1 Neutrality Before 1941

THREE COMPETING CONCEPTIONS

When the United States entered the war in 1941, it did not possess a single and coherent conception of neutrality. Too much had changed since the outbreak of the First World War, when America expected to practise integral neutrality but discovered that this had become difficult. Between 1914 and 1917, there was a furious debate over the meaning and practice of neutrality, a dispute which revealed that there was no longer any consensus about neutrality. The withdrawal into neo-isolation after the First World War did nothing to settle the question. On the contrary, as Congress and the nation began to define the new neutrality clearly in the mid-thirties, the divisions were as deep as ever. The debates over the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936 and 1937 showed how unsure America had become about its role in the world. This was plainly a time of transition, and the country did not yet know which way to go.

In the course of the Congressional debates, three types of neutrals emerged: the traditionalist neutrals, rooted in over a century and a half of American history and emphasising extensive trading rights in times of war; the neo-isolationist neutrals, aiming at a reduction of these rights (and favouring an embargo) to prevent another First World War experience; the internationalist neutrals, who also favoured an embargo but with the intention of using it as a sanctioning instrument against aggressors.

In the short run, the neo-isolationists triumphed. The three Neutrality Acts were largely the product of those political forces in the country which wanted to isolate the United States radically from international affairs, even at the cost of lost trade. Supporting this movement were important Senators and Representatives from all parts of the country.

Their victory was short-lived, however. After the outbreak of war in Europe, and particularly after the fall of France, international events made total abstention difficult. Once more, the United States became the chief supplier of the European states fighting Germany and, consequently, abolished the Neutrality Acts. Roosevelt was only too happy to do so because, at
heart, he had always been an internationalist neutral who favoured the Neutrality Acts only in so far as they could be turned into instruments to ‘quarantine’ aggressors and thereby to (indirectly) support the League.

Since the Neutrality Acts were mainly shaped by the neo-isolationists, they could hardly be used as international sanctioning instruments. In the short run, therefore, the internationalist neutrals had a difficult stand. But time was on their side. Internationalism was to become the dominant force in American foreign policy from 1940 onwards and, as this study will show, it shaped the American conception of neutrality decisively after 1941.

The biggest losers were the traditionalist neutrals. They won neither in the short nor in the long run. In the twentieth century, theirs was a story of constant decline and frustration. They took a beating initially in the First World War, when Wilson, in their view, failed to enforce neutral trading rights vis-à-vis the British and the Germans. They experienced a second setback when the Neutrality Legislation of the thirties firmly abolished most neutral trading rights, and finally, they lost out once more when Roosevelt instituted Lend-Lease to use American economic power as a sanctioning instrument against Germany.

Beginning in 1940, Roosevelt began systematically to eliminate neo-isolationist politicians from their positions of power. He engaged in a thorough campaign to eradicate isolationism from the American body politic. Neo-isolationist neutrality was thus consciously wiped out.² Not so traditionalist neutrality – after their many defeats, the traditionalists simply became unimportant and finally died out. When the United States emerged from the Second World War, there were no serious proponents left of the old school of neutrality. Not even scholars of international law showed much enthusiasm for integral neutrality. This was to have direct consequences for the conception of neutrality which emerged after 1941. Before entering into that question, let us look at the three competing conceptions of neutrality more closely.

TRADITIONALIST NEUTRALITY

In the 1930s, the traditionalists were still an impressive group. They included many important Senators and Congressmen who