

## THE ANTI-WAR WARRIORS

by Ruth Sarles Benedict

Back in 1941 some members of the Senate and House took an unpopular route to serve their country, their beliefs, and their priorities in a cause that was hopeless. Many of them were not reelected.

They were the men (no woman of the few then in Congress stands out) who fought against the United States' entry in World War II and against what they perceived as the pro-war measures of the Roosevelt administration. To me, who as a representative of the America First Committee talked with a few of them daily, they were brave men of principle who were willing to challenge a popular President. They were honorable men who understood that their government had the obligation to protect and defend the nation and its interests, which they in turn as elected officials felt obligated to help interpret.

There was Senator Burton K. Wheeler (Democrat-Montana), leader of the noninterventionists, approachable and brisk, who could quickly rally saddened colleagues after a legislative defeat; Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr. (Progressive-Wisconsin), the bright, thoughtful man of the famous Wisconsin family; Senator Robert A. Taft (Republican-Ohio), the intelligent, reserved son of another famous family; kindly Senator George D. Aiken (Republican-Vermont), whose down-to-earth common sense was refreshing; peppery Senator Hiram Johnson (Republican-California); and many others—Senators Gerald P. Nye (Republican-North Dakota), Bennett Champ Clark (Democrat-Missouri), Guy Gillette (Democrat-Iowa), John Danaher (Republican-Connecticut), D. Worth Clark (Democrat-Idaho), Charles W. Tobey (Republican-New Hampshire), Arthur Capper (Republican-Kansas), C. Wayland Brooks (Republican-Illinois), Henrik Shipstead (Farmer/Labor-Minnesota), to name a few. And on the House side Congressmen Karl E. Mundt (Republican-South Dakota), Paul Shafer (Republican-Michigan), John Vorys (Republican-Ohio), Hamilton Fish (Republican-New York), and Dewey Short (Republican-Missouri).

You can't pin down the exact number of noninterventionists that existed in Congress. The number obviously varied, depending on the subject of the legislation. Noninterventionists were no more monolithic than interventionists. Most military appropriation bills passed without record votes, a few with overwhelming "ayes." On the sweeping Lend-Lease bill, which authorized the President to provide military articles and information to any country "whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States," the "no" vote was 165 in the House, 31 in the Senate. In the last important vote before Pearl Harbor, on the question of revising the Neutrality Act to allow merchant ships to arm and sail with cargo and passengers through war zones, the "no" vote was 194 in the House, 37 in the Senate. In one of the strategy-planning sessions that brought out the noninterventionists on a Sunday afternoon or late on a weekday, 100 came from both houses; in another, 70; in still another, 30-40.

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Perhaps the least understood fact about these men was that most of them favored a strong national defense and supported it by their votes. As General Marshall, testifying before a Senate committee on July 1941, said: "As to the cooperation of Congress in matters of national defense, there has been no question at all for a long time. Congress has met our every demand, and, as I say, those demands have been in terms of billions." From 1933 to the end of 1941 Congress approved in regular and supplemental Navy appropriations over \$1.5 billion more than requested in the President's budget estimates, and some \$9.5 billion more than the President had requested in regular and supplemental War Department appropriations.

It was partly to serve the anti-interventionist members of the Senate and House that the Research Bureau of the America First Committee was set up in Washington early in 1941. The bureau was also to keep America First officials in Chicago informed about the mood and actions of Congress and to relay Washington "gossip" about the administration's intentions and reading of public opinion on issues of war and peace. The bureau had two distinct functions: (1) to circulate on Capitol Hill and to get information about, and plant ideas for, pending or potential legislative action and speeches; and (2) to produce a series of position papers entitled "Did You Know?"—which set forth the anti-interventionist position on important issues.

I was the bureau's free-floating lobbyist who spent her days visiting noninterventionists and their staffs, while James Lipsig, a New York lawyer, along with Cushman Reynolds and Kendrick Lee, all three experienced activists, produced the "Did You Know?" information leaflets. We all worked long hours. My research for the Chicago office and for members of Congress went on into the evenings. The three men never took a night off, and set up a ping-pong table for a daily one-hour's release from their labors. All three were accomplished researchers, knew how to find information quickly in a town papered with resources, and were wise to the needs of elected officials.

