

Ebb Tide of American Isolationism: The Senate Debate on the Arms Embargo, 1937-1939

Thomas N. Guinsburg

Volume 7, numéro 1, 1972

Montréal 1972

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030754ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030754ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Guinsburg, T. N. (1972). Ebb Tide of American Isolationism: The Senate Debate on the Arms Embargo, 1937-1939. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 7(1), 313–334. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030754ar>

EBB TIDE OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM: THE SENATE DEBATE ON THE ARMS EMBARGO, 1937-1939

THOMAS N. GUINSBURG

University of Western Ontario

For American diplomacy, no less than for the world's history, the year 1939 had obvious importance. As the old international order began to crumble, so did the long-standing isolationist foundations of United States foreign policy.¹ Nothing signaled this disintegration so clearly as Congress's repeal of the arms embargo in the fall of 1939. Thus far, Congress, especially the Senate, had succeeded in safeguarding the isolationist tradition. In 1939 the celebrated Senatorial apostles of this tradition would strive desperately to deter any change. Their ultimate failure revealed a shifting tide in American foreign relations.

Although the 1937 neutrality law had passed resoundingly, none but the most naive could have believed that the measure's enactment had ended the debate. First, the "cash-and-carry" provisions had a two-year time limit. More important, a law passed against potential dangers would meet severe tests only when the international crises became real and immediate. The Sino-Japanese struggle, the ordeal of Loyalist Spain, Italy's exit from the League and entry into a military alliance with Germany, Hitler's annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland, and finally, the eruption of European war — all these heightened American anxieties and impelled a hard look at the merits of the neutrality legislation. Amidst this turmoil, the American people and their Congressional leaders would have to ask themselves whether the law still served their interests and ideals.

The war between Japan and China, which widened in 1938, made the defects in Congress's past handiwork especially evident. Precluding arms sales to both sides, permitting the export of other materials only on a cash-and-carry basis, the neutrality act seemed to benefit Japan, which had less need for American arms and was better able to take advantage of cash-and-carry. Consequently, President Roosevelt, seeking to avoid the law's unequal effects, withheld a neutrality proclamation.² In the summer of 1938, the State Department strove further to circumvent the law by imposing a moral embargo on the sale of airplanes to nations that bombed civilian areas.³ Beyond this, however, there was little the Administration could do. The neutrality act prevented the American government from acting in a way calculated to deter the aggressor.

If a few proponents of strict neutrality protested openly against Roosevelt's evasion of the 1937 measure, most Senators, apparently satisfied that the law barred any substantial unneutrality, refrained from criticism. To be sure, Senators Gerald P. Nye, Bennett Clark, and Homer Bone asserted that the President's conduct proved the need for tighter legislation,⁴ and Arthur Capper charged that "the Administration has evaded the spirit of the Neutrality Act while rendering lip service to the letter of the act."⁵ But a number of prominent isolationist Senators, although wary of the Administration's foreign policy goals, appeared reluctant to attack the President's non-application of the law. Henrik Shipstead urged a policy of strict neutrality but carefully refrained from calling for invocation of the neutrality legislation.⁶ Hiram Johnson maintained his belief that the neutrality measure itself was "a fraud, a delusion, and a snare,"⁷ and William E. Borah, at least initially, supported Roosevelt's position. To a correspondent he expressed his belief that the President did not intend to intervene in the war. So long as he understood the President to be acting in the interest of peace, he did not expect "to quarrel with him about the technical observance of the neutrality law."⁸ Only later did he become more critical, when he thought he detected signs of a tacit Anglo-American understanding in regard to the Far East.⁹ George W. Norris believed that so long as the United States avoided provoking Japan into war, the nation should do what it could to show its disapproval of Japanese atrocities and to deter their continuance.¹⁰ "My feeling in this regard," he wrote revealingly, "has been intensified by the course taken by Italy in Ethiopia and by the threat of Hitler in Germany."¹¹

Although the Senate — even many of the pronounced isolationists — expressed no outrage at Roosevelt's failure to apply the neutrality act, such acquiescence did not mean that the upper chamber stood ready to revise or repeal the measure. It was one thing to sympathize with a victim of aggression, another to countenance abandoning the neutrality policy. Accordingly, while using what discretion it could on China's behalf, the Administration hesitated to challenge Congress directly by pressing for modification of the law. "There is no present prospect of a repeal or a suspension or a modification of the existing neutrality legislation," Cordell Hull conceded late in 1937.¹² Nor did prospects change the next year. In May, Key Pittman, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, wrote Joseph P. Kennedy that isolationist sentiment was so strong "it would be almost impossible to amend the Neutrality Act, so as to place any greater discretion in the President."¹³ The Administration, Pittman insisted in the fall of 1938, would be unwise to seek legislative change until there were stronger indications that the Senate might approve.¹⁴

Aware of the formidable obstacles to change, the Administration remained alert to the threats to world stability. Roosevelt's initial optimism

over the Munich settlement soon gave way to fears that Germany's aggressive demands had been merely interrupted. Within a month of Munich, the President seems to have become convinced that the United States could not expect lasting peace in Europe; accordingly, he began to work toward a policy by which the nation, without involving itself in any forthcoming conflict, would be ready to help Britain and France acquire adequate means of defense.¹⁵ Moving cautiously in this direction, the Administration began straining at the legal shackles which hampered its freedom of action. Even before the Czechoslovakian crisis, the State Department had begun exploring with Key Pittman the possibility of revising the Neutrality Act to allow the President more discretion.¹⁶ Pittman, while wary of Congress's response to proposals for change emanating from the White House, believed that a simple repeal of the arms embargo had the best chances for success.¹⁷ Throughout the fall, as various courses were discussed within State Department councils, speculation — in isolationist quarters apprehension — mounted over the Administration's intentions.¹⁸

In his State of the Union message at the outset of 1939, Franklin Roosevelt told Congress: "We have learned that when we deliberately try to legislate neutrality, our neutrality laws may operate unevenly and unfairly — may actually give aid to an aggressor and deny it to the victim. The instinct of self-preservation should warn us that we ought not to let that happen any more." In a speech well described by Langer and Gleason as "scrupulously designed to say what was necessary without saying too much," the President also spoke approvingly though vaguely of "methods short of war" to help deter aggressors.¹⁹ Although several years earlier Gerald P. Ney had avowed that the Senate could alter or repeal neutrality legislation which turned out to be poor policy, in 1939 it was by no means clear that Congress supported the President's analysis.²⁰ Only Key Pittman among the Senate leaders gave the President's precepts on foreign policy any full-fledged endorsement. Pittman interpreted the message to mean that the United States should not be content to back up American rights with mere protest and should seek "in every way except through the use of armed force" to aid democracies in their fight against aggressive dictators. A number of other Senators commended the speech in non-committal fashion; presumably they would wait to see precisely what Roosevelt had in mind. Although Arthur Capper and D. Worth Clark expressed some reservations, only one Senator responded hostilely. With characteristic bluntness, the freshman Senator from Ohio, Robert A. Taft, commented: "The logical conclusion is another war with American troops again sent across the ocean."²¹

