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THREE CENTS

THE PITTSBURGH FALLOUT FROM PEARL HARBOR

BY JAMES A. KEHL

ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1941, AS THE BOMBS fell at Pearl Harbor, some 2,500 Pittsburghers were taking their seats at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in the city's Oakland district, where a rally sponsored by the America First Committee (AFC) was scheduled to begin at 3 p.m. Fifteen minutes before the program, at about the time the last Japanese planes were leaving the scene of their destruction, a journalist informed the rally's organizers that Japan had attacked Hawaii and the Philippines.

America First organizers, hoping to discourage public support for U.S. involvement in the war already raging in Europe, would later say that they believed the report was a hoax. That's why, organizers insisted, they elected to proceed with the event. Whatever the truth, those gathered in the hall became an unusual captive audience for the next two and a half hours: as speaker after speaker demanded American neutrality, denouncing President Franklin Roosevelt as a war-monger, the nation was catapulted into war in Asia—and all the while, as news spread around the world, 2,500 Pittsburghers who cared more than most never knew.

The America First Committee was the last gasp of a national isolationist movement that had begun after World War I. Disillusioned with fallout from treaties signed at Versailles to end WWI, the American public demanded that the nation take a hard-line attitude of non-alliance with other countries. That posture, which became U.S. policy, was maintained without significant challenge into the mid-1930s.

With the rise of Hitler, Mussolini, and Japanese warlords, however, many Americans and U.S. policymakers began to question the wisdom of continued isolationism. High officials in the Roosevelt administration considered a non-interventionist stance imprudent. By 1941, the issue was a hot topic, with organizations on both sides of the debate actively seeking support in Congress and among the public. America First was one such organization. Understanding the currents of the debate, and the strange events in Pittsburgh on December 7, 1941, is vital for comprehending the mood of the nation in the days and months before the shock of Pearl Harbor.

IN THE 15 MONTHS PRIOR TO THE OUTBREAK of World War II, the America First Committee dominated the national isolationist thrust. Its policies were simple: defend our own shores, denounce Roosevelt's interventionist agenda, and oppose aid to Britain in her war against Hitler. Incentives for this organization sprung from the desire to combat the influence of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, chaired by William Allen White.¹

John B. Gordon, the youthful executive of America First's Pittsburgh chapter, charged that the Committee to Defend America was campaigning to make American security secondary to aid for Britain. Part of his assignment was to make certain that the America Firsters received radio exposure equal to that given White's committee. Furthermore, the AFC wanted to convey to Europe its intention to restate America's WWI policy to declare that "The Yanks Are Not Coming."²

Discerning confusion in the Roosevelt foreign policy, the America Firsters were determined to provide a focus. Their immediate legislative goal was to force Congress to act on a "war or no-war" resolution. Aware that public opinion polls revealed that the American people stood 2-1 in opposition to war and/or aid to Britain, they concluded that congressmen would support the no-war position.

A "no-war" vote would compel Roosevelt, AFC directors reasoned, to silence the most vocal

interventionists: cabinet members Frank Knox, Henry Stimson, and Harold Ickes, whose declarations were ably echoed by Wendell Wilkie and Pennsylvania Senator Joseph "Convoys for Britain" Guffey. At the same time, the soft-spoken Gordon made it clear that his was a patriotic but not a pacifist organization and that, if the United States entered war, "The Committee will fold up immediately, and we'll participate."³

From its formation on September 4, 1940, the America First Committee rapidly expanded to 800,000 mostly urban members in 450 chapters. The Pittsburgh chapter was formed on April 18, 1941, with former U.S. Senator David A. Reed as the prime mover and honorary chairman, and attorney Gordon as the executive. At both the national and local levels, the organization exhibited no clear distinction between members and supporters. Sen. Gerald P. Nye (R-N.D.), the AFC's most aggressive advocate, was technically not a member, only a spokesman. On the national scene, such prominent names as Irvin S. Cobb, Alice Roosevelt

Longworth, Charles A. Lindbergh, General Hugh Johnson, John T. Flynn, Chester Bowles, Lillian Gish, and several senators and former senators were linked to the AFC.⁴

Locally there was a religious connotation to the chapter, adorned with such names as the Rev. Bernard Clausen, Father Francis X. Foley, and the Rev. Orva Lee Ice, as well as Charles A. Arnesberg,



