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Totalitarianism or Peace: Herbert Hoover and the Road to War, 1939-1941

Gary Dean Best

THE ASSAULTS ON THE STATUS QUO IN EUROPE AND ASIA IN THE late 1930s brought former President Herbert Hoover to a prominent position in the debates over U.S. foreign policy. The response of one of America's leading conservatives was predictable in view of the policies of his administration at the time of the Manchurian Incident. The wave of international lawlessness which followed that incident, shattering the inter-war treaty structure upon which the world had pinned its hopes for peace, did not lead Hoover to re-evaluate the consequences of his policies of 1931-32. Rather the episode confirmed his belief that the United States should avoid involvement in such conflicts.

Commenting on the invasion of China by the Japanese in late 1937, he said: "There are plenty of ways that we can establish our honor and our dignity without going to war over questions of this sort. I am not particularly a pacifist, but I have felt that war should be resolved as the answer to assaults upon our national freedom and this alone."¹ Three weeks later he told a meeting of Republican women that "democratic government now, and for many years to come, probably could not stand the

¹Letter, Hoover to Bainbridge Colby, December 23, 1937, Hoover Papers, Post-Presidential Individual, Hoover Presidential Library, hereafter cited as HP.

shock of another great war and survive as a democracy." The United States should prepare herself to "fight for our independence to the last shred of our material and physical strength," but such strength should be used only to defend the Western Hemisphere and not to "prevent or end other peoples' wars." Nor should the United States participate in any economic actions to that end, but it should "co-operate with other nations to exert moral force and build pacific agencies to preserve peace or end conflict in the world."² Largely as a result, apparently, of his outspoken opposition to American involvement in the war, Hoover's popularity rose noticeably in early 1938. His appearance in movie newsreels evoked applause, and a public opinion poll in June showed him the second choice of Republicans, trailing Arthur Vandenberg, but leading the 1936 candidate, Alf Landon.³

The 1938 off-year elections brought Robert A. Taft to the U.S. Senate in 1939. Taft, son of former President William Howard Taft, had served under Hoover in Europe in the American Relief Administration after World War I, and had maintained his friendship with "the Chief" ever since. Taft quickly began to echo Hoover's foreign policy views in the Senate. Other allies also took up the fight, notably Senator Styles Bridges of New Hampshire who, like Hoover, argued that "above all things, America must keep out of war."⁴ Other allies came to Hoover in the unsuccessful fight against repeal of the neutrality law in 1939. By the end of the year, Hoover and Taft had especially become close, consulting with one another on foreign policy questions. Meantime, so closely were Hoover and Bridges cooperating on the fight over neutrality, at one point Bridges introduced as his own an amendment that had been largely drafted by Hoover. Similar requests for draft amendments were coming to Hoover from Senator Arthur Vandenberg.⁵

²Reprinted as "American Policies for Peace," in Herbert Hoover, *Addresses Upon the American Road, 1933-1938* (New York, 1938), 300-308.

³Letter, Raymond Clapper to George Carlin, April 14, 1938, Clapper Papers, Library of Congress; Arch Shaw to Hoover, June 9, 1938, HP.

⁴Letter, Bridges to Hoover, February 18, 1939, HP; "America Needs a Foreign Policy: Address of Senator Styles Bridges on NBC, February 20, 1939," HP.

⁵Letter, Taft to Hoover, September 5, 1939; Bridges to Hoover, October 10, 1939; Hoover to Bridges, October 11, 1939, with copy of amendment introduced; Hoover to Vandenberg, October 12, 1939, all in HP.