The central question of 1939 would be the Senate's attitude toward its own earlier creation. The 1937 act had passed with the votes of most of those who currently held Senate seats; its primary critics had been

isolationists who believed the legislation should have been even more stringent. Would those who had celebrated the 1937 act as a "peace" measure now reverse themselves? The sponsor of the 1937 act, Key Pittman, defended the right of Senators to change their minds. Simply because they had previously believed an arms embargo desirable, he insisted, Senators were not obliged to continue supporting it if the course of events belied their expectations.²² But such an argument would surely not persuade committed isolationists, to whom the effects of American neutrality policy on foreign wars were irrelevant. On the other hand, several internationalist Senators, including Utah's Elbert Thomas, Claude Pepper of Florida, and Tom Connally of Texas, quickly demonstrated their eagerness to shift the Senate's position.²³ Thomas introduced a resolution to authorize the President to discriminate between aggressor and victim in forbidding trade with belligerents in arms and raw materials.²⁴ But this proposal went further than most Senators thought advisable early in 1939. Indeed, whether the Senate would shift at all remained uncertain.²⁵

By 1939 many Senators took the attitude that substantial alteration of the 1937 act, especially a repeal of the arms embargo, would signify to the world a change in the nation's desire to remain neutral; that particular policy had come to stand for neutrality itself. "The only alternative to neutral," Borah reasoned, "is belligerent. If we refuse arms and munitions as neutrals, then when we furnish them we become belligerents."²⁶ Vandenberg advised his colleagues that the arms embargo symbolized the neutrality policy approved almost unanimously by Congress, and he warned that its repeal could only be interpreted as "a conscious drift away from neutrality as we ourselves defined it."²⁷

Accordingly, as the President prepared to follow up the sentiments of his State of the Union message with a drive to repeal the Neutrality Act, or at least the arms embargo, there was little doubt that the attempt would meet stiff isolationist opposition. How many Senators would continue to uphold the peace formula of 1937 in the context of 1939 was difficult to determine, but Pittman warned the President to expect "quite a contest." Aware of the determination of his isolationist colleagues, the Foreign Relations Committee chairman urged the Administration to proceed with caution. Pittman advised that the Senate might be more receptive to proposals for revision stemming from committee hearings than to changes demanded by the President, and Roosevelt yielded to this counsel.²⁸

Whatever the subsequent defects of his leadership, Pittman fully understood the intense Congressional distrust of presidential power. "There is a growing resentment in Congress," he explained to Raymond Leslie Buell, "by reason of the belief that the Executive Branch of the

Government has not only usurped constitutional functions of Congress, but has arbitrarily and inconsiderately dominated the action of Congress.”²⁹ For those who upheld the isolationist position, the prospect that the presidential sphere of influence would extend to the area of neutrality policy evoked genuine fear and provided a valuable debating point. “The real nub of the neutrality controversy,” Gerald P. Nye would insist, was “presidential power, presidential discretion, presidential chance to commit the country in a way that makes staying out of war exceedingly difficult.” To stay out of war, Nye contended, “we need restraints upon a President.”³⁰

Nye deliberately said *a* president, since he and his isolationist colleagues invariably insisted that their warnings against presidential power in foreign affairs were meant to apply to any president.³¹ Although they were doubtless concerned for the legislative prerogative, their mistrust of *this* president went far beyond ordinary constitutional scruple. The Senate confronted a chief executive who had only recently — in his court packing proposal, his quest for executive re-organization, and the attempted purge of recalcitrant members of his own party — shown what many felt was an insatiable appetite for power. Understandably, then, the Administration’s desire for revision of the neutrality law might be interpreted as another attempt to stifle opposition.³²

Citing the past encroachments of Roosevelt on Congressional power, North Dakota’s Lynn J. Frazier told a radio audience in February, 1939, “Surely we will go no further in delegating our powers to make any President a dictator, either in peace-time or in war.”³³ At about the same time Arthur Capper was warning his constituents that the changes being sought in the nation’s foreign policy might end up “replacing democracy in the United States by a form of dictatorship.”³⁴

Many of these same Senators, in addition to fearing further accretions of Roosevelt’s power, had begun to suspect by early 1939 that Roosevelt would make no genuine effort to keep the United States out of the forthcoming war. Hiram Johnson, as usual, was most direct. “I am entirely satisfied,” he wrote to John Bassett Moore, “that the President desires to take us into war.”³⁵ Gerald P. Nye became convinced that Roosevelt’s internationalist sympathies threatened to lead to full American involvement after the President’s celebrated meeting with the Senate Military Affairs Committee in January, 1939. At that off-the-record meeting Roosevelt allegedly said that America’s frontier was on the Rhine; his subsequent denial did not allay isolationist suspicions, nor did his characterization of Nye as a “boob” for spreading a false story help his relations with Nye and his Senatorial allies. After this episode, the distrust of Roosevelt’s intentions rose sharply among the advocates of mandatory

neutrality, as did their conviction that any changes in the neutrality law based on sympathy for Britain and France would lead to American military involvement.³⁶ Although at this point no Senator could publicly accuse Roosevelt of seeking to involve the United States in war, as the contest over the repeal of the arms embargo sharpened, so would the isolationists' accusations. "The President's position," warned Robert Taft, "seems to me much too warlike."³⁷ In July, 1939, West Virginia's Rush D. Holt announced to the press: "The President is not neutral . . . He is for England and France. If you want to send our boys across the water to help these countries in war, the surest way is to take sides when the contest begins."³⁸

Although Roosevelt refrained from appearing to force the Senate's hand, the isolationists hastened to make the Foreign Relations Committee their bastion. The Committee, which still included such isolationist stalwarts as Borah, Johnson, Shipstead, Vandenberg, La Follette, and Capper, was reinforced in 1939 by the accession of Democrats Robert B. Reynolds and Bennett Champ Clark. When the Committee launched hearings on the issue of neutrality, the isolationists gave full exposure to the critics of repeal of the arms embargo while harrasing those who supported repeal. So mordant were the isolationist inquisitors that Pittman dissuaded Hull from giving testimony, warning him that the Committee was "out of hand" and that "the Isolationists might even win."³⁹

While the advocates of change suffered from indecisiveness and disunity, the isolationists in committee managed to seize the advantage.⁴⁰ On the Foreign Relations Committee they were proportionately stronger than in the Senate at large.⁴¹ Moreover, in committee the isolationists could make maximum use of their skill in the tactics of obstruction and nay-saying; they effectively exploited hearings during the time their opponents had yet to agree on a positive program.

By the summer of 1939, the Senatorial isolationists had achieved a purposefulness and a cohesion unmatched by their adversaries. Not a tightly knit group when the Administration began to seek repeal — Vandenberg privately called them "a curious collection of 'prima donnas' and zealots" — they had quickly closed ranks for the showdown.⁴² Observers saw the symbolic significance when, early in July, Hiram Johnson's office — the headquarters two decades earlier for the isolationist campaign against the League of Nations — became the nerve center of the isolationists' operations. After their first meeting, the isolationist leaders, who claimed to speak for forty-two Senators, issued a manifesto on behalf of "real neutrality," warning that they would defend their position by "every honourable and legitimate means" at their command. By alluding to the prospect of filibuster if the administration bill to repeal the arms

embargo were discharged, they strengthened their case for postponement among waverers on the Foreign Relations Committee.⁴³

The Administration depended neither on the unity and intensity of internationalist commitment nor on the leadership of Chairman Key Pittman⁴⁴ but on the pull of party regularity. Sixteen of the twenty-three members were Democrats. Yet isolationist strength came not merely from Republican ranks; besides support from Bennett Clark and Robert Reynolds, the isolationists could hope to pick up support from other Democrats with either isolationist leanings, a record of dissidence, or both. By creating animosities within his own party, Roosevelt had handed a trump card to the isolationists, who themselves lacked the numbers for a victory in committee. When Pittman on July 11 finally submitted the repeal proposal for committee approval, its opponents managed to enlist the decisive votes from Georgia's Walter George and Iowa's Guy Gillette, neither of them committed to isolationism, but both targets of Roosevelt's 1938 purge attempt. The Committee voted, twelve to eleven, to table consideration of neutrality revision until the next session.⁴⁵ Congress adjourned in mid-August with the arms embargo still the law of the land.