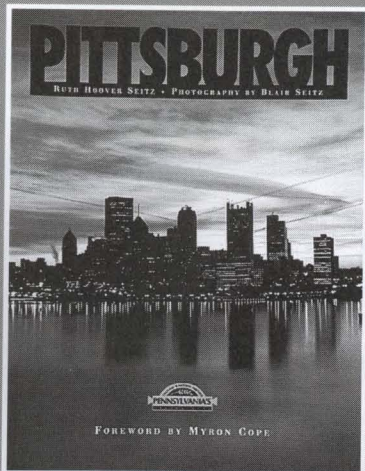
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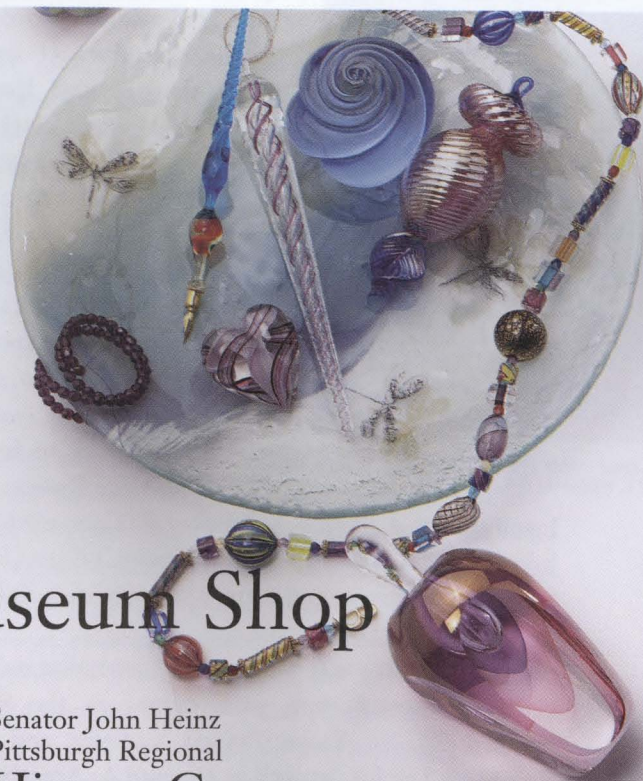
John J. Kane, Major Al Williams (an aviation authority), attorney Emanuel Amdur, dancer Irene Castle McLaughlin, Walter R. Hovey (Fine Arts director at the University of Pittsburgh), and Sewickleyite Margaret Shaw Campbell.⁵

For much of its existence, the Pittsburgh chapter held weekly Monday evening meetings that were frequently punctuated with boos and jeers—sometimes by the members themselves, who sounded off with every mention of Stimson, Knox, Ickes, and Wilkie, and at other times by unwelcome questions from critics whose goal was disruption. Thus, by December 7, members were hardened to the give-and-take atmosphere and at times had invoked a "throw-him-out" attitude.⁶

For the rally at Soldiers and Sailors, the theme was "Christianity and Intervention," and the principal speaker was Sen. Nye, who argued that these two concepts were "as completely opposite as anything under God." The chapter treasurer informed the audience that, without the committee's influence, the nation would already be at war and that such a realization should encourage everyone to place a dollar in the collection baskets as they were circulated through the hall.⁷

Nye, as well as attorney Gordon, were the ones personally advised of the Pearl Harbor attack before the meeting. Nye made the decision to proceed because, he later claimed, he had no verification of the report and doubted its veracity. Such skepticism

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was justified. This would not have been the first time that rumors had been spread to embarrass and mislead the isolationist movement. Nye could vividly recall, for example, how the administration's first report about an incident involving the destroyer U.S.S. *Greer* deviated markedly from the actual occurrence made public two months later. The original press release declared that, without provocation, a German submarine had fired two torpedoes at the *Greer* in North Atlantic waters.

Just how *unprovoked* ultimately came to light. The *Greer* had tracked the U-boat and reported its position to a British ship in the hope that the latter could reach the scene in time to sink the sub before it escaped. Interpreted as one of the president's measures "short of war," this conduct passed as protocol because Britain was at war with Germany and America was a quasi-neutral. (This quasi status perturbed the AFC, and it desperately wanted a clarification.)

So, at the Pittsburgh meeting on December 7, Nye perceived the report of a Japanese attack to be in the same category as the first *Greer* revelation.

Before Nye's address, the Bellevue Methodist Church Choir rendered several selections, followed by local "warm-up" speakers, one of whom was C. Hale Sipe. A former state senator who in later life resided in Butler County, he took the microphone before an audience overwhelmingly sympathetic to the AFC cause. During his remarks, Sipe referred to President Roosevelt as "the chief warmonger in the United States." Colonel Enrique Urrutia, dressed in civilian clothes, responded spontaneously to this epithet.⁸

The colonel lived in the Oakland area and, in a spur-of-the-moment decision, entered the hall after

America Firsters Jeer President As Nye And Others Conceal Awful Truth

Army Colonel Ejected As
He Tries to Tell of Jap
Attack

PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, DECEMBER 8, 1941

the proceedings had already begun. He held an advantage over others in the audience concerning the breaking international crisis because he had heard radio reports from Pearl Harbor; the white-haired reserve officer stood and shouted: "I wonder if the audience knows that Japan has

attacked us and that Manila and Pearl Harbor have been bombed...."⁹

The audience did not hear most of his statement. America Firsters near him, conditioned for immediate response to hecklers, yelled, "Throw him out!" even before he had finished, and the hubbub resounded through the hall.

