

Ross A. Kennedy

San Francisco State University

THE IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM 1931-1939

In the 1930s, as the international crises that led to World War II gathered momentum, the United States refused to take any major initiatives to co-operate with other major powers in confronting the aggressions of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Americans rejected the path of international co-operation put forward by collective security proponents and instead embraced, overwhelmingly, the ideas and arguments of "isolationism." As defined by its adherents themselves, isolationism had nothing to do with opposing American involvement in world economic, cultural, humanitarian, or even, to a much more limited degree, political affairs. Instead, being an "isolationist" in the 1930s meant that one wanted America to maintain an absolute neutrality in military-political conflict overseas, to keep its freedom of action in international security matters, and to avoid war at almost any cost. This position enjoyed wide support in American politics in the thirties, making it very difficult for the United States to do much of anything to prevent the slide of the world's major powers into war, a war that ultimately engulfed America itself in 1941.¹

In retrospect, the isolationism of the 1930s appears to be incredibly short-sighted and irrational. How, then, did the leading isolationists defend their position? What exactly were their ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about international affairs and American security? Numerous historians have studied these questions and their work has shed a great deal of light on isolationist ideology. Still, even the best analyses of the isolationists, such as those by Wayne Cole, Robert Johnson, and Manfred Jonas, have not spelled out with adequate precision the isolationists' conception of power politics. In looking at this crucial issue in more careful detail, one finds that isolationists perceived that the existing system of power politics was inherently unstable, that collective security schemes amounted to practicing power politics, and that American participation in collective security would lead to involvement in a

1. For an example of an isolationist defining "isolationism," see William E. Borah, *Bedrock: Views on Basic National Problems* (Washington, D.C.: National Home Library Foundation, 1936), 56-59.

war which would destroy America's freedoms at home. This chain of logic, more than anything else, lay at the heart of isolationism from 1931 to 1939.²

Before probing the views of the isolationists regarding power politics, we should first identify the leaders and scope of the movement during the 1930s. The leaders spanned the political spectrum, ranging from the urban liberals who wrote in the *New Republic* to agrarian progressives such as Senator William Borah of Idaho to conservative Republicans such as Herbert Hoover and Robert Taft. Isolationism dominated both major parties, although they were probably stronger among Republicans. They existed in all regions of the country, although most of their leaders in Congress came from the Midwest. One indication of the widespread nature of the isolationist appeal can be seen in the congressional votes on the Neutrality Acts, which most isolationists supported as the best way to keep America out of war. The first one, in 1935, passed the Senate with almost no debate; the House enacted the 1936 version by a vote of 353 to 27; the 1937 act also passed easily, with most of the Senate opposition coming from isolationists who wanted an even more extreme bill. Public opinion polls in 1937 mirrored attitudes in Washington, with 69% of respondents, across all regions of the country, supporting the strict neutrality laws passed by Congress. In the 1930s, in short, isolationists dominated the politics of American foreign policymaking, which meant that their ideology dominated debates.³

At the core of that ideology lay a complex of beliefs about the nature of international politics—or “power politics,” as the isolationists preferred to call the existing system. Power politics, in their definition, consisted in large part of amoral intrigue and strategic maneuvering. The *New Republic*, the leading organ of liberal isolationism, summed up this view of power politics best the week Nazi Germany signed its non-aggression pact with the Soviet

2. See Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Cole provides an excellent overview of isolationists in Congress, emphasizing their agrarian ideology as a major source of their isolationism. His discussion of their ideas about power politics tends to be brief, however. Johnson analyzes the foreign policy ideas of the isolationists more than Cole, but he concentrates chiefly on the 1920s rather than the 1930s and pays too little attention to their thinking on security issues, focusing instead on their anti-imperialism. Jonas, for his part, provides a fine summary of basic isolationist positions in the 1930s, including their views of war. He tends to skim over their specific conception of how power politics worked, however, and does not explore their perception of the relationship between power politics and collective security.

3. For the votes on the Neutrality Acts, see Robert A. Divine, *The Illusion of Neutrality* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1962), 112, 157, 185-193. For the public opinion polls, see *Public Opinion, 1935-1946*, edited by Hadley Cantril (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 966. Some of the more well-known isolationists, such as Charles Lindbergh of the America First Committee, emerged after September 1939 and are not within the scope of this paper.

Union. “European affairs are still full of insincerity, devious methods, secrets and surprises,” observed the editors, “and we should not be taken aback at any treachery or weakness.” Senator Styles Bridges agreed, calling European politics an alien mixture of “plots, plans, and diseases.” Borah used even more graphic language to describe the system’s essentially immoral nature—to him, it was “a maelstrom where a few men play with human lives as pawns.”⁴

In this “game,” nations practiced one tactic more than any other in pursuit of their goals—the tactic of coercion. “When we talk of using force of any kind,” explained Herbert Hoover, the most articulate of the conservative isolationists, “we are playing power politics at the European chess table.” The editors of the *New Republic* made the same point in their analysis of world politics. The Versailles treaty ending the World War was itself a product of coercion, being “signed at the muzzle of a gun.” The victorious powers, working through the League of Nations, then sought to uphold the treaty by threatening nations that challenged it “with diplomatic, economic and, if necessary, military sanctions.” The victors paid little attention to healing the sources of international conflict, relying instead upon “the menace of [...] threats” to maintain Versailles. The rise of dictators in Germany, Italy, and Japan did little to change this situation; “the only hope the former Allies entertain of keeping the peace,” asserted the editors in March 1935, “is to maintain the status quo by a threat of overwhelming force.”⁵

This effort—the use of coercion to keep peace—was bound to fail, argued the isolationists, in large part because it generated armed confrontations between states that increased the chances of war. Surveying the world scene in 1937, Champ Clark, one of the leading isolationists in the Senate, worried that nations were “once again wallowing in a pre-war era [...] where international suspicion has been so acutely aroused, where excessive competition in armaments on every side has so set the hair trigger of calamity that the bad temper of a dictator, the ineptness of a diplomat, the crime of a fanatic may at any moment loose irremediable disaster upon the world. Fear of an accidental war emerged in the pages of the *New Republic* as well. “If war comes,” predicted the editors in mid-1937, “it will probably be not because any single general staff decides upon it, but because in [the] tangle of bluffing and

4. “Stalin’s Munich,” *New Republic* 100 (30 August 1939): 89; Styles Bridges, “America’s Foreign Policy,” *Vital Speeches* 5 (1 April 1939): 369; Borah, “Our Imperative Task,” 389. *New Republic* will hereafter be abbreviated NR. *Vital Speeches* will hereafter be abbreviated VS.

