

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN by Wayne S. Cole

The America First Committee was part of democracy in action during one of the most terrifying times in human history. It was the leading pressure group appealing for mass support in opposition to involvement in World War II before Pearl Harbor.

When America First saw the light of day in September 1940, Poland, Denmark, Norway, France, and the Low Countries had already fallen before Nazi Germany's blitzkrieg. Fascist Italy had joined the fray. Winston Churchill had replaced Chamberlain at the helm of the British government. The "Battle of Britain" was raging in the skies and seas of that island kingdom. Though the holocaust lay beyond horizons of the future, Hitler's Nazi persecution of Jews was known to all. Immobilized by the Russo-German Pact, Stalin's Soviet Union waited in the wings to take advantage of opportunities the conflagration might provide. In Asia militarist Japan had overrun much of China, was soon to join in the Tripartite Pact, and was poised to seize northern Indochina. It was a terrible and terrifying time. No one could sensibly make light of the realities at that moment or of the horrors the future might hold. There were no easy answers to the question of what policies the United States ought to pursue toward those ominous developments.

Few Americans felt any sympathy for Hitler's Nazis, Mussolini's Fascists, Hirohito's militarists, or Stalin's Communists. America's charismatic President Franklin D. Roosevelt had proclaimed American neutrality. He pressed expansion of the sea, air, and land forces of the United States, culminating with enactment of the first peacetime selective service law in American history. Never neutral in thought or policies, FDR concluded the deal exchanging overage destroyers for bases in British possessions in the Western Hemisphere. His "aid-short-of-war" policies hoped to sustain resistance to Axis aggression. Millions of Americans, however, worried that those steps "short of war" could prove, instead, to be "steps to war." Therein lay the core of the divisions among the American people.

During its harried 15-month existence the America First Committee organized local chapters in most states, enrolled more than 800,000 members, attracted thousands to huge rallies addressed by leading noninterventionists, distributed millions of pamphlets and leaflets, and inundated congressmen and the White House with letters and telegrams opposing involvement in the war.

The committee's leaders rejected rioting and violence. They barred Nazis, Fascists, and anti-Semites from membership, and tried to enforce those bans. The committee used orderly democratic methods in desperate efforts to keep the United States out of the wars raging abroad. The committee's position on foreign affairs was consistent with

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traditions extending back to the beginnings of America's independent history and before. When war burst on America with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the committee ceased its noninterventionist activities, pledged support to the war effort, and dismantled its organization. Most of its members loyally supported the war against the Axis, and many, including some of its prominent leaders, served in America's Armed Forces. The America First Committee was a patriotic and honorable exercise of democracy in action at a critical time in American history.

Nonetheless, the committee, its leaders, and many of its members took a terrible beating. They failed to keep the United States out of the war. They could not even successfully block specific Roosevelt actions moving the United States closer to war. More troubling, they were tarred by charges that they were pro-Nazi, or serving the Nazi cause. One widely distributed pamphlet called America First "The Nazi Transmission Belt." Senator Joseph McCarthy did not invent "guilt-by-association" methods; President Roosevelt and many of his supporters used those methods with great effectiveness against opponents of his foreign policies. Most leading noninterventionists who held elective office were defeated in later bids for reelection. Prominent leaders of America First carried the stigma of their noninterventionist efforts with them to their graves. The committee remains tarnished and suspect in the eyes of most—including historians who ought to know better.

Though he was a member of America First only half of its history, the famed aviator Charles A. Lindbergh was both its most acclaimed and most vilified spokesman. He had his own independent thoughts and chose his words carefully, but he infuriated his critics. He enraged them when he called for "new leadership" in America—though he never intended the use of any but legal democratic methods to accomplish that leadership. And he brought down the full fury of his opponents when, at an America First rally in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 11, 1941, he charged that "The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration." Though denying charges of anti-Semitism, neither Lindbergh nor America First ever recovered from the staggering blow that statement brought upon them. One might have thought that Lindbergh had personally ordered the holocaust.

It has now been a half century since the America First Committee waged its losing battle to stay out of World War II. I began doing research on the committee in 1947—two years after the death of Roosevelt and the end of World War II. In the decades since then I have researched every document and letter I have been able to locate on the committee, its leaders and members, and its critics. I researched the papers of the organization and of many of its leaders—including Lindbergh. I gained research access to Justice Department and FBI records.

From the beginning I took the charges against the committee very seriously. I analyzed them with great care.

There were unsavory and disloyal members of the committee. Its membership was extremely diverse, and its loose-knit organization made control over local chapters difficult. A few obscure individuals were convicted later for failure to register as foreign agents.

