the League had become the Senate’s “strongest internationalist.” Perhaps Borah might be called a man who spoke his mind and went his own way or “the Senate’s Great Inconsistent,” as Time christened him, but that brings scholars little closer to grasping the essence of popular debate about Americans’ role in a war-bent world.21

The deeper this period is mined the more elusive such understanding seems to become. Just as the nation’s complicated social terrain did not correspond to binary labels, it also did not reliably shadow party loyalties or even emerging liberal and conservative platforms. FDR’s foreign policy opponents of course found a home in the Republican Party, but so did high-profile figures with grand global visions, not least Henry and Clare Boothe Luce and the GOP’s 1940 presidential nominee Wendell Wilkie. Meanwhile the President faced dogged opposition on international matters from progressives in Congress such as Senator Burton K. Wheeler (D-Montana) and old Popular Front allies, who feared war would roll back New Deal gains and civil liberties, among them the Socialist Party’s Norman Thomas and the CIO’s John L. Lewis.22 Beyond the famous rivalries, factions formed and broke apart amid a swirl of ethnic and religious antagonisms, local controversies, and the vicissitudes of world events. Italian Americans had been gravitating toward the Democratic Party since 1928 when Al Smith ran for President on a wet platform, but many still adorned their stores and homes with portraits of Mussolini and did not want to go to war with Italy or her allies. Generoso Pope’s pro-Fascist Party Il Progresso enjoyed the nation’s second largest circulation for a foreign language daily after the Jewish Daily Forward. Irish American workers, too, had been part of the New Deal coalition, but they remained unapologetically anti-English and furnished millions of listeners for Father Coughlin’s radio paens to Hitler as the last bulwark against an international conspiracy of Bolsheviks, Jewish bankers, and Wall Street plutocrats. African Americans, for their part, also swung to FDR during the 1930s but for them worrying about fascism overseas often took a back seat to battles closer to home; some even admired the Japanese for standing up to white imperialists, and others were susceptible to soapbox tirades against Jewish

Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945 (New York, 1979), 78, 530; Cole, Roosevelt and the Isolationists.


22. In the hawkish Century Group, members who were conservative on domestic issues outnumbered progressives two to one: Chadwin, Hawks of World War II, 66.
storeowners. By 1941, a few African American leaders judged the “anti-Semitic problem in Harlem” so serious that meetings were called to “deal with the pro-Hitler nonsense.” By contrast, white Southerners, usually a thorn in New Dealers’ side on domestic issues, spurned America First and championed Britain’s cause, evoking the empire’s support for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Some Northerners meanwhile cited the same fact to advocate against it.

The arguments and alliances became even more counterintuitive once the war broke out in Europe and took its bizarre twists and turns. Most famously, left-wing Communists sounded like right-wing America Firsters, decrying the war as a struggle between “rival imperialists,” until Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union reversed their position overnight. But there were other pickles. Many Catholics, for example, had aligned themselves with the European right during the 1930s on the supposition that fascism posed less of a threat to religion than "godless" communism, drawing comfort from Mussolini’s Lateran Accords (1929) and Hitler’s Concordat with the Holy See (1933) as well as from both dictators’ aid to Franco during Spanish civil war. But the destruction of Catholic Poland undermined that argument, which leftists lost no time pointing out. Similarly, for anti-fascists, who viewed the conflict as a good-and-evil battle between democracy and dictatorship, reconciling their principles with the realities of having Joseph Stalin as an ally after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union required careful mental maneuvering. By summer 1941, the time when intervention could be championed on purely ideological grounds had already passed. Finland’s alliance with the Nazis to push back against Soviet aggression after the Winter War offered a similar stumbling block. The hawkish Fight for Freedom Committee announced gravely in November 1941 that “in a world where sentiment has little place we must now painfully acknowledge that the Finnish government is a full-fledged member of the Axis.” Their opponents pounced on this hard-line thinking. Exactly how, asked one man, are we “going to help the cause of freedom the world over by assisting Russia in the defeat of Finland, one of the finest of democracies, and the best governed peoples”? Others found in Finland a way to salvage religious arguments: “We Americans will not combine with communistic Russia against our Christian brothers in Finland,” insisted one scholar (Figure 1). The war was a moral and


political morass. But trying to sort partisans into isolationist and internationalist camps only obscures the situation more.²⁵

If isolationism does little to clarify the positions of either famous leaders or factions on the ground, what about its usefulness for describing the general tenor of public opinion? The surveys of George Gallup and Elmo Roper, after all, consistently showed that a majority of Americans hesitated to go to war on behalf of Europe’s democratic governments. What did that mean if not that Americans were in an isolationist mood? Digging below the polling numbers to develop a more layered portrait of popular thought suggests that Americans were confused, angry, and indeed hesitant to take up arms on behalf of the Allies—probably even more

so, in fact, than they admitted to those official-looking interviewers who rang their doorbells asking about the war. But this is not to say that they felt no connection to the war or wanted nothing to do with European affairs. Americans had all kinds of raw emotions and only whisperable thoughts about the conflict, which they often kept from pollsters with their typed ballots and judging eyes but then poured into their own private correspondence. These thoughts were often extreme, prejudicial, and even pro-Axis, a fact downplayed in recent portraits of “isolationism.” But such beliefs comprised an important, if ugly, underbelly to public opinion during these years, and understanding them is essential for sketching a full picture of Americans’ engagement with foreign affairs.

