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US isolationism in the 1930s: democracy came under increasing threat in the 1930s. Why did the world's most powerful democracy not seem interested?

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Until the Second World War, the traditional policy of the USA was one of isolationism, i.e. a reluctance to become involved in the political affairs of Europe. In many ways, US isolationism was at its height in the 1930s, when the activities of Hitler and Mussolini seemed likely to drag Europe into another world war--one that most Americans were determined to keep out of.

The origins of US isolationism go back to the early years of the USA, following the War of Independence against Britain. George Washington, America's first president, urged his countrymen to avoid taking sides in the rivalries of Europe. Similarly, Thomas Jefferson, the third president, argued that the USA should be wary of 'entangling alliances' with European powers. By and large, the USA maintained a policy of political isolationism from Europe until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

US intervention, 1917

The president at this time, Woodrow Wilson, tried to keep the USA neutral but for various reasons, especially German submarine attacks on US shipping, the USA eventually declared war in April 1917. Having joined the war reluctantly on the side of Britain and France--though as an 'associated' power rather than an 'allied' one--Wilson strove to make the US war effort a campaign for democracy, blaming the war on the militarism of the German empire.

After the USA joined the war, Wilson put forward the idea of a League of Nations, which would aim to prevent future wars by following a policy of collective security, i.e. League members would act together to safeguard the security of other members. The League was a radical departure from the traditional policy of isolationism and US membership was rejected in the Senate. Wilson himself suffered a stroke while campaigning for the League and became an invalid. In the 1920 presidential election the Democrats (Wilson's party) supported the League but the Republicans won an overwhelming victory.

Franklin Roosevelt

As a result, the internationalism of Democrats like Franklin Roosevelt, the party's candidate for vice-president in 1920, was eclipsed by a new era of isolationism. The Republican presidents of the 1920s were not entirely averse to involvement in international affairs but they had no desire to join the League and there was general disillusionment with the results of US intervention in the First World War. This was made worse by the fact that most of the allies, including Britain and France, had complained about the repayment of their war debts to the USA and wanted them to be cancelled.

The election of 1932 was fought against the background of economic depression following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and resulted in a landslide victory for the Democrats, now led by Franklin Roosevelt. However, Roosevelt had disavowed his earlier support for US membership of the League, fearing that otherwise he might not get elected. His main priority was the economic crisis at home and the New Deal reforms that he pledged to introduce.

The isolationists

Roosevelt became president in March 1933, 2 months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany. He wished to cooperate with Britain and France against Germany but this was difficult in view of Congress's attitude, especially the Senate, which was the stronghold of isolationism. Two of the leading isolationists in the Senate were Hiram Johnson and William Borah, who were Republicans who had rejected Wilson's League in 1919-20. However, they were also supporters of many of the New Deal reforms, so

Roosevelt was reluctant to oppose them.

In fact, isolationism was a broad coalition that included Democrats as well as Republicans. The centre of isolationism was the Midwest--states like Illinois, Missouri and Ohio. One of the leading isolationist newspapers was the Chicago Tribune. The Hearst press, owned by William Randolph Hearst, also supported isolationism. Another leading isolationist was the 'radio priest', Father Charles Coughlin, who attracted a great deal of publicity with his attacks on the New Deal.

The isolationists argued that the USA had made a mistake entering the First World War because it had not been a war about democracy but rather about imperialism. It was felt that Britain and France were no different from Germany in this respect. Isolationists argued that the war had not benefited the ordinary US people but rather bankers and big business, especially arms dealers. In 1934, the Republican Senator Gerald Nye chaired an investigation into the sale of munitions in the First World War, which reported that US arms manufacturers had made vast profits.

Further evidence of the strength of isolationism came in January 1935 with the defeat of Roosevelt's attempt to secure US membership of the World Court. It had been expected that this would be successful as the Democrats had a large majority in the Senate. But a last-minute campaign against the court by isolationists, including Father Coughlin, led to 20 Democrats in the Senate not voting and the bill therefore fell short of the two-thirds majority it needed to pass. This was a great blow to Roosevelt and the internationalists.