5. Herbert Hoover, “Shall We Send Our Youth to War?” (15 July 1939), in Hoover, *Further Addresses Upon the American Road, 1938-1940* (New York: Scribner’s, 1940), 122; “Europe: Peace or War,” NR 74 (29 March 1933): 173; “Forcible-Feeble Diplomacy,” *ibid.* 92 (20 October 1937): 283-284; “Europe’s Tragedy: Act II,” *ibid.* 82 (27 March 1935): 173. For another example, see Borah, “Our Imperative Task,” 386-387.

counter-bluffing some crisis or incident will make it impossible for potential combatants to withdraw. No nation wants war, but each nation wants its own way and is backing up its demands with force of arms." Coercion backed by armaments, reasoned the isolationists, boxed nations into desperate situations in which almost anything could ignite fighting.⁶

Other analyses stressed the dangerous emotions that accompanied arms races and armed threats. As president, Hoover defended naval arms control on grounds it would "end the poison of suspicion and ill will generated by constant rivalry in [naval] construction," an important achievement given that Hoover felt that "war arises from a state of fear, a sense of injustice, and an ill will which culminates in uncontrollable national passions." Oswald Garrison Villard, former editor of the *Nation*, likewise pinpointed national recklessness as an outgrowth of armaments and a cause of war. The "larger and more efficient the army," he argued, "the greater the temptation to statesmen to take chances in bluffing their way through dangerous diplomatic relations [...] it gives them the feeling that they have got an army that will see them through if they blunder into war." The *New Republic* touched on this idea too, noting in 1935 that "when force confronts force and will confronts will too long, conflict is sure to break out. One side or the other, having come to believe it inevitable, will seize what it thinks is a favorable moment." Angry passions, aggressive risk taking, and the logic of pre-emptive attack all stemmed from the tactics of armed coercion that dominated power politics and all heightened the likelihood of war.⁷

Many isolationists also identified alliances as a destabilizing feature of power politics. Hoover included "alliances which shift the balances of power in the old world" in a list of "provocative actions" that the former president asserted "have hitherto always cracked up in war itself." Borah in particular portrayed alliances as inherently unstable. Nations, according to Borah, followed the "iron law of self interest" in international affairs, which meant, in his mind, that they could not be trusted to keep their word. Britain, for example, had signed treaties pledging to protect China's territorial integrity, but then decided that it was in its interest to acquiesce in Japan's attack upon Manchuria. It was entirely possible, Borah speculated in 1938, that Britain might even ally with Japan. In any case, any alliance, even between democracies, could founder at any moment or involve an unsuspecting nation in

6. Bennett Champ Clark, "Neutrality—What Kind?," *VS* 3 (1 February 1937): 252; "Can America Ensure Peace?," *NR* 91 (30 June 1937): 209.

7. Hoover, "Address to Daughters of the American Revolution" (14 April 1930), in *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover*, edited by William Starr Myers (Garden City: Doubleday, 1934), I, 237; Oswald Garrison Villard, "An Error that Cost a War," *Nation* 139 (28 November 1934): 610; "Europe's Tragedy: Act II," *NR* 82 (27 March 1935): 173.

unexpected conflicts; alliances, concluded Borah, ultimately brought with them “burdens and dangers, [...] debts, controversies and wars.”⁸

The picture the isolationists drew of power politics, then, was unrelentingly dark and ominous. They portrayed a world of amoral machinations in which the very tactics nations employed to advance their goals—armed coercion and alliances—led directly to war. How could such an unstable system exist? Where did it come from? Several of the isolationists, including especially Hoover and Borah, thought that power politics stemmed in part from the geography and history of Europe. “Do we not now realize,” asked Borah, “how toughly engrained and how inherently imbedded in the whole structure and civilization of Europe are the ambitions of rulers, racial antipathy, intolerance, and, most of all, the belief that only by force can such matters be dealt with?” Hoover elaborated on this idea in more detail, pointing to “the ever-present factor of a thousand years of European history that on a score of boundaries there exist zones of mixed populations, each with its own age-old hates and its aspirations.” These “agitations,” Hoover argued, “are the key to much of European war history,” a history that in turn fed “fears and hates [...] certain to evolve balances of power for defense.” Power politics, in this analysis, was a logical—and intractable—consequence of generations of ethnic and national strife on the continent of Europe.⁹

Borah, as well as other isolationists, also attributed power politics to imperial rivalries. The intrigue and armed confrontations that threatened war, Borah asserted in 1939, stemmed from “imperialism—that is, territory, colonies, raw material, trade.” Germany, Italy, and Japan, explained former Under Secretary of State William Castle, “want colonies as an outlet for their surplus population. They want raw materials.” They were “have-not nations” seeking “relief from those who have,” namely Britain and France, the “long-established imperialistic democracies” as Hoover called them. They did not wish “to surrender any of their possessions,” however, thus making conflict—and power politics—inevitable.¹⁰

8. Hoover, “Foreign Policies Today” (15 April 1939), *Further Addresses*, 105; Borah, “Our Imperative Task,” 386-387. Other isolationists simply linked alliances with unstable power politics without much explanation. See Bridges, “America’s Foreign Policy,” *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 369; “The Week,” *NR* 87 (1 July 1936): 224.

9. Borah, “What Our Position Should Be,” *VS* 5 (15 April 1939): 398; Hoover, “America and the World Crisis” (26 October 1938), *Further Addresses*, 89. See also David I. Walsh, “Keep America Out of War,” *VS* 5 (15 May 1939): 451; James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 197.

10. Borah, “What Our Position Should Be,” 398; William R. Castle, “Let’s Mind Our Own Business,” *VS* (1 April 1939): 361; Hoover, “Foreign Policies Today” (15 April 1939), *Further Addresses*, 110.