Letter writing was a thriving practice during the 1930s and 1940s, and those now called “isolationists” mastered the art, sending fan mail to Charles Lindbergh and the America First Committee as well as anonymous threats to prominent antifascists. One such letter writer, for instance, wished out loud that Americans had someone to “think as much of as Germany does of her Hitler” instead of the “mental and physical cripple in the white house.” Unlike poll results with their carefully worded categories, handwritten notes, hastily stashed into their envelopes, were brash and bellicose (Figure 2). “If I die I shall gladly do so for America but NEVER UNDER GOD’S WILL SHALL I LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR THE BRITISH IMPERIALISTS AND KING GEORGE,” one man wrote the Fight for Freedom Committee: “Smoke that in your pipes, there war mongers.” Anonymous authors branded advocates for intervention as “Jew loving Bastards,” “stooges for England,” or “Limey Ass Suckers.” “JUST WAIT UNTIL WE GO TO WAR, THEN YOU TRAITORS WILL KNOW WHAT ANTI-SEMATISM [sic] REALLY IS,” warned one writer: “WHAT HITLER DID TO THE JEWS WILL SEEM LIKE A TEA PARTY IN COMPARISON.” “Lindbergh for President,” exalted another: “Labor camps for you.” So-called “crank files,” kept by the targets of such hate mail, hardly produce a representative picture of what all Americans were thinking, but the sentiments they reveal proved in many ways commonplace and did not even constitute the extreme end of popular opinion, as British censors learned by

26. The era’s polls are compiled in Hadley Cantril, Public Opinion, 1935-1971 (Princeton, NJ, 1951) and George Gallup, The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971, vol. 1 (New York, 1972). Opinion polling in this period underrepresented people of color, non-English speakers, and others who did not seem to count as much in the quest to find the “average” American opinion. Studies have also shown that those who were confronted on their doorsteps often moderated their opinions about the war out of fear, shame, or an eagerness to please: Adam Berinsky, In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq (Chicago, 2009); Sarah Igo, The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public (Cambridge, MA, 2007), chaps 3–4. Interpreting polling results presented another complex problem. Roosevelt’s joke that his job was to “steer a course” between the seventy percent of Americans who wanted to “keep out of war” and the other seventy percent who wanted to “do everything to break Hitler, even if it means war” ably captured survey’s inconclusive conclusions: Steven Casey, Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War Against Nazi Germany (New York, 2001), 30.
intercepting Americans’ international mail at Bermuda between 1939 and 1942. Those eastbound mailbags contained astonishing declarations from young men serving in the U.S. military or expecting to be called up who expressed reluctance to fight their “German brothers,” from citizens who reassured friends and relatives

Figure 2: Carefully crafted opinion polls concealed much of the passion running through debates about the prospect of war, but “crank” mail, such as this altered piece of interventionist propaganda, reveals the extreme but not uncommon prejudices and partisanship found in a nation populated by so many European immigrants and their children. Fight for Freedom, Inc. Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 21 folder 1.
abroad of their “unbounded enthusiasm for Germany,” and from others who wrote
to the Führer directly, floating sabotage ideas and offering their personal services.
Among such private confessants was a West Point cadet in love with his German
fiancé, a Long Island man resentful of his Jewish boss, a Montana woman who had
been harboring a fugitive from a Canadian POW camp, and a New Jersey army
volunteer who photographed himself in uniform doing the Nazi salute. He prayed
that Germany would soon conquer “the damned English.”

If participating in Gallup’s and Roper’s surveys helped Americans to articulate
their best, most civic and rational selves, private correspondence by contrast gave
them license to work through less socially acceptable beliefs that, at first, their
writers may not have even wanted to admit to themselves that they had. Letters
sent to national spokesmen often began with moderate tones only to descend into
darker corners of the mind. “I have taught American History 15 years, I studied
American government . . . at Kansas University, I spent three months in Europe
some years ago. I read the current magazines every day, so I do not think I am
ignorant on what is going on in this world,” began one Oklahoma City woman’s
letter. “I do not want to see our fine young men slaughtered like hogs on foreign
soil to save Communist Russia,” she continued: “I am far more afraid of our
Democracy being destroyed from within than I am afraid of Hitler invading us,
as much as I hate his methods . . . .” Did she agree, however, with his principles?
This last statement got her thinking. “We need to drive out the Money
Changers,” she insisted: “It has been the Christian people of America and the
America First Committee that has kept us out of this terrible war so far.”
Starting with a modicum of reason, then dipping into thinly veiled antisemitism,
she attempted to pull herself back out with a Biblical argument at the end:
“BLESSED ARE THE PEACE MAKERS.”

Lines from sermons, talking points from congressmen, and even slogans
peddled by the representatives of foreign governments filled the mailbags that
piled up in politicians’ and activists’ offices by the hundreds of thousands, showing

27. “Crank” letters, box 20 f1 8-19 and box 21 f1-3, FFF; British Postal Censorship Extracts on
Enemy Sympathizers in America, 1940-1943, Hamilton Consulate General, Bermuda, Records of
the Department of State (RG84), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park,
Maryland. America First headquarters kept “Crank-Ignore” files sent by leftists and struggled with
mounds of unsolicited antisemitic and pro-Nazi mail. Wayne Cole estimates that 85–90 percent of
the letters that arrived after Lindbergh’s notorious Des Moines speech supported his views. Those
who wrote Lindbergh directly also heartily agreed, often in inciting language, with the aviator’s
claim that Jews, the British, and the FDR administration were “war agitators” scheming to embroil
the country in the conflict: Wayne Cole, America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940-1941
(Madison, 1953), 106–20, 134–6, 150; and Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle against American
Intervention in World War II (New York, 1974), chapter 21; fan mail, Charles A. and Anne Morrow
Lindbergh Papers, box 1 f5-23, box 2 f1-26, and box 3 f1-4, Department of Rare Books and Special
Collections, Princeton University Library.