Nonetheless, after studying America First and its membership thoroughly over the course of more than three decades, I am increasingly impressed by how clean it was. Close scrutiny leaves an overall impression of loyalty, patriotism, good citizenship, courage, and devotion to the country. Its leaders and members used democratic methods responsibly to influence public opinion and government action on issues of vital importance to all Americans. If one were to balance negatives (that is, the morality of the "dirty tricks" used by opponents of America First versus the magnitude of unsavory or disloyal elements within the organization) the America First Committee comes off vastly better than its critics. The fact that one disagreed profoundly with the views of Lindbergh and believed him totally wrong did not justify accusing him of disloyalty and Nazi sympathies. Those charges simply were not true.

I have reflected on why America First has garnered such an unsavory reputation, and why the images advanced by its critics have prevailed. I have wondered if there was anything the committee and its leaders might have done differently that might have made their efforts more effective or left them less tarnished in the eyes of Clio.

My conclusion is that their cause was hopeless. Nothing the committee or its leaders could have done or refrained from doing could have altered the outcome or aftermath significantly. Conceivably one might set more civilized rules of "fair play" for such important democratic contests. But human nature, raging emotions, and cultural and political differences make self-restraint and fair play increasingly more difficult to sustain.

When differences and debates on important (or even unimportant) matters persist over extended time it is easy to lose control and judgment. One may begin by seeing adversaries as simply mistaken, but end by seeing them as stupid, irresponsible, and downright evil. When those differences are further inflamed by politics, and perhaps by sectional, ethnic, or cultural differences, the emotions may become even more heated. That is human nature.

When those debates occur during terrifying wars abroad, the temptation to identify one's adversaries at home with the evil, aggressive, dangerous foreign foe becomes well-nigh irresistible. To identify America First with Hitler's Nazi Germany was much too tempting (and persuasive, to those eager to believe the worst) to be resisted. And when the powerful President Roosevelt set the example by associating his opponents with that evil aggressive dictator, the consequences for America First and its leaders were devastating. The fact that FDR was an urbane and respected part of the so-called "Establishment" or leadership elite in using those guilt-by-association methods helped protect him and his followers from the fate that befell Senator McCarthy when he used those same methods crudely a decade later.

And finally, when the values that America Firsters treasured and defended (rural, small-town, traditional, democratic, parochial, and conventional) were falling under the juggernaut of a new America radically changing the

country's image and values (urban, cosmopolitan, corporate, industrial, creditor, ethnic, outward-looking), the patterns were irreversible.

Many years ago I asked a man who had chaired a large America First chapter if there were any way the committee might have won. He had fought against involvement in World War I two decades earlier as well. He was convinced that once war fervor began to build it was impossible to stop or reverse. Nothing that America First might have done differently could have reversed the outcome. Conversations with others prominent in America First (and in its opposition) provided the same conclusion.

The America First Committee fought the good fight for a cause its members considered vital. That cause and their efforts were consistent with the best traditions of American democracy. Nonetheless, they are unlikely ever to win vindication or even fair treatment at the hands of the greater part of the leadership elite, educators, publicists, or historians. America First failed and suffered the fate of losing causes. The America it served and the world it envisaged are gone and can never be restored.

No one can know for certain what would have happened, either worldwide or within the United States, if the America First guidance had been followed and the United States had not entered World War II. One can only speculate or guess. But neither critics nor proponents of America First can properly pass judgment on the wisdom of its program without speculating about those possible effects—good and bad. Those who applaud America's participation in World War II and profess horror at what might have happened if the America First Committee and its "isolationists" had prevailed assume (*i.e.*, guess) that noninvolvement by the United States would have resulted in a vastly worse world and a more crippled America than we now know. Maybe so. Maybe not.

In the wake of the war in Vietnam, many viewed World War II as America's last "good war" (until the Persian Gulf War). But it was also a terrible, terrible war destroying life, property, and freedom wherever it spread. Nearly fifty million persons died worldwide during World War II. "Only" about three hundred thousand of those dead were Americans. Even when one tabulates total casualties (dead, wounded, and missing), the American total comes to "only" a little over one million—a tiny fraction of the World War II casualties worldwide. Nonetheless, more Americans died in World War II than in all of its other foreign wars before and since combined (not including the Civil War).