This single-focus kind of life we lived handed us a few minor surprises. While working late one night in the office we shared with the Washington chapter of America First, there was a sudden scratching sound from the front window. Several teenage boys were happily painting a huge swastika on our window. We rushed out and shooed them away, and spent a couple of hours scrubbing the window so the dawn would not display a repeat of the tag the Friends of Democracy had pinned on America First—"The Nazi Transmission Belt." And there was the time when we, along with the Washington chapter, were searching for a roomier office. We went with a real estate agent to look at an office near the Capitol. As we approached, we blanched. Inscribed in concrete over the door was the name of the building—Germania. We backed off. Somebody (was it a savvy agent?) squealed, and the next week a weekly magazine carried a nasty story. Around eleven o'clock one night, I heard footfalls outside the window near my desk. I called for my co-workers and we rushed into the alley but found no one.

We thought it might have been a *Washington Post* reporter, who in the middle of an earlier night had examined the Washington chapter's trash and had written a defamatory story.

The "Did You Know?" papers went regularly to approximately 35 Senators, 250 Congressmen, and 700 editors, writers, and columnists. Hardly a Congressional debate went by in which we did not find fruits of our work in Senate or House proceedings. Sometimes a whole line of argument was traceable to a "Did You Know?" Sometimes the *Congressional Record* carried articles or information we had given a Senator. A friendly State Department official, who did not agree with us but who liked to know what we were up to, read a batch of our pamphlets and commented, "I hate to say this, but they are legitimate, and what's more, readable."

Here is a sampling of the subjects we treated. When a German submarine in the South Atlantic sank the *Robin*

*Moor*, a merchant vessel flying the American flag, and when interventionists stressed that it carried no munitions, the "Did You Know?" of June 18, 1941, pointed out that the ship nevertheless was carrying 1,163 items (70 percent of its cargo) that both the British and Germans had declared contraband. The June 27, 1941, issue challenged the President's statement to the press that the Soviet constitution protected the free exercise of religion. After the President announced that 4,000 U.S. troops had landed in Iceland, the "Did You Know?" of July 9 accused the administration of placing U.S. troops within the German war zones and within shooting range of Hitler's forces. Through a secret agreement with the British, the United States was conveying over three-quarters of the merchant ships in the Atlantic with supplies for the British and with orders to destroy Axis ships. At least two U.S.-owned vessels under Panamanian registry were sunk. The September 23 issue declared that the entire practice of Panamanian registry was an evasion of the Neutrality and Lend-Lease acts. After a U.S. destroyer was sunk, administration pressure to abandon inhibiting sections of the Neutrality Act increased. The President wanted the sections that banned the arming of merchant vessels and their entry into combat zones to be repealed. The October 25 issue declared that repeal meant war and offered pages of shipping information.

I have been asked what it was like to spend my days as a lobbyist for the America First Committee. My day started around 5:30 A.M., when a thump outside my door signaled delivery of five newspapers. I read them and clipped items for my "research" files and then read and highlighted the daily *Congressional Record*. I spent some time almost every day on the Hill, seeing a Senator or a House member or two, or their staffers. The "research" service I provided these men is hard to describe. For example, I might suggest a relevant topic for them to pursue or copy several pages of a book or pamphlet for them. I occasionally wrote short speeches for a member and drafted a few resolutions, or helped a member draft one and find additional sponsors. Several members requested material for radio speeches, and I arranged opportunities for members to speak on the Radio Forum of the Air. It was rare to run across unfriendly staffers or members of Congress, for we were all in the same boat and under fire. We needed each other, and America First offered them help and in many cases a forum for their speeches at America First rallies throughout the country.

I am now 85 years old, and a firm believer in the examined life. I lost a few friends because of my America First ties. My Canadian mother, as pro-Royal as any Briton, offered me redemption through confession. Even as recently as the early 1980's a friend harshly took me to task for my past. Like most people in the peace movement I did not want to "isolate" America. I was an internationalist who welcomed the emergence of my country from that cocoon of aloof self-containment to full participation in the interdependent world community. Nevertheless, I cannot feel apologetic that I went against the mainstream before World War II, because I believed in the correctness of our stand. No one—but no one—knows what might have happened if the Japanese had not attacked Pearl Harbor and saved President Roosevelt the agonizing decision if and when his country should get fully into the war. ◊

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### By the Shores of—

by William M. Galbraith

Here by the golden waters  
of this slow stream and dreaming  
the clogged dream of aging  
indifference, I gather  
whatever sunlight pities  
the blessed blood. Ah, angels  
are turned to doves, to starlings  
with mockingbirds as cherubs  
a-dance; and sing their steeples;  
and windows are always open.  
Give hallelujahs, anthems  
and madrigals of loving  
to all the singing water.  
Give praise and in the praising  
be cup and crucible,  
the eye and the adorer,  
the voice, the scream, the whisper.