

Isolationism: How Would We Know If We Saw It? Reopening the Case of the 1930s

By John Walko

Despite the general consensus on US isolationism in the 1930s—or perhaps because of it—there has been little systematic analysis as to what evidence actually indicates that public opinion was “isolationist.” When claiming isolationism, the standard historiography makes several claims about public opinion. The problem is that these claims have been presupposed rather than evaluated empirically.

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Public Support for Military Spending

Nineteen-thirties’ isolationism is asserted on the basis of an assumed mass opinion which refused to fund properly a military establishment, largely because the economic crisis of the Great Depression forced the public choice of “butter” over “guns.” This assertion is often buttressed by the well-documented isolationist movement of the time, including speeches in the *Congressional Record*. However, it is these very isolationists from the 1930s who would probably be most surprised by the application of this label to the nation or the public, since the one thing their record shows is that the isolationists were not happy with the status quo.

We know that there were isolationists in the thirties, perhaps even more so than at other times in our history; the question is, were there enough of them to justify labeling the public as “isolationist”? Or, to tackle one part of the issue, was aggregate public opinion opposed to spending on the military because of the Depression?

We can examine public opinion with Gallup data dating back to late 1935. According to a poll from December 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression, a 48% plurality favored increasing spending on the army, versus only 11% who wanted to decrease it, and 41% who favored no change. A 54% majority favored increased spending on the navy, versus 11% who favored a decrease and 35% who favored no change. By the end of 1937, a year which had seen a recession within the Depression that had wiped out the gains of the past few years, support for enlarging the military increased over the balmy economic times of 1935. A December poll found that 69% supported a larger army, with only 31% opposed, and 74% supported a larger navy, with 26% opposed. In fact, of the 27 times in the 1930s when people were asked about the size and spending of the military, not once did the public demand a decrease and in only one instance did a plurality argue for maintaining current levels. Rather, in 26 out of 27 cases, pluralities or majorities supported increases for the military.

Moreover, public support for increased military spending was greater than support for social welfare and economic relief spending in the mid-to-late 1930s. In October

1937, 46% of Gallup poll respondents favored increasing funds for the army and navy while only 24% favored increased spending on unemployment relief. In other words, the public favored an increase over a decrease in military spending by a two-to-one margin (46% versus 21%) and, in spite of a 20% unemployment rate, favored a decrease in this social insurance expenditure by a two-to-one margin (49% versus 24%). This pattern held throughout the thirties. In January 1939—nine months before the invasion of Poland and nearly three years before Pearl Harbor—Gallup found that 68% favored an increase in national defense, versus 53% for an increase in old-age pensions, 36% for an increase in public works, and 24% for an increase in unemployment relief.

In direct contradiction to the dominant historiography, the polls conducted during the 1930s record that the public favored increasing military spending during the Great Depression, and that it favored military spending over social welfare spending in spite of the economic crisis. Given this, either the US was not isolationist in the 1930s, or isolationism is not related to public willingness to fund the military, even though this flies in the face of the common understanding of this era.

To be sure, one could argue that a large military is not incompatible with isolationism, if the public desires a large military to keep us out of foreign entanglements. This is a separate question, however, for it addresses not whether the public supported a larger military but why it did so. Here we can at least put to rest the oft-repeated but unsubstantiated claim that the public—distinct from an isolationist sub-population—refused to support funding for the military due to the Depression. The polling evidence belies this myth.

Public Support for Military Intervention

It is often supposed that willingness to send troops abroad was uniformly low in the "isolationist" 1930s and uniformly high in the "interventionist" Cold War era, when the US "knew" that it "couldn't" refrain from these activities. However, care must be taken in such characterizations, since there is often as much variation from case to case as from era to era.

Certainly, Gallup polls do seem to indicate general disinclination toward military intervention in Europe in the 1930s. For instance, a February 1939 poll registered only 18% in favor of sending our army and navy abroad to help England and France in case of war with Germany and Italy, with 77% opposed. In July of that year, when the public was asked about its willingness to go to war if the "dictator" nations were likely to win, 28% favored war either "now" or if France and England were losing, with 66% opposed—still a clear majority opposed to entering war overseas. Although opinion clearly shifted toward intervention in Europe in 1940 and 1941, isolation theorists have always acknowledged that support was not static, and characterize the 1940s shift as a belated recognition which only points up the isolationism of the 1930s all the more.

However, it should be noted that, according to a December 1947 National Opinion Research Center (NORC) poll, willingness to go to war to fight the communists in China was only 6% during this supposedly interventionist period. A September 1958 Gallup poll found that only 25% favored going to war against Red China to defend the Nationalist Chinese isles of Quemoy and Matsu, with 60% opposed. In May 1954, only 22% favored going to war to help France fight communism in Indochina, with 68% opposed. And in February 1963, public willingness to send our troops into Cuba reached a high of only 20%, with 63% opposed, and fell to a low of 6% by May. By comparison, a Gallup poll showed public support for going to war in China against Japan also at 6% on July 1, 1939. In other words, the "isolationist" public in the Depression was as willing to go to war in China in 1939 as the "interventionist" public was willing to fight in China in 1947 or Cuba in May of 1963.

Just as there are examples of little support for intervention in the Cold War, there are examples of majority support for intervention in the thirties. For instance, the possession of the

Philippines by the US made conflict with Japan more likely in the 1930s. When, in a March 1938 Gallup poll, the public was asked whether, "in view of conditions in the Orient," the Philippines should be granted independence "now" rather than at the prearranged time in 1946, 65% said "no" and only 17% said "yes," even after being explicitly reminded of the risks of conflict with Japan in this unstable region. In fact, the public of the Great Depression registered its willingness to go to war over this antipodal commitment, first in a November 1938 Gallup poll with a plurality of 46% and then in a November 1939 Roper poll with a majority of 54%.

This proportion of the Depression era public that was willing to check Japanese imperialism in the Philippines in 1939 was the near-equal of the post-war 53% that was willing to go to war to check (presumed) Soviet imperialism in Greece in 1948, according to a March Roper poll, and of the 54% that was willing to go to war to check a Chinese attack in Formosa in November 1954, according to NORC. Subsequently, however, public opinion would turn against Formosa. A September 24, 1958 Gallup poll found a plurality of 45% opposed to fighting for the island. Furthermore, a poll done by NORC in March 1950, a few months before the Korean War broke out, asked, if "the countries near China" (conceivably including the Philippines) forged a defensive alliance to protect themselves from communism, should the US militarily "back up" these countries? Fifty percent said that the US should not use its military to help defend the countries from communist invasion, with 36% dissenting. This makes the 1930s public opinion on the Philippines more belligerent than the Cold War public opinion on Formosa in 1958 or "the countries near China" in 1950.

Lessons on the Question of Isolationism

Even a cursory study of poll data evaluating isolationist tendencies reveals that there is often as much variation between particular cases within the same era as variation between eras. Public reluctance to intervene does not necessarily translate to isolationism. Such a claim would require additional evidence that resistance to act was due to a cultural aversion instead of a reasonable geopolitical assessment of the issue at hand. In the post-cold war period, as we examine whether or not we are returning to isolationist roots, first we should determine if we were ever truly there.



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