Although they argued that disputes over resources and colonies contributed to power politics, conservatives like Hoover and Castle said little about the sources of imperialism, beyond implying that it arose out of population pressures or greed. The *New Republic*, in contrast, closely associated imperialism with capitalism. According to Bruce Bliven, one of the editors, “capitalistic enterprise” inevitably produced surplus goods that needed to be exported lest the economy collapse. Capitalist businesses also often needed to import raw materials to make their products. Capitalism therefore “presupposes the continuance of large and expanding foreign trade,” reasoned Bliven. Driven by the demands of their economic systems, capitalist nation-states competed for resources and markets outside their borders, producing “quarrels over colonies” and other tensions and, ultimately, “large military and naval forces” and war.¹¹

A narrower interpretation of the economic factors behind power politics, and one embraced by liberals and conservatives alike, emerged in the mid-1930s with Senator Gerald Nye’s investigation of the munitions industry. The committee’s work, pushed forward largely by Nye, Champ Clark, and Arthur Vandenberg, convinced Nye that “there may be doubt as to the degree but there is certainty that the profits of preparation for war and the profits of war itself constitute the most serious challenge to the peace of the world.” Borah encouraged the Nye Committee’s work, claiming that “the great munition manufacturers of Europe” had spread “sordid and vicious” propaganda about the pre-1914 naval programs of Germany and Britain to inflame relations between the two countries and thus get “a market for their instruments of murder.” Less an indictment of capitalism than of the greed and amorality of a specific industry, the munitions investigation illuminated a key source of international “war situations” for many isolationists.¹²

In their discussions of international affairs, few isolationists paid much attention to the possibility that the structure of the international system itself—a structure in which sovereign states operated in an anarchical environment where survival could not be taken for granted—might lie at the root of power politics. Hoover did state in July 1939 that governments in Europe

11. Bruce Bliven, “They Cry ‘Peace, Peace,’ II. The Difficult Road Away from War,” *NR* 84 (6 November 1935): 352; Bliven, “They Cry ‘Peace, Peace,’ I. The Plight of the Pacifists,” *ibid.* (23 October 1935): 287.

12. Nye quoted in Wayne S. Cole, *Senator Gerald P. Nye and American Foreign Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 76; Borah, *Bedrock*, 174; “Hucksters of Death,” *NR* 78 (7 March 1934): 89. On the leaders of the Nye Committee, see John E. Wiltz, *In Search of Peace: The Senate Munitions Inquiry, 1934-36* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 42-43. See also Villard, “The international Traffic in Arms,” *Nation* 139 (3 October 1934): 371. Villard also saw the armed forces as a source of power politics. See “Our Inefficient Navy,” *Nation* 141 (14 August 1935): 175 and “Issues and Men,” *ibid.* 143 (29 August 1936): 242

“play power politics as sheer necessity for national defense, and they play it for national aggression.” But his analysis of the context of such politics, as noted above, focused on “age-old hate and greed,” on emotions and ethnic rivalries. He did not assess how the dangers and uncertainties inherent in a system of independent sovereignties might generate the “necessity for national defense” or, for that matter, aggression.¹³

Likewise, the *New Republic* observed in 1933 that tension was beginning to grip Europe in the wake of Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, with fears of attack growing on all sides. “There is something of a general compulsion-neurosis,” mused the editors, “which causes feverish preparation for war which in turn makes the compulsion even deeper.” Six years later, George Soule, writing as German troops invaded Poland, warned that when peacemaking came, the chief danger would lay in a “military attitude” that “will want to protect the victors against future attack by strengthening frontiers, carving out new states with military resources, erecting a system of alliances.” Even as they alluded to an instinct for self-preservation as a key motivation behind power politics, however, the editors failed to analyze where it came from. It was the internal character of states, namely their economic systems, that interested Soule and his colleagues, not the structure of the international arena within which states operated.¹⁴

Of all the isolationist leaders, Borah probably came the closest to analyzing how international anarchy contributed to power politics. In a major speech before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in January 1934, the Idahoan asserted that “nationalism” was a “persistent and universal law of nature” that would never disappear; “no power,” he claimed, “can change this law or frustrate its operation.” In other statements, Borah observed that “the controlling forces” in international affairs “were political, that national interests and national ambitions directed the course” of a nation’s foreign policies. But Borah, like Hoover, drew back from assessing how those “interests” might relate simply to survival in an anarchical environment, preferring instead to link them to irrational emotions and greedy economic desires.¹⁵

13. Hoover, “Shall We Send Our Youth to War?” (15 July 1939), *Further Addresses*, 122, 120. My understanding of international anarchy has been strongly influenced by Kenneth Waltz’s neorealist theory of international politics. For a convenient introduction to the debate over Waltz’s theory, see *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

14. “Europe: The Brink of Catastrophe,” *NR* 75 (24 May 1933): 31-32; George Soule, “The Basis of a Lasting Peace,” *ibid.* 100 (20 September 1939): 177.

15. Borah, *Bedrock*, 55-56, 208.

The isolationists' tendency to attribute power politics to human nature or internal economic pressures of one type or another, despite their occasional suggestions that more systemic factors might be at work, becomes understandable when one realizes that the isolationists' opponents, the advocates of collective security, focused on international anarchy as the basic cause of war. Like the isolationists, collective security proponents ranged across the political spectrum. They included the liberal editors of the *Nation*, the Roosevelt administration, and Republican stalwarts such as ex-Secretary of State Henry Stimson. Collective security advocates disagreed about exactly what the United States should do in response to the deteriorating situation abroad, but they held similar basic ideas about world politics. They believed, most importantly, that mankind, over many decades of struggle, had managed to impose some measure of "order" over "international anarchy," chiefly through the development of international law and of respect for the sanctity of treaties. The Covenant of the League of Nations, which laid out procedures for the peaceful settlement of disputes and provided for mechanisms through which nations could co-operate to punish aggressors, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, by which signatories, including the United States, renounced war as an instrument of foreign policy, represented the culmination of this effort to bring a greater degree of ordered security to the world. If states failed to uphold the Covenant and Kellogg-Briand, as well as other treaties, collective security proponents argued, then anarchy would again reign supreme in international relations and result in another world war.¹⁶

The advocates of collective security further believed that such a war would almost certainly involve the United States. A war between the major powers would have unpredictable consequences, they warned, and it could easily threaten America's political integrity, physical safety, or economic well-being. To avoid this outcome and to defend the advancement of order over anarchy, the opponents of isolationism proposed that America co-operate with other "peace-loving nations" in trying to deter states from violating the Covenant and Kellogg-Briand and to punish states that pursued such aggression. Most of the advocates of this position urged that America impose economic sanctions against aggressors, preferably with others but if necessary alone, or, failing that, that the president have discretion to embargo arms sales to one side in a conflict. At the very least, collective security proponents wanted America to be able to sell armaments to all belligerents since in a European war this policy would in practice favor the "law-abiding" powers of Britain and France. This, they argued, was the least the United States could do to