The participation of the Soviet Union in the invasion of Poland confirmed Hoover's long-time suspicion and hatred of the Soviet Union's communist government. In an article in *Collier's* magazine, Hoover charged that the Soviet invasion of Poland and her attacks on Latvia, Estonia and Finland revealed the bankruptcy of the Roosevelt administration's policy of recognizing the USSR in 1933, breaking with sixteen years of non-recognition by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Considering her aggression in Europe together with alleged attempts at subversion within the United States itself, Hoover concluded that recognition of the USSR was a "gigantic political and moral mistake." He did not suggest the withdrawal of recognition, as such an action might be misinterpreted as "warlike," but he did suggest leaving the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in the hands of a charge d'affaires, and he asked of his countrymen: "Why are we more tender of tyranny in Communist Russia than in Nazi Germany?"⁶

By 1940, Hoover had formed a geopolitical view which was in conflict with that prevailing in much of the United States, and certainly in the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Roosevelt administration regarded Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan as the great threats to the status quo and, ultimately, to American security. For Hoover, the greatest threat to the world and to the United States was the Soviet Union and its support of international communism. According to this view, Germany and Japan represented the two forces containing Soviet expansion. Destruction of them would deliver much of the world to communism.⁷ This view was not unique with Hoover. It had been expressed as early as 1935 by John V. A. MacMurray in a memorandum for the State Department.⁸ But it now contributed to the motivation of the former president in rallying public opposition to the drift toward American participation in the war against Germany.

The winter of 1940-41 saw a losing battle by Hoover, Taft and others against the proposed Lend-Lease Act. Although he

⁶Reprinted as "Russian Misadventure," in Hoover, *Further Addresses Upon The American Road, 1938-1940* (New York, 1940), 158-171.

⁷Letter, Felix M. Morley oral history, Hoover Presidential Library.

⁸Quoted in George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago, 1951), 48.

refused to join the America First Committee—the anti-interventionist group headed by General Robert E. Wood—Hoover cooperated closely with them in the fight.⁹ Hoover was already convinced that President Roosevelt was bent on taking the United States into the European War. Given the overwhelming Democratic strength in Congress, the best that opponents of war could hope for was to reduce the president's options through amendments, or to gain time by delaying passage of the bill. As for Hoover, he was widely accepted as the leader of Republican opposition to the bill. As he put it himself:

I have been in constant communication with Republicans in the House and Senate. We are developing a definite program. We have secured a continuous stream of able radio speakers and have more coming up. I think we are going to defeat the big issue in this bill, that is giving the President the power to make war.¹⁰

Hoover refused to concede that the Germans posed any immediate threat to the United States. When he met with Secretary of State Cordell Hull in February, 1941, Hoover recorded:

[Hull] referred to the Germans as determined to conquer the entire world. That if England fell, they would at once bring South America into their economic or political axis and then they would attack us. I said that if we were speculating, I had entirely another thesis—that was that they had no intention of any attack on the Western Hemisphere, at least for a very long time. That it was my view that it was their determination to dominate Russia after they had settled with the British. I recited my impressions from discussions with them in 1938 where I saw many evidences of their interest in Russia. That Russia and the Balkans together possessed far greater undeveloped resources than the whole Western Hemisphere, that the Germans were a land people, a soldier people not a sea people, that Russia could be had with two Army Corps, while the Western Hemisphere would require gigantic sea equipment.¹¹

While Hoover's assessment of Germany's military strength was faulty, his prophecy was superior to Hull's own view of the future. And for Hoover Communist Russia was clearly acceptable as a direction for German expansion. If the United States stayed out of such a war, perhaps the two totalitarian dictatorships would spend their strength in battling one another.

⁹Letter, Hoover to R. Douglas Stuart, Jr., December 6, 1940, HP.

¹⁰Letter, Hoover to Taft, January 6, 1941; Hoover to Walter Newton, January 25, 1941; Robert E. Wood to Hoover, February 7, 1941, all in HP.

¹¹"Memorandum of a meeting with Hull at 9:30 on February 28, 1941," in HP.