28. W. Keever, September 1941, box 21 f1, FFF. On the culture of letter writing and how it
helped Americans articulate their political views, see James T. Sparrow, Warfare State: World War
II Americans and the Age of Big Government (New York, 2011).
the degree to which Americans listened to foreign policy debates and were trying on a series of arguments for themselves. “We have no interest in preserving either a Stalinist Russia or a British oligarchy; we don’t care to fight the Finns, the French, the Norwegians, etc.,” one couple characteristically echoed senators like Gerald Nye during the summer of 1941. “We believe that the United States CAN do business with anyone in the world,” they wrote: “We wonder if England will ever allow peace.” What to make of statements like these, which suggested that Americans were sometimes willing to give Hitler the benefit of the doubt, to hear the Nazis out? The United States “has absolutely no cause for war against Germany,” concluded another such person tired of “all this hooey” about freedom and democracy; in Europe those “groups of individuals who have engaged in war mongering,” he argued, simply “got what was coming to them.” Feeling brave behind the nom de plume “Ann Tagonistic,” a Californian similarly condoned Nazi aggression in carefully disguised language, encouraging Americans to remain “passively resistant” like Christ, by which she meant not aiding the Allies. She asserted: “The peoples of the world [here she really means Germans] DO NOT WANT WAR. And what are the nations of the world [i.e. the Axis powers] fighting for??” she asked rhetorically. For “FREEDOM from the yoke of the 20%—the international financiers—who make wars to break the peoples of the earth . . . to enslave the Christian peoples—and all for gold!” Jews, in other words, were the aggressors; Hitler was merely waging self-defense. Yet this writer managed to make her argument without mentioning either and by hanging her claims on the concepts of freedom and passive resistance.29 This tactic, more common than many would like to admit, no Gallup survey or isolationist epithet could hope to capture.

Looking beyond the labels and the opinion polls makes it clear that what has often been characterized as Americans’ desire to keep the United States isolated from international politics was more accurately a profound ambivalence about their quite well-developed sense of engagement with foreign affairs. Although the public face of popular sentiment slowly began to tilt in favor of aiding the Allies, privately Americans harbored more sympathy for Germany, construed as the victim of a vengeful peace at Versailles, than often admitted, even if memories of the tense atmosphere during World War I make people circumspect about expressing such opinions too loudly. Moreover, during these years widespread antisemitism plagued cities such as New York and Boston, and it is likewise hard to overestimate the acute nature of anti-British sentiment. How did antifascists know “that we ought to be on the side of the democracies?” the old anti-imperialist

Oswald Garrison Villard baited his colleagues at *The Nation*.\(^3\) Few Americans would have desired to see a fascist revolution in the United States of course, but many considered the Nazi’s New Order perfectly appropriate for unruly continental Europe just as many Americans thought Mussolini served Italy well and that “story-book dictators” suited Latin America. Allied supporters dwelled so much on the specter of a spiritually bankrupt Nazi empire run on “slave labor,” because they were at pains to counter two ideas that Americans seriously entertained—that they would be able to “do business” with Hitler in a postwar world and that fascism did not pose the same threat to Christianity as communism.\(^4\) On these matters, Americans were not simply pitted against each other, neatly arrayed into opposing camps. Contemplating their sons and husbands across the dinner table, thinking about their shaky small businesses and their own freedoms at home, they found themselves internally torn.

Americans found no right or easy answers to the situation they faced after September 1939. Both those who favored aiding the Allies and those who did not made arguments that would seem compelling in retrospect. Antifascists’ predictions that an Allied victory would depend on U.S. manpower proved true, as did their warnings about the depth of atrocities the Third Reich’s ambitions would wreak upon the world. But Americans were entertaining radical measures, ranging from the possibility of sanctioning preemptive military engagement to amending the Constitution to require a national referendum for a declaration of war. Americans approved and then extended their first peacetime draft and eventually inched away from the rules governing neutrality under international law. Many, understandably, found the moment unsettling. The pacifism of clergymen, mothers, and some veterans could be quite poignant. Still rattled by what he had witnessed during the First World War, one man implored interventionists to go out into the battlefields “and do as I have done, see men with gas gangrene cough out their miserable lives... see the bodies piled up swarming with flies, and stinking under the hot summer sun.” Others could not shake the sense that Americans who thought they could be “the moral umpire of the universe” or “go Sir Galahading around the world” were chasing rainbows right into the line


of fire. One Kansan characteristically argued that Americans should not be “policing the other billion and one half people” on the earth who had not even had “kindergarten lessons” in free government. Such arguments managed to be arrogant and humble, short sighted and prophetic, all at once. Democracy would not “come by a magician’s wand” once the world’s dictators had been overthrown, he insisted: “I vote NO on hunting trouble.”

At other times, however, those who participated in the debates offered less estimable rationales. Americans who favored a negotiated truce between Germany and Great Britain rarely dwelled on the crimes of Axis powers—which Senator Nye made a point of calling “alleged aggressors”—and they bordered on apologism for the Nazi New Order on continental Europe. Their opponents, on the other hand, sometimes betrayed a melodramatic overestimation of the virtue, even a glorification of war. Hawks all too easily dismissed pacifists as those who frivolously indulged in “pious shudders about the horrors of war.” War was “our human privilege” and the “only genuine solution,” FFF writers claimed. Antifascists also paved the way for regrettable internment policies, constantly airing their fifth-column paranoias about Vichy plotters, “Japanese-American Quislings,” and other “Subversivists.” Fight for Freedom Committee members proved as intolerant of the war’s gray areas as their detractors, dismissing those who disagreed with them as cowardly Quakers, “primitive” mothers, red-baiters, and “pacifist-appeasers.” In their most controversial stand, the group viciously attacked Hoover’s initiative to feed hungry families in occupied territories. No one behind Axis lines was innocent, they insisted. The women, children, cripples, and elderly of Belgium and France had become “part of the Nazi system.”

