# *Why Did the United States Not Save the Six Million?*

**By: ELLIOT RESNICK**

Among contemporary Jews, the belief is nigh universal: America should have done more to save Jews during the Holocaust. It did not do so because of pervasive callousness in government circles and crippling timidity among American Jews. Even though the Holocaust's six million victims were our grandparents' close relatives—not ours—we know that *we* would have acted more aggressively to save them. We truly care about the six million. Our grandparents did not.

Furthermore, while our grandparents considered President Franklin D. Roosevelt heroic for leading America through the Great Depression and preparing it to confront Nazi Germany[1] in the face of fierce domestic opposition, we know the truth. We know that Roosevelt was an evil man who deserves no credit for stopping Hitler from achieving his original goal of "murder[ing] eleven million Jews, not six million."[2] Every day of World War II, the Nazi machine wreaked havoc across Europe—tens of

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1 This preparation included sending weapons to England from 1939 through 1941. Thanks in part to this aid, England held its own against the Nazis, and 300,000 British Jews never experienced the terrors of the Holocaust. This aid also arguably saved the 400,000 Jews of Palestine, as it was the British who

> … kept the Nazis from taking Egypt and then overrunning Palestine and killing Jewish settlers there. Without FDR's policies and leadership there may well have been no Jewish communities left in Palestine, no Jewish state, no Israel. Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2013), 318.

One also has to wonder how many more Soviet Jews would have perished in the Holocaust had the Nazis defeated England (or forced it to sue for peace, which seems to have been Hitler's preference) and consequently been free to concentrate all their forces on the eastern front.

2 Robert Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2006), xxv.

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millions ultimately died in the war[3]—but we are confident that Roosevelt acted maliciously in focusing on ending this mass misery as quickly as possible rather than brainstorming on how to save our relatives.

These beliefs are rather presumptuous—arguably even preposterous—but many Jews evidently hold them. If they are not true, however—and I am obviously implying they are not—what explains America's response to the Holocaust? Why did the U.S. not take more vigorous steps to rescue European Jewry? Of course, it saved many individual Jews, including such greats as Rav Aharon Kotler and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, for which it deserves our eternal gratitude, but it clearly could have done more had it set its mind to the task. Even if bombing Auschwitz was not feasible—historians vigorously debate this question[4]—surely it could have taken other steps such as simplifying the immigration process or opening emergency shelters on American territories like the Virgin Islands.[5] At the very least, it could have established the War Refugee Board—which saved numerous Jews—earlier than January 1944. So why did it not? Why did America not do more?

Defenders of Roosevelt and American Jewry have offered numerous explanations for their behavior, including lack of appreciation for the

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3 A million people died in the Nazi siege of Leningrad, and an additional three million died in Nazi prisoner-of-war camps for Soviet soldiers (where the death rate was 58 percent, as opposed to a death rate of 5 percent in prisoner-of-war camps for Western soldiers). Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 173 and 181. These and many other facts led to "a general feeling that the entire war was one immense atrocity perpetrated by the Germans and Japanese on all the occupied nations." Ariel Hurwitz, *Jews Without Power: American Jewry During the Holocaust* (New Rochelle: MultiEducator, 2011), 285.

4 See *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, eds., Michael J. Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003). One key, and relatively unknown, fact is the true nature of "precision bombing" during World War II: Fully 97-98 percent of bombs dropped by heavy bombers missed their target. Michael J. Neufeld, "Introduction to the Controversy," ibid., 7. A raid on Auschwitz could thus have killed hundreds of Auschwitz inmates whilst causing no damage to the camp's gas chambers.

5 See Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New York: Waldon, 1970), 155-157.

enormity of the Holocaust,[6] intense domestic opposition to immigration,[7] and a general sense that only a single-minded focus on defeating Hitler could ultimately save Europe's suffering populations.[8] However, I believe another major factor was at play: America's long tradition of non-interference in problems abroad that did not concern American national security. This factor, though, barely appears in the scholarly literature on the Holocaust—a state of affairs I hope to correct with this article.