The outbreak of war the next month demanded a reappraisal of the neutrality law. Dramatically the bloodshed impugned the forecast that had been made by some of the isolationists, notably Borah, that war was not imminent. Furthermore, now the nation and Congress had to consider not abstract legislation but its actual operations. Did the measure provide real neutrality? Was it the policy best calculated to maintain the peace and security of the United States? The arms embargo came in for especially intense scrutiny. Now that it would affect the European war, cutting off arms from the Allied powers, Americans would have to ask if this was the neutrality they had earlier envisioned. As one student of the contest over neutrality has written, "nothing could try the embargo with greater harshness than the very contingency against which the law had been passed."⁴⁶

Yet however the war might alter some outlooks, it brought no change of heart from the isolationists. When the Administration, summoning a special session of Congress in September, once more pressed for repeal of the embargo, those who had earlier led the opposition reaffirmed their stand. A private Administration canvass of the Senate revealed that a minimum of twenty-five Senators — led by Borah, Bennett Clark, Johnson, La Follette, Nye, and Vandenberg — could be expected to wage an all-out fight. Another eleven were rated "uncertain."⁴⁷ The majority seemed willing to support the Administration at least in repealing the arms embargo, but whether they would fight against the isolationists' intransigence or resist their logic remained in doubt.

Well before the coming of war, the architects of the “new neutrality” had framed a response to the claim that the outbreak of armed conflict would require a reappraisal of American policy. Detached and impregnable, protected by great oceans on either side, the American nation, according to Arthur Vandenberg, had merely to “‘decline to surrender’ to the propaganda that we cannot escape participation in other people’s wars.”⁴⁸ Believing, in Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.’s words, that “even if Germany were victorious and desired to conquer the United States, she never could do so,” the isolationists saw no national interest at stake in the European war.⁴⁹ The outbreak of hostilities, moreover, served only to harden the isolationists’ belief that no tenable middle ground existed between absolute disinterest and intervention. This belief lent special urgency to the renewed campaign against revision of the neutrality law. Furnishing arms to one side, Borah asserted, would thrust upon the United States the full consequences of belligerency: “Our boys would follow our guns into the trenches.”⁵⁰ Ten days after the German invasion of Poland, Vandenberg noted in his diary:

My quarrel is with this notion that America can be half in and half out of this war, that we can bravely sustain our erstwhile allies and yet retain an insulated security which — if we are really in earnest about this business of “helping the democracies” — is utterly cowardly as a public policy for a country like ours. I hate Hitlerism and Naziism and Communism as completely as any person living. But I decline to embrace the opportunist idea — so convenient and popular at the moment — that we can stop these things in *Europe* without entering the conflict with everything at our command, including men and money. There is no middle ground. We are either *all the way in or all the way out*.⁵¹

Some two dozen Senators clung to these cardinal tenets.⁵² Almost all the expected figures joined in the organized campaign to do battle with the Administration: the presence at the helm of men like Nye, Vandenberg, Clark, Borah, Johnson, and La Follette came as no surprise. But these leaders received help from Senators in both parties who had previously given no express indication of their position. Several Republicans from the New England states, who had opposed the mandatory neutrality legislation in the middle 1930’s, now appeared determined not to give Roosevelt additional discretionary power. Styles Bridges, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Charles Tobey joined in the meetings to oppose repeal. But although most Republicans joined the opposition, the campaign was not organized on a partisan basis. Despite their comeback of 1938, the Republicans still found themselves vastly outnumbered in the Senate and would have to depend on aid from Democrats to achieve their goal. Joining Bennett Clark from the outset were an assortment of Democrats whose past careers to some degree already had marked them as dissidents: Pat McCarran of Nevada, Rush D. Holt of West Virginia, David I. Walsh of Massachusetts, Sheridan

Downey of California, D. Worth Clark of Idaho, John Overton of Louisiana, and William Bulow of South Dakota.

For the anti-repeal campaign to succeed, this nucleus had to grow. Accordingly, the issue came down to whether others could be persuaded to oppose the Administration in the forthcoming contest. Would non-isolationist Republicans like Warren Austin, Warren Barbour, Chan Gurney, Frederick Hale, Clyde Reed, and Wallace White join in a united partisan front? Or could Democrats who had disagreed with the Administration on other issues and had supported the embargo back in 1937 be encouraged to take an independent stand? Important, too, would be the ultimate position of two influential national figures who had not taken part in the anti-repeal strategy meetings but who had isolationist reputations: George W. Norris and Robert A. Taft.

In assessing the prospects for victory, the isolationists recognized that the outbreak of war might well handicap their cause. If they derided the notion of "steps short of war," most of their colleagues — to say nothing of the majority of the American people — did not. Much as all Americans dreaded entanglement in the war, a large proportion also feared the possible consequences of an Allied defeat. A clear majority of Americans had endorsed the embargo during the lull prior to the war; the advent of hostilities changed this stance. Polls revealed that the bulk of Americans though decidedly non-interventionist, believed that the United States should revoke that part of the neutrality legislation which prevented Americans from selling arms to Britain and France. Shortly before the war 57 per cent of the American people had endorsed full retention of the neutrality laws; on September 3 only 50 per cent opposed repeal of the arms embargo, and a month later the percentage had fallen to 38.⁵³

The Administration bill did not attempt to move faster than public opinion. While calling for the repeal of the arms embargo, it retained a cash-and-carry trade policy, a ban on loans to belligerents and on American travel on belligerent merchant ships, a prohibition of the arming of merchantmen, and presidential power to declare combat zones closed to American ships.⁵⁴ Several independently-conducted canvasses of the Senate revealed that a sizable majority looked favorably on the Administration's proposal.⁵⁵ Save for the two dozen or so Senators who quickly launched the counter-offensive, there seemed little enthusiasm for maintaining the embargo in the face of a war endangering western democracies, a marked shift in public opinion, and an Administration asking for repeal of the arms embargo but not, ostensibly, for repeal of neutrality.

