

H-Diplo ESSAY 207

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

25 March 2020

Naught without Labor: A Half Century of Exploration into Twentieth-Century American Intervention and Its Critics

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E207>

Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

ESSAY BY JUSTUS D. DOENECKE, NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA, EMERITUS

When I entered Colgate University in 1956, I arrived with the vaguest of vocational goals. In secondary school, I had picked up a love of history, in part prompted by assiduous stamp collecting, and I entered college with the nebulous aspirations (in order of preference) of being a high-school history teacher-cum-track coach, journalist, lawyer, or Protestant minister. Not long after my first term began, I set my sights on teaching on the college level, thanks in large measure to a remarkable group of professors: Rodney Mott, who could argue both sides of any Supreme Court case with equal rigor; Charles Ray Wilson, whose dynamic lectures on the Gilded Age gave me a lifelong fascination with the subject; Arnold Sio, a sociologist whose knowledge of the American past made him the peer of many in the discipline of history; and William Askew, whose excitement about Europe's diplomatic past was contagious. (Askew loved to describe 'secret papers' he had found in the Italian archives).

Most of all, there was Charles Stuart Blackton (whose nickname was curiously "T"), an Australia expert who taught a course in Far Eastern history and who had mastered Japanese while attending language school as a naval officer. He supervised my senior thesis, which centered on the Pearl Harbor attack and reached quite conventional conclusions: the strike was the product of blundering, not conspiracy. In fact, looking at the thesis over half century later, I find that I wasn't rough enough on the casual way in which the United States' diplomacy was conducted with the Japanese during those crucial years of 1940 and 1941.

Only when I began graduate work at Princeton in 1960, however, did I realize what it meant to be a professional. Nobody could have been more green. I had yet to realize that exploring almost every major topic in American history involved perusing an endless amount of books, articles, and dissertations, that academic prose had to be as meticulously accurate as it was readable, and that one must choose a dissertation topic within a year and a half. Most important of all, I was totally ignorant of the fact that one had to pass qualifying exams at the end of one's second year of study in order to qualify for writing a Ph.D. thesis. For me, both the written and oral parts of this exam, conducted by four professors, covered 150 years of American history plus 100 of European history and would therefore include entire decades for which no graduate seminars had been offered. In short, though the Princeton campus is noted for its Gothic towers and ivy-covered walls, I experienced it as an academic boot camp, an intellectual Parris Island on Lake Carnegie.

Yet I was singularly blessed by the caliber of instruction. Much of what I learned came from auditing lectures, something not required, or even expected, of graduate students. Wesley Frank Craven conveyed American colonial history with both erudition and passion. What I thought would be the duller of periods turned out to be quite fascinating. His notes were a lifesaver when I was later drafted to teach a course on the subject. David Donald, the Lincoln biographer and Civil War scholar, was almost hypnotic in his presentations. His presentations were so skillfully crafted they would have done credit to the *Atlantic* or *New Yorker*. In seminar, Donald evaluated papers on a number of categories (e.g., form, organization, sources, style, methodology, and conclusion). The word 'rigorous' is a term far too mild to describe his critiques of our work. John

William Ward's seminar in American intellectual history taught us to read a text as intensely as would any biblical expositor. Eric Goldman, a specialist in the twentieth-century United States, was a spellbinder on the lecture platform and a true master of English prose. "A sentence," he once said, "is a beautiful thing." (When students, however, sought to imitate his *Time*-style slavishly, the results could be disastrous!) Arno Mayer's lectures on twentieth-century Europe and his seminar on the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 stressed underlying ideological currents—right versus left, revolution versus counterrevolution, the forces of order versus the forces of movement. His depth of analysis, combined with his continental urbanity, would have made him an ideal traveling companion while driving through Europe. My notes on his courses helped save me when time and again I had to teach European history.

By far, however, the greatest influence was Arthur S. Link, a man of formidable demeanor who academic rigor and encyclopedic knowledge of the general literature of American history drew respect bordering on awe. Not particularly sparing in his criticism, he would find many candidates for "the historian's chamber of horrors." Once, when finding a decent work written by a scholar whom he considered a walking potboiler, he remarked, "You know, the book is much better than the man." (Full disclosure: after his meticulous evaluation of the first seminar paper I ever wrote in graduate school, I wondered if I was truly cut out for the historical profession.)

My interest in isolationism (I now prefer the term anti-interventionism) was first aroused by my parents, both of whom were isolationists and who thought that the columnists in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal-American* (I was a Brooklyn boy) were sacred scripture. Hence in 1962, I sought to write a doctoral thesis attempting to prove a claim propounded in a stimulating lecture by Eric Goldman, namely that what was usually considered America-firstism was really Asia-firstism. When I broached the hypothesis to Arthur Link, who was my thesis adviser, he suggested that I start with the Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria and see what I came up with. After a summer's reading of the *New York Times* in microfilm in a gloomy room in the basement of Firestone Library, I came up with negative findings concerning the working hypothesis, as I discovered that the 'isolationists' of 1931-1933 were isolationists after all.