In recent decades, calls for the U.S. military to rescue beleaguered populations in foreign lands have become fairly commonplace. Just witness all the appeals to help the Ukrainians in 2022. Many Americans assume we have a moral obligation to save threatened peoples, and this belief has led America to send troops to such places as Somalia, Bosnia, Sudan, and Kosovo.[9] People today who criticize America for not doing more to save Jews during the Holocaust thus reflect the era in which they live.[10]

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6 Decades after the war, William Casey, chief of OSS intelligence in Europe, wrote, "We knew in a general way that the Jews were being persecuted… and that brutality and murder took place in these camps. But few if any comprehended the appalling magnitude of it," Hurwitz, 87-88.

7 According to one poll in January 1939, 83 percent of Americans opposed increasing the country's immigration quotas. Breitman and Lichtman, 116. This opposition likely only increased once the war began as many Americans feared Nazi spies would pose as, or blackmail, refugees coming to the U.S. Indeed, over the next few years, "hundreds of bills were introduced in Congress to *decrease* immigration." David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 8.

8 "[I]t might be worthwhile to consider how many more Jews would have survived had the war ended even a week or ten days earlier—and conversely, how many more would have died had the war lasted an additional week or ten days. Whatever numbers one might put forward in such speculations, one thing is or ought to be reasonably clear: the number would be greater than the total number of Jews saved by the various rescue efforts in 1943-1945." Gerhard L. Weinberg, "The Allies and the Holocaust," in *The Bombing of Auschwitz,* 26.

9 Many even invoke the legacy of the Holocaust to justify humanitarian intervention. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter declared that "we must forge an unshakable oath… that never again will the world stand silent, never again will the world fail to act in time to prevent this terrible crime of genocide" in Samantha Power, *"A Problem From Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xxi.

10 Even today, many oppose U.S. intervention abroad. The last two Republican presidents—George W. Bush and Donald Trump—both campaigned on adopting a less interventionist foreign policy. Historian Stephen Wertheim writes that the United States barely thought of intervening in 1994 to stop the Rwandan

Our grandparents, however, lived in a very different era with very different moral sensibilities. These sensibilities were rooted in 150 years of American foreign policy. The origin of America's non-interventionist tradition is George Washington's famous 1796 Farewell Address, in which he said, "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little *political* connection as possible."[11] His successor, John Adams, argued, "we should separate ourselves as far as possible and as long as possible from all European politics and wars" and "it ought to be our rule not to meddle."[12] Thomas Jefferson put it this way in his first Inaugural Address: "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none."[13] In what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, the country's fifth president, James Monroe, declared,

> In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves, we have never taken any part nor does it comport with our

massacres because, among other reasons, "Americans did not yet feel their government had a duty to attempt forcible intervention to stop genocide," in Stephen Wertheim, "A Solution From Hell: The United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (3-4) (2010), 153. The U.S. did not ratify the Genocide Convention, introduced at the United Nations in 1948, until 1986. Indeed, despite all their pious rhetoric, "U.S. leaders who have denounced the Holocaust have themselves repeatedly allowed genocide," Power, 504. See also Breitman and Lichtman, 325: "Later presidents [after Franklin Roosevelt], despite American military supremacy and knowledge of Western failures during the Holocaust, typically responded feebly or worse to genocide on their watch." For further details, see ibid., 325-326. Nonetheless, it is true that calls for humanitarian intervention in the last several decades have become routine—almost de rigueur.

11 "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," https://www.senate.gov/ artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf (accessed April 3, 2022). Twenty years earlier, Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*, "It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions." www.gutenberg.org/files/147/147-h/147-h.htm (accessed April 3, 2022).

12 In Charles A. Beard, *A Foreign Policy for America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 16 and 19.

13 "The Avalon Project at Yale Law School," *First Inaugural Address*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp (accessed April 3, 2022). Jefferson spoke of "China-like isolation from the outside world." See George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 93.