Nonetheless, the isolationists made a fight of it; they responded to the President's call for repeal of the embargo by meeting twenty-four strong in Hiram Johnson's office and pledging their opposition.⁵⁶ Despite the odds, they clung to the hope that a concerted campaign against the abandonment of strict neutrality might once again carry the day. They took heart from the content of the mail sacks delivered to their offices in what the *New York Times* called the "heaviest flow of mail in the history of Congress."⁵⁷ Since their correspondence ran overwhelmingly in favor of retaining the embargo, the isolationist Senators felt vindicated and encouraged. In late September Nye found the peace bloc "confident and enthusiastic" that the outpouring of mail and points scored in Senate debate enhanced their prospects of victory.⁵⁸ Yet whatever a count of the letters, telegrams, and petitions indicated, there was reason to question the representativeness of such sentiments. To be sure, the nation's isolationist peace groups were making a rousing last-ditch effort to bring pressure on the Congress; the mail demonstrated their effectiveness in prompting an anti-repeal barrage.⁵⁹ The polls, however, revealed that the isolationists' exertions had not converted the nation.⁶⁰ Moreover, Senatorial canvasses showed sizable support for the Administration measure.⁶¹

Determined though the isolationists remained, their success depended on whether their example would prompt the less rigidly committed to hold fast to their 1937 positions on the arms embargo. The Senators who formed the peace bloc strove for support from colleagues who had previously shown either some sympathy for their arguments or anti-Roosevelt proclivities. This time, however, their quest for allies failed.

In July the isolationists had bottled the repeal proposal in committee with the aid of several Senators whose outlook differed. Wallace White had sided with the other Republicans on the Foreign Relations Committee. Robert Reynolds, Frederick Van Nuys, Walter George, and Guy Gillette had broken with the Administration and fellow Democrats on the Committee. But the international crisis altered their stance. White, after a meeting with Roosevelt late in September, indicated that he would vote to report the repeal measure; indeed, his criticism of the Administration's proposal was that, by retaining cash-and-carry, it might deprive beleaguered France and England of all the aid they needed.⁶² Shortly after the war broke out, Gillette wired Roosevelt that in the present international situation, "individual or partisan views must be subordinated to . . . national unity. I pledge my help to this end."⁶³ Van Nuys wrote to a constituent that he sympathized with the democracies of Europe and therefore, while opposing steps toward American intervention, he would support the sale of arms on a cash-and-carry basis.⁶⁴ George and Reynolds also voted in committee to report the Administration bill, though Reynolds, who earlier in the year had obtusely compared Hitler's actions to

the frontiersman's settlement of boundary disputes "with the aid of a shotgun", still had his doubts about the proposed legislation.⁶⁵ In such grave times, the isolationist leaders could no longer capitalize on extraneous anti-Roosevelt sentiment. "There are plenty of things about Mr. Roosevelt I don't like," Millard Tydings replied to constituents who brought up his past differences with the President, "but I'm not going to talk about *him* in this situation."⁶⁶

The Senators who plotted strategy in Hiram Johnson's office felt most frustrated by the altered position of past enthusiasts of the arms embargo. Outstanding among these was George W. Norris. The sole survivor in the Senate of the handful who had voted against American entry into the First World War, Norris had usually been in the isolationists' corner in past campaigns, and his devotion to the cause of peace was well known. Listed as "uncertain" in the Administration's early reckoning, Norris undermined the prospects for maintaining the embargo by coming out in favor of repeal.⁶⁷

Norris's reputation, one editorial writer observed, prevented supporters of the arms embargo from damning all their opponents as war mongers and compelled them "to stop claiming for themselves a corner on the will-to-peace."⁶⁸ Having themselves stood fast by their position, anti-repeal leaders doubted the sincerity of Norris's reversal; privately they attributed his shift to gratitude to Roosevelt for the President's efforts on behalf of TVA.⁶⁹ Yet Norris changed his mind for better reasons. Contending that in wartime no American policy could have equal impact on the belligerents — that the arms embargo worked in Germany's favor, that its repeal would aid Britain and France — Norris explained to Edwin Borchard: "When we must help one side or the other by our action or non-action, we would be less than human if we did not cast our influence in favor of the right against the admitted wrong."⁷⁰

If others did not move as far from neutrality as Norris — or did not reveal their feelings as candidly — they nonetheless felt obliged to reassess their position in the fall of 1939. Lewis Schwellenbach of Washington, who prior to 1939 had termed the impending conflict "just another war because somebody has something that somebody else wants," now avowed that he had erred in 1937 in voting for the arms embargo as a vehicle of neutrality.⁷¹ The staunch isolationist Ernest Lundeen posed the question to him squarely: "Why was [the embargo] all right a few months ago and why is it all wrong now?" Schwellenbach responded: "I have not sufficient stubbornness . . . that when I believe I made a mistake I am not willing to correct that mistake."⁷² The arms embargo policy, he added, "looks away from peace, not toward peace," by benefitting those nations who had prepared themselves to attack nations less prepared. Repeal would not

end American neutrality, he insisted, but it would relieve the United States of the difficult and hazardous task of enforcing the embargo in order to remain neutral.⁷³

Dolefully the isolationists watched the "moderates" whom they had hoped to win over move to the other side. Senators who had supported the embargo in 1937, many who had assailed the Administration on a number of matters in the past, signaled their support for the revised neutrality measure. Some showed open sympathy for the allied cause; most more cautiously expressed the view that the new law, which in addition to repealing the embargo placed all trade with belligerents on a strict cash-and-carry basis, would best serve American security and peace. Nebraska's Edward Burke mirrored the candor of his colleague Norris. "I find that a law which I voted for in the fond hope that it would aid in preserving peace," he said, "now affords comfort and strength to the enemies of peace."⁷⁴ Wallace White explained that his first concern was keeping the nation out of war, his second, "a fervent hope that Britain and France will prevail in their righteous cause."⁷⁵ Even among Senators who voiced no such preferences, the isolationist leaders could elicit no great fear of repeal. New Jersey's Warren Barbour, whom the isolationists had counted upon, announced that he believed repeal consistent with American neutrality.⁷⁶ Kansas's Clyde Reed, though sympathetic to the isolationists, asserted that he did not consider retention of the embargo essential to keeping the nation out of war.⁷⁷ Edwin Johnson of Colorado told his constituents that he was "a nationalist, an isolationist, an insolationist, and a pacifist," but that after asking himself whether the Pittman bill was a step toward war, he had concluded it was not.⁷⁸

The band of embargoists, for their part, insisted that American policy could take absolutely no account of any "right" and "wrong" in the war, and that the Administration's proposal did just that. Borah, for example, vehemently denied that the United States would help the cause of democracy by repealing the embargo. To aid Great Britain, he believed, was to serve the greatest imperial power of them all.⁷⁹ The "high flown language about democracies that is being bandied about," Capper emphasized, was not sufficient to disguise "another of those European boundary disputes."⁸⁰ Neither publicly nor privately did the Senatorial isolationists show sympathy for the fascist aggressions, but they remained unconvinced that England was fighting "our war" and resisted any policy with such connotations. Hiram Johnson wrote: "I think, probably, I have as great a feeling toward Hitler as his most determined opponent, but I am striving to look at this situation from our country alone and do what will best preserve it."⁸¹

The floor debates on the Administration's bill, for all their sound and fury, appear to have had very little impact on the outcome of the contest.

