



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on March 4, 2022

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America First

When President Donald Trump vowed in his first inaugural address to always “put America first,” he touched on a theme seldom heard by the American electorate in more than 70 years. Despite decades of foreign policy seemingly prioritizing the interests of illegal immigrants, the sanctity of distant borders such as the Korean DMZ, and foreign military alliances such as NATO — everything, it would seem, aside from American citizens, American borders, and American defense — the rational impulse to prioritize national self-interest has never been completely stifled by internationalist elites.



U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

In fact, the catchphrase “America First” has been around since the late 1800s, coinciding with America’s very first dalliances with internationalism. It was disingenuously given currency by unapologetic internationalist Woodrow Wilson as a rhetorical sop for those who suspected — correctly, as it turned out — that he intended to embroil America in World War I. And it was resurrected after the outbreak of World War II in the title of the wildly popular and — for a time — influential America First Committee, which sought to keep America and its ambitious internationalist president Franklin Delano Roosevelt out of World War II. Led by the likes of Charles Lindbergh and supported by both political leaders and rank-and-file Americans from a broad spectrum of political convictions, the America First Committee was the last time, until the rise of Donald Trump, that America hosted a consequential political movement dedicated to the fundamental proposition of Americanism, namely, that American policy should put American interests, citizens, territory, and values first.

Historical Parallels

The parallels between America of the 1930s and today are difficult to overstate. Then, as now, the American economy was burdened by unprecedented economic calamity. The great collapse accompanying the coronavirus pandemic has been the most severe since the onset of the Great Depression. Then, as now, economic recovery was being suppressed by a cadre of Big Government fanatics, led by a president with grand Utopian designs of radically restructuring American society and enlarging without rational limit the powers and cost of the federal government. Then, as now, international commerce was on an exceedingly unsound footing. And in the 1930s, as in our time, swaggering dictatorships ascended to superpower status, spewing threats of war and sowing paranoia among their cowed citizenries. One of today’s dictatorships has even managed to showcase its regime by hosting a controversial Olympics, just as Germany’s Nazis did in 1936.

None of these domestic and international calamities, then or now, were happenstance. Thanks to decades of research, it is now clear that the rise of both Nazism in Germany and communism in the Soviet Union were abetted by Western bankers, capitalists, and leftist ideologues masquerading as



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statesmen, just as the rise of modern-day China and post-Soviet Russia have been. The painful duration of the Great Depression, after the corrective shock of 1929-1932, was inflicted on America and the world thanks to socialist New Deal policies, and their counterparts abroad, that stifled initiative, penalized success, and, in general, disincentivized free-market capitalism. And perhaps most tellingly, 1930s American political elites, emboldened by victory in World War I, had abandoned the old noninterventionist posture and embraced the Wilsonian policy of “making the world safe for democracy,” inserting America into military and commercial squabbles worldwide and continuing to maintain a fledgling overseas empire that included the Philippines and islands all across the Pacific Ocean.

What was more, the United States was adopting an increasingly adversarial posture toward Japan, as the latter country invaded China and took over much of the Chinese northeast and its most important international ports, such as Shanghai. On December 12, 1937, an incident took place that strained relations between the two countries almost to the breaking point. The Japanese, in the course of attacking the Chinese city of Nanjing, attacked an American gunboat, the *Panay*, and three Standard Oil tanker ships that were trying to evacuate American and Chinese civilians. Americans were outraged, but Japan, anxious to avoid drawing its trans-Pacific rival into the war, moved quickly to conciliate the American government. Japan took full responsibility and apologized swiftly for the incident, claiming that it had failed to recognize American flags painted on the gunboat. After the Japanese paid a hefty indemnity amounting to more than \$40 million in today’s money, the incident was considered closed, although Japanese and American versions of events have always differed and some historians suspect that the attack was deliberate.

Post-*Panay*, Japanese-American relations continued to be extremely strained. Anti-Japanese public opinion in the United States reached a fever pitch, especially after details of the infamous Nanjing massacre began to appear in the press.