16. Cordell Hull, "Our Foreign Policy," VS 4 (1 April 1938): 369.

uphold the regime of international reform that had been built up so laboriously since 1918 and that they associated with America's future security.¹⁷

Isolationists disagreed with all of these arguments. As noted, they did not pay much attention to the problem of anarchy in the international system, however much they denounced power politics. They also rejected the idea that co-operation with or active support for Britain and France would uphold international reform or enhance American security. As far as the isolationists were concerned, the Western powers had corrupted the League of Nations at its founding because they turned the League into an agency to maintain the Versailles treaty—a treaty of “vindictive fatuousness” that carved up the world according to “secret treaties dividing the spoils of victory.” Epitomizing the imperialism, hates, and jealousies that the isolationists blamed for power politics, the treaty's basic purpose “was to punish and weaken the defeated nations.” This objective, complained the *New Republic*, was totally “contrary” to the effort of the Covenant “to establish a regime of international justice and cooperation through the League of Nations.” Not surprisingly, the League “failed to make any substantial modification of the terms of the treaty” while at the same time the Allies did not reduce their armaments in any meaningful way, as they had implied they would under the provisions of the Covenant. Germany eventually did get admitted to the League, “but coldly,” recalled William Castle, “making the Germans feel like they were pariahs.” France, in any event, tried “to crush Germany and keep her crushed.” Far from being a vehicle of international reform, the League, because of the policies of the Allies, was simply an alliance typical of power politics.¹⁸

Given the character of the League, American co-operation with its security policies, or with the security policies of its leading members, amounted to helping “to maintain an unhealthy *status quo*.” It would mean interjecting America into a Europe “dividing into two armed camps, two systems” at odds over the “grossly unjust set of conditions” erected at Versailles. It would also mean entering into the “labyrinth of commitment” the Allies had made

17. Hull, “The Corner Stone of Our Foreign Policy,” *VS* 5 (15 August 1939): 664-665. For other representative statements of the collective security position, see Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address at Chicago,” 5 October 1937, in *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, edited by Samuel Rosenman (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 6: 406-411; Roosevelt, “Annual Message to the Congress,” 4 January 1939, *ibid.* 8: 1-5; Henry Stimson, “We Must Drop Our Isolation,” *VS* 5 ((15 April 1939): 399-401; “Our New Role in Europe,” *Nation* 136 (24 May 1933): 573; “The Problem of Neutrality,” *ibid.* 140 (10 April 1935): 404; “We Must Enforce the Kellogg Pact,” *ibid.* 141 (6 November 1935): 524; “America Must Choose,” *ibid.* 145 (25 December 1937): 704; “Isolation is Not Enough,” *ibid.* 148 (18 March 1939): 307-308.

18. Borah, “Our Imperative Task,” 386; Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover* (New York, 1951), 1: 438; “Forcible-Feeble Diplomacy,” *NR* 92 (20 October 1937): 283; Castle, “Let's Mind Our Own Business,” *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 362; “What Do Americans Want,” *NR* 94 (30 March 1938): 233.

in and out of Europe to preserve their territory and empires, including, Hoover noted with alarm, “the alliance of France with Communist Russia,” a state Hoover believed had been trying “to undermine” the U.S. government since 1919. It would mean, in short, associating the United States not with the cause of democracy or reform, but with the “old, old” cause “of power politics.”¹⁹

The outcome would be war, especially since the kind of co-operation with the Western powers envisioned by collective security proponents usually involved economic sanctions against aggressive states. Bruce Bliven, “astonished” at the chorus of calls for American and British sanctions against Japan in the wake of its attack upon China, warned of the dangers of such a policy in September 1937. Its effect on Japan, he contended, would be “to fuse the whole nation behind its leaders, to destroy any possible opposition voices, to create burning hatred of the foreigners responsible for this action.” To have any hope of breaking Japan’s will to continue its campaign in China, Bliven added, the impact of the sanctions would have to be very strong, causing them to amount to “making war on an entire population.” Why would Japan not retaliate or resist, Bliven wondered. “Would not the policy lead at once to war?”²⁰

Hoover had no doubts that it would. As president, he rejected using economic or military sanctions in response to Japan’s 1931 invasion of Manchuria because, he told his cabinet, they were “the roads to war.” In 1939, in reply to President Roosevelt’s declaration that there were “many methods short of war, but stronger and more effective than mere words” that Americans could use to oppose aggression, Hoover speculated that FDR must have in mind sanctions of one kind or another—“the method of coercion, not persuasion.” Coercion could only have any hope of working if it was done in co-operation with other states, Hoover argued, which demanded “at least temporary alliances with countries in Europe or Asia.” Since coercion also risked “reprisals,” the sanctions would have to “be backed by armament far beyond that required for the Western Hemisphere.” Economic pressures would mean starving civilians too. “Any nation which sets up such policies and builds an armament of dimensions to back them is sure to arouse fear,” Hoover predict-

19. Edwin M. Borchard, “Neutrality for the United States,” VS 3 (15 September 1937): 738; “Europe: Peace or War,” NR 74 (29 March 1933): 173; Hoover, “Foreign Policies Today” (15 April 1939), *Further Addresses*, 111. Castle, indeed, suggested that he saw the Soviet Union as a bigger threat to the United States than Nazi Germany. See Castle, “Let’s Mind Our Own Business,” VS 5 (1 April 1939): 362. The *New Republic*, in contrast, worried that collective security could easily end up being directed at the Soviet Union, a state the editors considered “the most hopeful experiment in all human history.” See “Another War for Democracy,” NR 85 (5 February 1936): 355.