> policy to do so. … Our policy in regard to Europe… is not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers.[14]

Historian George Herring writes that the "Revolutionary generation rebelled not only against the British, but also against Old World ways."[15] They saw "themselves as heralds of a *novus ordo seclorum*, a new world order." They regarded "conventional dealings among nations" as "repugnant" and even refused "to appoint ambassadors, a rank associated with European royalty."[16] It was not until 1893, in fact, that America's representatives to foreign countries finally received the title "ambassador."[17] In describing America's foreign policy in the mid-19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote,

> As the Union takes no part in the affairs of Europe, it has, properly speaking, no foreign interests to discuss…. The country is as much removed from the passions of the Old World by its position as by its wishes…. The foreign policy of the United States is eminently expectant; it consists more in abstaining than in acting.[18]

The country's sixth president, John Quincy Adams, put America's isolationist[19] stance most starkly:

> Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She

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14 "The Monroe Doctrine (1823)" https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/democrac/50.htm (accessed April 3, 2022).

15 Herring, 3.

16 Ibid. See also ibid., 12, 16, 96, 180, 279. "This may be the custom of the old world, but it is not ours," said Thomas Jefferson, ibid., 58.

17 Ibid., 300.

18 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Vol. 1*, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 234.

19 I use the word "isolationist" (and "isolationism") as Americans evidently used it in the 1850s— as a "handy designation for [the U.S.'s] twin policies of neutrality and non-interventionism." Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth Century Reaction* (New York: Collier, 1961), 31. Adler notes, ibid., "American isolationism has never meant total social, cultural, and economic self-sufficiency." See also Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt & the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 6, and Ralph Raico, "The Case for an America First Foreign Policy," *The Failure of America's Foreign Wars*, eds. Richard M. Ebeling and Jacob G. Hornberger (Fairfax: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1996), 23.

> is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.[20]

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, wrote,

> Our policy of non-intervention, straight, absolute, and peculiar as it may seem to other nations, has… become a traditional one, which could not be abandoned without the most urgent occasion.[21]

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes proclaimed that the U.S.'s "traditional rule of noninterference in the affairs of foreign nations…ought to be strictly observed.[22]

In 1885, President Grover Cleveland stressed the importance of avoiding "any departure from that foreign policy commended by the history, the traditions, and the prosperity of our Republic," which he defined as one of "independence" and "neutrality."[23] In 1888, President Benjamin Harrison said, "We have no commission from God to police the world."[24] Fittingly, the entire staff of the U.S. State Department numbered only 81 in the Gilded Age.[25]

In short, America's traditional foreign policy was "hands off" when its interests were not at stake and reflected a "national reserve," as President Andrew Jackson's secretary of state put it.[26] This foreign policy largely remained in place until after World War II.[27] Thus, for example, despite much support in the U.S. for Greek independence during Greece's revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1821-1830, the U.S. government did not officially recognize independent Greece until 1833 and refused to

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20 In *We Who Dared to Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now*, eds. Murray Polner and Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 296.

21 Beard, 31.

22 Herring, 272.

23 Adler 22-23.

24 Bill Kauffman, *America First!: Its History, Culture, and Politics* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1995), 14.

25 Herring, 279. "There was strong opposition to international involvement and especially commitment" during the Gilded Age, ibid., 271.

26 Albert K. Weinberg, "The Historical Meaning of the American Doctrine of Isolation," *American Political Science Review* 34 (1940), 539.

27 Joyce P. Kaufman, *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 3rd edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 18 and 38. See also, ibid., 19, 95, and 97, and Cole, ix: "isolationism… prevailed in the conduct of American foreign affairs. It won nearly universal support from the American people and their leaders, whatever their political affiliations."

give the Greeks anything other than moral support during their uprising.[28] It believed in non-interference, or a "principle of neutrality to *all* foreign wars."[29] It held true to this position again in 1848 when the Hungarians fought for independence. Hungarian hero Louis Kossuth was greeted enthusiastically in America but ultimately received no "money, men, [or] materials" from the U.S. government "for his crusade against Austria."[30] As the elder statesman Henry Clay explained to Kossuth,

> By the policy [of non-interference] to which we have adhered since the days of Washington… we have done more for the cause of liberty in the world than arms could affect; we have shown to other nations the way to greatness and happiness.[31]