Americans may have been at odds over their ideas about foreign affairs, but once they are no longer sorted into isolationist and internationalist camps, important commonalities in tactics and tone become clearer. Certain ways of arguing and thinking were shared across the political spectrum. Many became shrill and hyperbolic, stoking popular anxieties and accusing their opponents of being fronts or dupes. America First spokesmen such as Charles Lindbergh became famously conspiratorial in their reasoning, but their rivals indulged in it, too, by obsessing

32. Charles Sprague in “What’s YOUR Opinion?” Current History, October 1939, 42–47; Norman Thomas, “We Needn’t Go to War,” Harper’s, November 1938, 657–64; Richard Payne, September 11, 1941 and J. C. Ruppenthal, September 29, 1941, both in box 21 ft, FFF.
over the specter of Nazi “puppets” and “hirelings” doing their sinister work behind the scenes in Washington and New York. (FFF’s staff lamented that the FBI did not have a Gestapo-like espionage unit to track them down.) Yet despite the satire and creative name-calling, everyone insisted that “our Western civilization” or “civilization as we know it” was at stake. Likewise, everyone except party members excoriated the Communists and claimed to uphold “Christianity” and the “American Way.” 35 In several crucial respects, this presented not a debate of opposites but a fine-grained battle over who spoke for the nation’s shared history, mission, and values. The daunting question was not will the United States play a role but what role will it play, or more to the point, what kind of neutral—or belligerent—should the United States be in a world where the old rules of warfare, it was said, no longer applied?

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If historians do away with isolationism and its tendency to reinforce myths about Americans’ accidental but noble rise to superpower, then how to explain this befuddling period of foreign relations? Looking beyond the United States to the experiences of other nations on the periphery of the original war in Europe suggests an answer. Historians do not typically write about the isolationism of the Swiss or the Argentineans, although like Americans they considered noninvolvement a way to promote certain ideals and goals without shedding their own citizens’ blood or else simply as a means to keep internal ethnic factionalism at bay. Scholars do not consider Italians isolationist for delaying entry into the war until June 1940, or call Mexicans or Brazilians isolationists, who also equivocated, like their northern neighbors, before joining the Allies. Americans who wanted to intervene would of course argue that they occupied a special position because of their nation’s great power status, and since the 1950s it has been widely assumed that the United States was an “unnatural neutral,” in the words of one pioneering neutrality historian, which had become “too big to abstain from influencing world affairs.” 36 Yet possessing the military and economic means to impact foreign affairs but hesitating to do so had never been cause to label other powerful states isolationist, for example Great Britain which had taken a hands-off approach to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Spanish civil war.

The success and duration of a nation’s neutrality would always depend on the commitment of its leaders, its resources and bargaining chips, as well as the fate of geography. But nations struggling with the shifting meanings and ultimately

perceived demise of neutrality—including other world powers that intervened selectively rather than consistently abroad—make far better comparisons for the United States during the 1930s and early 1940s than states that have earned the label isolationist throughout history, such as Ming dynasty China, Japan before the 1860s, or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Moving away from exceptionalist assumptions about the United States and delving into the largely overlooked concept of neutrality offers a new way to understand the interwar years. Since the 1930s, Americans have become more readily embroiled in military conflicts overseas not because they have given up “isolationism,” but because they have discredited neutrality.

The modern institution of neutrality grew up out of its trial-and-error practice over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then was enshrined in the rules of war established at the Hague convention in 1907. In exchange for ensuring that their territories would not be used for military recruiting, transport of troops, or other belligerent operations, the lands and waters of neutral states would be regarded as inviolable. Neutral merchants remained free to trade with whom they pleased, although belligerents, if they had the capacity, were allowed to blockade contraband, and neutral governments themselves were prohibited from selling munitions to warring nations. Modern neutrality rested on a set of assumptions that had fit nineteenth-century European realities: That commerce was largely a private endeavor while wars were the prerogative of states resorted to in the normal course of protecting or advancing national interests. In the holy wars of the medieval and early modern period, bystanders had been expected to distinguish between just and unjust perpetrators of violence and offer assistance accordingly, but once war became more an instrument of foreign policy than a battle on behalf of God, neutral governments were expected to be capable of dealing impartially with disputing parties. In the nineteenth century, Americans saw neutrality as a proper, moral way to safeguard liberty at home, while international law designated it as a perfectly legitimate, even admirable stance to adopt (rather than cause for being branded isolationist). Modern neutrality protected the sovereignty and economic needs of small or distant states from great power intrigues. It had the virtue of localizing conflicts that might otherwise spread, of “keeping some people

37. For the increasingly diverse practices and theories of neutrality outside the United States during the era of the world wars, see Ørvik, Decline of Neutrality; Bill Albert, South America and the First World War: The Impact of the War on Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile (Cambridge, 1988); Christian Leitz, Nazi Germany and Neutral Europe during the Second World War (Manchester, 2000); Neville Wylie, ed., European Neutrals and Neutral Europe during the Second World War (New York, 2002); Thomas Leonard and John Bratzel, eds., Latin America During World War II (Lanham, MD, 2007); Herbert Reginbogin, Faces of Neutrality: A Comparative Analysis of the Neutrality of Switzerland and Other Neutral Nations during WWII (Berlin, 2009); Johan den Hertog and Samuél Kruizinga, eds., Caught in the Middle: Neutrals, Neutrality and the First World War (Amsterdam, 2011); Herman Amersfoort and Wim Klinkert, eds., Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940 (Leiden, 2011).
out of war when others lose their heads,” as its leading American defender, the Yale law professor Edwin Borchard put it.38