For Hoover the most serious totalitarian threat to the United States was an internal one, and one that would be immeasurably assisted in its goals if the United States entered the war, and war-time regimentation was delivered into the hands of New Dealers. At Yale University he recalled for his listeners the history of the United States during World War I:

Whatever the fine phrases were in which we wrapped these actions, the cold fact was that government in business was Socialism, and government dictation to private owners was Fascism. The word Fascism had not then been invented. The freedom of labor and the freedom of the farmer were driven a long way down that blind alley. When people attempted to stand on their so-called rights, propaganda, intolerance and penalties of a law were directed to drive them to cover. Taxes which expropriated savings, pressure loans and inflation were necessary. All that is the method of Fascism. Is it to be the tragic jeopardy of democracy that if it would go to war, it must adopt the very systems which we abhor?¹²

A few weeks before the 1940 presidential election, Hoover charged that: "This administration is steadily developing the same growth of personal power that has swept the world into Nazism and Fascism."¹³ Clearly, Hoover feared that the war-time regimentation which had been ended after World War I by President Woodrow Wilson, would not be surrendered so easily by the New Deal leaders if they were once able to institute it. Later, when the United States had already entered the war, Hoover wrote GOP Congressional leader Joseph Martin that the Republican party must "stop the use of war measures to permanently collectivize this country."¹⁴

When, in June, 1941, the German armies poured into the Soviet Union, as Hoover had predicted they would, he was furnished with a strong new reason why the United States should avoid participation in the European war. The Russian Revolution in 1917 had affected the perceptions of many concerning World War I. Slogans supporting a war in defense of democracy had a hollow ring as long as one of those nations allied against the Germans had been the widely despised Czarist government of Russia. But the revolution of 1917 changed that view to one of democracy against autocracy. The Bolshevik take-over later that

¹²Reprinted as "The Question of Peace," in Hoover, *Addresses Upon the American Road, 1940-1941* (New York, 1941), 66.

¹³*San Francisco News*, October 22, 1940.

¹⁴Letter, Hoover to Joe Martin, November 6, 1942, HP.



Hoover as he appeared in 1933

year, however, gave the lie to that view of the war. But in 1941, events in Russia again contributed to an altered perception of another war. What had to this time been in many minds a war by nazism and fascism against freedom was now transformed, in the eyes of Hoover and others, into a war in which the principal antagonists were two totalitarian dictatorships—Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.

Soon after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, both Taft and Hoover delivered radio speeches outlining the altered situation. Taft's speech, on June 25, 1941, argued that "it would be contrary to the future welfare and happiness of the people of this country for us to intervene in the war now proceeding. . . ." Interpreting arguments in favor of American participation in the war as "a belief in our divine appointment to reform the world," Taft called them bankrupt and ludicrous. He cited the recent transformation of the conflict through the German invasion of the Soviet Union as confirmation of his conclusion. The war was no longer between totalitarian states and democracies, but rather a war between totalitarian states. This was so, Taft maintained, despite the efforts of the Roosevelt administration to influence public opinion in transforming the image of Greece and China and Brazil and the Soviet Union into democracies, even while all the time "they were governed without question by dictators." How could the United States aid the USSR when "no country was more responsible for the present war and Germany's aggression than Russia itself." It was the Russian pact with Germany which had freed the Germans to undertake their aggression against Poland and their war against France and Great Britain. What's more, "Russia proved to be as much of an aggressor as Germany itself." How could the United States, in the name of democracy, make an alliance "with the most ruthless dictator in the world?"

Could there be a greater travesty on the false propaganda fed to the American people than that this is a great moral issue between ideologies? If Hitler wins, it is a victory for fascism. If Stalin wins, it is a victory for communism. From that point of ideology, there is no choice. But the victory of communism in the world would be far more dangerous to the United States than the victory of fascism.

Taft asserted that "communism masquerades, often success-

fully, under the guise of democracy, though just as alien to our principles as nazism itself." Thus, while as false a philosophy as nazism or fascism, it appealed to more people. If the United States would stay clear of the conflict, the German invasion of the Soviet Union might turn out to be the solution to the problems of the world. The Germans seemed to have turned from the objective of capturing the British Isles. The United States ought to continue supplying the British and to try to make peace between Germany and Great Britain, but it ought to stay out of the war. Taft concluded that: "The Russian war has weakened every argument for intervention."¹⁵

Hoover pronounced Taft's a "good speech," and sent him a copy of his own, which followed Taft's by four days.¹⁶ Hoover told the American people he found it curious that the German invasion of the Soviet Union had led to an intensification of the "propaganda of fear or hate" designed to draw the United States into the war. He recognized that it was sensible for Great Britain and the Soviet Union to cooperate against their common enemy, now that the Soviet Union had been invaded by Britain's enemy, but he argued that the same invasion "makes the whole argument of our joining the war to bring the four freedoms to mankind a gargantuan jest." Before the Roosevelt administration, the United States had for sixteen years, under four American presidents and four secretaries of state, refused to recognize the Soviet Union because it was "one of the bloodiest tyrannies and terrors ever erected in history."