20. Bliven, “On Hating the Japanese,” NR 92 (22 September 1937): 177-178.

ed, as well as “bloody resistance” from the targeted state. War could be the only result.²¹

To be sure, the *New Republic* occasionally wavered in its belief that collective economic sanctions or military threats against aggressors would lead to war. “There is a slight chance of preserving peace by ‘concerted action of peace-loving nations,’” conceded the editors in October 1937, “if these nations can surely enforce their will and are known by the trouble-makers to be willing to do so.” But America and the Western powers lacked this all-important credibility, insisted the *New Republic*. “The fear of war on the part of pacifistically inclined peoples” made them “reluctant” to confront aggression, noted the editors, and the “difficulty of defining the moment at which military action becomes an obligation creates the uncertainty which permits such reluctance to be effective.” The aggressor powers fully recognized the West’s lack of will and exploited it by “continually threatening to fight without really meaning to go to war, believing that by doing so they can frighten their opponents into acquiescence in their aims.” Making incredible threats in this context just spurred on the dictators, thus increasing the chances of a crisis in which no state felt it could back down. “We do not want to fight,” admitted the editors, so “all the talk of collective security is dangerous nonsense.”²²

If the isolationists perceived “collective security” as simply war-provoking power politics masquerading as international reform, they also detected within it, in Professor Edwin Borchard’s words, “the implications of a crusade for righteousness.” They noted the tendency of collective security advocates to talk about the world in terms of a stark division between “the fascist and the democratic nations,” language which to the isolationists recalled America’s “war for democracy” in 1917. Historian Charles Beard scorned this sort of idealism. The notion that Americans had an “obligation to do good in Europe,” he asserted, “assumes we know ‘good’ when we see it, and that we can make it prevail.” Nothing positive had resulted from such thinking in 1917, Beard claimed, and if the United States now tried “to right historic wrongs in Europe, to promote democracy there and to act as mediator,” then Americans would just be “badly burned again.”²³

21. Hoover, *Memoirs*, 2: 370; Roosevelt, “Annual Message to the Congress” (4 January 1939), *Public Papers* 8: 3; Hoover, “President Roosevelt’s New Foreign Policies” (1 February 1939), *Further Addresses*, 96-97. See also Robert A. Taft, “Let Us Stay Out of War,” *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255; Arthur H. Vandenberg, “Peace or War for America,” *ibid.* (1 April 1939): 355.

22. “Forcible-Feeble Diplomacy,” *NR* 92 (20 October 1937): 284; “Can America Ensure Peace?,” *ibid.* 91 (30 June 1937): 209-210; “Forcible-Feeble Diplomacy,” *ibid.* (20 October 1937): 286. See also Castle, “Let’s Mind Our Own Business,” *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 361; Borah, *Bedrock*, 204-206.

Hoover, for his part, was alarmed by Roosevelt's January 1939 statement that "God-fearing democracies [...] cannot safely be indifferent to international lawlessness anywhere" and that America had to confront aggressors with more than just verbal protests. Hoover interpreted this to mean that Americans would "set ourselves up as the oracle of righteousness in age-old quarrels that began before our nation was born." FDR's policy could only lead to endless interventionism around the globe, to the United States becoming "policeman of the world." Hoover's fellow Republican, Senator Robert Taft, used more colorful language to attack Roosevelt's speech, charging that FDR proposed "that a single nation should range over the world, like a knight-errant, protecting democracy and ideals of good faith, and tilting, like Don Quixote, against the windmills of Fascism." To both Hoover and Taft, the "unsoundness and danger of such a course" was obvious.²⁴

In fact, avowed the isolationists, the warfare that would inevitably follow from collective security policies would destroy democracy, not save it. They pointed to the experience of the Great War to demonstrate this fact. As noted above, the war, according to the isolationists, ended with an unjust peace treaty written according to the logic of power politics and with a League of Nations that operated as a de facto alliance against Germany. "The result of this," former Under Secretary of State Castle explained, "was that the German people lost all faith in their democratic government which seemed unable either to improve conditions at home or to put up a defense against aggression from abroad. When this happened Hitler's day had come." Hoover stressed the damaging economic consequences of the war and of Versailles as important causes of fascism, but his basic point was the same as Castle's and others'—the "only result" of the war to "save the world for Democracy" was to "sow dragons' teeth which sprang up into dictatorships."²⁵

The war, moreover, had eroded democracy even within the nations that prevailed in the conflict. Berating collective security proponents for forgetting "the lesson" of the last war, the *New Republic* reminded its readers that "the

23. Borchard, "Neutrality for the United States," *VS* 3 (15 September 1937): 738; "Another War for Democracy," *NR* 85 (5 February 1936): 354; Charles Beard, "In Time of Peace Prepare for Peace," *ibid.* 86 (18 March 1936): 157.

24. Roosevelt, "Annual Message to the Congress" (4 January 1939), *Public Papers* 8: 3; Hoover, "President Roosevelt's New Foreign Policies" (1 February 1939), *Further Addresses*, 96, 98; Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War," *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255. See also Vandenberg, "Peace or War for America," *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 357.

25. Castle, "Let's Mind Our Own Business," 362; Hoover, "Foreign Policies for America" (31 March 1938), in Hoover, *Addresses Upon the American Road, 1933-1938* (New York, 1938), 319. For Hoover's linkage of the Great War, economic dislocation, and fascism, see, for example, Hoover, "America and the World Crisis" 2 (6 October 1938), *Further Addresses*, 86. For the liberal view of Versailles and Hitler, see "Europe: Peace or War," *NR* 74 (29 March 1933): 173; "The Day of Reckoning," *ibid.* (5 April 1933): 201.

first thing that happens in a modern conflict is that democracy is suspended even in those countries where it previously existed, 'for the duration' if not longer." The editors saw a "good chance that another general war would finish the job of destroying our Western civilization, a job so well begun by the last one." Taft absorbed the same "lesson" from 1917. "We learned that modern war defeats its own purposes," destroying more democracy than it preserved. "We may go in on the side of France and England because they are democracies," Taft speculated in 1939, "and find before they are through that they are Communist or fascist."²⁶

Nor would the United States be immune to war's corrosive impact on democracy. All isolationists emphasized this crucial idea. "I know of no course we as a people could pursue more definitely calculated to establish a totalitarian government in this country," declared Borah, "than by permitting ourselves to be involved in foreign wars." With America profoundly weakened by the Depression, Borah feared that the government would have no choice but to "call for and receive authority for the exercise of the most arbitrary power" in order to prosecute a war. The *New Republic* similarly asserted that "nothing is more likely than that the United States would go fascist through the very process of organizing to defeat the fascist nations." Taft and Hoover reached the same conclusion from a conservative perspective, arguing that the New Deal had moved America "far towards totalitarian government already." The "lowered vitality of free enterprise, the necessity to subordinate or repudiate our enormous peace-time national debt to make way for finance of a new war, together with the ideas of economic power which impregnate our government," intoned Hoover, "all drive to the improbability of after-war demobilization of centralized power." From any angle—agrarian progressive, liberal, or conservative—American involvement in a general war looked certain to produce the same result: the destruction of liberty and democracy at home.²⁷

Considering their assessment of the threat that war posed to American democracy, it is not surprising that isolationists decided that no American interests in Europe or Asia were worth trying to protect with the policies of collective security-cum-power politics. Economic sanctions against Japan meant

26. "Another War for Democracy," *NR* 85 (5 February 1936): 354; Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War," *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255. See also Villard, "Issues and Men," *Nation* 148 (14 January 1939): 67.

