Foot in the Door: Roosevelt’s Crucial Initial Victory over the Unprepared Isolationists

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In April 1917, when, in direct contradiction of his word, President Woodrow Wilson brought America into the Great War, American foreign policy was drastically and irrevocably changed. The world’s business had forever become America’s business. Afterwards many Americans, bitter from fighting a war they had not signed up for, sought to return to a neutral America. Isolationism was born. It came in many different shades, and it swiftly became the predominant opinion of the American people and their representatives, enduring through the twenties and the thirties. In 1935, 1936, and 1937, isolationists passed various Neutrality Acts, which most importantly forbade the sale of arms to belligerents.

In October 1939, after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called a special session of Congress, the Neutrality Acts were revised and the arms embargo lifted in favor of a ‘cash-and-carry’ policy. This marked the beginning of the end of isolationism. Once he had his foot in the door Roosevelt did not relent. He followed the revision with the destroyer deal, the draft, and Lend-Lease. By October 1941 American and German ships were exchanging fire in an undeclared war. But all this reversal came suddenly and unexpectedly. What changed between the mid-thirties and 1939 that allowed for this sudden shift to intervention? What caused the revision of the Neutrality Acts in 1939? Historians began debating this question almost immediately. Some, like Wayne S. Cole and James MacGregor Burns, argue that it was Roosevelt’s own skills as an orator and a politician that allowed for the repeal of the embargo. Not only did the President deliver a well-crafted speech on the issue in an effort to sway congressmen to his side, but he appealed to senators and the American public by reassuring them that he had no intention of going to war. Roosevelt also cashed in a

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number of political favors in order to garner votes and public support for the bill.¹

But the real cause of the change in policy was the shift in public opinion following the beginning of the war. This shift came as a result of a combination of sensationalist news coverage of the war and deep divisions among the isolationists. Sensationalist coverage of the war caused the American public to sympathize with the Allies, and as a result senators aiming to please the public were more willing to sign off on a bill that de facto aided Britain and France. The divisions among the isolationists meant that early attempts among right-wing isolationists to organize a resistance and information campaign against cash-and-carry stalled. The divisions also meant that arguments for isolation came from a wide variety of sources, each with different goals and reasoning; the unreliability of certain sources as well as the sheer volume of different opinions both helped to discredit the isolationist position and prevented it from reaching as many ears. The isolationists were disorganized and fragmented compared to the interventionists, who could organize and rally behind Roosevelt.

Roosevelt the Deft Politician

Roosevelt is well known for his prowess at politics and persuasion. Some historians suggest that Roosevelt’s tactics and rhetoric were the primary reason that the revisions to the Neutrality Act were passed in spite of heavy opposition from isolationists in the Senate. They argue that the combination of Roosevelt’s hands-off policy on the bill, his stirring rhetoric that emphasized his commitment to keeping America at peace, and his continual covert appeals to congressmen garnered enough votes to tip the close balance in his favor.

Senator Key Pittman of Nevada was Roosevelt’s major ally in Congress. Pittman advised Roosevelt that revision of the Neutrality Act would have a greater likelihood of success if the administration kept its distance and allowed congressional leaders to take responsibility for it.² Pittman drafted a bill that repealed the arms embargo but sharply restricted American shipping.³ He presented this bill to the Senate in October. Roosevelt and his administration were extremely cautious
not to associate themselves publicly with the bill. They achieved moderate success. Most news coverage and debate referred to the bill as the “Pittman bill.” De jure this meant that Roosevelt wasn’t linked with the bill, but de facto senators knew that Roosevelt was the real architect of the bill.

Continual reassurances that the revision would prevent war were another key piece of Roosevelt’s strategy. Pittman and the bill’s other supporters stayed away from mentioning France or England, stressing instead that the bill would help keep America out of war. This deliberate emphasis on peace aligned with current public opinion: “the overwhelming majority of voters...are willing to give [the Allies] every aid short of actual armed intervention,” but they retain an “intense desire…to avoid shedding American blood.” The overemphasis on peace meant that senators would be pressured to pass the bill or else appear to be misrepresenting their voters.

Although Roosevelt publicly maintained distance from the bill, privately he not only heavily influenced its drafting but also mobilized every contact at his disposal to support its passage. He promised and cashed in on political favors in order to garner votes. He also asked his friends in Congress to campaign privately among their peers on his behalf. Although all of this politicking probably only gained Roosevelt a few votes, the debate was close enough that even a few votes could make a difference. Historians also cite Roosevelt’s ability to give persuasive and well-constructed speeches as a reason that revision succeeded. In his September 21 message to Congress Roosevelt artfully made appeals to U.S. history, insisted that the bill would prevent American entry into the war, and deliberately avoided mentioning Britain and France.

The speech received praise across party lines. Senators responded by calling it “a great speech….the president’s ablest state paper….a magnificent and impressive plea.” The speech, with its adeptly crafted argument, convinced some congressmen unsure of which way to vote that revision was the better option. For example, Republican Senator Bridges of New Hampshire said, “we must mind our own business” on September 8, but after Roosevelt’s speech on September 21 he was “glad the President [admitted] he made a mistake in signing the Neutrality
Act and that Congress made a mistake in passing it.”

