

indefensible. It is inconsistent with a proper understanding of the conditions under which individuals may justifiably come to own previously unowned worldly resources. Contrary to Locke's own understanding of these conditions, they call for an egalitarian pattern of ownership of land . . . among the members of each generation" (p. 98).

Basing himself on a misunderstanding of standard libertarian views, Otsuka frightens us with a vision of a single person or small group who dominates society by owning all the land that it contains. Against this menace, he proposes to subject everyone to a dictatorship of the poor and disabled, by giving them control of virtually all property. Such is left libertarianism. ■ MR

Against Preemptive Strike

*Defend America First:
The Antiwar Editorials
of the Saturday Evening
Post, 1939–1942*

GARET GARRETT

INTRODUCTION BY BRUCE RAMSEY

CAXTON PRESS, 2003; 285 PGS.

During the 1920s and 30s, a majority of Americans came to believe that our involvement in World War I had been a horrendous

mistake. The war was supposed to make the world safe for democracy, but instead fascism, communism, and aggressive nationalism were the order of the day in Europe. In an effort to forestall future involvements in European conflagrations, Congress enacted stringent neutrality legislation.

Toward the end of the 1930s, a crucial question confronted Americans. Did the growing power of the Nazi

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regime require Americans to alter their newfound commitment to neutrality? The question could not be avoided once Britain and France decided in 1939 to resist Hitler's endeavors to revise the Versailles and Locarno treaties in Germany's favor. War in Europe began on September 3, 1939, when Hitler refused British and French ultimatums that he end his invasion of Poland.

Garet Garrett, an outstanding critic of Roosevelt's New Deal, brilliantly argued in favor of continued American neutrality. Garrett, during the decisive years 1940 and 1941, was the chief editorial writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, then one of the most popular American magazines; and Bruce Ramsey has very usefully gathered together a selection of Garrett's articles from this and a slightly earlier period.

Garrett's decisive move was to deny that an adequate response to Hitler required military aid to the Allies.

One way to defend American neutrality was to argue that Hitler posed no danger to the United States. Garrett decisively rejected this line of thought. As he saw matters, the Nazi regime had built up a military machine of unparalleled power. This might very well pose severe problems for America. In an editorial of July 6, 1940, Garrett said: "A new and frightful power has appeared, an offensive power moved by an unappeasable earth hunger, conscious of no right but the right of might. It does not

threaten this country with invasion: at least, not yet. It does threaten the Western Hemisphere by economic and political designs in the Latin American countries, and this is, for us, an ominous fact. But the larger aspect of what has happened is that the world is in a state of unbalance" (p. 51).

If this is Garrett's view, does he not at once confront a difficulty? If Germany was moved by "unappeasable earth hunger," should not the United States act to contain this malign power? If so, should not neutrality be abandoned? Whatever the failings of Britain and the nations allied with her, was it not in the interest of the United States to provide the anti-Hitler forces with all possible aid?

Garrett's decisive move was to deny that an adequate response to Hitler required military aid to the Allies. Quite the contrary, America should make its borders impregnable to attack: "In the whole world . . . there is one people able to create a defensive power equal to the new power of frightful aggression that has destroyed the basis of international peace and civility. We are that people . . . we are the most nearly self-contained nation of modern times, an empire entire, possessing of our own in plenty practically every essential thing. . . . Our productive power is equal to that of all Europe, and may be increased, so far as we know, without limit. . . . Finally, as we lie between two oceans, our geographical advantages in the military sense are such as to give us great natural odds against any aggressor" (pp. 58-59).

Defenders of American intervention in the war might answer Garrett in this way: "Maybe America can do as you say. But why should we retreat to a Fortress America? If, as you concede, Germany menaces us, why should we not aid those already struggling against the Third Reich and its *Führer*?"

Garrett fully anticipated this objection, and in his response he showed

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himself a better economist than his critics. If America sent arms to other countries, would this not weaken our own forces? Interventionists thought only of the benefits that aid would help secure, but they ignored the fact that stripping America of its arms weakened us, all the more so as America had not yet built up secure defenses. In sum, Garrett, unlike his critics, was fully alive to the concept of opportunity cost. "If it should turn out that to strip this country of armaments and send them to Europe at a moment when our

existing power of defense was pitifully inadequate . . . had been a tragic blunder . . . then the leader who had done it might wish that his page in the book of fame might refuse to receive ink, for it would be written of him that in his passionate zeal to save civilization in Europe he had forgotten his own country" (p. 56).¹

Garrett supplemented his argument with a further point. Did not interventionists realize that if they armed one side in a war, the enemy would deem this a hostile act? Roosevelt, beginning with his notorious Chicago Bridge speech of October 1937, had spoken of the need to "quarantine" aggressors. But how could this be done "short of war," as the interventionists promised? Garrett accused his interventionist opponents of seeking a victory on the cheap over the Axis powers. Others would do the fighting, while America would secure without bloodshed the end of the German threat.

For Garrett, this course of action was foolhardy and cowardly as well. In June 1940 the Navy arranged for France to buy American bombers, a sale that Garrett claimed had put us into the war. "Suppose we were at war and a government that had been neutral in form, but not in feeling, suddenly opened its arsenals to our enemy, exactly as we have opened ours to the

¹The importance of this theme for noninterventionists has been stressed by Justus Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). See my review in *The Mises Review*, Summer 2000.

Allies. Would we regard it as an act of war? We would” (pp. 55–56).

Not only did Roosevelt’s unneutral conduct risk reprisal from Germany, but it also displayed a lack of moral fiber. If the Germans were really our enemies, we should take up the battle ourselves rather than rely on others to give their lives on our behalf.