The U.S. did not always abide by its own principles. Thus, for example, the State Department instructed a U.S. representative in Egypt in 1840 to interfere diplomatically when a blood libel was leveled at a number of Jews in Damascus, Syria.[32] Over the next hundred years, it issued similar instructions on behalf of persecuted Jews in such countries as Turkey, Iran, Morocco, Romania, Poland, and Russia.[33] In correspondence with its officials abroad, the State Department sometimes acknowledged that protesting anti-Semitic incidents in foreign lands violated traditional U.S. policy.[34] For example, in response to anti-Semitic riots in Romania in 1872, Secretary of State Hamilton Fish wrote to the U.S. consul in Bucharest that the American government "has no disposition or intention to give offense by impertinently interfering in the internal affairs of Roumania." Yet, "humanity" required it "to remonstrate," he added.[35] These acts

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28 Herring, 153 and 155-156; Beard, 24-25; and Gary J. Bass, *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 97.

29 Bass, 89, quoting John Quincy Adams, the then Secretary of State.

30 Beard, 27; Adler, 20; and Herring, 216-217.

31 Beard, 29. President Millard Fillmore said America's mission was "to teach by example." Herring, 217. Kossuth apparently was not mollified and left "for Europe, disillusioned and bitter," Beard, 29.

32 Cyrus Adler and Aaron Margalith, *With Firmness in the Right: American Diplomatic Action Affecting Jews, 1840-1945* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1946), 3-5.

33 See Adler and Margalith's book for numerous examples.

34 The "settled policy of the United States [is] to abstain from all interferences" was President James Buchanan's explanation in 1858 for why he would not involve the U.S. in the infamous Mortara Affair (concerning a Jewish child who was kidnapped by the Catholic Church in Italy), ibid., xxvii.

35 Adler and Margalith, 105. See also ibid., xxiii, 105, 120, and 126.

of diplomatic interference were relatively small-scale, but arguably constitute exceptions to standard U.S. policy.

It is also true that America began violating its traditional foreign policy more fundamentally toward the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century—by conquering the Philippines in the Spanish-American War of 1898[36] and especially by entering World War I in 1917 and trying to reshape the world in its aftermath.[37] In between these two wars, President Theodore Roosevelt also stepped beyond traditional American bounds by, among other things, helping end the Russo-Japanese War at a peace conference whose "location in the United States was without precedent."[38] Historian Charles Beard calls "the imperialist outburst" of these years, "accompanied by wars [and] diplomatic entanglements in Asia and Europe," a "revolution in American foreign policy."[39]

To a large extent, however, the U.S. re-embraced its traditional foreign policy after World War I.[40] Disillusioned by post-war peace negotiations and no longer under the sway of Wilsonian idealism, the U.S. "reverted to familiar and soothing isolationism," in the words of historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.[41] It rejected calls to become a member of the League of Nations; it refused to join the World Court; it ignored the unprecedented crimes of Lenin and Stalin in the USSR in the 1920s and '30s; it said little when Japan bombed Shanghai in 1932; it did not get involved

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36 Kaufman, 44. This conquest was a "breach with the past," writes Beard, 61. See also ibid., 36.

37 Interestingly, Wilson preserved an element of American separateness during World War I by insisting "that Americans fight separately under their own command rather than being integrated into Allied armies," Herring, 410. He also insisted on referring to the U.S. as an "associate" rather than an "ally" in the fight. Wilson "spoke of the 'Allied and Associated Powers.'" Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Short History of American Foreign Policy and Diplomacy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959), 406.

38 Herring, 361.

39 Beard, 68. It "cut the United States adrift from its moorings," ibid., 30. See also Herring, 376.

40 See Martin Folly, *The United States and World War II: The Awakening Giant* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2002), 3, who writes of "a return to what was regarded as the traditional approach of the United States to world affairs." This paragraph, and a small portion of the previous one, derive from this author's PhD dissertation, "First and Foremost, An American Congressman: The Holocaust-Era Activities of Rep. Sol Bloom," available at https://repository.yu.edu/handle/20.500.12202/8142 (accessed May 8, 2022).