Neither side felt able to express its motives candidly. Supporters of repeal knew that the isolationists could not win unless they proved that rescinding the arms embargo was the first step on the road to war. Accordingly, most advocates of repeal refrained from arguing for the change as a means of aiding Britain and France,⁸² and left the isolationists to rail at the “secret assumption” behind the quest for repeal.⁸³ For their part, the isolationists could not openly vent their main fear — that repeal would remove important legislative constraints from a president they distrusted. Consequently, most of the debate amounted to a grand display of what Arthur Krock labeled “oratorical camouflage.”⁸⁴ The Washington correspondent of the *Nation* assailed the debate as “an exercise in phony dialectics which has fooled none and interested few.”⁸⁵

What *Time* called the “greatest legislative battle since the 1919 Senate fight over . . . the League of Nations” seems to have been decided shortly after the onset of the European War.⁸⁶ After the Administration’s bill cleared the Foreign Relations Committee, the contest, for the isolationists, became an exercise in futility. Vainly they introduced nearly a score of resolutions and amendments designed to undermine or circumscribe repeal. The fate of all such efforts was heralded by the vote on a motion to recommit, which, gaining only twenty-six votes and one pair, demonstrated that the earlier estimates of Senatorial alignment on the repeal measure had held up.⁸⁷ For all their efforts, the anti-Administration forces had added only three members to the battalion of twenty-four who had initially plotted strategy for the anti-repeal campaign.

Subsequent endeavors to cripple the Administration’s bill met a similar fate. No attempt by the isolationists to modify the repeal of the arms embargo substantially received more than thirty-three votes. The only changes that came even close to passage related to maintaining the ban on the export of certain offensive weapons, such as flame throwers, and to limiting presidential authority over the National Munitions Control Board.⁸⁸ After withstanding the isolationists’ barrage, the Senate passed the bill 63 to 30 and the Conference Report, 55 to 24.⁸⁹ The isolationist group had not broken ranks, but neither had their opponents. Indeed, almost all of the Senators displayed a notable consistency on one side or the other. The occasional deviations had little to do with the heart of the matter, the retention or repeal of the arms embargo.⁹⁰

If the Senate alignment on the issue of repeal did not fall into a simple pattern, the most striking feature of the vote was the split between the parties. Of the thirty votes against the bill when it passed the Senate — essentially the same votes that had been cast for the crippling amendments — fifteen came from Republicans; 62 per cent of the Republican members voted against the bill, compared to 18 per cent of the Democrats. Narrow

partisanship, however, is not the full explanation. A greater proportion of Republican Senators in the 1930's came from those sections with isolationist proclivities, the Middle West and West.⁹¹ Moreover, nearly all the Republicans who had managed to survive the New Deal land-slides in 1932, 1934, and 1936 — for reasons that probably had very little to do with their foreign policy stands — were isolationist mainstays: Borah, Johnson, Capper, Vandenberg, Nye, McNary, and Frazier. Their numerical importance in the small Republican Senatorial contingent helps to accentuate "Republican" isolationism.

The striking Republican opposition to the neutrality revision emerged without the benefit of a concerted party effort against the measure. McNary, the Republican leader, did not attend the strategy meetings of the bill's opponents, and he denied that the anti-repeal campaign was in any sense a party matter.⁹² The non-committed Republican Senators seem to have weighed the merits of the proposal and public opinion on the matter, then arrived at independent judgments. Clyde Reed wrote William Allen White: "There never has been with me any personal rancor against Roosevelt, and I am not for or against any plan of neutrality because of any position he takes." Unless Roosevelt strove for expanded discretionary powers, Reed forecast early in September, his real difficulty was more likely to come from Democratic dissidence than from Republican unity.⁹³

Neither party, in fact, mustered really impressive cohesion; not one roll call furnished what a student of legislative behavior has termed a "party vote," with 90 per cent from one party voting against 90 per cent from the other.⁹⁴ Isolationist intransigents and undeviating Administration followers came from both parties. While Senators Borah, Capper, Frazier, Johnson, Nye, and Alexander Wiley voted against the Administration on virtually every roll call, a number of Republicans, including Warren Austin, Charles Gibson, Frederick Hale, Chan Gurney, Styles Bridges, Wallace White and Warren Barbour persistently voted against attempts to cripple the bill.⁹⁵ Nor could the Administration, despite the best efforts of James F. Byrnes and Tom Connally, marshal Democratic solidarity. The voting records of Bennett Clark, Rush D. Hold, David I. Walsh, Burton K. Wheeler, Pat McCarran, Victor Donahey, Sheridan Downey, and John Overton ranked among the most consistently isolationist.

A breakdown of the vote by region indicates perceptible sectional differences, irrespective of party. In each of the sections where the Republicans were represented, they were more likely to vote against the Administration measure than were Democrats, but the strength of opposition to repeal varied from section to section in *both* parties. Leaving aside the South, where twenty-seven of thirty Democrats — whatever their other differences with Roosevelt — supported the Administration measure,

the East was the least isolationist section in both parties. Nearly half the Republican delegation in the East supported the measure, while eight Democrats stood against David I. Walsh in endorsing it. The Middle West, contrary to convention, was *not* the most isolationist Senatorial section on the question of the arms embargo. Sixty per cent of the Middle Western Republicans voted against the bill; three-quarters of the Democrats favored it. In the West, all four Republicans stood against the measure, and only two-thirds of the Democrats approved it. The notion of *both* seaboard pitted against the interior does not stand up. All eight Senators from states bordering on the Pacific opposed the repeal save Lewis Schwellenbach, and even he hesitated to affirm the idea that the United States had a vital stake in a European War.⁹⁶ Senators from the West Coast states, not a part of the Atlantic Community, could more easily view the European struggle with some detachment. They also presumably recognized that while placing armaments on a cash-and-carry basis would benefit England, if the act were applied to the Asian war, it would aid Japan.

In the Middle West, where Samuel Lubell has shown ethnic sentiments to have worked against Roosevelt in the election of 1940,⁹⁷ a number of Senators defied the isolationist views prevalent in their mail. To be sure, both senators from North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Minnesota did attack the 1939 neutrality bill. In Nebraska, Iowa, and Indiana, on the other hand, neither Senator opposed the measure. Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, and South Dakota presented divided delegations; interestingly, in the latter two states the Democratic senators voted against repeal and the Republicans supported it. The directives which Senators received in this contest were far from clear. Constituent mail heavily against repeal was offset by opinion polls demonstrating that, even in the Middle West, a majority of the people supported the change. Intra-party splits were evident from the outset. Consequently, Senators found themselves unusually free to make individual assessments of the issue.

Overall, the outcome of the 1939 contest revealed that support for Senatorial isolationism had shrunk to its narrowest base since the First World War. In none of the four sections had the repeal bill received less than a majority of the Senate's votes, a result which mirrored the findings of public opinion polls in each of the sections. If the unbending posture of long-time isolationists was expected, their inability to rally more to the cause had come as something of a surprise. Yet the majority of the Senators, less ardently committed to the arms embargo, had found compelling reasons to back the Administration on the matter of repeal.

The eruption of war had made the impact of the arms embargo on Britain and France a jarring reality. Neither the nation nor the Senate abandoned neutrality in the fall of 1939, but the international situation did not look the same as it had only a short time earlier. Washington observers

believed that the Administration would have had more than enough votes for repeal in the previous session, except that some Senators had seen no need for immediate action. Now all those who had leaned toward repeal could delay no longer, and others joined their ranks.⁹⁸ Some senators were more guarded in their comments than others, but when Millard Tydings asserted on the Senate floor that "every person in this chamber knows who the aggressor is," not even the isolationists disputed him.⁹⁹ Most Senators supported the Administration bill because they believed to do otherwise amounted to "taking sides with Hitler."¹⁰⁰ In this view they were supported by the majority of the American people.