But Link saved me. Rather than have me give up the summer's work, he suggested that I write on the general reaction of American opinion leaders to the Manchurian crisis. I scoured every source in sight—general journals of opinion; religious and business periodicals; radical and labor newspapers; manuscript archives in Washington, Boston, New York, New Haven, and Boston and at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. Link's training was invaluable, first because of his insistence on thoroughness, and second because prose had to be as precise as one could make it. In time the thesis became a book with the title *When the Wicked Rise: American Opinion-Makers and the Manchurian Crisis of 1931-1933*.¹ I concluded that there existed a surprisingly amount of internationalism for an isolationist decade. Far from being indifferent, Americans were first distressed, then outraged by Japan's behavior in Manchuria as well as by the Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1932. Debates over coercing Japan by sanctions and boycotts were quite lively, involving a good many opinion leaders. Despite Japan's conquest of Manchuria, the great majority of American policy and opinion leaders believed that the Japanese could not possible remain there, indeed that the peace system embodied the 1923 Washington Conference and the Kellogg-Brand antiwar pact of 1928 was still working quite well.

But my encounter with Manchuria was not yet done. Thanks to several summers of research at Stanford's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, I was able to work through the papers of Stanley K. Hornbeck, chief of the State Department's Division of Far Eastern Affairs and a diplomat who in 1932 wanted a much more strident confrontation with Japan than did the rest of the Hoover administration. Hence, the book's major title: *The Diplomacy of Frustration*.²

¹ Justus D. Doenecke, *When the Wicked Rise: American Opinion-Makers and the Manchurian Crisis of 1931-1933* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1984).

² Doenecke, *The Diplomacy of Frustration: The Manchurian Crisis of 1931-1933 as Revealed in the Papers of Stanley K. Hornbeck* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1981).

All this time, indeed throughout my whole career, I was teaching at small liberal-arts colleges with heavy teaching loads. In the academic year 1963-1964, I replaced my undergraduate mentor Charles Blackton at Colgate, where I taught a *course* in contemporary U.S. foreign policy and a freshman survey spanning the Renaissance through World War II. Both met three times a week. From 1965-69, I was on the faculty at Ohio Wesleyan University, where I had a 2-2-3 load, sometimes without repeating a single course throughout the academic year. The range of courses included twentieth-century Europe, a narrative sequence in U.S. history, and American intellectual history.

From 1969 to my retirement in 2005, I taught at New College of Florida, long designated as the honors college of the state. In a history department of three people, I incarnated an entire one-person American history program. Because of the highly flexible nature of the institution, I could design entire courses on such topics as Puritanism, Slavery, Dissent in American History, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. I also co-taught American studies courses involving literature and history. All New College faculty were responsible for holding several one-on-one tutorials with students each term and supervising senior theses, a mandatory requirement of all our undergraduates. In my entire teaching career of forty-two years, I never had a TA. I read every paper and blue book myself. Yet I consider myself truly privileged for being able to have so rich a span of knowledge open to me and to share it with students. My entire career has been a venture in self-education.

By the time I received my doctorate in 1966, I was ready to look at the wider phenomena of isolationism. Wayne S. Cole had already written his definitive history of the America First Committee and was embarking on his study of Charles Lindbergh as well as on a wider work, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45*.³ As I engaged in my own research, it became increasingly clear that whereas Cole stressed geographic and economic factors, I emphasized ideological ones. In this sense, I feel that we both supplemented each other. Cole was always a good personal friend whose historical wisdom, which he was quite willing to share, I always treasured.

I not could have written history without the generosity of others. Once I started researching, I was fortunate enough to receive aid from the National Endowment of the Humanities, the Shell Oil Company, the John Anson Kitteridge Educational Fund, the Earhart Foundation, and my own New College. I spent many months at the Institute for Humane Studies in Menlo Park, California. Without such aid, I could never have spent summer after summer, sometimes an academic term or even a year, traveling to one archive after another throughout the nation, not only examining manuscripts and newspapers but something I found to be a surpassingly good source for my kind of research, the student press. For over the past half century, I have also benefited from painstaking and meticulous critiques from in some of the most generous people ever to grace any profession: Forrest and Ellen McDonald, Thomas C. Reeves, Alan Peskin, James T. Patterson, Hans Louis Trefousse, David Trask, Irwin Gellman, John Milton Cooper, Jr., John A. Thompson, June and Elliot Benowitz, Scott Perry, Frank Samponaro, and John Belohlavek. More than anyone, the McDonalds taught me how to write.

Heavily influenced by Otis S. Graham, Jr.'s *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal*, I sought to apply his methodology to foes of FDR's foreign policy, an enterprise that resulted in *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era*.⁴ In my conclusions I like to think of myself as more balanced than many previous commentators.