It destroyed every semblance of human rights and human liberty; it is a militant destroyer of the worship of God. It brutally executes millions of innocent people without the semblance of justice. It has enslaved the rest. Moreover, it has violated every international covenant, it has carried on a world conspiracy against all democracies including the United States.

In violation of its pledge to the United States at the time of U.S. recognition, the Soviet Union had carried out systematic subversion in this country, as revealed by the Dies Committee. "Is the

¹⁵"Broadcast by Robert A. Taft over Columbia Broadcasting System, June 25, 1941," HP.

The *Wall Street Journal* of same date expressed similar sentiments in describing the Russo-German war as between "Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

¹⁶Letter, Hoover to Taft, June 27, 1941, Taft Papers, Library of Congress.

word of Stalin any better than the word of Hitler?" Hoover asked his listeners.¹⁷

Hoover pointed to the agreement of 1939, between Stalin and Hitler under which "Stalin attacked the Poles jointly with Hitler and destroyed the freedom of a great and democratic people." Two weeks later the Soviet Union had put an end to democracy and freedom in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, and three months later she had attacked democratic Finland. If the United States now joined the war and helped the Soviet Union to win, she would "have won for Stalin the grip of communism on Russia, the enslavement of nations, and more opportunity for it to extend in the world." Instead, the United States should adopt a policy of "watchful waiting, armed to the teeth, while these men exhaust themselves." Then, the United States, as the most powerful nation in the world, could make her voice heard. She could do so only if she did not become enfeebled by participation in the struggle. And to align herself with the Soviet Union would cause the United States to lose all moral force, since "to align American ideals alongside Stalin will be as great a violation of everything American as to align ourselves with Hitler." Instead, the United States should "give every aid we can to Britain and China within the law, but . . . not put the American flag or American boys in the zone of war." The United States should "arm to the teeth" for the defense of the Americas and concentrate not on imposing freedoms on other peoples, but on "improving the four freedoms within our borders that the light of their success may stir the peoples of the world to their adoption." "Here in America," he argued, "is the only remaining sanctuary of freedom, the last oasis of civilization and the last reserve of moral and economic strength. It must be preserved."¹⁸

Privately, Hoover was convinced that "Germany will defeat Russia and dispose of that infecting center of Communism." He believed that Hitler would then propose peace to the British on terms that the latter would be able to accept.¹⁹ Moreover, he be-

¹⁷Reprinted as "A Call to American Reason," in Hoover, *Addresses Upon The American Road, 1940-1941*, 87-102.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Letter, Hoover to John Callan O'Laughlin, June 26, 1941, O'Laughlin Papers, Library of Congress, hereafter cited as OP.

lieved that were it not for the alignment of the United States in a stance favorable to the Soviet Union, a satisfactory arrangement might be made with Japan in Siberia. The collapse of the USSR would furnish the opportunity for a deflection of Japanese expansion away from the south, where it might threaten American interests, and toward the north. As Hoover put it, "It would relieve [Japan] of the terrible menace of the Vladivostok air bases—which relief they have a right to—and would give them a vast populated area into which to expand. I have just the hunch they would give up everything south of the Great Wall if they could get this and peace."²⁰ According to Hoover, American interests would be better served if eastern Siberia and Vladivostok were in the hands of Japan, than of Germany.²¹

