

# SETTING THE ISOLATIONIST RECORD STRAIGHT

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## **A Story of America First:**

### **The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in World War II**

Ruth Sarles

Edited with an Introduction by Bill Kauffman

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*Reviewed by Stephen J. Sniegowski*

**T**he America First Committee was the major anti-war group during the Roosevelt administration's preparations for American entrance into World War II. There was nothing novel about its stance. The idea of putting American interests paramount and of staying aloof from overseas conflicts had been the traditional foreign policy of the United States from the time of the Founding Fathers, and was most memorably articulated in George Washington's "Farewell Address." Yet the America First Committee was smeared by the Roosevelt administration and the interventionist media as a subversive "Nazi-transmission belt."

That negative image persists today among the liberal and neoconservative punditry. However, this has not been the case in the scholarly literature, especially in the works of the pre-eminent historian of the American "isolationists,"<sup>1</sup> Wayne S. Cole, who evaluates America First as patriotic and principled:

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 positions on foreign affairs were consistent with 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.<sup>2</sup>

The manuscript that provides the basis for the book under review was written during the early years of World War II by Ruth Sarles, who had been a staff member of the America First Committee. The book was commissioned by William H. Regnery, a major financial backer of America First. Sarles finished the manuscript in October 1942; its publication comes over sixty years later. Historian Bill Kauffman, a libertarian sympathetic to non-interventionism, was selected to edit the work. Kauffman significantly shortened the massive 759-page manuscript but retained what he describes as "the pith of the manuscript: Sarles's knowledgeable accounts of the America First Committee's founding, its work with congressional allies, its popularity as measured in public opinion polls, the difficulties of being a loyal opposition as the war clouds descend, and the central role played by Charles A. Lindbergh."<sup>3</sup> Kauffman does not present the book as the definitive account of the America First Committee, but rather as a supplement to other works on the subject such as those by Cole and Justus D. Doenecke, with Cole's *America First: The Battle against Intervention, 1940-1941* remaining the "standard history."<sup>4</sup>

Despite her close connection to America First, Sarles wrote in an objective manner; her interpretation does not significantly differ from Cole's. Kauffman comments that such "Olympian detachment," which was recommended to her by Charles Lindbergh, "may suit a hero, but it does not always behoove an author. Sarles's book is a valuable compilation of facts and speeches – this is what America First sounded like – but it might have benefited from a dash of partisanship."<sup>5</sup>

The America First Committee originated as a student organization at Yale University Law School in early 1940 under the leadership of Robert Douglas Stuart, Jr., a law student there. The initial intention was to establish a national organization of college students opposed to American intervention in the ongoing European war, which had broken out in September 1939, but this effort soon expanded beyond the college ranks to become a general national anti-war organization headquartered in Chicago. Stuart served as its director, while its permanent "acting" national chairman was General Robert E. Wood, head of Sears and Roebuck. In 1941, it attained a membership of around 850,000. Prominent figures in America First included aviation hero Charles Lindbergh; liberal journalist John T. Flynn; the former head of the New Deal's National Recovery Administration, General Hugh Johnson; and Theodore Roosevelt's feisty daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Although its political

and financial support came disproportionately from conservative Midwesterners, Sarles depicts the extensive diversity in the organization. There were numerous liberals, and America First had significant regional support in every region of the country except the South.

America First was devoted to two fundamental principles: keeping the United States out of war and maintaining an "impregnable defense." Ironically, America First's positions here were superficially the same as the official policy of the Roosevelt administration. Given the overwhelming popular opposition to entering the war, it would have been politically suicidal for President Franklin D. Roosevelt to advocate anything else. Consequently, the Roosevelt administration resorted to public claims that aid to Britain was vital for America's defense and that such aid would actually serve to keep the United States out of war. Thus a major effort of America First was to show how such Roosevelt policies as lend-lease and the convoying of British ships would ineluctably embroil the United States in a shooting war. It would seem undeniable that America First was absolutely correct in its assessment of the effect of Roosevelt's policies, which by the fall of 1941 had drawn the United States into an undeclared naval war with Germany in the Atlantic and would ultimately induce Hitler's declaration of war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Roosevelt's more astute interventionist supporters have recognized that his public claims of "aid short of war" were nothing but political cover for his real aim of bringing the country into the war. As Establishment pro-war historian Thomas Bailey would acknowledge after the end of World War II:

Franklin Roosevelt repeatedly deceived the American people during the period before Pearl Harbor . . . He was like the physician who must tell the patient lies for the patient's own good. . . . A president who cannot entrust the people with the truth betrays a certain lack of faith in the basic tenets of democracy. But because the masses are notoriously shortsighted and generally cannot see danger until it is at their throats, our statesmen are forced to deceive them into an awareness of their own long-run interests. This is clearly what Roosevelt had to do, and who shall say that posterity will not thank him for it.<sup>6</sup>

It might be added that members of America First generally supported an Allied victory and were not averse to providing aid to Britain. Sarles notes that America First "favored aid to Britain within the limits of the neutrality law, but it opposed giving or selling or lending materials needed for our defense."<sup>7</sup>

Why did America First want to stay out of war? Obviously, since most sane individuals prefer peace to war, the proper question is why the Roosevelt administration was pushing (surreptitiously) for war. The Roosevelt administration claimed that America itself would ultimately be vanquished if Germany defeated Britain. Moreover, it portrayed the war as a crusade for freedom and democracy—the Four Freedoms, the noble principles of the Atlantic Charter—against Nazi totalitarianism, despotism, and military subjugation.