Heyday: Charles Lindbergh addressed a capacity crowd of at least 20,000 at the Hollywood Bowl in June 1941, warning of the dangers of involvement in a war that, at the time, did not pose a direct threat to America. At its peak, the America First Committee, with more than 450 chapters and 800,000 members nationwide, routinely drew massive crowds at its rallies. (*Photo credit: AP Images*)

It was in this context that, in 1939, after war broke out in Europe, American opposition against



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involvement in another overseas bloodbath began to crystallize. In its war with China, Japan sought to cut off all avenues of weapons shipments from outside of China, and by early 1940, the only remaining overland route was via Indochina (now Vietnam) from the south. The Japanese in June of that year demanded that the French colonial government in Indochina stop shipments of arms to China, and that a Japanese inspection team be allowed into Indochina to ensure that the flow of weapons to China had stopped. Once the French acquiesced, the Japanese further demanded that the border with China be closed completely. The French, well aware of their military weakness vis-à-vis the Japanese, sent out feelers to the United States — still officially neutral — requesting military support. The United States did not provide significant support, but on July 26 imposed a suffocating embargo on imports of steel, iron, and oil. Alongside the United States in the embargo were belligerents Great Britain, Australia, and the Dutch government in exile.

To Americans, the handwriting on the wall was clear, and popular opinion clearer still: However worthy of condemnation Japan's belligerence might be, a large majority of Americans had no appetite for a reprise of the feckless bloodletting of 1917-1918. But it was becoming evident that, left unopposed, the actions of the Roosevelt administration would end up dragging America into the Eurasian conflagration as surely as Wilson had done two decades earlier. Trade embargoes and a steady supply of weapons delivered to the adversaries of Japan and Germany were not the actions of an administration determined to safeguard American neutrality and non-interventionism.

The America First Movement

On September 4, 1940, a group of students at Yale University Law School decided that the time had come to take action. Led by R. Douglas Stuart, Jr., the son of the founder of Quaker Oats, and including the likes of future president Gerald Ford and future Kennedy administration official Sargent Shriver, the students declared the creation of the America First Committee (AFC), a political action group dedicated to keeping America out of the war and dissuading American political leadership from once again embarking on the disastrous path of interventionism.

From the outset, it was clear that the America First Committee had struck a responsive chord that reverberated across the political spectrum. The membership swelled rapidly to hundreds of thousands, peaking at around 800,000 in 450 chapters. As the organization ended up headquartered in Chicago, membership in the AFC was particularly pronounced in Illinois and adjacent regions, but the America First Committee's influence extended coast to coast, attracting then-fringe radical leftist agitators in urban Bohemian enclaves alongside salt-of-the-earth farmers, small-town businessmen, and factory workers alike. The organization's star power was formidable. The AFC soon drew to its ranks America's most celebrated aviator, Charles "Lucky Lindy" Lindbergh; Hollywood actress Lillian Gish; and architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Nor was the AFC lacking in sympathy from political heavyweights; senators from both sides of the aisle, such as Burton K. Wheeler (D-Mont.) and Gerald P. Nye (R-N.D.), lent their considerable clout to the cause. Not only that, but two future U.S. presidents, the aforementioned Gerald Ford and Democrat John F. Kennedy, were also supporters.

In an age when nationalism and patriotism still ran deep even among American media, financial, and business elites, the AFC was not lacking in wealthy backers, with many of America's richest men donating lavish sums to the organization. One of them, Robert E. Wood, the chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Co., was named president of the AFC and remained in that post for the duration of the AFC's



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existence. Others, such as Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*; Joseph Patterson, publisher of the New York *Daily News*; and H. Smith Richardson of the Vick Chemical Company, donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the AFC, assuring the organization of the means to make its voice heard and its influence felt.