AFC supporters wanted no repetition of an incident that had occurred at another major rally weeks before, when John and Grace Ewart, along with their 18-year-old son, were intent on embarrassing Senator Bennett Champ Clark (D-Mo.) with a barrage of disruptive questions and comments. Minor skirmishes between the Ewarts and ushers were disconcerting to the audience, but Clark persevered to the conclusion of his prepared remarks. Senator Reed, as the presiding officer, then invited young Ewart, the most obnoxious in the family, to take the microphone and offer a rebuttal. As Ewart wended his way to the podium, the crowd rebelled, making it clear that they did not want to hear him. Amid cries of "Throw him out!", pandemonium broke loose. After a few hurried words aside to young Ewart, Reed reversed his decision and ordered the meeting adjourned with the singing of *God Bless America*. As the audience sang, Ewart screamed into the microphone: "Is this freedom of speech?"¹⁰

At the December 7 event, Pittsburgh's America Firsters, aware of the ever-present threat of "dirty

tricks,” and with this experience ringing in their ears, most likely concluded that Colonel Urrutia should not be allowed to repeat the Ewart disruptions. They believed this was reason enough to rough him up, but the police intervened and escorted Colonel Urrutia to the Soldiers and Sailors lobby, where he denounced the gathering as “a traitors’ meeting.” From the dais, draped with a “no-war” banner, Sipe took a sarcastic stand; viewing the colonel as an interventionist “plant,” he quipped to the ushers: “Don’t be too hard on this bombastic man. He is only a mouthpiece for Franklin Delano Roosevelt—only another springboard for the warmongers.”¹¹

NOT TO BE DENIED HIS TIME ON CENTER STAGE, Sen. Nye took his turn at the podium and proceeded as though he knew nothing about a war message. After he had been speaking for more than a half hour, a reporter handed him a note: “The Japanese Imperial Government in Tokyo at 4:00 p.m. (EST) announced a state of war against the United States and Great Britain.”

Nye glanced at the note and, without pausing, continued to harangue his audience by asking: “Whose war is this?” In thunderous response, the answer reverberated through the hall, “Roosevelt’s,” but it is believed that the vast majority thought Nye was referring to the war in Europe, not the one into which America plunged only hours earlier.¹²

For another 15 minutes, his assault on the administration continued. He denounced the “destroyer deal,” which had occurred the day before the birth of the America First Committee. By that arrangement, the United States transferred 50 “over-age” destroyers to Britain in exchange for 99-year

PRESIDENT WILL REPLY TODAY TO JAP DECLARATION OF WAR

PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, DECEMBER 8, 1941

leases on eight British bases in the Western Hemisphere. The term “over-age” had been inserted expressly to assuage isolationist objections, but Nye identified this as Roosevelt duplicity; for years the president had deplored the woeful state of U.S. Navy readiness and had repeatedly pressed Con-

gress for funds to build it to acceptable strength. Now, contradicting that stance, the president, incredulously to Nye, traded away 50 ships. The America Firster interpreted the deal as a “lose-lose” situation in which the nation lost 50 ships and assumed the added burden of defending the eight bases.¹³

The senator recalled for his audience that he woke up one morning “to find that we had 50 ships less—that the president had given them away despite laws forbidding it.” Some listeners responded with cries of “Treason,” and others shouted, “Impeach him.”

Reporters continued to hand Nye messages about the Japanese war declaration. Finally, he paused, scanned one of the notes, and, realizing the gravity of the moment, declared: “I have before me the worst news that I have encountered in the last 20 years. I don’t know exactly how to report it to you, but I will report it just as a newspaperman reported it to me.”¹⁴

As the audience sat stunned, Nye added: “I can’t somehow believe this.... but I suppose I must.”

On that note the rally ended, and, for all practical purposes, the national isolationist movement died in Soldiers and Sailors Hall, an ideological casualty of the Pearl Harbor attack.

After the meeting was formally closed, the senator commented: “There is nothing to do but declare war.”¹⁵ Before the day’s end, the national AFC headquarters in Chicago called on its members to

support "all out hostility ... until the conflict with Japan is brought to a successful conclusion."¹⁶

The next day, President Roosevelt gave his official response to the tumultuous events in his "day that will live in infamy" speech. Without hesitation, Sen. Reed called a special meeting of the Pittsburgh chapter of the America First Committee for that same evening, at which the local group solemnly concluded: "There is not the slightest doubt about what our action should be or what it will be—America is at war."¹⁷

Three days later, the national organization formally disbanded, while Sen. Nye expressed hope for a brighter day in predicting that, after the war, there would be a popular clamor for an AFC revival.

Before the war's end, however, in April 1945, the nation would demonstrate how wrong he was with the signing of the charter to form the United Nations. Nye would effectively be sentenced to the political oblivion reserved for the advocates of lost causes. ☼

NOTES

¹Wayne S. Cole, *Senator Gerald P. Nye and American Foreign Relations*, 176.

²*Bulletin Index*, (5/22/41).

³*Bulletin Index*, (5/22/41).

⁴Cole, *Senator Nye*, 179; *Pittsburgh Press*, (4/18/41).

⁵*Bulletin Index*, (5/22/41).

⁶*Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, (12/4/41).

⁷*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

⁸*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

⁹*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

¹⁰*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, (10/7/41).

¹¹*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, (12/8/41).

¹²*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, (12/8/41).

¹³*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

¹⁴*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, (12/8/41).

¹⁵*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, (12/8/41).

¹⁶*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

¹⁷*Pittsburgh Press*, (12/8/41).

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