27. Borah, "Our Imperative Task," 388; "Positive Neutrality," *NR* 92 (27 October 1937): 327; Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War," *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255; Hoover, "President Roosevelt's New Foreign Policies," 1 February 1939, *Further Addresses*, 102. See also Norman Thomas, "How Can We Escape War? Neutrality Plus Socialism," *Nation* 145 (25 December 1937): 708 and Jonas, *Isolationism in America*, 259-272.

war, claimed the *New Republic* in 1932, and “we have no interest in the Far East which justifies the sacrifice of a single American, Chinese or Japanese life.” The entire thrust of the isolationist analysis of European affairs suggested the same thing—that America had no moral, political, or economic stakes in Europe vital enough to risk involvement in war. America’s “national interests” instead dictated that the United States “remain neutral in all European controversies.”²⁸

So long as Americans stuck to “minding our own business,” isolationists believed the U.S. would be secure from danger. The “blessing of geography,” as Champ Clark put it, allowed the United States to remain aloof from international politics and still preserve its national security. Clark, as well as other isolationist leaders, outlined in great detail how America’s “isolated location,” re-confirmed by its impending withdrawal from the Philippines, its ability to be “self-sufficient” during war, and the obvious practical difficulties involved with a nation invading a distant, hostile shore all combined to make America, and the Western Hemisphere in general, secure from attack. Even if Germany and Italy defeated England and France, assured Taft, “it is hard to see what they could gain . . . by an attack on the United States.” As for the Japanese, Clark thought it extremely unlikely that they would ever have the forces necessary “to attack our shores or even Hawaii with our navy based on Pearl Harbor.” In the Pacific too, then, America was safe.²⁹

In their analysis of America’s security, the isolationists recognized that geography and resources alone were not enough to assure the nation’s safety. The U.S. also needed to maintain military forces sufficient “to repel aggression against the Western Hemisphere.” The level of forces necessary to attain this objective was a source of controversy throughout the 1930s, however. Villard, at one extreme, opposed all of the Roosevelt administration’s proposed defense increases, asserting that they were excessive and created “a huge army and navy lobby” eager to support “any movement for a totalitarian, all-military state.” The *New Republic* also opposed the administration’s defense plans, charging in 1938 that the ever-growing navy was designed “not merely to defend our shores, but to fight in any part of the world.” In January 1939, though, the editors changed their mind and decided to support naval expansion because it would provide an “impregnable defense against possible military attack on this continent.” Similarly, Taft and Hoover grudg-

28. “Can Japan Be Stopped?,” *NR* 69 (10 February 1932): 335; Borah, *Bedrock*, 207.

29. Vandenberg, “Peace or War for America,” *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 354; Clark, “The Question of National Defense,” *ibid.* (15 January 1939): 218; Taft, “Let Us Stay Out of War,” *ibid.* (1 February 1939): 255; Clark, “The Question of National Defense,” *ibid.* (15 January 1939): 218. For a liberal analysis, see Bliven, “Memorandum on National Policy,” *NR* 93 (26 January 1938): 328-330. For Borah’s views, see Borah, *Bedrock*, 207, 209.

ingly went along with the 1939 program, which approximately doubled the defense expenditures of just five years earlier, but only so long as the forces were aimed at hemisphere defense. Along with other isolationists, they opposed any military establishment oriented for use “in an offensive war, or employed as a threat to enable us to interfere in other people’s quarrels in all parts of the world.” That type of armament, they were certain, led directly to arms races, bankruptcy, and war.³⁰

In order to make their case for the viability of a national security policy based upon aloofness from world politics and upon hemispheric defense, isolationists had to explain America’s involvement in the World War of 1914-1918. After all, if isolationism was possible now, in the dangerous world of the 1930s, why did America reject it and plunge into power politics just twenty years earlier? In general, isolationists answered this question by asserting that short-sighted economic interests and misplaced, naïve idealism, fueled in part by Allied propaganda, led the United States to abandon neutrality and to support the cause of the Allies. America loaned money and sold war supplies to Britain and France, and failed to stand up to British violations of American neutral rights. Alienated and threatened by this policy, the Germans felt they had no choice but to use their submarines to stop America’s aid from reaching Britain, which led to the German attacks upon American ships that triggered America’s entry into the war in April 1917. To be certain, isolationists differed in the specifics of this “revisionist” interpretation of America’s involvement in the Great War, but they all agreed on its basic argument: a lack of true neutrality arising from factors having nothing to do with vital U.S. interests led America into, in Hoover’s words, a misguided “crusade for the freedom of mankind.”³¹

30. Hoover, “American Policies for Peace” (15 January 1938), *Addresses Upon the American Road*, 303; Villard, “Issues and Men,” *Nation* 143 (29 August 1936): 242; “The Week,” *NR* 93 (12 January 1938): 264; “Yes and No to the President,” *ibid.* 97 (18 January 1939): 299; Clark, “The Question of National Defense,” *VS* 5 (15 January 1939): 217. For Taft’s views, see Taft, “Let Us Stay Out of War,” *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 254-255; for Hoover’s see Hoover, “President Roosevelt’s New Foreign Policies” (1 February 1939), *Further Addresses*, 94, 97.