41 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Back to the Womb?: Isolationism's Renewed Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August (1995), 3. See also Kaufman, 56 and 61, and Adler, 39.

in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939; and it did not interfere to stop Japan's Rape of Nanking in 1937, during which anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000-plus Chinese were killed and tens of thousands were raped.[42]

The inter-war period cannot be categorized as fully isolationist.[43] Among other reasons, in 1921-1922, the U.S. called for—and hosted—the first arms reduction conference in history, and, in 1928, it signed along with fourteen other countries the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which banned war as a means of solving disputes. Yet, overall, a "dominant mood of withdrawal"[44] characterized this period, and the 1930s was arguably the most isolationist decade in American history.[45]

Thus, our grandparents lived in a very different America than the one we live in. Before World War II, America's longstanding foreign policy—rooted in George Washington's Farewell Address and largely pursued over the next 150 years—was not to meddle in other countries' affairs, not politically and certainly not militarily. America's interests were more provincial at the time[46]—which is not surprising considering that America was not yet the superpower it is today. It was not yet the "United States of the Cold War period [which], like ancient Rome, was concerned with all political problems in the world."[47] Historians Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley remind us how different the country was before it became a dominant superpower:

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42 "Nanjing Massacre," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/event/Nanjing-Massacre (accessed April 3, 2022). "The Rape of Nanking was front-page news across the world, and yet most of the world stood by and did nothing while an entire city was butchered," writes historian Iris Chang in Rosen, 58. The U.S. also did nothing to stop the Armenian genocide in World War I.

43 Historian Joyce Kaufman wisely notes, though "few countries pursue [a policy of unilateralism or engagement] in its purest theoretical form." Kaufman, 16.

44 Adler, 137. See also Mark Lincoln Chadwin, *The Warhawks: American Interventionists Before Pearl Harbor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 4.

45 See the "Amazon Exclusive interview with author George C. Herring," second answer, available at www.amazon.com/Colony-Superpower-Foreign-Relations-History-dp-195078225/dp/0195078225/ref= mt_other?_encoding= UTF8&me=&qid= (accessed April 3, 2022). See also Kaufman, 16.

46 Amazingly, not a single sitting U.S. president traveled to Europe before Woodrow Wilson.

47 Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (New York: Penguin, 2011), xiii.

> In 1939, on the eve of World War II, the United States had an army of 185,000 men with an annual budget of less than $500 million. America had no entangling alliances and no American troops were stationed in a foreign country. The dominant mood was isolationism.…
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> A half century later… [t]he budget of the Department of Defense was over $300 billion.[48] The United States had military alliances with fifty nations, over a million soldiers, airmen, and sailors stationed in more than 100 countries, and an offensive capability sufficient to destroy the world many times over.[49]

Before the war, America was not regarded as the leader of the free world and did not yet believe in preserving global peace through collective security.[50] Indeed, it specifically rejected joining a body—the League of Nations—that was *designed* to provide collective security. It was a proud country, but one with a small army[51] that wished to teach by example, not force.[52] Furthermore, Americans felt safe, situated between two large oceans, minding their own business. As French ambassador Jules Jusserand (1855-1932) put it, America was "blessed" because on "the north she had a weak neighbor; on the south, another weak neighbor; on the east, fish, and on the west, fish."[53]

If the United States involved itself in foreign affairs, it did so—not for altruistic reasons—but because it believed a matter of national self-

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48 Today it is over $750 billion.

49 Ambrose and Brinkley, xi. See also Herring, 6-7. It is perhaps also useful to remember that military airplanes were only developed circa 1910, and modern missiles only made their appearance in the late 1950s.

50 Ambrose and Brinkley, xii. Some Americans, though, had already begun to think more globally in the decades before the war, arguing that advances in technology had made the world "smaller" such that "isolation was no longer possible or desirable," as President William McKinley said a week before his assassination in 1901, Herring, 336. See also Adler, 113, and Beard, 110-111, quoting John B. Whitton, who argued that the Atlantic Ocean "no longer separates us from Europe; *it ties us to it!*" (Emphasis in the original.)

51 The American army ranked 18th in the world. Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 425. Its air force ranked 20th. Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight Over World War II, 1939-1941* (New York: Random House, 2013), 26.