The Administration's tactical delicacy had also frustrated the isolationists. The *New York Times* had sagely observed early in the contest that the President could lose many of the promised votes if he indulged in "dramatics suggesting that . . . repeal of the arms embargo is the step toward war which the isolationists call it."¹⁰¹ Heeding such advice, Roosevelt, though firm in his quest for repeal, avoided taking a central role in the contest itself. The isolationists thus had little success in waging the sort of "anti-Roosevelt" campaign that might otherwise have brought greater support from Republicans and conservative Democrats.¹⁰² Moreover, the Administration had not sought repeal of the Neutrality Act.¹⁰³ Save for the elimination of the arms embargo and an exemption of Latin America from cash-and-carry, the 1939 bill retained the structure of American neutrality policy and even tightened it. To blunt the isolationists' weapons the Administration had resigned itself to a bill which, in most respects, was "the very epitome of American isolationism."¹⁰⁴ Thus, the proposal invited support from the many middle-ground Senators who would have fought an attempt at more sweeping revision. Even the isolationist Robert A. Taft, who found the arms embargo no asset to neutrality, could support the 1939 Neutrality Act with confidence that "no sensible British or French observer will advise his government that the passage of this law is any symbol of an American desire to enter the war."¹⁰⁵ When Rush D. Holt charged that the nation was being asked "to go in the direction of war," most supporters of the bill could genuinely deny that their vote signified an "interventionist" position.¹⁰⁶ The Administration had made it possible for Senators to diverge from the isolationists without feeling that they were discarding the mantle of peace.¹⁰⁷

Though disappointed by the outcome of the contest, the isolationists believed that their tenacity had by no means been in vain. "While we appear to have lost the battle," Nye wrote to the pacifist leader Frederick J. Libby, "I wonder if we haven't won something more."¹⁰⁸ The "something more," as many of the Senatorial isolationists saw the situation, was the demonstration that whatever the fate of the embargo, the American people overwhelmingly opposed intervening in the war. The great debate,

Vandenberg hoped, “had made it impossible for the President to misunderstand the national attitude toward war itself — the limitation which Americans put upon their sympathies for the Allied Cause.”¹⁰⁹ Even staunch defenders of repeal had been forced to avow non-intervention.

Still, whatever their consolations, the Senatorial isolationists had to recognize that the repeal of the arms embargo had severely damaged their cause. If the debate had been technically over whether the United States should continue to ban arms shipments to all belligerents, the isolationists knew well that the outcome had broader implications. “The same emotions which demand the repeal of the embargo,” Vandenberg recorded in his diary, “will subsequently demand still more effective aid for Britain.”¹¹⁰ Borah viewed the true significance of repeal as “part of the general program to associate this nation with the European balance of power system.”¹¹¹ The tide was turning.

NOTES

¹ The term “isolationist” is somewhat problematical, since the United States was never fully isolated from world affairs. Yet, defined in a more circumscribed way, “isolationism” is, I believe, a useful descriptive term, denoting, in the words of Charles A. Beard, “non-entanglement in the political controversies of Europe and Asia; non-intervention in the wars of these continents . . . non-entanglement in any association of nations empowered to designate ‘aggressors’ and to bring engines of sanction and coercion into action against them.” *American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932-1940* (New Haven, 1940), p. 17, n. 2. See also Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca, 1966), ch. 1.

² On the Administration’s response see Cordell Hull, *Memoirs* (2 vols.; New York, 19-48), I, pp. 556-558, 569; and Robert Divine, *The Illusion of Neutrality* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 215-219.

³ Hull, *Memoirs*, I, p. 569. The overall administration policy did result in a material advantage for China. See Francis Deak, “The United States Neutrality Acts: Theory and Practice,” *International Conciliation* (March, 1940), p. 101 n. Yet it is possible that invoking the neutrality act might also have benefitted the Chinese. Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, p. 218.

⁴ *New York Times*, August 15, 1937; *Congressional Record*, 75th Cong., 1st Sess., Appendix, p. 2187; National Council for the Prevention of War MSS, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Drawer 80 (hereafter NCPW MSS).

⁵ Speech before the National Council for the Prevention of War, November 30, 1937, Arthur Capper MSS, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

⁶ “Neutrality and Democratic Government,” radio speech, November 16, 1937, copy in NCPW MSS, Drawer 80.

⁷ Johnson to Elizabeth I. Moore, October 7, 1937, Hiram Johnson MSS, University of California at Berkeley.

⁸ Borah to Mrs. Thomas E. Kinney, November 18, 1937, NCPW MSS, Drawer 62. R. Walton Moore on November 12, 1937 informed Roosevelt of the favorable response of Borah and several other isolationists. Franklin D. Roosevelt MSS, Hyde Park, New York, President’s Secretary’s File 24.

⁹ See Marian McKenna, *Borah* (Ann Arbor, 1961), p. 353.

330 HISTORICAL PAPERS 1972 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

¹⁰ Norris to Fred G. Stickel, April 23, 1938, Norris to G. William Ferguson, December 8, 1938, George W. Norris MSS, Library of Congress, Tray 104, Box 4.

¹¹ Norris to John T. Flynn, January 4, 1938, *ibid.*

¹² Hull, *Memoirs*, I, p. 556. See also R. Walton Moore to Roosevelt, November 12, 1937, FDR MSS, President's Secretary's File 24.

¹³ Pittman to Kennedy, May 2, 1938, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Papers, U.S. National Archives, File 75A - F9 - 1 (hereafter S.C.F.R. Papers).

¹⁴ Pittman to R. Walton Moore, October 13, 1938, *ibid.*

¹⁵ William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation* (New York, 1952), pp. 36-38.

¹⁶ See R. Walton Moore to Pittman, September 22, 1938, S.C.F.R. Papers, File 75A - F9-1.

¹⁷ Pittman to R. Walton Moore, October 13, 1938, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, pp. 232-233.

¹⁹ Samuel E. Rosenman (ed.), *The Public Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (13 vols.; New York, 1938-50), VIII, pp. 1ff.; Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. 46.

²⁰ Nye's 1935 statement about the mutability of neutrality policy is in the *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 14535.

²¹ *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, January 5, 1939.

²² *New York Times*, January 5, 1939.

²³ *Ibid.*, February 14, March 9, April 10, 1939; Connally, *My Name is Tom Connally* (New York, 1954), p. 226.

²⁴ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 1347.

²⁵ *New York Times* (January 5, 1939) quoted an informed source sympathetic to the Administration who believed Congressional sentiment for neutrality was, if anything, stronger in 1939 than 1937.

²⁶ Undated memorandum [1939], William E. Borah MSS, Library of Congress, Box 544.

²⁷ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 100.

²⁸ Confidential memorandum from Pittman to Roosevelt, January 11, 1939, FDR MSS, President's Personal File 745. Perhaps, as Robert A. Divine has suggested, Roosevelt should have ignored Pittman's chronic timidity and from the outset exerted more forceful leadership in the campaign for repeal. Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, pp. 283-285. Yet, in the face of pronounced Senatorial distrust of presidential power, few at the time would have thought it sound strategy to make the President any more central an issue than he would inevitably be.

²⁹ Pittman to Buell, July 23, 1938, S.C.F.R. Papers, File 75A - F9-1.

³⁰ Quoted in Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. 220.

³¹ Nye and Burton K. Wheeler, in interviews with the author, still maintained that they had no special animus toward F.D.R. Author's interview with Nye, August 19, 1965, and with Wheeler, December 28, 1965. Wheeler recounted a conversation he had at the time with George Norris in which Norris accused him of not trusting Roosevelt. Wheeler replied that it was not a question of trusting Roosevelt but of trusting any man with concentrated power that *could* be misused.