31. Hoover, *Memoirs*, I, 434. For other examples of isolationist revisionism, see Beard, “Solving Domestic Crisis by War,” *NR* 86 (11 March 1936): 127-129; Clark, “Neutrality—What Kind?,” *VS* 3 (1 February 1937): 252; Nye, “Our Foreign Policy,” *ibid.* 5 (15 March 1939): 329; and Walsh, “Keep America Out of War,” *ibid.* (15 May 1939): 451. Borah actually avoided endorsing the revisionist interpretation, perhaps because he had voted for America’s entry into the war in April 1917. But Borah certainly believed that America had quickly tied itself too closely to the Allies and, in 1936, he asserted that “propaganda” played a “very great” role in drawing America into the war. See Borah, *Bedrock*, 208. For an interesting discussion of Borah’s views in the thirties about America’s entry into the war, see Robert James Maddox, *William E. Borah and American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 228-229. Much of the isolationist analysis of the causes of America’s entry into World War I was taken from Walter Millis’s popular book on the subject. See Millis, *Road to War: America, 1914-1917* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935).

Isolationists had a variety of proposals for avoiding a repetition of the events that supposedly produced war in 1917. As noted earlier, most of them thought the Neutrality Acts of 1935-1937 offered the best hope of achieving this goal. The central features of these laws, which remained in effect until after the war broke out in Europe in September 1939, banned American loans and arms sales to all belligerent states, regardless of whether or not they were aggressors. Other provisions prevented Americans or American ships from travelling to war zones, thus further insulating the United States from involvement in overseas conflicts. Many isolationists also felt that the legislation helped to keep America out of war because it sharply limited the president's choices about how to respond to a foreign conflict. Deeply suspicious of Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy preferences, as well as of the president's ambitions to expand his authority, isolationists like Nye believed that the neutrality legislation "was denying power to a president to involve us in war." That power, they insisted, should lay only with Congress—where the isolationists believed they had the votes to prevail.³²

Isolationists such as Edwin Borchard, however, doubted the efficacy of the Neutrality Acts and called on the U.S. to hew to long-standing international laws regarding neutral rights. The "well-established rules, had they been applied in 1914-1917," counseled Borchard, "would probably have prevented American intervention and saved the world and the United States untold misery." So long as America strictly observed "the obligations of neutrality," it would be safe now too. Still another position, endorsed by Hoover, agreed with Borchard that the arms embargo provision of the neutrality legislation was unrealistic and unneutral in practice, but objected to enforcing "lawful rights for American trade by military action." For Hoover, "such ends" could best be advanced by "the processes of peace," not war.³³

Regardless of what particular policy they favored, all isolationists recognized that the key to avoiding power politics lay in convincing the public, in the *New Republic's* words, that "no interest in trade or finance, no moral con-

32. Nye, "Save American Neutrality," *VS* 5 (15 September 1939): 724. On fears about presidential discretion in foreign policy, see also Bridges, "America's Foreign Policy," *VS* 5 (1 April 1939): 368-369 and "Limit the War Power," *NR* 95 (27 July 1938): 320. For the most thorough discussion of the passage of the Neutrality Acts, see Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*.

33. Borchard, "Neutrality for the United States," *VS* 3 (15 September 1937): 739-740; Hoover, "President Roosevelt's New Foreign Policies" (1 February 1939), *Further Addresses*, 95, 101. Some isolationists also wanted to pass a constitutional amendment requiring that a national referendum be held on any declaration of war by Congress, except in cases of attack, on the theory that this would make the administration hesitate to embark on any policy that risked war. Nye supported it strongly, but Hoover and the *New Republic* thought it was impractical. See Hoover, "American Policies for Peace" (15 January 1938), *Addresses Upon the American Road*, 303; "An Amendment against War?," *NR* 93 (29 December 1937): 212-13; and Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 253-262.

ceptions, no sympathy for other peoples can possibly involve issues so important as to outweigh the certain losses of war." Usually, of course, the isolationists went out of their way to declare their dislike for dictatorships, particularly in the second half of the decade. But however much they denounced "Nazism, Fascism, Socialism, and Communism" for violating "every ideal we hold," the isolationists, Hoover stated, opted to "reserve the question as to whether America should send her sons to Europe to die in a war against these ideologies, or that we should enter into measures that may lead to that end." The crises of the thirties had to be approached with a "realistic view," lectured the isolationists—and their brand of "realism" considered "the horrors of modern war [...] so great, its futility [...] so evident, its effect on democracy itself so destructive, that almost any alternative is more to be desired."³⁴

Most isolationists persisted in their determination to avoid war even after Germany began its armed conquest of Europe in September 1939. The movement itself changed considerably, however. New leaders and organizations emerged, most notably Charles Lindbergh and the America First Committee. The message of the isolationists changed too, especially after Germany's invasion of France in May 1940. Surprised by the French defeat, nearly all isolationists endorsed massive defense increases while simultaneously revealing more sympathy for Britain than ever, even to the point of supporting "aid-short-of-war" to the beleaguered British. The *New Republic*, meanwhile, decided that the risks to American democracy posed by German hegemony in Europe outweighed the dangers the editors associated with war. They consequently abandoned isolationism and, along with most liberals, joined the ranks of the advocates of collective security. Their rejection of isolationism mirrored trends in public opinion: in late 1940 the majority of respondents in public opinion polls thought that aid to Britain even at the risk of war was more important than staying out of the conflict. By 1941, with a majority favoring entering the war if it was necessary to save Britain and defeat the Axis, isolationism had clearly lost its place of dominance in American political culture.³⁵

34. "An Amendment against War?," *NR* 93 (29 December 1937): 213; Hoover, "Foreign Policies Today" (15 April 1939), *Further Addresses*, 107-08; "Positive Neutrality," *NR* 92 (27 October 1937): 327; Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War." *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 256.

35. For the *New Republic's* change of position, see Soule, "If Germany Wins," *NR* 102 (22 April 1940): 525-526; "If Hitler Writes the Peace," *ibid.* (20 May 1940): 660-661; "The Way to Help the Allies," *ibid.* (17 June 1940): 813-814. For isolationist views in 1940, see Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 414-415; for trends in public opinion, see *ibid.*, 364-365. For the America First Committee, see Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953).

