

The Realities of American Isolation and Engagement

Historians often describe America's foreign policy stance prior to the mid-20th century as isolationist. This changed, many argue, as the United States hesitantly engaged in two 20th century wars of unprecedented magnitude, emerging as one of two superpowers. Of this remarkable development, some would say, "The abandonment of isolationism in favor of a policy of overseas military and strategic engagement in the first half of the 20th century was a profoundly misguided choice. It has added nothing to the US security, which could not have been had otherwise, especially in the nuclear age, and has added many burdens and risks instead." This claim is flawed because it first of all employs the problematic term "Isolationist" – a term that is vague and misleading. The claim is also flawed because engagement overseas was vital to American interests in the first half of the 20th century, making isolation impossible.

By the middle of the 20th century the United States had an extensive military presence around the world; yet its lesser military presence prior to the 20th century did not make America isolated. As Bernard Fensterwald, legal advisor to the State Department, argued, "Even in the heyday of 'isolationism' in the 1930s, [America] never practiced isolationism in its pure form...[its] policies have never amounted to anything more than pseudo-isolationism."¹ America was only isolationist in the sense that it could often afford to separate itself from European military affairs. Journalist Walter Lippmann claimed that British naval power made it possible for American's isolation in the 19th century.² Yet according to historian Bradford Perkins, while the American people, knowingly or not, relied on the British navy, the United States did not need this assurance

¹ Bernard Fensterwald Jr., "The Anatomy of American "Isolationism" and Expansionism, Part I, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2, (1958): 111-139, 111.

² Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1943), 17.

until the 20th century. After the 1815 Vienna agreement, no “European ambitions in the western hemisphere, save those of Britain, [posed] a serious threat, or even the appearance of one.”³ The United States has always had profound international interests; however, its interests in Europe were generally more commercial than military. By the 1840s Britain was already dependent on American goods, and while Anglo-British relations were not always amicable, it became less and less in the two nations’ interests to war with each other.⁴ Largely free to pursue its own economic growth then, there was little for Americans to gain through European military alliances. Instead, Americans sought to increase their power through trade and attempted to expand in ways that would not bring war with European states. America’s first treaty attempt during the American Revolution demonstrates this clearly.

The Model Treaty that Americans proposed to France in 1776 outlined a trading system where neutrality was greatly respected. It also proposed no continuing military alliance after the Revolution. In short, it attempted to “lessen the impact of war and in the longer term to create a commercial system that would reduce international conflicts.”⁵ These values drove American foreign policy after its independence, but it was also willing to fight for these values when threatened. As early as 1794, statesmen such as Alexander Hamilton considered forming a league of neutral nations to protect against Britain, whose abuse of American commercial rights eventually brought war in 1812.⁶ In the Napoleonic Wars the United States intervened once on the British side and once on the French side.⁷ The United States only avoided military conflict in Europe in the 19th century because it had secured its place in the world through commerce.

³ Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Volume I: The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1993), 204.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Alexander Hamilton, Ambivalent Anglophile*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 113.

⁷ Fensterwald, 112.

Americans also rapidly expanded their territory in the 19th century, yet rarely risking war with Europeans in the process. American continental power was consolidated well enough that in 1866 a British journalist stated that “nobody doubts any more that the United States is a power of the first class, a nation which is very dangerous to offend and almost impossible to attack.”⁸ Historian Robert May argued that the United States may have gained more Latin American territory if illegal American filibuster armies had not constantly agitated Britain, Spain, and various Latin American states before the Civil War. For instance, Horatio Perry, an American legate to Spain, wrote in 1854 that America might have been able to purchase Cuba from Spain. However, the several American filibuster armies who tried to take the island without official state approval spoiled this goal by encouraging Spanish bitterness towards America.⁹ Still, by 1900 American territory had extended nearly 7000 miles west of California.¹⁰ America was always engaged in the outside world, making isolation an inadequate term for the nation’s stance. As Fensterwald stated, “In all cases where European politics touched directly upon [American] interests, and particularly in Latin America and the Far East, [the United States] took an active hand.”¹¹

To say that America should not have come out of its so-called isolation in the first half of the 20th century is also wrong because the nation could not remain aloof in the World Wars. The United States attempted to remain neutral in the First World War, but by 1917 this became illogical. Having put itself in a position of great international commercial engagement, America naturally had an interest in a war on such a large scale. As Fensterwald argued, “the fact that we had grown to be an economic giant gave us a stake, unwanted or not, in every major conflict anywhere in the world.”¹² Neutral trading rights had brought the United States to military conflict in the 19th

⁸ Perkins, 230, 232.

⁹ Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 242.

¹⁰ Lippmann, 24.

¹¹ Fensterwald, 118.

¹² Fensterwald, 131.

century, and by World War I the issue was even more important. In 1940 Far East scholar Nathaniel Peffer wrote, “There was a time when Americans could say that they were neutral but not impartial; in our time it is more fitting to say that America can be impartial but not neutral.”¹³ America was an economic giant by the 20th century, but rather than protecting its commercial interests with a strong navy, the American navy was the smallest among the European powers.¹⁴ Because of this, American security relied geography, “coupled with the British navy and the maintenance of a balance of power in continental Europe.”¹⁵ While Americans tried to assert their rights as a neutral power, their reliance on British naval power gave them a profound interest in Britain’s survival.