Members of America First did not see European war as a Manichaeian conflict of good versus evil, but as more a traditional European power struggle. Some feared that war would so enervate Europe as to pave the way for a Communist takeover—a belief also held by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, incidentally—so that the best alternative would be a negotiated peace. Moreover, adherents of America First believed that if the United States entered the war it would become a fascist military state itself, with the termination of traditional American civil and economic liberties.

While America Firsters were not proved right in all their predictions, on balance they were more correct than their interventionist adversaries. Obviously, the war did not bring about a reign of peace, as the interventionists had claimed.<sup>8</sup> The war led to the killing of millions of civilians, but victory did not actually improve American security. The Soviet Union, strengthened by its war conquests, quickly became America's implacable foe and developed the offensive capability to destroy the American homeland. And the United States became a permanently militarized state—though perhaps not as dictatorial as America Firsters envisioned.

Of course it is now widely believed that somehow Nazi persecution of the Jews provided the imperative for the United States to join the war. That reason, however, was never expressed in the debate that preceded American entrance into the war, and even as a very belated *ex post facto* justification, it is obvious that American intervention did not prevent it.

Since Establishment opinion has always been, and continues to be, absolutely supportive of the "Good War," it is rather ironic that America First was founded at Yale by scions of the American elite who, as Kauffman points out, "went on to spectacular careers as pillars of the postwar American Establishment."<sup>9</sup> These included Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, Yale president Kingman Brewster, President Gerald R. Ford, and Peace Corps organizer and vice-presidential candidate R. Sargent Shriver, Jr. R. Douglas Stuart served as ambassador to Norway from 1984 to 1989 and as chairman of the Council of American Ambassadors. In contrast to the anti-American ethos of later antiwar movements, most of the founders of America First, including Stuart, were reserve army officers.

America First lost every major political battle—lend-lease, convoys, entering combat zones—but it was successful in delaying America's entrance into the war. Sarles sees this as a positive achievement, maintaining that the United States would not have been ready for war at an earlier date.<sup>10</sup> Of course, if America First had been successful, the United States would have stayed out of the war altogether.

Although its enemies constantly smeared it as being pro-Nazi, America First explicitly banned Nazis and tried to keep out other disreputable folks, including "anti-Semites." Of course, a question (seldom asked) is what actually constitutes "anti-Semitism." Apparently, to the America First leadership, anti-Semitism included the view that Jews had a hand in pushing the United States

toward war. Sarles writes that the America First Committee "was constantly weeding from active positions in local chapters individuals who spread anti-Semitism by publicly blaming the Jews for the trend toward war."<sup>11</sup>

Referring to anything that might imply Jewish power and influence is one of the great taboos of modern American life.<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, so great a taboo that it is taboo to refer to it as a taboo. Charles Lindbergh, of course, violated that taboo in his much noted (or, in the current Establishment's view, notorious) Des Moines speech of September 11, 1941, in which he claimed that "The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration" (see p. 7 of this issue). This was Lindbergh's only public reference to Jewish war influence, but interventionists and Jewish groups became apoplectic over this alleged evidence of "anti-Semitism." As Wayne Cole writes, "neither Lindbergh nor America First ever recovered from the staggering blows that statement brought upon them. One might have thought that Lindbergh had personally ordered the Holocaust."<sup>13</sup> Although some leading figures of America First were concerned about the impact of Lindbergh's speech on public relations, many subscribed to the now quaint notion that "No group in a democracy is entitled to immunity from criticism. It was hard to believe that any group in America could be regarded as occupying a position where its attitude on any public question should be unmentionable and that anyone who did mention them should be accused of trying to incite prejudice."<sup>14</sup> If such limits on freedom were "hard to believe" in 1941, it certainly demonstrates the diminution of freedom since that time, to the point where today all public speech must fit the Procrustean bed of political correctness, where not only "hate speech" but "insensitivity" can bring upon the offender serious sanctions. It should be added that left out in the brouhaha over Lindbergh's speech was the issue of its veracity. "Greatly confusing the matter," Kauffman notes, "was the minor detail that Lindbergh was *right*: Jewish groups *were* solidly behind the push for war."<sup>15</sup>

It might be added that since World War II is universally portrayed in today's media as the "Good War," American Jews can now acknowledge the Jewish role in intervention, as political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg, director of the Center for Governmental Studies at Johns Hopkins University, does in his revealing *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State*. Among the efforts to mould public opinion for war, Ginsberg points out that Jewish Hollywood filmmakers concentrated on the production of anti-Nazi propaganda films. In short, although it is regarded as "anti-Semitic" to "blame" Jewish groups for pushing the United States into World War II, it is permissible to praise them for doing the very same thing. Ginsberg even points out that the Anti-Defamation League "employed investigative agents who secretly penetrated isolationist and anti-Semitic organizations and collected potentially damaging or incriminating information," which it turned over to the FBI and other federal agencies.<sup>16</sup>