And it could have been much worse. If they had not broken the German Ultra code and developed the Enigma decoding machine, if Magic had not allowed Americans to know the contents of Japanese communications, losses for Britain and the United States would have been far greater than they were. If Hitler had not wasted resources developing the V-1 and V-2 weapons and had, instead, pressed earlier production and use of German jet fighters, the losses for British and American bomber squadrons could have been alarmingly greater than they were. If Germany had successfully produced an atomic weapon, can anyone doubt that Hitler would have used it against London and other allied targets? If any one or combination of those and other

variables had been turned around, the balance between gains from American entry into the war versus costs and losses could have been altered radically. We still might have been able to look back on victory with pride. But conceivably we would be doing so from a more deeply wounded America in a less triumphant Western civilization than we know on this 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

A far more terrifying scenario for America might have presented itself, however, if Hitler had not loosed his German military forces east on the morning of June 22, 1941, beginning the Russo-German War. After the eruption of the Russo-German War, General Robert E. Wood, national chairman of America First, put the committee's position clearly and simply: "With the ruthless forces of dictatorship and aggression now clearly aligned on both sides [of the European war] the proper course for the United States becomes even clearer. We must continue to build our own defenses and take no part in this incongruous European conflict."


At a cost of millions of casualties, Soviet armed forces stopped the German advances at the gates of Moscow, held Leningrad against extended siege, checked the Germans in the Battle of Stalingrad, and threw the German armies back with terrible losses. The British and Americans conquered Axis forces in the skies and on the seas, but it was Stalin's Soviet armies that broke the back of Hitler's armies on the European continent—at a terrible cost in lives and material. Nearly twenty-five million people in the Soviet Union (civilians and military) died in their "Great Patriotic War" against Nazi Germany. If there had been no Russo-German War, Hitler's Nazi forces concentrated in the West would have been vastly more formidable than those the British and Americans actually had to contend with.

Before the Russo-German War began, Charles A. Lind-

bergh predicted that American military involvement in the war against the European dictators could cost the United States a million lives or more. America's actual losses were less than one-third that number. If any substantial proportion of the losses suffered by the Soviet Union had been transferred to Britain and the United States in the West, however, Lindbergh's prediction would not have been excessive. The costs and losses for Britain and the United States would have been vastly greater, and the possibility of failure at Normandy could have been very real. The United States and Britain may have triumphed ultimately even without the Russo-German War. But if they had, Lindbergh's prediction would not have been unrealistic. The United States could have survived such losses—just as the Soviet Union, Germany, Japan, and China did. But the destructive effects on American and British lives, democracy, economy, and civilization would have been far worse than they were.

The next scenario is more difficult to estimate. If the United States had not entered World War II in Europe, could (and would) Britain and its allies have mounted a successful cross-channel invasion of Hitler's Europe in the West (even with the Russo-German War)? Not likely. What would the consequences of the war between the Soviet Union and Germany have been without Anglo-American fighting on land in Western Europe? Hitler's armies might have crushed the Soviet Union, but that seems unlikely. Or, Stalin's massive forces might have driven west across all of Europe to the English Channel—hardly an appealing possibility. Given the probable Soviet exhaustion by that time, however, that might have been preferable to having Hitler in that position. A third possibility might have (I believe, would have) been a bloody stalemate with both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and their people bled white and exhausted. But that scenario need not have endangered American national security or survival.

From the vantage point of a half-century one can even speculate that the main beneficiaries of American involvement in World War II may have been today's prosperous and democratic states of Germany and Japan that were set in new directions as consequences of American involvement and victory. And could it be that noninvolvement by the United States might have left Stalin's Soviet Union more exhausted and less dangerous than it proved to be after the victory that the United States helped to accomplish? And in that situation would the United States in the Western Hemisphere have felt it necessary to spend any more money (and lives and resources) on its military forces than it actually has spent worldwide from 1942 to 1991?

That still leaves the question of whether wars between the United States and the Axis powers in Europe and Asia were inevitable, regardless of what policies and actions the United States might have pursued. And it also leaves the question of whether America's involvement in the war was inevitable, given FDR's leadership, the triumph of industrial-capitalist America, the urbanization of American society, and the erosion of rural and small-town America. Those are separate questions. I would answer the first question negatively, and the second with a probable affirmative. And that gets back to the conclusion reached in the first part of this article. The America First cause was hopeless. 

On a Line From the *New Yorker* March 11, 1991

by William M. Galbraith

"Rapunzel in winter is a lonely rhino —"
Spring, alas, is no different,
and what can a rhino do but be angry,
glare balefully and kick dirt?
And such a sad dry dirt it is;
no honest feel of sod,
no turf of ancient grasses,
no sponge of rains
or of spored dust rising,
no smell on the autumn air
except a vague anxiety of absence
when continence is a flood
searing the pea of brain.
And what else is there?
Whatever else but food?
Horizons are only fences,
distorted trees and lines
of little somethings gawking by.