Neutrality laws

The international situation--especially in Europe--grew steadily worse in 1935. Not only was Germany rapidly rearming but Italy, led by Mussolini, sought to create an empire in Africa by invading Abyssinia (Ethiopia). In August 1935, a meeting between Italy, France and Britain failed to persuade Mussolini not to attack Abyssinia. This led Congress to pass a neutrality resolution banning the supply of 'arms, ammunition and the implements of war' to states involved in a conflict. This arms embargo, which became law on 31 August 1935, was mandatory on both sides in the event of war. It was due to expire in February 1936 but was then extended until March 1937.

Roosevelt had wanted discretionary powers over arms, ammunition and the implements of war in order to have some influence on the Italo-Abyssinian war and to be able to cooperate with the League in imposing sanctions on Italy. However, Britain and France were half-hearted in supporting sanctions and these were ended eventually. In June 1936, Roosevelt revoked his neutrality proclamation against US involvement in the war. By then Abyssinia had been defeated.

Worse was to come with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. Britain and France wished to remain neutral but Germany and Italy supported the Nationalists under General Franco and Russia supported the Republicans. Roosevelt wanted more discretion to decide US policy and eventually, in May 1937, the neutrality law was amended to give the president flexibility in defining which materials could be sold to belligerents on a 'cash and carry' basis. But the arms embargo remained in force.

Quarantine speech, 1937

Although Roosevelt had signed the neutrality laws, he had done so reluctantly. He believed that the best way of avoiding US involvement in war was to prevent war in the first place. He feared that if war broke out, the USA would eventually be dragged in, as had happened in 1917, and that his New Deal reforms would suffer. To prevent this he wanted to support Britain and France and issue a warning to Germany, Italy and Japan. To this end he made his famous Quarantine speech in October 1937 in Chicago, the heartland of American isolationism. He said that if aggressive nations ignored international laws they should be 'quarantined' by law-abiding countries.

Roosevelt's speech was heavily criticised by the isolationists. Fearful of his intentions, they rallied behind the so-called Ludlow resolution, introduced into the House of Representatives by the Democrat, Louis Ludlow, from Indiana. This said that, except in the case of invasion of the USA, Congress should be able to declare war only after the approval of a national referendum. Roosevelt strongly opposed this proposal but it was defeated in January 1938 only by a narrow margin of 209 to 188.

The European situation worsened when, in March 1938, Hitler's bid to encompass all Germans within a greater Germany led to the German Anschluss with Austria. This created a huge German-speaking state in the centre of Europe and directly threatened Czechoslovakia which had a German minority in the Sudetenland. The appeasement policy of the British government under Neville Chamberlain resulted in the Munich Agreement, whereby the Sudetenland was ceded to Germany in exchange for a security guarantee for the rest of Czechoslovakia. However, this guarantee proved worthless and in March 1939, Hitler took control of this territory as well.

Repeal of arms embargo, 1939

From March 1939, another European war looked very likely. The US neutrality laws were due to be renewed in May 1939 and Roosevelt mounted a strong campaign to make the arms embargo discretionary. However Johnson, Borah and the other isolationists in Congress argued that this would make US involvement in war more likely and the laws were renewed. Thus, when Germany attacked Poland in September 1939 and Britain and France declared war, the US neutrality laws, including the arms embargo, came into force.

Once he was sure that US public opinion was overwhelmingly on the side of Britain and France, Roosevelt called for revision of the neutrality laws; this was finally achieved in November 1939. The arms embargo was replaced by a cash and carry provision, whereby

belligerent states could be sold arms and other war supplies if they paid cash and carried them away in their own ships. This clearly favoured Britain, with its stronger navy and economy, over Germany.

The isolationists opposed bitterly the repeal of the arms embargo. They feared it would be the thin end of a wedge that would lead to US involvement in war. After the defeat of France in June 1940, US support became more and more important to Britain's survival. In September, Roosevelt announced the destroyer-bases deal, whereby the USA gave Britain 50 over-age destroyers in return for the use of British bases in the Caribbean.

