

## Introduction

The America First Committee was a short-lived group whose entire purpose was to keep the United States out of the European war that began in 1939. The committee was formed in September 1940 following Nazi Germany's successful conquest of France, which gave Adolf Hitler control of almost all of Europe. The committee lasted only until December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. When the United States declared war against Japan, Germany quickly declared war on the United States in support of its Japanese ally. During the year between the fall of France and Pearl Harbor a great debate raged in the United States over the extent of American involvement in a European war. America succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Americans against the war, but it repeatedly failed to stop Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt from cautiously moving the United States away from neutrality and toward war with Germany. The sneak attack by the Japanese ended what contemporaries called the "Great Debate," plunging the United States into another world war.

A twenty-five-year-old Yale law school student, R. Douglas Stuart, Jr., organized the American First Committee following the fall of France in September 1940. Stuart and his school friends, all of draft age, debated and sharpened their argument for keeping the United States out of war while attending Yale. The core of the argument was the traditional U.S. policy of nonintervention. The Yale students granted that it was necessary to build strong defense in the Western Hemisphere but thought participation in a European war would threaten democracy in the United States. The fear of threats to liberty and the rise of a dictator were, along with staying out of wars in Europe, traditional beliefs that dated to the founding of the nation itself. The Yale group supported the "cash-and-carry" policies that the Neutrality Laws allowed. The college students argued

that the United States should not intervene even if Britain was on the verge of defeat.

In June 1940, Stuart and his fellow students attended the Republican National Convention and received much positive feedback on their views from many attendees. Encouraged, Stuart, the son of the first vice president of the Quaker Oats Company in Chicago, was able to use his family connections to lure General Robert E. Wood, head of Sears and Roebuck Company and Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army during World War I, to head the organization. Many pointed to Stuart's driving collegiate optimism as an asset and the reason for the committee's initial success. The committee touched the isolationist nerve that ran deep in America and quickly received support from across the nation and in Congress. At its peak the committee claimed 800,000 members, including Charles Lindbergh, the aviation hero.

The committee united a number of local groups whose only common denominator was opposition to U.S. participation in another European war. Nationalism, ancient distrust of Europeans, and the lingering disillusionment from the last war combined to make many Americans suspicious of Europeans and their motives. Those who saw a threat to liberty believed that participation in the war would encourage the centralization of power within the federal government and the restriction of basic freedoms, thereby eventually leading to an American dictator. Anglophobia, or a fear of Great Britain, motivated many. This group remembered the days of the Revolution, the War of 1812, and countless other slights that Britain had paid the United States since Independence. There was a widespread perception that Great Britain was willing to fight to the last drop of American blood. While the committee supported creating a strong defensive force to protect the Western Hemisphere, it did not see either Great Britain or the Soviet Union as security assets to the United States, and hence did not feel that U.S. lives or treasury should be expended to defend them. Committee members in general did not see

the security threat that Hitler's Germany posed to the United States, and they had no way to know how evil his regime would become.

The committee brought together a wide variety of Americans: pro-Nazis, pro-Fascists, anti-Semites, pacifists, parents of draft-age sons, and draft-age men. It allied conservatives opposed to President Roosevelt and his New Deal with liberals who feared that a war would derail the New Deal. Communists opposed the war until Hitler attacked the Soviet Union; they then left the committee. The tag of anti-Semitism was most troubling to the committee. The group constantly denied any association with those views yet was never able to disassociate itself, mainly because of its anti-Semite members. In a speech in September 1941, Charles Lindbergh, the group's star speaker, expressed sympathy for Nazi hatred of the Jews. He also warned against Jewish agitation for war, saying that in the intolerance of a war the Jews would be the first to suffer. Lindbergh warned his audience to watch the Jews because of their power in the motion picture industry, the press, and government. With such overtly anti-Semitic sentiments expressed by its most important speaker, it is no wonder that the American First Committee could not shake its anti-Semitic tag. Still, . . . the group attracted thousands to its rallies, filling Madison Square Garden, ran a speakers' bureau, did mass mailings, sponsored polls and radio shows, and published newsletters, autostickers, and pamphlets. The committee counted numerous congressmen, state and local politicians, journalists, and leading businessmen among its members.

Neither the government nor the America First Committee was a clear winner in the Great Debate. During this period, President Roosevelt and Congress took a series of cautious steps, moving the United States in the direction of war with Germany. The American First Committee was unable to stop any of these steps, from the Lend-Lease Act and convoy escorts to the final repeal of the Neutrality Acts. Roosevelt used his great charisma to prepare the country

mentally for war and to expose the evil that he saw in Hitler's Germany. For the most part, the public did not oppose the president's actions, even if it did not support a war any time soon. Pearl Harbor made war immediate, pushing many undecided Americans to the government's side, and made opposition to the war appear traitorous. The America First Committee quickly disbanded.

The FBI files will be of interest to anyone studying America's isolationist traditions. The Bureau investigated Fascist and Communist members of the American First Committee. These reports provided a snapshot of both groups at the end of the 1930s. The Bureau's files contain newspaper clippings that allow the researcher to follow the development of the committee. The collection of pamphlets and speeches, especially by Lindbergh, allows readers to see firsthand the committee's public relations campaign and judge for themselves the extent of anti-Semitism within the group.

The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under the Freedom of Information Act; the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation has deleted certain documents or a portion of the documents. The material has been filmed in the exact order and condition in which it was released, and every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

This file is in approximate chronological order, and the FBI did not index documents. The Roll Notes section is not a complete inventory of the file; however, it gives an indication of the types of material or specific documents that may be particularly worthwhile for research.

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