Admittedly, many of the so-called isolationists acted most irresponsibly, opposing economic and military aid to war-torn Europe, propounding conspiracy theories concerning Franklin D. Roosevelt, backing Senator Joseph McCarthy, and harboring a reckless 'Asialationism' during the Korean War. Yet I found some to have been wise in pointing out the danger

³ Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention 1940-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953); Cole, *Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle Against Intervention in World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

⁴ Otis L. Graham, Jr., *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979).

of overcommitting the nation's resources, presenting thoughtful challenges to 'official' or 'court' history, and offering a healthy distrust of executive power in what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. ended up calling the imperial presidency.⁵

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, I concentrated on composing extensive bibliographies and on exploring various individuals (e.g., the self-styled "fascist" Lawrence Dennis, arch-revisionist historian Harry Elmer Barnes, Yale law professor Edwin Borchard, mid-western business leader General Robert E. Wood); various action groups (e.g., the Keep America Out of War Congress, the No Foreign War Committee, the Foundation for Foreign Affairs); and publications (e.g., *Scribner's Commentator*). Thanks to the Hoover Institution, I was able to publish *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee*.⁶ In 2000, three and a half decades of research culminated in *Storm in the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941*, a work that tried to put to rest any notion that the basis of significant opposition to Roosevelt's foreign policy lay in lunacy, anti-Semitism, or a naiveté that was criminally irresponsible.⁷ I found that the anti-interventionists often offered coherent strategic and economic rationales for their stance, many of them far from being "the illustrious dunderheads" of legend or the "subversives" portrayed in John Roy Carlson's *Under Cover*.⁸ I was particularly surprised by the ardent opposition found on university campuses and among a substantial element of the American left, even after Hitler invaded Russia.

During this time, I began to broaden my focus, venturing into the administrations of James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur for the University Press of Kansas's presidential series.⁹ I fully realized the relative obscurity of both figures. I also knew that many historians found the Gilded Age itself either so boring in subject matter or so repellent in its materialistic ethos that they would race through the period so as get quickly to 'the age of reform.' In many ways, however, this was the period when modern America was being born, for it marked the industrialization of the nation. As I paged through *Harper's Weekly* and E.L. Godkin's *The Nation*, I found myself utterly fascinated by the era, particularly in regard to such matters as Latin American policy, naval development, and the post-Reconstruction South. I discovered surprising vacillation in the 'martyred' Garfield while seeing a great deal of competence in the much ridiculed Arthur.

I've taken other side excursions. Great privileges were extended me when Hans L. Trefousse asked me to contribute a volume on the New Deal for the Anvil series, James Patterson suggested I co-author a "debate" series on FDR's foreign policy with Mark Stoler, and John Wilz requested that I update editions of his *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941*.¹⁰

My methodology has always been traditional, as I have steeped myself in manuscript and contemporary narrative accounts. I've never been enticed by quantitative studies, psychohistory, and the categories of the Frankfurt school. I hold a sneaking sympathy for Warren Harding's secretary of labor, 'Puddler Jim' Davis, who claimed that he 'never knew a theorist who

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

⁶ Doenecke, *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990).

⁷ Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

⁸ John Roy Carlson, *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underground of America* (New York: Dutton, 1943).

⁹ Doenecke, *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1981).

¹⁰ Doenecke, *The New Deal* (Malibar, FL: Krieger, 2003); Doenecke and Mark A. Stoler, *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies, 1933-1945* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Doenecke and John A. Wilz, *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 2nd ed., 1991; 3rd ed., 2003; 4th ed., 2015).

wasn't a sick man.' I have relied on such long-revered political scientists as Gabriel Almond to analyze the nature of public opinion, but even the once popular categories as 'realism/idealism' or 'Open Door diplomacy' have left little mark.¹¹

As I was approaching retirement in 2005, I decided to venture into an entire new area, the U.S. in World War I. Not that long before, over lunch at Stanford, Germany expert Gordon Craig told me, "Always select a big topic for study. Always choose a topic that is impossible to exhaust. Work on something where there will always be too many sources, too many avenues ever to master totally."

Despite my seminar work with Arthur Link and Arno Mayer, I had never worked in the Wilson era. For close to a half century, I had read intensively on the period and collected a good number of books on the subject, many of them primary works. I realized, of course, that American involvement in World War I had been covered numerous times. I was originally going to write on opponents of Wilson's European policy during the years of American neutrality. As I researched, I became increasingly convinced that I needed to broaden my inquiry to present a fresh full-scale study focusing on policymaking as well. In my *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry into World War I*, I fault Wilson on a number of matters, in particular his "strict accountability" note and his entrusting the most sensitive of diplomatic missions to his confident, Colonel E.M. House.¹² At the same time, however, I find Wilson far superior to any rival who stood a chance of being elected president.

Currently I'm completing a manuscript on U.S. participation in the war itself, giving extensive attention not simply to the battlefield but to such matters as conscription, peace aims, and the Russian involvement. As in my past work, I do much with the opposition to the Wilson administration, examining the arguments and ideologies of the dissenters. Now, as the United States is exercising a global influence unmatched by any power the world, we historians have a responsibility to scrutinize more critically our past crusades.

Justus D. Doenecke is professor emeritus of New College of Florida. Among his books relevant to this review are *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), recipient of SHAFR's Arthur S. Link Prize for Documentary Editing; *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (4th ed., Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2015); and *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), recipient of Herbert Hoover Book Award of the Hoover Presidential Library. He is currently writing an account of America's role as belligerent in World War I.

¹¹ Gabriel Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950).

¹² Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of American Entry into World War I, 1914-1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).