The isolationists retaliated by setting up the America First Committee, which argued that the USA should strengthen its own defences rather than support Britain. America First opposed the Lend Lease Act of July 1941, which promised massive aid to Britain and was highly critical of Roosevelt's policies. However, Japan's attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the German declaration of war that followed effectively ended US isolationism, as it became unpatriotic not to support the war effort. Historians sometimes refer to 'the myth of isolationism' but it was no myth as far as Roosevelt was concerned. His efforts to support Britain and France and to deter Germany, Italy and Japan were opposed at every turn by the isolationists. It was only the attack on Pearl Harbor that finally undermined US isolationism and allowed the USA to become the superpower we know today.

Major US isolationists

William Borah (1865-1940) 1890 Admitted to the Bar and practised in Lyons, Kansas. 1896 Unsuccessfully ran for election to Congress on a Silver Republican ticket for Idaho. 1903 Unsuccessfully ran for nomination as a Republican Senator. 1907 Elected as a Republican to the US Senate and served there until his death in 1940. Chaired several Senate committees, including the Committee on Foreign Relations. 1936 Unsuccessfully ran for Republican presidential nomination. 1939 Opposed repeal of the arms embargo following the outbreak of war.

Hiram Johnson (1866-1945)

Republican governor of California 1911-17 and senator for California from 1917 until his death in 1945. He favoured many of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reforms but opposed Roosevelt's internationalist outlook in foreign policy.

William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951)

Press magnate who owned the Hearst chain of 23 newspapers, plus gold and silver mines. He was a populist who used his papers to influence public opinion.

He favoured an 8-hour working day, public ownership of utility companies and direct election of US senators.

1903-07 Served as a US congressional representative. 1904 Campaigned, unsuccessfully, for Democratic Party presidential nomination. 1905, 1909 Served as mayor of New York City. 1906 Served as governor of New York State. 1930s Hearst's newspapers were strongly isolationist but he lost much of his influence during the Second World War. Chronology April 1917 US intervention in First World War. March 1920 Senate rejects US membership of League of Nations. March 1933 Franklin Roosevelt becomes president. January 1935 Senate rejects US membership of World Court. August 1935- Neutrality Acts passed by May 1937 Congress. January 1938 Ludlow resolution narrowly rejected by House of Representatives. November 1939 Repeal of arms embargo. December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; Germany declares war on USA. Gerald Nye (1892-1971) 1912 Began several years' service as journalist and editor of various Wisconsin newspapers. 1926 Elected to Congress, on the progressive wing of the Republican Party. 1934 Submitted a resolution asking the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to investigate the link between US entry into the First World War and munitions industry lobbying. 1936-39 Nye generally supported the Neutrality Acts although, during the Spanish Civil War, he tried to amend the arms embargo so that it would apply to Italy and Germany but not to the Spanish government. 1939-41 Nye remained a staunch isolationist, although not a pacifist. In 1940, he attacked Roosevelt's policy of 'all aid to Britain and France short of entering war', believing it to have misled Britain and France into a false sense of security. 1941 Nye was the most active member of the America First Committee in the Senate. 1944 Although he had supported the war (after Japan's attack on US ships in Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941), Nye lost his Senate seat because his isolationist views made him unpopular once the USA was at war.

Key concept

Understanding terms and concepts

Before you read this

It is not quite true that the USA did nothing at all in European affairs between the wars--look at the story of German reparations, for example. Check your textbook or your notes. Where was the USA active in the world between the wars, and what policy did it follow?

Key points

* US isolationism (a reluctance to become involved in the political affairs of Europe) had its origins in the early history of the USA but was stimulated by disillusionment with the USA's role in the First World War.

* Isolationism in the 1930s was also partly a reaction to the policies of Hitler and Mussolini that seemed to be driving Europe towards war. Most Americans were determined to keep out of such a war.