52 See Cole, 7.

53 In Herring 6. See also ibid., 101 and 399, and Adler, 111, 137, and 147.

interest was at stake.[54] Indeed, self-interest was almost invariably the argument interventionists—including President Roosevelt—advanced in advocating that America do more to defeat Hitler. In 1939-1941, for example, one rarely finds anyone arguing that the U.S. should send weapons to England for humanitarian reasons. The argument almost *always* revolves around national self-interest: What's best for America? One interventionist group in mid-1940, for example, paid for full-page advertisements that blared, "Between Us and Hitler Stands the British Fleet!"[55] Similarly, the draft statement for the interventionist Fight for Freedom group declared: "the war in Europe, Asia and Africa is one war. … It is *our* war. *Our* freedom is at stake."[56]

In late 1940, President Roosevelt warned in a fireside chat, "Never before since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock has our American civilization been in such danger as now." If England loses, he continued, it "is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military."[57] Roosevelt said the U.S. could possibly avoid fighting Hitler "if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis."[58]

Historian Mark Lincoln Chadwin explains:

> The interventions were obsessed [in 1940] with the fear that Hitler would conquer the rest of Europe, and with the cooperation or connivance of Moscow, Tokyo, and Rome, dominate Africa and infiltrate South America, thus surrounding the United States. The nation would be cut off from vital raw materials, subverted from within, under continuous aggressive pressure from a concert of foreign en-

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54 Thus the U.S. policy in South America and the Caribbean for many decades. The U.S. sent troops to Cuba, Panama, Haiti, and Nicaragua, among other places, in the early 1900s, but it did so largely for perceived business and security interests, Kaufman, 49 and 51.

55 Chadwin, 79.

56 Ibid., 163 (emphasis added). See also ibid., 169, and Olson, 86 and 194.

57 "The Great Arsenal of Democracy," *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, www.americanrhetoric.com/ speeches/fdrarsenalofdemocracy.html (accessed April 3, 2022).

58 In Olson, 274. See also Ruth Sarles, *A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in World War II* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 7. In late 1940, Roosevelt argued that the U.S. should help England "from a selfish point of view." Alonzo Hamby, *Man of Destiny: FDR and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 321.

> emies who would eventually be armed with the sophisticated weaponry of the future—trans-oceanic bombers, rockets, and nuclear weapons. America, they were convinced, would have little chance to survive as a land of a free society and democratic government.[59]

In short, as historian Wayne Cole writes, the interventionists believed "Great Britain was America's first line of defense. … If Britain fell America would be the next to feel the power of Hitler's might."[60]

In extensive testimony before Congress in support of Lend-Lease legislation in 1941, never once do administration officials like Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and Secretary of the Navy Frank W. Knox use the word "humanitarian" or anything like it to make their case. (In fact, one interventionist senator explicitly states during the hearings, "[W]e are not viewing it from a humanitarian standpoint."[61]) Rather, they argue repeatedly—at least twenty times by this author's count—that the legislation is vital for "the defense of the United

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59 Chadwin, 21-22. Prominent U.S. journalist Dorothy Thompson argued that South America would ultimately align with Hitler due to economic exigencies:

> If Britain collapses, in all probability the South American countries will say to us, 'Gentlemen, we prefer to go along with you; but will you please take our 2,000,000 bales of cotton, our cottonseed oil, our 200,000,000 bushels of corn, our 100,000,000 bushels of wheat…?' What will the farmers and the producers of America say in this event? They will say, 'No.' … The consequence, therefore, would be that South America would have to trade with Hitler, who would control her entire markets apart from us…. And, inasmuch as it is Hitler's system when he becomes a buyer also to become the dominant partner in the concern, it follows that no navy in the world could prevent him from becoming the master of South America without firing a single shot…. It would be very easy in South America. There are millions of Germans, Italians, and Spaniards in South America already. All the influential commercial and plantation interests would have to be on the side of a Nazi-dominated Europe or starve. They would rapidly come to control the governments of the republics. (*Lend-Lease Bill: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-Seventh Congress, First Session, on H.R. 1776: A Bill Further to Promote the Defense of the United States, and for Other Purposes* [Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941], 648.)

60 Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1953), 94. See also Chadwin, 52, 54, 71-72, 228 ("Shall we carry the war to Hitler or shall we wait upon Hitler's convenience as to where and how he shall bring the war to us?" asked one interventionist), 259, and 269.