The Anti-Defamation League was not alone in using underhanded tactics to try to destroy the America First Committee. The Roosevelt administration and British intelligence also engaged in such tactics. Significantly, for all the talk by America Firsters of Roosevelt's quest for dictatorship, the organization's leadership seemed to possess an illusory faith in the fundamental fairness of the American government. Sarles portrays America First as such an upstanding organization that it went so far as to voluntarily give its membership lists over to the federal government for investigation.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, such efforts made America First vulnerable to its enemies, but could never really persuade them of its innocence, since those enemies interpreted "truth" to be what advanced their own war agenda, and certainly smearing the opponents of war intervention as pro-Nazi advanced that agenda.

America First essentially suffered the same fate as all popular anti-Establishment groups in America deemed to be too far right of center. The Establishment constantly portrayed it as malicious, and nothing it could do could remove that stigma. The Roosevelt administration's heaping of lavish praise on "Uncle Joe" Stalin and the Soviet Union, support for the incarceration of Japanese Americans, enactment of the genocidal Morgenthau Plan, terror-bombing of civilians, and repatriating prisoners to Stalin's lethal work camps never seemed to tarnish its beneficent image. And the fact of the matter is that both Truman and Roosevelt held negative views of Jews. Truman even went so far as to claim (in his diary) that Jews selfishly put their interest above that of other peoples.<sup>18</sup> All of these negatives were rendered insignificant by support of the "Good War." Most have long ago disappeared down the Orwellian memory hole to all but scholars of a revisionist bent.

Does the history of the America First Committee have relevance today? The very idea of putting America first puts one on the fringes of the political right, in the realm of bone-headed chauvinism, if not malevolent racism. Today America follows a policy of global imperialism through its "war on terrorism," and the stated American goal is to make other societies, especially in the Middle East, "democratic." Like President Roosevelt, the Bush administration lied the country into war—in fact, in one sense, it was evidently a greater lie since the "weapons of mass destruction" invoked as the *casus belli* were non-existent, whereas Pearl Harbor really was attacked. Once again it is "anti-Semitic" to mention that any Jews, in this case the neo-conservatives, have played a role in bringing the country into war. It should be pointed out that the "anti-Semitic" standard has broadened beyond the prohibition of referring to Jews as a collectivity to actually silencing any reference to a particular small group of Jews.

The ongoing global war/imperialist policy is being promoted by self-styled conservatives and a purportedly conservative administration. The major opposition to the war has come from the radical left, which is characterized by support for revolutionary socialism, anti-Americanism, and general hostility to traditional Western culture. While there has been opposition to the war from

right-wing intellectuals – paleoconservatives and paleolibertarians – what has been lacking has been the grass-roots and financial support to develop a patriotic anti-war organization. That nothing like America First could emerge in 2002–2003 shows how far the mainstream American populace has strayed from the republican principles that once served as the nation’s foundation, and which were still largely extant in pre-World War II America.

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### ENDNOTES

1. The opponents of a war of American military intervention did not like the term “isolationist,” but it has become part of common parlance, demonstrating the power of the interventionist/internationalists to shape the language.
2. Wayne S. Cole, *Determinism and American Foreign Relations during the Franklin D. Roosevelt Era* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America), 1995, p. 40.
3. Sarles, *A Story of America First*, p. xlvii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. xlvii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xlv.
6. Thomas A. Bailey, *The Man in the Street* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 13.
7. Sarles, p. 8.
8. I wrote about interventionist beliefs in my Ph.D. dissertation, “The Intellectual Wellsprings of American World War II Interventionism,” University of Maryland, 1977. A brief summary of some of this information can be found on the Internet. See Stephen J. Sniegoski, “Decline and Renewal: American World War II Interventionists,” *World & I*, February 1987 (<http://www.worldandi.com/public/1987/february/mt6.cfm>).
9. Sarles, p. xxi.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
12. It is, of course, one of those taboos that *The Occidental Quarterly* deals with. For example, see TOQ Editors, “The Question of Jewish Influence,” *The Occidental Quarterly* 3:2 (Summer 2003) (<http://theoccidentalquarterly.com/vol3no2/toq-editnote3-2.html>), and Kevin MacDonald, “Understanding Jewish Influence I: Background Traits for Jewish Activism,” 3:2 (Summer 2003) (<http://theoccidentalquarterly.com/vol3no2/toq-editnote3-2.html>).
13. Cole, *Determinism*, p. 41.
14. Sarles, p. 57.
15. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.
16. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 110.
17. Sarles, pp. 33–37.

18 President Harry S. Truman wrote in a 1947 diary that was recently discovered on the shelves of the Truman Library:

"The Jews, I find are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as D[isplaced] P[ersons] as long as the Jews get special treatment. Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the under dog." "Harry S. Truman 1947 Diary," July 21, Truman Presidential Museum and Library (<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/page21.htm>); "The Truman Diary," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2003, p. A-18 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A8864-2003Jul17.html>).