Roosevelt’s eloquent rhetoric convinced undecided senators of both parties to support him, gaining him crucial votes for the tough battle ahead.

But Roosevelt’s tactics cannot be the primary reason for the change in policy. Roosevelt’s vigorous politicking alone can’t explain such a sudden and drastic change in foreign policy. Other factors were responsible. Roosevelt was merely taking advantage of unrelated circumstances that had reduced the strength of the isolationists.

**Divided Resistance**

Although historians will often categorize all those opposed to U.S. intervention as isolationists, in reality they were an extremely diverse and disorganized group. The ‘isolationists’ consisted of communists, fascists, anti-Semites, socialists, pacifists, Christian sects, Democrats, Republicans, and liberals among others. Many of these groups were distrusted minorities, and as such their support brought as much suspicion to isolationists as they did assistance. Due to their disorganization the isolationists were slow to mobilize in response to the shifting public opinion and Roosevelt’s pushes towards intervention. The America First Committee, the largest and best-known isolationist organization, was not formed until September 1940, a full year after the outbreak of war and the beginning of Roosevelt’s campaign for intervention. There was an attempt by Phillip La Follette to create a national organization in September of 1939 in order to fight cash-and-carry, but Republican isolationists’ suspicions of La Follette stalled the efforts and the organization never materialized. The sluggishness and general disarray of the isolationists allowed Roosevelt a substantial advantage in passing the revisions.

Some isolationists didn’t even realize the fight had begun. They bought into assurances that cash-and-carry would prevent war. Senator Robert A. Taft, for example, supported revision of the arms embargo, even though he firmly opposed U.S. intervention and later became a prominent opponent of Roosevelt’s interventionist policies. Taft, like many other isolationists, didn’t really figure out what was going
on until it was too late. Taft’s support for cash-and-carry also serves to demonstrate the extent of the divisions among the isolationists. Despite their lack of organization, most isolationists were opposed to cash-and-carry. The fact that a fellow isolationist like Taft could remain on the wrong side of the bill speaks to the isolationists’ inability to consolidate and unify.

The only national isolationist organization able to challenge Roosevelt during 1939 was the Keep America Out of War Congress.\textsuperscript{14} The KAOWC included pacifists, labor groups, liberals, and farm groups but was a predominantly socialist organization. It focused primarily on the threats of intervention to the economy and organized labor. The KAOWC warned of artificial war booms followed by depression, of the ‘million man draft,’ and of strict restrictions on labor in the interest of national security.\textsuperscript{15} The organization’s de facto leader and Socialist Party national chairman Norman Thomas’s rhetoric suggested socialist ‘awakening’ for Europe and America, which discredited him in the minds of most Americans who were suspicious of communists and socialists. But the greatest fault of the KAOWC was its lack of influence and following. On September 12 Thomas gave a speech in New York about the dangers of intervention, which about 1,400 people attended. The KAOWC’s following is tiny compared to later America First rallies that filled the Madison Square Garden. In the end the KAOWC couldn’t compete with the power and organization of Roosevelt’s plethora of supporters in a contest of public opinion.\textsuperscript{16}

Internal disputes dogged the isolationists throughout the Neutrality Act debate. On October 4 Republican Senator Charles Tobey, an isolationist, motioned to separate the bill into two parts and vote on them independently. Yet prominent isolationist leaders like Senator William Borah condemned the idea because it would reveal their strength too early. The resolution was thoroughly rejected a few days later due to interventionist opposition and fragmented support among isolationists.\textsuperscript{17} Tobey’s unsupported break from the isolationist bloc demonstrates the disorganization of the isolationists and their lack of clearly planned strategies.
A similar example of tensions among the isolationists was Phillip La Follette’s attempt to form a national organization to rally popular opposition against revision of the Neutrality Act. In September of 1939 La Follette confirmed the support of several major public figures and politicians for his new organization. Unlike the KAOWC, La Follette’s organization had a great deal of power lined up, including such influential names as Charles A. Lindbergh, Henry Ford, Herbert Hoover, Borah, and Senator Gerald Nye. But, despite promising beginnings, the organization stalled after conservative Republican isolationists like Arther H. Vandenberg and Chester Bowles grew wary of a third party dominated by La Follette. Divisions and distrust within the isolationists doomed their best chance at combatting the revisions.

One year later almost the exact same group formed the America First Committee, but the one-year delay caused by internal bickering would prove fatal. AFC was too little too late. By the time it organized Roosevelt had already passed cash-and-carry and public opinion was firmly in favor of sending material aid to the Allies. The divisions among the isolationists prevented them from marshalling a swift and well-organized opposition to Roosevelt and the interventionists. Cash-and-carry was the gateway for the rest of Roosevelt’s interventionist legislation, and the disorder of the isolationists provided him with the window of opportunity to pass it.