61 Lend-Lease Bill, 432.

States"[62] (so that America wouldn't later have to fight Hitler alone or fight it before it had time to properly build up its armed forces). "The only chance we have of keeping out of this war ultimately is by helping Great Britain win it," Knox said.[63]

Some prominent individuals did call for fighting Hitler for humanitarian reasons. For example, in connection with the growing crisis, influential journalist Dorothy Thompson wrote in 1937, "Believe it or not, there are such things in the world as morality, as law, as conscience, as a noble concept of humanity."[64] University of Chicago President Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins argued more directly in 1941, "I believe that the people of this country are and should be prepared to make sacrifices for humanity. National selfishness should not determine national policy."[65] These sentiments, however, reflected a minority position—even among committed interventionists.[66] As Ruth Sarles writes in her book on the America First movement, the division between interventionists and non-interventionists during this period was not over America's moral duties to the rest of the world. It "was over what constituted U.S. interests."[67] Or, as the U.S.'s minister to Norway, J. Borden Herriman, said during her congressional testimony on Lend-Lease legislation: "It has nothing to do

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62 Hull's testimony, *Lend-Lease Bill*, 33. For other examples of these administration representatives making arguments based on "self-defense" or "national defense," see ibid., 11, 12, 13, 23, 30, 38, 43, 86, 88, 91, 97, 98, 101, 102, 118, 140, 151, 156, 158, 168, and 178.

63 Ibid., 181. See also ibid., 172. Many isolationists of course believed the opposite, arguing that aiding England would inevitably lead to the U.S. *entering* the war. As one isolationist activist put it, "They talk about aid to Britain 'short of war.' Gentlemen and ladies—there is no jumping half way down Niagara Falls. At least that is my belief. I never tried it." *Lend-Lease Bill*, 561.

64 In Olson, 79.

65 In Sarles, 151. Some "in the interventionist camp emphasized what they viewed as America's moral obligation to stop Hitler—the embodiment, as they saw it, of pure evil. How could we stand on the sidelines, they argued, while Nazi Germany enslaved sovereign countries, went on a rampage against Jews, and threatened to wipe out Western civilization as we know it?" Olson, xvii.

66 Some interventionists were also Anglophobes or subscribed to the internationalism of Theodore Roosevelt or the idealism of Woodrow Wilson. Of "greater weight… was their reasoned appraisal of the world political realities," Chadwin, 72. See also, ibid., 165 and 269.

67 Sarles, 2.

with any other country. It is purely a question of our own national defense."[68]

Thus, although the name of the most prominent non-interventionist group in 1940 was America First, Roosevelt and nearly all his allies could also rightfully be called "America firsters" as they too placed America's interests first in forming their foreign policy. Roosevelt wanted to fight Hitler, not because he thought he had a moral obligation to save Europeans from a madman, but because he was convinced Hitler would defeat England without American help, and a Hitler-controlled Europe would pose a grave threat to the United States. Indeed, when asked by a senator if we should consider the question of aiding England "from the standpoint of protecting American interests first," administration official Secretary Knox said explicitly, "I am for that 100 percent."[69] Thus, when Roosevelt was called an interventionist—as he was—that did not mean he supported interfering abroad for humanitarian reasons or to preserve world peace. Rather, it meant he had a different view on the danger Hitler posed to the U.S.

Regrettably, though, in analyzing the wartime actions of President Roosevelt and American Jewry, Holocaust historians never *mention* the longstanding American tradition of minding its own business. They sometimes acknowledge the strong isolationist tenor of the 1930s but never note the crucial fact that isolationism was deeply embedded in American history and championing it practically amounted to a "hallowed tradition."[70] The isolationist impulse of the interwar period was not a temporary aberration. It was in Americans' blood. The closest one gets to an acknowledgement of America's isolationist tradition in academic works on the Holocaust is a passing reference in Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman's book *FDR and the Jews*. They write that Roosevelt's secretary of state, Cordell Hull, following the example of "his predecessors… firmly backed the principle of noninterventionism in foreign domestic matters."[71] The reader would hardly suspect from these words, however,

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68 *Lend-Lease Bill*, 659. Columnist General Hugh S. Johnson made a similar statement: "I believe sincerely, that the purpose of those who are for this bill, as well as the purpose of the people who are against it, is for the defense of America, and that alone—not for any humanitarian lollypop all over the world… but I do believe there is a serious difference of opinion as to what is 'defense of America.'" Ibid., 442.