³² The importance of the context in which the battle over the arms embargo would be fought is made clear in a letter from Rush D. Holt to E. Worth Higgins, January 13, 1939, Rush D. Holt MSS, University of West Virginia, ACQ. 1701. See also Hiram Johnson to Richard M. Tobin, December 12, 1938, Hiram Johnson MSS.

³³ Radio address, February 16, 1939, NCPW MSS, Drawer 54.

³⁴ Radio speech, WIBW, February 5, 1939, Capper MSS.

³⁵ Johnson to Moore, May 12, 1939, Hiram Johnson MSS. See also Johnson to Edwin Borchart, April 9, 1939, *ibid.* To his son, Johnson had expressed such fears even earlier. See Johnson to Hiram Johnson, Jr., February 11 and March 19, 1939, *ibid.*

³⁶ Author's interview with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965. The events leading up to Roosevelt's meeting with the Military Affairs Committee and the aftermath of that meeting are discussed in Wayne S. Cole, *Senator Gerald P. Nye and American Foreign Relations* (Minneapolis, 1962), pp. 154-156. With Nye at the meeting, among others, were Senators Bennett Clark, Robert Reynolds, and Ernest Lundeen, the latter, according to Nye, the real source of the "leak" as to what was said at the meeting.

³⁷ Radio address, April 25, 1939, Robert Taft MSS, Library of Congress, Box 639.

³⁸ Statement to Hearst Newspapers, July 7, 1939, Holt MSS, Acq. 1701.

³⁹ Diary of J. Pierrepont Moffat, April 7, 1939, Moffat MSS, Harvard University. Moffat's diary entries for April are filled with insightful reflections on the treatment of the neutrality issue by the Foreign Relations Committee.

⁴⁰ The lack of unanimity even among the advocates of revision is discussed in Stanley Hornbeck's confidential memorandum to Cordell Hull, April 7, 1939, Hull MSS, Library of Congress, Box 81. See also "Neutrality, Peace Legislation, and Our Foreign Policy," *Hearings before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., Text of Legislation Relating to Neutrality, Peace, and Our Foreign Policy Pending in the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate* (Washington, D.C., 1939) and Francis O. Wilcox, "The Neutrality Fight in Congress, 1939," *American Political Science Review*, XXXIII (1939), pp. 811-818.

⁴¹ On the Committee the "hard-core" isolationist vote was about 35 per cent, considerably higher than the percentage of such votes among the entire Senate membership. Moreover, to triumph in Committee they had only to win over a few waverers.

⁴² Vandenberg, typed commentary on "The Arms Embargo Battle," October 27, 1939, Scrapbook 12, Vandenberg MSS; Hiram Johnson to Hiram Johnson, Jr., July 16, 1939, Johnson MSS; author's interview with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965. Vandenberg noted that whatever their differences, the "curious collection" became "intent upon team ball" in the matter of the arms embargo.

⁴³ *Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 1939; "34 in a Lair," *Time*, XXXIV (July 17, 1939), p. 13; Statement issued from office of Hiram Johnson, July 7, 1939, Hiram Johnson MSS; Johnson to Hiram Johnson, Jr., July 16, 1939, *ibid.*; author's interviews with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965, and Burton K. Wheeler, December 28, 1965.

⁴⁴ On Pittman's inadequacies as a leader, see J. Pierrepont Moffat to Joseph Grew, Moffat MSS.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, July 12, 1939; Johnson to Hiram Johnson, Jr., July 16, 1939, Johnson MSS; Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, pp. 277-278.

⁴⁶ Donald Drummond, *The Passing of American Neutrality, 1937-1941* (Ann Arbor, 1955), p. 96.

⁴⁷ Stephen Farly to Myron Taylor, September 8, 1939, FDR MSS, Official File 1561. See also telegrams from Pat McCarran to Borah, August 31, 1939, Borah to McCarran, August 31, 1939, and McCarran to Borah, September 1, 1939, Borah MSS.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, June 6, 1939.

⁴⁹ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 250; Ernest Lundeen Radio Address, December 4, 1939, Lundeen MSS, Hoover Institution, Stanford University; author's interview with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965.

⁵⁰ Statement to International News Service, September 1, 1939, Borah MSS, Box 426.

332 HISTORICAL PAPERS 1972 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

⁵¹ "The Battle over the Arms Embargo," typewritten entry, September 15, 1939, Scrapbook 12, Vandenberg MSS, Clements Library, University of Michigan; Emphasis his.

⁵² See footnote 56, below.

⁵³ Philip E. Jacob, "Influence of World Events on U.S. 'Neutrality' Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, IV (March, 1940), pp. 55-56; *Public Opinion Quarterly*, IV (March, 1940), pp. 105-106.

⁵⁴ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 47-49.

⁵⁵ Stephen Farly to Myron Taylor, September 8, 1939, FDR MSS, Official File 1561; *New York Times*, September 15, 1939; NCPW MSS, Drawer 82, *passim*. The NCPW assessments tended to be slightly more optimistic, but merely by listing as "doubtful" those who were not rabid Administration supporters.

⁵⁶ The twenty-four were Republicans Johnson, La Follette, Borah, Gurney, Nye, Vandenberg, Danaher, Reed, Tobey, Barbour, Capper, Frazier, Bridges, Lodge; Democrats McCarran, Downey, Overton, Walsh, Holt, Bulow, Clark (Mo.), and Clark (Idaho); Farm-laborites Lundeen and Shipstead. Undated memorandum, Hiram Johnson MSS.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, September 31, 1939. The volume of mail grew to such proportions, Nye recalled, that each time they made a major speech, the leaders became fearful that the deluge of responses would be completely unmanageable. Author's interview with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965. Several Senators had brief form replies printed; that of Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., stated that he had received over 100,000 letters. Copies in NCPW MSS, Drawer 82.

⁵⁸ Both the quantity and content of mail received can be seen in the Borah MSS, Boxes 645-682. Capper MSS, Hiram Johnson MSS, George W. Norris MSS, Library of Congress, Tray 31; La Follette MSS, Library of Congress, Boxes B372-B392; Lundeen MSS, Boxes 14-19; and Henrik Shipstead MSS, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Boxes 2-5. Nye's report is in "Off the Record Memorandum" to staff members, October 1, 1939, NCPW MSS, Drawer 82.

⁵⁹ The prodigious efforts of the National Council for the Prevention of War are revealed in NCPW MSS, especially Drawer 82.

⁶⁰ *Public Opinion Quarterly*, IV (March, 1940), pp. 55-56, 105-106.

⁶¹ See footnote 55, above.

⁶² *New York Times*, September 23, 1939; *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 293.

⁶³ *New York Times*, September 7, 1939.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, September 14, 1939.

⁶⁵ The committee voted 16 to 7 to report the bill. Only Borah, Capper, Clark, Johnson, La Follette, Shipstead, and Vandenberg voted to block its passage. *New York Times*, September 29, 1939. James Byrnes worked to ward off a repetition of the dissidence of conservative Democrats. Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, p. 292. Reynolds' pre-war statement is in Allen Michie and Frank Rhylick, *Dixie Demagogues* (New York, 1939), p. 226; he did not support the bill once it had been reported out.

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, September 23, 1939.