But no sooner had this classic form of neutrality been codified than it would face a series of grave challenges. During World War I, the Entente and Central Powers alike brazenly disregarded maritime laws, attacking neutral vessels and confiscating their cargoes. To most Americans, torn in their allegiances, eager to carry on business, and grateful to be far from the carnage “over there,” the virtues of neutrality remained clear. Indeed, defending their neutral rights against the depredations of German U-boats, which cost American lives, provided the stated purpose for eventually entering the war. Woodrow Wilson, too, had seen neutrality as a noble posture at the conflict’s start, allowing the United States with “splendid courage of reserve moral force” to rise above power politics as a great mediator. But the scope and scale of the war so complicated this stance that the president and his advisers soon doubted the practice’s long-term relevance. Moreover, Wilson’s failure to effectively protest British violations against U.S. property suggested that the administration was in fact making precedent-setting distinctions between “good” and “bad” belligerents. More and more, a position of neutrality did not seem bold enough to convey Wilson’s ambitions to remake the international order by spreading progressive American values. “Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples,” he reasoned in his war address.39

The pursuit of collective security and punishment after the Armistice, embodied by the punitive peace and the League of Nations charter, further undermined the concept of neutrality. In an era of common causes and ideological crusades, when it was again incumbent upon states to distinguish between perpetrators and innocents, standing aside would be more easily recast as selfish, irresponsible, even immoral. The notorious Treaty fight in the U.S. Senate, rather than a battle between isolationists and internationalists, is better understood as a local variation on the debate taking place across the Atlantic world about this proposed departure from traditional statecraft.40 Americans had been leading proponents of neutral rights since the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1794, path-blazing legislation that provided the groundwork for modern neutrality law by promising to keep

40. Hertog and Kruizinga, eds., Caught in the Middle.
American territories free from involvement in foreign hostilities in exchange for unfettered overseas trade and movement. Defending neutral rights embroiled Americans in conflicts with France and Great Britain during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), and Unionists momentarily opposed the policy when the British invoked their own neutral rights during the American Civil War. But otherwise this arrangement had greatly benefited Americans. It offered them a way to be out in the world without getting run over by Europe’s imperial wars.\textsuperscript{41} Focusing their ire on the Covenant’s Article X, which assured mutual security for all members, League opponents were not looking to shrink from international life. But nor did they want to relinquish the advantages Americans had enjoyed under the old system or incur a host of new obligations in a disputatious world.\textsuperscript{42}

During the years after the Armistice, American foreign policy debates centered on this disagreement between defenders of traditional neutrality, such as William Borah and Edwin Borchard, and those who were beginning to suspect that the ideological burdens and warfare capabilities of the twentieth century would prove too much for its continued practice. Woodrow Wilson certainly opened the door for a new era of moral crusading abroad, but the course was far from predetermined. Through the mid-twenties, in fact, it looked as though neutrality would be sufficiently patched up, just as it had been after the excesses of the Napoleonic Wars. Germany declared neutrality toward the Russo-Polish War in 1920; Soviet Russia completed a series of bilateral treaties ensuring neutrality in the event of certain border conflicts; and at the Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922), the Nine-Power Treaty reiterated China’s neutrality. Despite skeptics’ dire predictions, neutrality even survived under the collective security auspices of the League of Nations itself. The London Protocol of 1920 allowed Switzerland to join as a “differentiated” neutral, exempting it from potential military obligations, and others joined under similar arrangements. Americans were far from alone in their doubts about Article X at a moment when, by one count, twenty-three armed conflicts were raging in Europe alone. Furthermore, Americans had no trouble practicing neutrality themselves at this time. Tellingly, the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), Mussolini’s temporary occupation of Corfu (1923), and the Spanish-French expeditions to reconquer Northern Morocco known as the Rif War (1920–1926) did not spark any great debate or crisis of conscience about American involvement as would Mussolini’s Ethiopian campaign and the Spanish civil war in the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{43} Ørvik, Decline of Neutrality, 121–34; Reginbogin, Faces of Neutrality, 25; Louis Clerc, “The Hottest Places in Hell? Finnish and Nordic Neutrality from the Perspective of French Foreign
Yet even as the practice of neutrality continued, the perception of its vulnerability, even obsolescence, grew stronger as Americans, and others, developed new understandings of what war entailed. Ironically, the opponents of Article X were among the first to chip away at Americans’ confidence in neutrality by portraying it during the Treaty fight as fragile and under siege. Then in the mid and late twenties, pacifist activists, at a peak of their influence, argued that the Great War had ushered in an age when conflicts had reached totalizing, nightmarish proportions. The flouting of maritime law, the extension of submarine and air power, the proliferation of irregular warfare all threatened to suck international trade routes and neutral territories into the landscape of modern combat. Rather than an inevitable feature of international relations, war now seemed, even to someone like Reinhold Niebuhr who would later help to revive just war theory, “an unmitigated and unjustified evil.” Revisionist histories, beginning with Harry Elmer Barnes’ *The Genesis of the World War* (1926), and novels such as Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and the English translation of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), further underscored this emergent common wisdom. “Today war is a battle of whole peoples,” Herbert Hoover summed up a widespread sentiment by the 1930s: “They must be mobilized to the last atom of their economic and emotional strength.” Previous distinctions between combatants and civilians, between private commerce and state-supported militaries, between forbidden contraband and allowable trade, or between war fronts and neutrality zones no longer made sense in a world where wars were about attrition and “almost anything except ostrich feathers,” it was often said, might determine the outcome. If war now presented a “death struggle between whole economic systems,” then “what is an implement of war?” Bernard Baruch asked rhetorically. With all commerce now suspect, with all people instrumental for the war machine and all lands a part of battleground strategy, the problem of “waging neutrality,” one contemporary scholar diagnosed, had become about as difficult as waging war.44