The rapid decline of the isolationists after 1939 should not obscure the significant contributions they made to the development of American thinking about foreign affairs. Their arguments against excessive presidential discretion in foreign policy, for one thing, raised vital constitutional questions about the executive branch's power to take the country to war without congressional approval. Equally important, the isolationists made incisive criticisms of the ideology of collective security. They recognized that collective security's basic premise—that peaceful nations “cannot safely be indifferent to international lawlessness anywhere”—invited a foreign policy of global interventionism. As Hoover and Taft rightly perceived, becoming “the world's policeman” might end up costing America a great deal, especially since other peoples would probably resist America's interference in their affairs. “In time,” warned Hoover, “they would envisage us as the world's greatest bully, not as the world's greatest idealist.”³⁶

The isolationists illuminated problems with the credibility of collective economic sanctions and military threats too. Ultimately, the success of collective attempts at deterring or compelling aggressors depended upon the nations that issued the threats having an equally strong interest in stopping the aggression as well as an equally strong will to fight if the aggression continued. As Borah, the *New Republic*, and others realized, though, neither condition characterized the collective security efforts of the 1930s. League members chose to ignore aggression if they decided it was in their immediate interest to do so while none of the major Western powers, including the United States, demonstrated any real willingness “to outface the dictators in the game of military racketeering.” Collective security might sound great in theory but, as the isolationists perceived, it utterly failed in practice—which left one wondering if the theory made any sense at all.³⁷

But the isolationists' argument had its own shortcomings. A profound contradiction marred the logic of their message, a contradiction that the isolationists never addressed, let alone resolved. On the one hand, they insisted that power politics were completely unstable and could never produce any sort of lasting peace. But at the same time, the isolationists repeatedly suggested that the tactics of power politics—the same tactics that supposedly always led to war—should and could be employed by the West to deter or contain Axis aggression. In March 1936, for example, the *New Republic* urged Britain and France to fix boundaries “beyond which German aggression will meet armed resistance” and to cut Germany off from international credit. In all likelihood, argued the editors, Germany's economy would soon collapse, turning

36. Hoover, “Foreign Policies Today” (15 April 1939), *Further Addresses*, 112.

37. “An International Program for Democracies,” *NR* 89 (18 November 1936): 60.

the German people against the Nazis. Deterrence and coercion, in this scenario, appeared to be a path to peace, not war.³⁸

To be sure, on one occasion the editors flirted with an appeasement policy as a way to deal with Hitler. But they never seriously considered this option, perceiving early on that the Nazis could not “be appeased by concessions; rather their appetite would be whetted.” In late 1936, moreover, the editors criticized the Allies for failing to arm the Loyalist forces in Spain in the face of fascist threats. Had the Allies done so, claimed the editors, the fascist rebellion in Spain would have collapsed. Then, when it became clear that Germany and Italy were violating the international arms embargo on Spain, *New Republic* called on the Western powers to use “their naval and military power” to stop arms shipments from reaching the rebels. The journal mentioned no risk of war that might follow from such a policy. Finally, in late 1938, the editors denounced the West’s capitulation at Munich, protesting that had the West “stood firm” in its alliance with Czechoslovakia, Hitler would have backed down without a fight. Threats, force, and alliances—the ingredients of power politics—apparently were not the recipe for disaster that the *New Republic* usually described³⁹

Hoover and Taft likewise sent out contradictory signals about the efficacy of power politics as a means to defeat aggression without war. Taft, for instance, suggested in January 1939 that Germany and Italy were deterred from attacking western Europe because they realized Britain and France could not be defeated “in any protracted war.” Hoover, in late October 1938, applauded the “increase of defensive armament in the Western European democracies,” calling it one of the “weights in [the] balance toward peace between the totalitarian states and the democracies.” Other “weights for peace” included the “ratio” between offensive and defensive weapons on the ground, which Hoover thought would produce a “near stalemate” if war broke out, and the threat of mutual air strikes upon civilians, which Hoover claimed had “a sobering effect upon popular emotions in all countries, including the totalitarian states.” While Hoover also emphasized the “superlative value” for peace of the “Munich agreement,” the point of his analysis of military affairs in Europe was clear: arms races could produce a military balance that inhibited attack by one side against another while the fears generated by threats of air strikes on cities actually deterred war rather than provoked it.⁴⁰

38. “The Chance of Peace in Europe,” *NR* 86 (25 March 1936): 180-181.

39. “Chamberlain Gets His Chance,” *NR* 94 (9 March 1938): 116-117; “The Day of Reckoning,” *ibid.* 74 (5 April 1933): 202; “‘Neutrality’ about Spain,” *ibid.* 88 (9 September 1936): 117-118; “One-Way Neutrality,” *ibid.* (30 September 1936): 212-213; “The Great Surrender,” *ibid.* 96 (28 September 1938): 200.

Undoubtedly the best evidence of the isolationists' unwitting endorsement of power politics as a method to maintain peace can be found in their discussions of America's national security. In their analyses of this subject, it will be recalled, the isolationists argued that a combination of geographical advantages, resources, and military forces more or less in line with the administration's program were enough to keep America safe from attack. To be more precise, the isolationists asserted that these various factors produced a position of "strength" for America, in Taft's words, that would make "any nation hesitate" to attack "no matter how strong it might be." Without apparently realizing it, in other words, the isolationists spoke the language of deterrence when they addressed their nation's security needs. So long as America's potential enemies were impressed with its power, so long as they feared the costs and risks of attacking it or challenging the Monroe Doctrine, then America's defense forces were "adequate" and the United States could avoid war. How this logic differed from that of power politics—the same power politics that the isolationists constantly condemned as amoral and unstable—was unclear.⁴¹

Despite the cogency of their criticisms of collective security, then, the isolationists never really offered a coherent, compelling alternative to it. Essentially, they simply further demonized balance-of-power politics in American political culture. This meant that when the wisdom of their policies appeared in doubt after Germany's stunning victories in Europe, the ideas and assumptions of collective security actually had greater appeal than ever for the American people. Whether those ideas were any less unreal and dangerous than the isolationists described them remained to be seen. But with neither power politics nor isolationism apparently a viable option, Americans had no where else to turn to find a framework for understanding the new era of war and Cold War they were about to enter. That outcome was perhaps the isolationists most significant legacy.

40. Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War," *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255; Hoover, "America and the World Crisis" (26 October 1938), *Further Addresses*, 88.

41. Taft, "Let Us Stay Out of War," *VS* 5 (1 February 1939): 255. For other examples, see Hoover, "President Roosevelt's New Foreign Policies," 1 February 1939, *Further Addresses*, 101; Vandenberg, "Peace or War for America," *VS* 5, (1 April 1939): 354-357; Walsh, "Keep America Out of War," *ibid.* (15 May 1939): 452; Bliven, "Memorandum on National Policy," *NR* 93 (26 January 1938): 328-329.