The possibility of Germany winning the Great War, replacing British naval power, and destroying the balance of power on the European continent was therefore an obvious threat to American interests. If Germany won the war, “the defense of the western hemisphere would require immense armaments over and above those needed in the pacific, and America would have to live in a perpetual state of high and alert military preparedness.”¹⁶ American strategic advisor George Kennan argued that, like impartiality, neutrality was also impossible in the war. The “total blockade and the submarine,” Kennan wrote, challenged traditional neutral rights with regards to naval warfare. Each belligerent “had come to feel that its chances of victory and survival depended on the violation [of American neutral rights]. Either side would have preferred to accept war with [the United States] rather than refrain from violating certain ones of them.”¹⁷ This German use of unrestricted submarine warfare against the United States, the issue that brought America into the war, illustrates this point. American “overseas military and strategic engagement” in the first half

¹³ Nathaniel Peffer, “Entanglement or Non-Entanglement: Is There a Choice?”, *Political Science Quarterly* 55, vol. 4, (1940): 522-534, 522-533.

¹⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 47.

¹⁵ Fensterwald, 127.

¹⁶ Lippmann, 34-35.

¹⁷ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 64.

of the 20th century was not misguided because by World War I engagement was necessary and isolation impossible.

Moreover, overseas engagement was not misguided because it proved necessary again in World War II. As in the Great War, Kennan argued that in World War II American leaders were aware “of the damage that would be done to [America’s] position by the elimination of England as a strong force in the world.”¹⁸ Americans preferred a secure global power balance that did not involve American engagement; yet in World War II the balance could not have been maintained without American involvement. Peffer correctly stated, “The only circumstance in which there would have been no danger of entanglement for America would have been a speedy and crushing Anglo-French victory.”¹⁹ But even an Anglo-French victory required American financial involvement, for “to have refused to sell Great Britain and France arms, munitions and raw materials essential to armament... was for practical purposes to ordain their defeat.”²⁰ By 1941, with France defeated and Britain on the defensive, America could be neutral only at enormous risk to itself. There was a not unrealistic fear that if Germany conquered Europe, it might even project its power across the Atlantic. “[E]mploying a combination of economic, political, and military means,” Hitler might “obtain control over several important republics of Latin America – republics that could ultimately be used as staging areas from which to launch an invasion of the United States.”²¹ For these reasons, aid to Britain became an extraordinarily important matter.

Protecting American interests in World War II also necessitated heavy lend-lease aid to the Soviet Union. As Kennan argued, the Western Democracies were so unprepared for war against Germany that “there was no prospect for victory over Germany, unless it were with the help of

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹ Peffer, 531

²⁰ Ibid., 525.

²¹ David G. Haglund, “George C. Marshall and the Question of Military Aid to England, May-June 1940”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 4 (1980). 745-760, 747.

Russia.”²² Until American forces were ready to invade the European mainland, financial engagement in the form of lend-lease was the only way they could help avert a German victory over the Soviet Union.²³ Many Americans distrusted the Soviet Union, fearing that Stalin would seek to dominate Europe if given the chance; however, when lend-lease to Russia began in 1941 it was not clear if Russia could win a war with Germany. Kennan asserted that America’s indiscriminant aid to Russia after 1944 was unjustified, and scholars have argued over the wisdom of the lavish American aid to the Soviet Union near the end of the war.²⁴ Yet it can hardly be argued that the United States should never have aided the Soviets at all. If the continuance of lend-lease was unjustified, this was true only after America could be reasonably certain that Russia would not be defeated. It was impossible to achieve peace through compromise with Hitler, so America’s first priority was to ensure that he would not conquer Russia.²⁵ In order to have the power to determine whether it would engage itself globally after the mid 20th century, the United States first had to ensure it survived the Second World War, and before that, the First World War.

American strategic engagement in the first half of the 20th century was not a misguided break from isolation. In fact, American separation from world affairs was hardly pronounced enough to deserve the title of “isolation,” and it is often argued that more American financial involvement in Europe after World War I may even have decreased the chances that World War II would have ever begun. America’s drive to engagement in the 20th century was necessitated by events far before the advent of the nuclear age, and until one acknowledges the threats to the United States in the World Wars, the Cold War is utterly irrelevant. According to Kennan, the reality of American unpreparedness in World War II and the simple geography of the situation meant that

²² Kennan, 77.

²³ George C. Herring, Jr., “Lend-Lease to Russia and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944-1945, *The Journal of American History* 56, vol. 1 (1969), 93-114, 94.

²⁴ Kennan, 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

“sooner or later you would end on some sort of a line in eastern or Central Europe...with [the United States] on one side and Soviet forces on the other....”²⁶ After the Second World War began to turn in the Allies’ favor one can argue over what strategy with regards to the Soviets would best have served American interests. But it would have done little good to warn American decision makers in 1914 or 1941 about the burdens of Soviet containment policy if they could not first of all be sure that American well-being was safe from the more immediate threats.

²⁶ Kennan, 88.

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