By revising their narratives about the Great War, and indeed about the nature of war in general, Americans inadvertently began to undermine their own historic

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commitment to neutral rights. If war was to be regarded not as “one of the normal instrumentalities of human life,” but as an aberrant horror to be avoided at all costs, then belligerency no longer had a legitimate place in international relations, and neutrals ought no longer treat warlike nations “with the punctilios of the duelist’s code,” as Henry L. Stimson put it. The Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) is often remembered as merely a token gesture to pacifist ideals, but it had important, unforeseen implications for thinking about neutrality. In its wake, international lawyers vigorously debated whether, by renouncing the use of war as an instrument of foreign policy, the Paris Pact had technically outlawed the kinds of wars in which remaining neutral made sense. “During the last ten years, the status of war has profoundly changed,” the international relations expert Raymond Leslie Buell contended in 1929, and with it the status of neutrality, too, had been “fundamentally altered.” In subsequent years, as legal scholars began to pry open the concept of neutrality, some began to argue moreover that neutrality did not avert war but rather led right into it. Drawing on his experience in the Attorney General’s office during World War I, Charles Warren argued in a widely read Foreign Affairs article in 1934 that Americans needed to renounce their wartime trade and travel rights unless they wanted to “run the risk of another Lusitania complication.” There was no use, he convinced many, of “deluding ourselves with international law as it exists in books.”

45 Neutrality talk—not isolationist talk—resounded on Capitol Hill and at academic conferences. Exercising neutral rights had always been a risky proposition but by the mid-thirties, doing so was widely seen as “unenforceable,” “dangerous,” “disagreeable,” or even, as the economist Ernest Minor Patterson determined, “impossible for us in a world so complex and so interdependent as that of the twentieth century.” Popular magazines like Harper’s clamored for “new conceptions of neutrality” to meet changing geopolitical realities. Yet in the absence of international agreement on updated protocols—something the League of Nations might profitably have tackled, one critic suggested—nations were left to modernize the rules themselves.46


Fight as they would over foreign policy, Americans largely agreed by the mid-thirties that they faced a new frontier in international relations that necessitated a “radical departure” from the “passive neutrality of other days.” Modern warfare technology had proven the exercise of neutral rights to be impractical, and signing Kellogg-Briand had made it ideologically untenable, more and more said, drowning out the arguments of those who had defended traditional international law more effectively in the twenties. The Neutrality Act of 1935 and its various revisions reflected this emerging consensus. Far from preserving or reaffirming neutrality, these misnamed acts relinquished neutral rights. Forbidding Americans to trade in munitions with belligerents or sail on their ships and conduct other business that was perfectly legal under international law but brought Americans into the fray of battle, the neutrality acts aimed to do away with the scenarios that had led the nation to the brink of conflict in 1812, 1898, and 1917. In the “showdown on neutrality” that took place between 1935 and 1939, the matter at hand was not isolation versus intervention. It was a dispute over who specifically Americans should embargo—only those judged “aggressors” or all belligerents? Antifascists advocated selective embargoes to send a strong message to the world’s dictators (not to mention to keep trade lines open for the Ethiopians, Spanish Republicans, and then other democracies). Those who preferred wholesale embargoes, by contrast, wanted to shut off supplies to all warring nations to “make it plain that Uncle Sam does not intend again to play Uncle Santa Claus to the war lords of the world,” as Senator Bennet Champ Clark (D-Missouri) put it. The latter position prevailed in Congress, but neither policy was technically neutrality. Indeed, both stood as indictments against using war as an instrument of foreign policy and punitive measures against those who continued to do so. To embargo someone who had not violated your rights was to teach a moral lesson. It was to decide that right and wrong now had a place in statecraft. Rather than heralding the culmination of isolationism, in other words, the neutrality acts could be seen as inaugurating a new era when Americans would make liberal use of sanctions and other short-of-war forms of coercion to impact the policies and conflicts of others (Figure 3).  

By the time war erupted in September 1939— with Americans now racked by doubts about the nobility or workability of neutrality and as all those spirited crank

letters poured into Washington—Franklin Roosevelt could not ask, as Wilson had at the start of the First World War, for Americans to embrace the “true spirit of neutrality” by being “impartial in thought, as well as action.” “Even a neutral,” he asserted instead, “cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.” Neutrality had in fact become so confused and uncertain, not only as a personal sentiment but
also as a matter of policy, that FDR was obliged to implement two separate neutrality regimes for the nation to follow after the invasion of Poland. First, he announced adherence to traditional international protocols, among them bans on conscripting for belligerent armies on American soil and limitations on access to American harbors for war ships. Plane manufacturers continued to ship their cargoes to France and England, however, until five hours later when FDR activated the second form of neutrality conjured up by Congress, embargoing the sale of war materials to all belligerents. But neither approach inspired much confidence that it would ensure safety or respect for the United States in the long term. “Neutrality is no longer considered by the general public as a natural guarantee of independence and security,” one journalist reasoned, “but as an abnormal régime which is no longer justified by modern circumstances.” The Nation’s Freda Kirchwey concluded that what Americans really wanted, or at least what most of them suspected was at this point the best-case scenario, was to find a way to be half in and half out of the war.  