Even in an age when the phrase “America First” had not yet been turned into an epithet, the America First Committee attracted controversy and obloquy. Then, as now, those who advocated for American national self-interest were smeared as “anti-Semitic” and “Nazis” — this, even though both terms were of very recent vintage. Dorothy Thompson, a columnist writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, a reliably pro-establishment mouthpiece, fulminated that Charles Lindbergh, the most visible face of the AFC, was “pro-Nazi. I am absolutely certain that Lindbergh foresees a new party along Nazi lines.” What had Lindbergh done to cause such a reaction? He expressed publicly the opinion that American Jews who favored involvement in the war were more concerned with the welfare of their people in Europe than with the long-term best interests of the United States. “Instead of agitating for war,” Lindbergh opined in a widely criticized speech on September 11, 1941, “the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences.” He went on to note that “tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength. History shows that it cannot survive war and devastations. A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not.”

Lindbergh went on to note large Jewish ownership in American media, and although he tried to clarify that he had the highest respect for the Jewish people, the rhetorical damage was done. Lindbergh, not a silver-tongued politician, had given the pro-war faction ammunition to try to discredit him and the entire AFC movement.

The America First Committee’s broad-based appeal was also something of a political liability. At first, it attracted even American communists and fellow travelers on the far left, but as soon as Hitler declared war on the Soviet Union, the American Left abandoned the organization and, along with the American establishment, began clamoring for war. In hindsight, of course, the AFC was better off without such allies, but the mass defections created the appearance of an unstable movement, which was easily exploited by its many foes.

Internal divisions, inevitable in an organization so large and diverse, gave additional fodder to the movement’s enemies. Before the full horrific nature of Nazism was laid bare to a shocked world, many in the salons of the West admired the Nazi program. Nazism was, after all, short for “National Socialism,” and most of Hitler’s economic policy goals differed little from those of other socialist factions in Europe and the United States. Hence some among the American anti-war movement were motivated by unabashed admiration for Hitler and his program. One such was businessman and Nazi supporter William Rhodes Davis, who, along with journalist Verne Marshall, founded the “No Foreign Wars Committee.” Once the Nazi supporters’ true sympathies became apparent, Lindbergh, who had initially given the group encouragement, cut all ties and became thereafter a target of its extremist rhetoric. Then, as now, the cause of genuine patriotism was hindered by extremist saboteurs seeking to sow discredit by association.

In spite of all such challenges, the America First Committee forged forward, determined to prevent American entry into the war and to re-enshrine American patriotism and the noninterventionist foreign policy that had served America so well for a century and a half. Lindbergh and the rest of the AFC took



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heart in the overwhelming support they enjoyed among ordinary Americans. “The pall of the war seems to hang over us today,” Lindbergh wrote in early 1941. “More and more people are simply giving in to it. Many say we are as good as in already. The attitude of the country seems to waver back and forth. Our greatest hope lies in the fact [that] eighty-five percent of the people in the United States (according to the latest polls) are against intervention.”

That such a high degree of consensus was once possible regarding a pivotal foreign policy strains credulity in our era of bitter partisan, moral, and social animus. Americans understood where their elite classes were trying to take them, and wanted no part of it.

Globalist Machinations

Unfortunately for the AFC and Lindbergh’s 85 percent, the internationalist faction controlling the American government had not been idle. In addition to actively training and giving support to a Chinese air force (the “Flying Tigers”) since 1939, America had imposed a full oil embargo on Japan in July 1941 and begun actively preventing oil tankers from reaching Japan — a clear act of war designed to strangle the Japanese economy or provoke some kind of attack to give America full *casus belli*.

The full story of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor has been told elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the evidence is overwhelming that FDR knew of an impending attack on American forces in the Pacific, and appears to have done nothing to prevent it, knowing that only a cataclysmic Japanese attack on America would suffice to stifle what has been dismissively called America’s “berserker nativism.”

In this, FDR and his cronies proved correct. Although a few discerning Americans smelled a rat after December 7, 1941, the overwhelming majority saw it as a completely unprovoked attack on America, an attack for which war was the only appropriate response.

America Firsters were nothing if not patriotic. Resigned to the reality of war with Japan and its European allies Germany and Italy, the America First Committee disbanded three days after Pearl Harbor and encouraged all of its members to support the war effort. “I can see nothing to do under these circumstances except to fight,” Lindbergh wrote at the time. “If I had been in Congress, I certainly would have voted for a declaration of war.” He and many of the leaders of the AFC were as good as their word, signing up for the war effort, and Lindbergh himself flew combat missions in the Pacific.