The ‘Yellow Press’

Many Americans remained resentful and suspicious of England and France following America’s reluctant entry into the Great War, but Americans shared much more in common with the British and French than they did with the Germans. Americans were bombarded with descriptions of the frighteningly efficient German war machine and the plight of Poland following the outbreak of the war. The dramatization of such reports combined with the swiftness of Poland’s fall slowly but surely ate away at the foundations of isolationism and built popular support for the Allies. Not only did most reports of the war by their nature promote intervention, but also several interventionists, quicker to act and more organized than the isolationists, were actively churning out pro-intervention propaganda. The most prominent of them was
William Allen White, who organized the Non-partisan Committee for Peace through the Revision of the Neutrality Law. White used his considerable influence to sway American opinion in Roosevelt’s favor. The press played a key role in accelerating the American shift to intervention.

Following the emergence of the ‘Yellow Press’ back at the turn of the twentieth century, newspapers began publishing dramatized and exaggerated versions of events to take advantage of the new readership made possible by mass literacy. Dramatization of Hitler’s invasion of Poland depicted Hitler’s forces as efficient and lethal, swiftly exceeding expectations and crushing Poland. Articles with phrases like “German Hopes Exceeded,” “German Position Better than in ’14,” and “Nine days of war have brought… surprising victories to German arms,” demonstrate the portrayal of German armies as stronger and more capable than expected. One particularly telling example of the frightening way that the news described the Germans is a series of sketches describing the German Blitzkrieg. (See Appendix.) The illustrations show the German Blitzkreig as a well-oiled, technologically advanced war machine, and the Poles as helpless in the face of its might and brilliance. Increased fear and awareness of the threat Germany posed promoted increased support and sympathy for the allies.

After the fall of Poland, Polish citizens refused to give up the fight and guerrillas took to sniping at the German occupiers. The news coverage of these snipers demonstrated and promoted pro-ally views. The snipers were described as patriots and heroes mounting a “heroic resistance” to defend their homeland from the ruthless Nazi invaders. Similarly, Nazi reprisals against the guerillas were portrayed as merciless and excessive. The papers describe dozens of towns bombarded to smoldering ruins in retaliation for guerilla attacks. The American audience reading such papers could not help but sympathize with the beleaguered Poles staunchly fighting on.

Another contributing pro-intervention influence on American opinion was the Non-partisan Committee for Peace through the Revision of the Neutrality Law headed by William White, the prominent editor
of the *Emporia Gazette*. White’s organization was established in late September 1939, and almost immediately Clark Eichelberger, an interventionist who had originally conceived the Committee and convinced White to be its head, began coordinating efforts in support of revision of the Neutrality Acts. Eichelberger “distributed leaflets, sponsored daily news spots, sent telegrams to newspaper and magazine editors, and organized press conferences and radio broadcasts.”

The Committee also targeted specific Senators, urging members to write to them in favor of revision. Although the Committee was only active for about a month, Eichelberger and White worked feverishly to support their cause. Their efforts flooded the public with pro-intervention media influencing public and senatorial opinion.

The Committee’s efforts, combined with the coverage of the German offensive, caused a sizable shift in public opinion towards intervention. One Gallup poll showed that public acceptance of Hitler’s demands dropped from 23 to 14 percent. The increase in public sympathy for the Allies and fear of Hitler impacted Congress’s receptiveness to cash-and-carry. Senators attempting to satisfy increased desires to send material aid to the Allies gained the interventionists’ vital votes in the close battle. It was one thing to stand by total neutrality in times of peace, but it was another thing to remain entirely passive while democratic nations were crushed by an aggressor nation. The coming of the war tested isolationists’ resolve, and many, influenced by the dramatic news coverage and interventionist propaganda, changed their minds.

**The Politics of Popularity**

The neutrality battle, though decided on the Senate floor, was ultimately a battle fought in the streets and homes of America, both sides vying for the attention and support of the American people. The slow, steady shift in American public opinion from isolation to intervention mirrored Roosevelt’s gradual implementation of interventionist policies. In those crucial first months of the struggle Roosevelt caught the isolationists flat-footed. From the moment he passed cash-and-carry onward the isolationists were always on the defensive, trying to
recover from Roosevelt’s initial gains. In the end Roosevelt won the war for the minds of the American people, and by 1941 he was waging an undeclared naval war against Germany.

Yet in many ways the isolationists were doomed from the beginning. Despite their lingering suspicions, Americans naturally identified with the English and French. The isolationist battle against public opinion was an uphill one. Additionally, the isolationists did not fully understand the nature of the conflict they were involved in. Because the battleground of the neutrality fight lay within the psyche of the American public, the cautious logical arguments of the isolationists had little sway. Roosevelt, on the other hand, understood the psychological nature of politics, as demonstrated by his remarkable 1933 ‘Bank Holiday’; his stirring emotional rhetoric was much more effective in winning the American people.

Isolationism never recovered after the war. But in studying its death we can learn much about the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. In the globalized world we receive news of events in other countries every day. We are no longer isolated by information, and the world’s business is our business. Therefore control on the battleground of the media and public opinion translates directly to influence on foreign policy.
Appendix

Notes


2. Cole, 659.

3. Ibid.


8. Burns, 396.


20. Ibid.


25. Ibid.


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