⁶⁷ See Norris, "American Neutrality," radio speech, National Broadcasting Company, October 3, 1939, copy in Norris MSS, Tray 31, Box 4.

⁶⁸ Editorial, Portland, *Oregonian*, October 7, 1939, copy in Norris MSS, Tray 25, Box 9. Richard Neuberger wrote Norris's secretary: "My stand for the embargo is made difficult by a lot of people who say to me, 'Senator Norris, whom you admire more than any man in public life, is for lifting the embargo. What have you got to say about *that*?' " Neuberger to John P. Robertson, October 21, 1939, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ According to Senators Nye and Wheeler, most of the pro-embargo group believed that Norris's stand stemmed from, in Nye's words, a "personal relationship with FDR that weakened his independence." Author's interviews with Gerald P. Nye, August 19, 1965, and Burton K. Wheeler, December 28, 1965.

⁷⁰ Norris to Borchard, October 12, 1939, *ibid.* See also Norris to William Allen White, October 30, 1939, and "Interview Dictated by Senator Norris for Blair Moody," *ibid.* For a detailed analysis of Norris' position, see Thomas N. Guinsburg, "George Norris's 'Conversion' to Internationalism, 1937-1941," *Nebraska History*, LIII (Winter 1972), pp. 477-490, from which the preceding three paragraphs have been adapted.

⁷¹ Unidentified clipping, December 1, 1938, Lewis Schwellenbach MSS, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Acq. 11,494, Box 5.

⁷² *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 128.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-125.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, October 7, 1939; *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 638.

⁷⁷ *New York Times*, October 2, 1939.

⁷⁸ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., Appendix, p. 146.

⁷⁹ Borah to T. S. Bright, July 29, 1939, Borah MSS, Box 426; handwritten notes [1939], *ibid.*, Box 544.

⁸⁰ Radio Speech, WIBW, September 3, 1939, Capper MSS. See also Ernest Lundeen's Speech of October 14, 1939, Lundeen MSS, Box 277.

⁸¹ Johnson to John Bassett Moore, September 24, 1939, Hiram Johnson MSS.

⁸² See, for example, Pittman's statement during the debate on repeal that it was "obvious that if we have no embargo law both belligerents will obtain equally our arms, ammunition, and implements of war." *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 268.

⁸³ Bennett Clark's bitter attack upon the "secret assumption" is in *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 266.

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, October 8, 1939.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Crawford, "Shadowboxing in Washington," *Nation*, CXLIX (October 14, 1939), p. 40.

⁸⁶ *Time*, XXXIV (October 2, 1939), p. 16.

⁸⁷ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 237. The Bill to recommit received "yea" votes from those Senators listed in note 56, above, with the exception of Gurney of South Dakota and New Jersey's Barbour, both of whom had decided to support repeal, and Shipstead, who was absent but paired in favor of the bill. Joining them were Montana's Wheeler, McNary and Rufus Holman, Republicans of Oregon, John Townsend, Republican of Delaware, and Pennsylvania Republican James Davis.

⁸⁸ Even this alteration was defeated, on two occasions, by forty-five to forty-one and by fifty to forty-three. *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 805, 974.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1024, 1356.

⁹⁰ Only eleven Senators deviated from their basic position more than twenty per cent of the time. Only three presented a completely "divided" voting record over the series of roll calls. Robert Taft cast nine votes with the isolationists but believed that the arms embargo made American involvement in the war more likely. Colorado's Edwin Johnson, a Democrat, and South Dakota's Republican Chan Gurney wavered unpredictably from one side to the other, but furnished welcome — and unexpected — support to the Administration on the crucial motion to recommit and on the final votes.

334 HISTORICAL PAPERS 1972 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

⁹¹ 54 per cent of the Republicans came from these sections, 43 per cent of the Democrats.

⁹² Undated memoranda, Hiram Johnson MSS; McNary to W. Yeoman, October 12, 1939, Charles McNary MSS, Library of Congress, Box 7.

⁹³ Reed to White, September 4, 1939, William Allen White MSS, Library of Congress, Box 224.

⁹⁴ Julius Turner, *Party and Constituency* (Baltimore, 1951), p. 24. Using Stuart Rice's analytical device, the "index of cohesion," the difference between the percentage of those on one side on an issue and the percentage of those on the other (see his *Quantitative Methods in Politics* [New York, 1928], ch. 15), the Republicans had a low index of 20. The Democrats' relatively high index (64) is somewhat deceptive, since it includes the nearly unanimous southern delegation of thirty members. These aside, the Democratic index stood at 44.

⁹⁵ Charles Graham shows the diversity of Republican Senatorial positions in his "Republican Foreign Policy, 1939-1952" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1955), p. 22. Of those who helped to defeat the attempted emasculations, only White ultimately voted against the bill.

⁹⁶ See above, pp. 317-318.

⁹⁷ I ubell, *The Future of American Politics* (2nd ed., revised; New York, 1956), p. 140.

⁹⁸ See the analysis by Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner in the *New York Times* September 15, 1939.

⁹⁹ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 605.

¹⁰⁰ The quoted words are those of James Byrnes. *New York Times* September 13, 1939.

¹⁰¹ *New York Times*, September 15, 1939. This view was shared by the State Department. Hull believed "a single false step might lose the battle." See Moffat Diary, September 18-19, 1939 Moffat MSS.

¹⁰² The Administration's caution about encroaching on Congressional prerogative is indicated in a letter from Hull to Vandenberg in which the Secretary refused to comment on the bill before the Senate. Hull to Vandenberg, September 26, 1939, State Department File 811.04418/555-1/2, U.S. National Archives. The Administration did wage a concerted behind-the-scenes campaign to conciliate the conservative Democrats and build bi-partisan support. Divine, *Illusion of Neutrality*, pp. 302-307.

¹⁰³ When Roosevelt had suggested to Pittman on September 20 that an attempt should be made at outright repeal, Pittman had replied, "If you try that you'll be damn lucky to get five votes on my committee." Fred L. Israel, *Nevada's Key Pittman* (Lincoln, 1963), p. 168.

¹⁰⁴ The text of the "Neutrality Act of 1939," is in *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 1352-1354. The quoted characterization is that of Langer and Gleason, *Challenge to Isolation*, p. 232.

¹⁰⁵ *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 360. See also his "The Foreign Situation and the Neutrality Act," September 6, 1939, Taft MSS, Box 639.

¹⁰⁶ Holt's charge came in a radio address, National Broadcasting Company, October 16, 1939, Holt MSS, Acquisition 1701. Representative protestations to the contrary are quoted in Charles A. Beard, *American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932-1940*, pp. 245-250.

¹⁰⁷ "I let no group assume the exclusive label of peace bloc," Roosevelt said in his message to Congress: "We all belong to it." *New York Times*, September 22, 1939.

¹⁰⁸ Nye to Ibbey, November 6, 1939, NCPW MSS, Drawer 82.

¹⁰⁹ Vandenberg to Newbold Noyes, October 10, 1939, Vandenberg MSS. For a similar viewpoint see the "Comments of David I. Walsh on Passage of Neutrality Bill," October 27, 1939, David I. Walsh MSS.

¹¹⁰ Typewritten comments, "The Battle over the Arms Embargo," September 15, 1939, Scrapbook 12, Vandenberg MSS.

¹¹¹ Borah to Jess Hawley, October 31, 1939, Borah MSS, Box 246.