Interventionists rarely sought directly to counter Garrett’s powerful dialectic, but a Roosevelt supporter rash enough to do so might have replied to him in this way: “Your case is too exclusively strategic. Even if you are right, what about the moral dimension of the war? Do we not have a duty to fight against evil, even if it has not yet reached America?”

Our imagined objector is quite wrong; Garrett did not ignore the moral dimension. For him, the preservation of America as an independent civilization was a categorical imperative. A worldwide crusade against evil could not succeed and put in peril our unique contribution to the world: “They are defeatists who develop the beautiful thought that if America will now put her strength forth in the world, instead of keeping it selfishly to herself, the principle of evil can be chained down. . . . Suppose we had reconquered Europe for democracy, and the principle of evil were chained down. What should we do about the peace? Leave it to Europe? We did that once [without success]. . . . Should we stay there to police it? Or should we come home and stand ready to go back to mind or mend it when something went wrong?” (pp. 138–39). It is

apparent that Garrett had learned the lessons of Woodrow Wilson’s futile crusade.

The essentials of Garrett’s case remained constant from the onset of war in Europe until Pearl Harbor; but as Roosevelt proceeded relentlessly on the path to war, another issue emerged. Garrett and his fellow noninterventionists had ably stated their case, and their opponents were not slow to follow with their point of view. Who should now decide what course of action America should follow?

For Garrett the answer was obvious: the American people, through their representatives in Congress. Unfortunately, Franklin Roosevelt had entirely other ideas. He gradually maneuvered America into the war, all the while professing his peaceful intentions. Congress for him was but a minor obstacle, to be evaded or ignored if it refused to obey his bidding.

Roosevelt’s policy of executive dictatorship continued and extended his conduct into domestic affairs. Garrett, who had long been one of the president’s fiercest critics on this score, stressed a devastating admission by Roosevelt: “As he was receiving into his hand from an obedient Congress the new instrumentalities of power [in 1936], Mr. Roosevelt himself remarkably said: ‘In the hands of a people’s government this power is wholesome and proper;’ in bad hands, he added, it ‘would provide shackles for the liberties of people’” (p. 101).

But could not the American people, if they wished to do so, repudiate Roosevelt and all his works? Had the

Republicans in 1940 nominated for President a resolute noninterventionist, such as Senator Robert Taft, the choice of peace or war would have been up to the voters. But they did not do so, instead choosing under mysterious circumstances Wendell Willkie. He favored, like Roosevelt, a policy of unneutral aid to the allies; voters who saw through the “aid short of war” deception could do nothing.

Garrett puts the essence of the matter this way, in his inimitable style: “when you consider what must be involved in the decision [on whether America should defend Britain and her allies], who will have to fight and die for it, whose country it is, you might think that with all the facts submitted, it could be left to the people. Was it? Did they vote on it?” (p. 123).

Incidentally, Garrett’s point undermines his surprising defense of conscription. Although Garrett fully grasped that conscription was a step toward totalitarianism, he thought it was needed to build up America’s defenses. Did not the extraordinary nature of the European situation require drastic action?

Perhaps it did; but why could not Americans of military age decide the matter for themselves by volunteering? Garrett relied on a peculiar argument of Woodrow Wilson’s that the volunteer system was “unscientific.” As near as I can make out, the contention is that a draft allows men to be deployed efficiently, as the central command wishes. With volunteers, the armed forces must rely piecemeal on those who happen to appear at recruitment

stations. But this argument ignores the fact that volunteers can register for future call up, in the same fashion as draftees.

In the context of his magnificent defense of liberty, Garrett’s lapse is a minor failing. Garrett noted that once Roosevelt won reelection, he could drop the mask. Although he had promised during the election to keep us out of “foreign wars,” Roosevelt three months later said that America would

Voters who saw through the “aid short of war” deception could do nothing.

never accept a peace dictated by aggressors. Garrett commented: “‘We’ were the people, suddenly staring at the fact that we had assumed ultimate and unlimited liability—moral, physical, and financial—for the outcome of war on three continents, for the survival of the British Empire, and for the utter destruction of Hitler” (p. 161). If the American people did not accept this broad and ambitious mandate, what did this matter? Roosevelt, like Woodrow Wilson before him, viewed himself as the indispensable man who would guide Americans as he saw fit. ■ MR

Do Future Generations Have Rights?

*A Poverty of Reason:
Sustainable Development
and Economic Growth.*¹

WILFRED BECKERMAN
THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE, 2002
XIII + 94 PGS.

Wilfred Beckerman is an outstanding economist of a type probably more common in Britain than America. Like Anthony de Jasay, Amartya Sen, and I.M.D. Little, Beckerman is thoroughly at home in philosophy; and in *A Poverty of Reason*, he makes insightful remarks about the rights of future generations, equality, and the so-called “precautionary principle.”

Some environmentalists are outright enemies of humanity, who favor a drastic reduction in human population, if not the elimination altogether of our species. Once at a conference, I was seated at dinner next to that eminent Luddite, Kirkpatrick Sale. I mentioned that a critic had accused him of wishing to return to the Stone Age. To my

¹I cite the title as it is given on the cover. The title page omits “and Economic Growth.”

surprise, he said that this was just what he wanted.

More moderate environmentalists do not propose to crawl on all fours, and Beckerman here analyzes the views of those who seek the seemingly reasonable goal of “sustainable development.” They do not propose to do away with economic growth altogether; but must not the rights of future generations be guaranteed? We

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must leave to them an environment at least as good as that which we have enjoyed. In particular, we must make sure that vital resources remain available, act to contain global warming, and endeavor to prevent “biodiversity” from unacceptable reduction.

But will not the free market take care of all such issues? Owners of private property have every incentive to conserve their resources rather than squander them for immediate gain. Further, most people wish to provide