World War II not only shattered, for many years to come, the popularity of noninterventionism, it also provided a pretext for the creation of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, which was transformed decades later into the World Trade Organization), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the “free trade” European Common Market (which eventually was expanded into the European Union). All of these organizations are part of the modern globalist “international system,” the United Nations-centered network of international institutions designed to dilute the sovereignty of member states, including the United States, and to furnish the architecture for an eventual global government. Since the end of World War II, the U.S. military has fanned out across the globe in the service of UN Security Council resolutions and defense of nebulous new “national interests” in far-flung spots such as Kosovo, Somalia, Syria, and Libya. Larger conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq have cost tens of thousands of American lives and trillions in national treasure. Over time, the precedent of American interventionism in the service of global



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“stability” became almost unassailable — until the rise of Donald Trump and his latter-day emphasis on America First.

Lessons for Today

What lessons can be drawn from the America First Committee, its failure to deter American involvement in World War II, and the decades of globalist policymaking that followed, to America’s immense long-term detriment? First of all, the movement was birthed in a time when America was wallowing in an unexampled depression, and in which patriotism was perhaps less broadly informed than is the case today. Many otherwise well-meaning Americans, who had not yet learned the truth of what was going on in the Soviet Union, for example (thanks to the obfuscations of *The New York Times* and other leftist news organs, who artfully concealed Stalin’s purges and the Ukrainian Holodomor from the world), were at least tolerant of the appealing rhetoric of the Left. After all, the world had recently suffered unprecedented devastation in a world war and Great Depression, and socialism promised to cure such ills. Very few Americans understood the nature and designs of conspiring glob-alists already entrenched in the halls of political and financial power, and few had heard of the Council on Foreign Relations or suspected the power it wielded over the American body politic. The America First Committee, despite its popularity and laudable aims, was very much a single-issue movement that proved no match for the well-coordinated machinations of the globalist establishment.



America First president: President Donald Trump made putting “America first” a central theme of his administration, and popularized a phrase that had been in America’s memory hole since World War II. *(Photo credit: Gage Skidmore)*

What chance does the modern “America First” movement have, with the world seemingly again building toward some kind of epochal conflagration centered on Eastern Europe or the South China Sea? In our time, while the globalist agenda and its agents are as entrenched as ever and enjoy almost unanimous backing in the news media, the academy, and the worlds of Big Business and Big Finance, we have the advantage of 80 years of hindsight. We have seen firsthand the real fruits of communism and socialism, and have experienced again and again the humiliation of fruitless interventionism, most recently in the Afghan debacle. We also know a good deal more of the globalists’ organizations and methods of operation. And perhaps most critically, popular understanding of constitutional principles and appreciation of the Founders’ noninterventionist foreign policy is probably higher than it has been for



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generations, thanks to the efforts of Americanists and partisans of liberty such as The John Birch Society, former Congressman Ron Paul and his movement, and many others. Meanwhile, the outspoken Trump presidency and its welcome emphasis on America First opened many eyes.

To truly reverse the tide of globalism, however, more work is still needed. Based on the continued impoverishment of rational thought in Washington, America in 2022 remains — as it was in 1941 — just one international incident away from yet more globalist consolidation in response to a terrorist attack or a major war. Had America had 80 senators like Wheeler and Nye in 1940, perhaps confrontation with Japan could have been avoided prior to Pearl Harbor.

Of course, it is always easy to speculate in hindsight, at a safe distance from the world-altering events of the 1930s and early 1940s. But in our time, it has surely become evident that our program of relentless globalism and interventionism has done great harm to the American body politic. Moreover, our domestic challenges are daunting enough without assuming all of the burdens of the rest of the world into the bargain. But only a sustained effort on the part of an educated and principled electorate will be able to restore control over American foreign policy to the people of the United States — where it has always belonged.

Charles Scaliger, a longtime contributor to The New American and former academic at an American university, now lives and works in East Asia.



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