The meaning of neutrality had been upended in the debates of the interwar years, and the extent of its new, murky possibilities became only more apparent during 1939 and 1940 as European states put their own versions into practice. In addition to judging the consequences of their own embargo-based neutrality, Americans could also learn from Spain’s pro-Axis neutrality and Vichy’s suspicious quasi-neutrality as well as from Ireland’s “against everybody” neutrality and Portugal’s beneficial-to-everyone “strict” neutrality. There was the Finnish Foreign Minister’s announcement of his nation’s “active neutrality,” the spiritually guided “pope’s neutrality,” and the Danish Foreign Secretary’s promise that, even if occupied, Denmark would adhere to “neo-neutrality,” or what might more accurately be called wishful-thinking neutrality. In a world of such varied neutrals, then, what kind would the United States be? Many researched the policies of Scandinavian and South American nations during World War I looking for models, and the conservative Saturday Evening Post, for its part, was “bubbling with enthusiasm about the Swiss.” In essence, what many so-called isolationists advocated was what is now known to be Swiss-style neutrality—the maintenance of democratic government without relinquishing profitable dealings with dictatorships and without opening the nation up to an inundation of refugees. Like many European neutrals, this stance left open the option of making peace with a Nazi New Order. Indeed, compelling comparisons can be made between the United States and Switzerland during the early years of the war, when transatlantic refugee traffic was kept below immigration quota limits and American

businessmen continued to collaborate and trade with their German counterparts (German assets in the United States were not frozen until June 1941, unlike the assets of occupied territories, which were blocked in mid-1940). Since World War II, Swiss politicians and bankers have come under intense criticism for their wartime choices, but Americans, styled as isolationist rather than neutral before 1942, have escaped similar scrutiny.49

American policy makers also experimented with a form of collective, hemispheric neutrality—embodied in the Declaration of Panama (1939) and the Act of Havana (1940)—but the version of neutrality that eventually prevailed in the United States was Mussolini’s. Between September 1939 and June 1940, Italy maintained a position of “non-belligerence,” a status that had no basis in international law but nevertheless would be emulated by other states wanting to favor one side while avoiding actual combat. The President, of course, did not borrow Il Duce’s term (though Churchill pleaded for him to do so explicitly after the start of the blitzkrieg). Instead he called it “national emergency” or “methods short of war.” Declaring an emergency in September 1939 granted Roosevelt powers he would normally have only in wartime, for example, the ability to fix prices and control international exchanges. On this authority, FDR enlarged the FBI, forbade travel to Europe without special approval, and sent troops to the Panama Canal Zone to inspect passing crafts.50 For more than two years that followed, Americans lived in this shadowy space of nonbelligerency, which, like Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception,” proved to be a “no-man’s-land between public law and political fact.” The creation and then expansion of the “neutrality belt” around North and South America, as well as the extension of the “Western Hemisphere” so that it reached Iceland, dictated the movement of troops and warships, even though international law guaranteed neither set of borders. Americans violated the spirit of their own neutrality acts as well. The 1939 “cash-and-carry” revisions were obviously designed to benefit the Allies, while new rules forbidding American vessels from combat zones were simply maneuvered around by recommissioning U.S. ships under Panamanian flags. Meanwhile, FDR declined to declare a state of war in East Asia, where one clearly existed, so that cash and carry did not benefit Japan, a maritime power,


over China. With American sentiments clearly backing Chinese forces—with loans flowing to Chiang Kai-shek and a tightening embargo pushing Japan to the edge—nonbelligerency rather than isolationism or even old-fashioned neutrality best characterized Americans’ policy in the Pacific as well.\footnote{51}

Even more significant, perhaps, were the multifaceted ways in which American policies would disregard the Hague’s rules on neutrality. The government’s role in transforming the nation into the “arsenal of democracy,” beginning with the release of surplus military supplies in the summer of 1940 and the destroyer-for-bases deal that September, violated bans on the public sale of war supplies to belligerents by neutral states (but would be justified under the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which allowed states to deny equal treatment to those who violated their treaty obligations). Opening the Lend Lease hearings at the start of 1941, Cordell Hull spoke a language Americans now well understood: “Mankind is today face to face, not with regional wars or isolated conflicts,” he warned, “but ‘forces which are not restrained by considerations of law or principles of morality.’” The Lend Lease Act dwarfed all aid previously given by a neutral power to a belligerent, but its passage proved not nearly as controversial as might be expected. A line had already been crossed. Deprived of arguments based on law or precedent, the policy’s outnumbered opponents could only quibble about the dangers of enlarging presidential power. If any doubts remained after the passage of Lend Lease in March, the seizure of Axis ships in American waters, the freezing of Axis funds, and the behind-the-scenes planning between American and British military officials all made clear that the United States had relinquished traditional neutrality in favor of a “common-law alliance” with Great Britain and the “creeping involvement” that some had so fearfully predicted. By May 1941, when FDR extended the state of crisis to an “unlimited national emergency,” few, at least privately, would have disputed Congressman Roy Woodruff’s (R-Michigan) description of it as a “declaration of undeclared war.” Within months, Pan American Airways began using secret Presidential funds to forge a supply line from Brazil to Africa to fortify British troops against Rommel’s forces, and the U.S. Navy started skirmishing with U-boats during its “neutrality patrols.”\footnote{52}