Coincidental with his June 29th speech, Hoover was becoming involved in the construction and release of a joint statement by prominent Americans opposing the drift of the United States in the direction of war. Apparently it was the changed circumstances in the war which prompted Hoover's interest in such a statement now. Robert A. Taft and other Congressional opponents of war were not invited to participate in the statement, as the intent was to mobilize opinion outside of Congress. Hoover made numerous suggestions which were incorporated in the final draft of the statement, and it was released, finally, in early August of 1941. Despite efforts to obtain the signatures of leading Democrats, no Democrat of stature participated in the statement, although labor leader John L. Lewis did add his signature. The principal signatories were Republican leaders like Governor Landon, Governor Frank Lowden, former vice president Charles G. Dawes, and Hoover. The final statement read:

The American people should insistently demand that Congress put a stop to step-by-step projection of the United States into undeclared war. Congress has not only the sole power to declare war but also the power and responsibility to keep the country out of war unless and until both Houses have otherwise decided. Exceeding its expressed purpose, the lease-lend bill has been followed by naval action, by military occupation of bases outside the Western Hemisphere, by promise of unauthorized aid to Russia, and by other belligerent moves. Such warlike steps, in no case sanctioned by Congress, undermine its constitutional powers and the

²⁰Hoover to O'Laughlin, September 6, 1941, OP.

²¹Hoover to O'Laughlin, October 19, 1941, OP.

fundamental principles of democratic government. . . . We hold that in giving generous aid to these democracies . . . we have gone as far as is consistent either with law, with sentiment or with security. Recent events raise doubts that this war is a clear-cut issue of liberty and democracy. It is not purely a world conflict between tyranny and freedom. The Anglo-Russian alliance has dissipated that illusion. Insofar as this is a war of power-politics, the American people want no part in it. American participation is far more likely to destroy democracy in this country and thus in the Western Hemisphere than to establish it in Europe. The hope of civilization now rests primarily upon the preservation of freedom and democracy in the United States. . . . Few people honestly believe that the Axis now, or will in the future be in a position to threaten the independence of any part of this hemisphere if our defenses are concentrated on the defense of our own liberties. Freedom in America does not depend on the outcome of struggles for material power between other nations.²²

Thus, the statement re-emphasized Hoover's point that the war was not one between tyranny and freedom, but between two varieties of totalitarianism.

Hoover continued his attack against Roosevelt's policies. In mid-September he went on the air to tell the American people:

I hold, and 99 per cent of Americans hold, that totalitarianism, whether Nazism or Communism, is abominable. Both forms are unmoral because they deny religion, and there is no sanctity of agreement with them. They are abhorrent because of their unspeakable cruelty and their callous slaughter of millions of human beings. I abhor any American compromise or alliance with either one of them. A cold survey of this world situation will show that the dangers of ultimate totalitarian success are very much less than even ten weeks ago. The fratricidal war between Hitler and Stalin is daily weakening both dictators. . . . We are assured that Hitler cannot cross the English Channel with his armies. And England is even more impregnable because of this breathing spell for production of more planes, tanks and ships and our increasing aid in war tools. . . . The actual dangers to America are less today than at any time since the war began. Less even than three months ago.

Yet Roosevelt was rapidly driving the United States closer to war through such devices as the Atlantic Charter with Churchill. Hoover reviewed the World War I experience and told his listeners that the United States "should not again sacrifice our sons for proved will-o'-the-wisp." The United States should practice

²²The correspondence on this statement is in Foreign Policy File, HP, Post-Presidential Subject Files; the statement itself was printed in *New York Times*, August 6, 1941.

neither isolation nor intervention. It should aid the democracies short of going to war.²³