69 Ibid., 181.

70 Herring, 406. See, for example, Rafael Medoff, *FDR and the Holocaust: A Breach of Faith* (Washington: Wyman, 2013), 130-131, and Hurwitz, 11.

71 Breitman and Lichtman, 59.

that these predecessors dated back to the founding of the republic and that the policy they followed represented an American tradition rooted in the words of George Washington.

Historian Henry Feingold notes, as a general matter, that humanitarian responses on the part of governments "are rare in history and practically nonexistent during wartime."[72] That is why until "recently, the Armenians, whom the Turks slaughtered mercilessly during World War I, did not raise the question of 'where was America?' Neither do the Cambodians, the Ibos, the Bahais or the countless other groups who have been history's victims."[73] Feingold does not note, however, that America's government was *particularly* not inclined to rush to European Jewry's aid in light of the country's long history of non-interventionism. This history goes unmentioned and unexplored in his works.[74]

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72 Feingold, xiii. See also Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 59: "The notion that the rescue of threatened foreign civilian populations was an obligation of a country involved in total war did not occur to Americans during World War II or its immediate aftermath."

73 Henry L. Feingold, "Did American Jewry Do Enough During the Holocaust?" The B.G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1985), 1.

74 The same is true of the works of historian Rafael Medoff. Not only does he not mention this non-interventionist tradition, he almost creates an alternative one. In arguing that the U.S. should have done more to save European Jewry during the Holocaust—and in response to Feingold's claim that countries do not act altruistically—Medoff writes that the U.S. was "founded on such moral principles as tolerance, liberty, and charity," Medoff, 238. He fails to mention, however, that John Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and a whole host of other prominent American figures—all of whom were quite aware of the principles upon which America was founded—explicitly rejected interfering abroad. In *FDR and the Holocaust*, 236, Medoff, without mentioning America's tradition of non-interventionism, lists two examples of American foreign policy that were made "partly out of moral considerations" and thus could have served as precedents for U.S. politicians to follow during the Holocaust. The two are the "abrogation of the Russo-American commercial treaty in response to Czarist Russian pogroms and the U.S. endorsement of England's 1917 Balfour Declaration." Both are poor examples, though. Although the pogroms stirred up anti-Russian feelings among many Americans, the 1832 Russo-American treaty would almost certainly not have been terminated in 1912 if not for the fact that Russia consistently discriminated against *American* Jews. Indeed, the congressional resolution calling for the treaty's abrogation does not mention the pogroms. See Adler and Margalith, 261-290. Medoff's second example is also less than compelling considering that support for the Balfour Declaration imposed no requirements on the U.S. and was likely seen at the time as coming with no costs.

A country's past does not control it. America was of course free during the war years to abandon its traditional foreign policy and do more to save Jews in Europe. Nonetheless, in assessing the deeds of historical characters, one must place them in the context of their times and endeavor to see the world as they saw it. As historian Ariel Hurwitz has written,

> There is no point, in a historical analysis, to bewail the given circumstances. We should depict the situation as it was; interpret the evidence as we have it; and attempt to see what, under those conditions, was done, or could possibly and effectively have been done.[75]

Considering the long history of non-interventionism in the U.S., government officials and ordinary citizens thought of the question of rescue with very different foreign policy assumptions than ours.[76] This fact must be considered before passing judgment on what America should or should not have done to save European Jewry during World War II. ☙

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75 Hurwitz, 15. See also, Rosen, xxvi.

76 Of course, Roosevelt did, in fact, set up a government agency to save European Jews in January 1944, and the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee expressed support for government rescue efforts during congressional hearings on the topic in late 1943. The crucial fact remains, though, that—thanks to 150 years of precedent—American politicians in this era did not react to reports of persecuted people abroad the way they do today; unlike so many of their modern counterparts, they did not reflexively think it was their obligation to intervene.