52. Sherwood, \emph{Roosevelt and Hopkins}, 270–73; Doenecke, \emph{Storm on the Horizon}, 119–22, 166–68, 178–79, Woodruff quotation p. 181; “We Choose Human Freedom,” May 27, 1941, \emph{Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt}, vol. 10, 181–95; William Langer and S. Everett Gleason, \emph{The Undeclared War, 1940–1941} (New York, 1953), 262–85, Hull quotation, p. 263; Deborah Ray, “Pan American Airways and the Trans-African Air Base Program of World War II,” NYU dissertation, 1973. In light of the United States’s obvious nonbelligerency, the once popular Neutrality Act had become an embarrassment to some Americans by September 1941. The \emph{New York Post} urged Congress to get rid of “this hoary and decrepit antique”; it was just a reminder}
As Americans stepped into this breach, they tried to understand their place in the war by drawing on personal, everyday ethics rather than the dispassionate logic of law and traditional statecraft, which had come to seem so inadequate. In all kinds of ways, Americans began to evoke a “neutrality of the Good Neighbor,” as one legal scholar put it, or a way to be the world’s “Good Samaritan,” as Henry Luce called it. Some, like Hoover, emphasized the virtue of putting “our own house in order,” of minding “our own business,” as Borchard pointed out that respectful neighbors often did. The war constituted a private matter “within our own family of nations,” Charles Lindbergh ventured; it would be different if it was a “question of banding together to defend the white race against foreign invasion,” say against “some Asiatic intruder.” But Allied supporters most effectively marshaled good neighbor talk. FDR, who celebrated the concept in his first inaugural address, continued to persuade his listeners in its homespun, common sense terms. Lend Lease, he said, meant simply loaning a fire hose to a neighbor whose house was in flames. Standing up against the Axis, others reasoned, was like facing off against a bully on the playground. “There is no virtue in pacifism or in neutrality which denies aid to a neighbor in dire distress,” the leading interventionist Herbert Agar made an increasingly common argument; there was merely “inability to distinguish between right and wrong.” Unrest abroad deserved Americans’ attention he insisted, just as “the welfare of the poor traveler who fell among thieves should have been the business of every passer-by.” Supporters of the President’s course, moreover, rationalized it as inevitable for a powerhouse such as the United States. Maybe a small state, geographically distant from the action, could sit out the century’s great clashes, *Time* wagered, but “every neutral nation that had risen above the level of primitive handicrafts” could not afford impartiality or disinterestedness. A “simple but unalterable fact in modern foreign relations,” Roosevelt insisted, even as he reaffirmed the nation’s “neutrality,” was that “every word that comes through the air, every ship that sails the sea, every battle that is fought does affect the American future.” “Who is our neighbor?” the president of the American Society of International Law had asked as the neutrality debates heated up: “Everybody.”

Reframing the interwar years around the crisis of neutrality will not make it any easier to label Americans’ political views. Historians will still have to carefully

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distinguish between antifascist idealists, opportunistic unilateralists, traditional law advocates, pacifists, pragmatic businessmen, and those who did not find the Nazis all that objectionable so long as they stayed on the other side of the Atlantic. But unlike isolationism, the concept of neutrality pinpoints the common ground and specific problems shared by interwar Americans as they debated their role in world affairs, and it highlights what proved distinctive about this turning point moment. Behind the fact that a president sympathetic to the plight of Great Britain and the bombing of Pearl Harbor explain the United States’s entry into World War II—beyond Americans’ predilection for viewing themselves before 1941 as “Babes in a pre-war World,” as Time put it—there is a longer, more complex history to how Americans found themselves destined for battlefields across the globe.54 What happened after the late twenties was not a turning inward, or a drift away from internationalism, but a change in the way Americans understood the causes and conduct of modern combat. Seeing the United States as a neutral nation, rather than an isolated one, helps to reveal how, caught up in the difficult ethical dilemmas of the day and faced with a collapsing faith in international law, Americans, like others, succumbed to new conceptions of war and neutrality with far-reaching and largely unintended consequences. The stakes of military engagement had never been higher, and war by its very nature in modern times, it was now believed, could not be civilized or justified as a normal part of international relations. Therefore, now more than ever, aggressive forces had to be kept in check. Yet even as Americans became more critical and fearful of war, rising hopes for collective security and arbitration also suggested that the world had become a place where it was only natural, only human to take sides. War had become less tolerable to Americans. But without the old fail-safe refuge of neutrality, it would also become more likely.

This irony, however, has been eclipsed by the grand narratives about the trials and triumphs of the Second World War. After 1945, all Americans’ hard-fought battles over neutral rights since the Napoleonic Wars, all the agonizing over their fate during the 1920s and 1930s, were forgotten as new stories emerged about a good-neighborly nation that had finally overcome its isolationism. Before World War II, neutrality had been imagined as “unquestionably one of the most complex and crucial issues of our time,” as the Nation called it. Little more than a decade later it seemed quaint and irrelevant. Looking back over the old, “endless disputes” about neutral rights from the vantage point of Americans’ global ambitions and reach in the midst of the Korean War, George Kennan marveled: “It seems hard to understand how we could have attached so much importance to them.” Unlike the rules governing the status of refugees and prisoners of war, international law on neutrality would never be updated after 1907. It was not fit for the holy wars of the twentieth century. Content

with its demise, Americans now thought that “the choice did not necessarily have to be made between total peace and total war,” one legal scholar surmised in 1943. But choosing between war and peace had never really been the dilemma anyway. For Americans—their nation born amid the Old World’s balance-of-power struggles and formed in an age defined by the bloody work of consolidating modern nation-states and far-flung empires—there had been only times of war and times of neutrality. But now, with neutrality “out the window,” as many cheered with noble intentions but also naïve relief, Americans helped to inaugurate a new era of open-ended “war-but-not-war,” as Mary Dudziak calls it. As combat’s kaleidoscopic potential burst forth in all of its varieties—undeclared, covert, proxy, dirty, metaphoric—Americans would discover that without times of neutrality, war was only a matter of time.55