Hoover's last major address before the bombing of Pearl Harbor was on November 19th when he launched yet another attack on the steady march toward war. By now it appeared that Hoover's prediction was coming true, that the Soviet Union might before long be brought to defeat by the German Army. Hoover, however, was able to find even in the prospect of a Soviet defeat, proof that the United States ought to avoid participation in the war. On the one hand, the failure of the Soviet Union to contain the German armies, even with her "10 million men, 20 thousand tanks, 20 thousand planes, fighting on her own soil behind her own fortifications, with her transportation wholly over land and on inside lines," made clear the folly of any attempt by the United States to bring the war to an end by the use of military power. The best strategy was to let the war continue, if it must, without the United States involved. Already the German empire consisted of 230 million alien subjects who hated their German masters. If the Soviet Union were defeated, that total would be swollen by an additional hundred million. Hoover did not believe that Hitler would be overcome by internal revolts, but he did believe that the forces working against him from within would be more successful in destroying Hitler's dreams than would military attacks or economic blockades. Meanwhile, however, there was in Hoover's position no sympathy for the plight of the Soviet Union and no identification with it as an enemy of nazism. Rather, communism continued to be identified with *its* enemies, as an enemy of the United States. Said Hoover: "We want the end of these evil and brutal ideas of Nazism, Fascism and Communism."²⁴

At least as early as February, 1938, Hoover was concerned that Roosevelt was seeking to involve the United States in conflict with Japan.²⁵ The abrogation of the U.S. commercial treaty with Japan in mid-1939 left Hoover with "a foreboding that we have taken on a situation from which sooner or later we will see

²³Reprinted as "The Crisis," in Hoover, *Addresses Upon the American Road, 1940-1941*, 103-114.

²⁴"Shall We Send Armies to Europe? And a Way to National Unity," in *Public Statements, 1941*, HP.

²⁵Hoover to O'Laughlin, February 8, 1938, OP.

outrages upon American citizens and other incidents which will inflame the country and draw us into war in the east." If it was Roosevelt's desire to go to war with Japan, then the abrogation was "one step on the road."²⁶ When the Roosevelt administration cut off scrap iron and high octane gasoline exports to Japan, Hoover viewed it as "again only sticking a pin in a rattlesnake." In Hoover's opinion, "Either we should leave this thing alone, or we will be drawn into real trouble."²⁷ If the Japanese had only been left alone "these past three years, they would have gone to pieces internally. There is nothing so good for the dictators of Japan as outside pressure."²⁸ Hoover did not sympathize with Japan's occupation of Indochina, and he supported Roosevelt's actions in response to that occupation, but he felt that "Roosevelt's continuous sticking vocal pins in this tiger" had contributed to Japan's action and made a solution more difficult. Still, he hoped that a *modus vivendi* might be reached with the Japanese.²⁹ Three weeks before Pearl Harbor, Hoover wrote John Callan O'Laughlin that: "There is no sense in having a war with Japan. But I am afraid that our people are so anxious to get into the war somewhere that they will project it. They know there will be less public resistance to this than to expeditionary forces to Europe."³⁰ Three weeks later, as the result of the Japanese attack, the United States was locked in a war against German nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese imperialism, with the Communists of the Soviet Union as allies.

Hoover's opposition to participation in World War II stemmed from diverse causes. Certainly his Quaker background led him to view war as a last resort, to be entered into only as an act of self-defense. His intimate experience with the futile American crusade in World War I made him chary of new calls for intervention to save Europe from itself. But a prominent factor in Hoover's opposition to American participation in World War II was his perception of the totalitarian alternatives which seemed to be posed by that war. Support of Nazi Germany and

²⁶Hoover to O'Laughlin, July 31, 1939, OP.

²⁷Hoover to O'Laughlin, August 5, 1940, OP.

²⁸Hoover to O'Laughlin, August 3, 1941, OP.

²⁹Hoover to O'Laughlin, August 30, 1941, OP.

³⁰Hoover to O'Laughlin, November 16, 1941, OP.

Fascist Italy was clearly anathema to Hoover, as it was to most other Americans. But for Hoover, American support of Communist Russia, another totalitarian government, was equally objectionable—in some ways more so. Furthermore, Hoover's memories of the regimentation in America during World War I, were coupled with his very real concern over the greater regimentation he feared in a second world war under the New Deal. In Hoover's view, war would not save democracy and freedom in the United States, but extinguish it. The United States could remain a bastion of freedom in the world only by staying aloof from this war between totalitarian states.



Hoover testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees in February 1951. He still opposed involving the U.S. in a land war overseas.

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