* An early victory for the isolationists was the defeat of US membership of the World Court in January 1935. This was blocked in the Senate, where it was opposed by isolationists such as Hiram Johnson and William Borah. The Ludlow resolution of January 1938,

which was only narrowly defeated, showed the strength of isolationism in the house.

* The main aim of the isolationists was to use the Neutrality laws of 1935-37, especially the arms embargo, to prevent the Roosevelt administration from taking sides in the event of war in Europe. However, the arms embargo was repealed in November 1939, once war broke out.

* Following the destroyer for bases deal with Britain in September 1940, the isolationists established the America First Committee to oppose Roosevelt's increasing aid to Britain, which they feared would lead to direct US involvement in the war.

* The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 was followed by a German declaration of war on the USA and this effectively ended US isolationism.

George Washington (1732-99): first president of the USA. He warned Americans to avoid becoming involved in European quarrels and was much quoted by isolationists in the 1930s.

Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924): Democratic president of the USA 1913-21. He took the USA into the First World War in 1917 and launched a campaign for a League of Nations, but it was rejected by the Senate.

League of Nations: established in 1919 on the principle of collective security. It was handicapped by the USA's refusal to join, as well as by the absence of the USSR until 1933 and the departure of Japan, Italy and Germany in the 1930s.

New Deal: programme of economic reforms introduced by Franklin Roosevelt. Their main aims were to achieve economic recovery and justice, especially for the unemployed and the low paid.

Midwest: farming and ranching region of the USA, characterised by traditional US principles of family and religion and hostility to political involvement abroad.

Father Charles Coughlin (1891-1979): Roman Catholic priest and political agitator. In the early 1930s, his weekly radio show reached over 40 million listeners. Coughlin was an outspoken critic of Roosevelt's New Deal and of his internationalist policies. His broadcasts were suppressed in 1942 for criticising US involvement in the Second World War.

World Court: the International Court of Arbitration established at The Hague, Netherlands, in 1899, to settle disputes between countries.

discretionary powers: giving the president the authority to decide on a policy, rather than having to follow a specific policy laid down by Congress.

Spanish Civil War 1936-39: conflict between the leftwing government of Spain (the Republicans) and the right-wing Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco. The war attracted widespread involvement on both sides by volunteers from around the world.

Ludlow resolution: Congressional resolution put forward by Louis Ludlow, a member of the House of Representatives from Indiana. It proposed that any future declaration of war by the USA should be made dependent on a national referendum. Its narrow defeat in January 1938 showed the strength of isolationism in the late 1930s.

Questions

* Was the USA wise to stay out of the League of Nations?

* To what extent was isolationism merely a mask for opposition to the New Deal?

* In what ways did the struggle over isolationism and neutrality strengthen the position of the presidency? Does the evidence suggest that this was Roosevelt's underlying motive in trying to support Britain?

Weblink

Even the briefest of Google searches will show that many sites refer to 'the myth of isolationism'. This is because US historians have questioned the extent to which the USA really did cut itself off from world events, and have pointed out that Roosevelt actually did have a foreign policy. In this connection, you might like to look at the History Today site, www.historytoday.com, where there is an article on Roosevelt's foreign policy by Robert Dallek, though this is a subscription service. To read Roosevelt's policy from his own mouth, see his 1936 annual message to Congress at: <http://newdeal.feri.org/Texts/subject.htm#97>.

Finally, there are useful essays that put the USA's isolationist tendencies into the wider context at: www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1601.html and www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1978/3/78.03.05.x.html.

Further reading

Cole, W. (1983) *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, University of Nebraska Press. A good, detailed study.

Dallek, R. (1979) *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, OUP. The standard work on Roosevelt's foreign

policy.

Divine, R. (1962) *The Illusion of Neutrality*, Chicago University Press. A classic work.

Jonas, M. (1966) *Isolationism in America*, Cornell University Press. A very detailed treatment.

Jones, M. (1995) *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1992*, OUP. A good general textbook with an excellent section on isolationism.

Kennedy, D. (1999) *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, OUP. Another standard work on Roosevelt.

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