

Historical Revisionism and World War II

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THE JAPANESE attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, put an abrupt and final end to the great debate that had raged in Congress, the press and on public forums from one end of the country to the other on whether the United States should become involved in what had begun as a European war. The America First Committee, which had been the largest and most effective organization opposing American intervention was formally dissolved two days after war was declared, and its leaders, General Robert E. Wood, Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh and Robert D. Stuart, among others, loyally and unstintingly served their country at war, but when the war ended, the great question of American involvement—its necessity, how it had come about, and its results—again became a burning issue. The form the developing debate was to take between the “orthodox” historians on the one hand, those, that is, who supported the official version of events, and, on the other, the “revisionists,” who questioned the accepted account, was clearly foreseen by Charles A. Beard, the distinguished historian and one-time president of the American Historical Association, in a short article on the editorial page of the *Satur-*

day Evening Post in the issue dated October 4, 1947.

The immediate reason for Dr. Beard's article was the announcement by the Rockefeller Foundation in its annual report for the year 1946 that in order to forestall a repetition of “the debunking journalistic campaign following World War I” the sum of \$139,000 had been granted to the Council on Foreign Relations, which the Council had agreed to use to support the preparation of a “clear and competent” history of World War II from 1939 to “the peace settlements,” a project which was to be entrusted to Professor William Langer of Harvard. The report of the Foundation went on to say that Professor Langer had been granted “exceptional access to materials bearing on foreign relations.” Dr. Beard pointed out that in a previous book concerned with foreign policy, *Our Vichy Gamble*, Professor Langer in the introduction acknowledged that he had been furnished secret documents, or digests of such documents, by President Roosevelt, Secretary Hull, Admiral Leahy, and the War Department. In addition, the first draft of the book had been read by Secretary Hull, who had suggested the project to Professor

Langer in the first place, and by other government officials, who had made suggestions for revision, and, finally, had approved publication. To all this Dr. Beard commented:

Duly blessed by Secretary Hull, the War Department and Admiral Leahy, the professor's book was issued by a private publisher with an official fanfare valuable to all parties of interest. Presumably, in carrying out the new Rockefeller commission, Professor Langer will again enjoy special favors denied to others—favors from the State Department, the War Department, Admiral Leahy, President Truman and the guardians of the Roosevelt and other papers.

In conclusion Dr. Beard wrote:

Who is to write the history of World War II? Some person or persons well-subsidized and enjoying access, under Government patronage, to secret archives? Or is the opportunity of inquiring and writing the story of this critical period to be open to all talents on the same terms, without official interference or favoritism? There is the choice before us, and if tested methods of truth-seeking are to be followed in the business of history writing, the answer seems rather obvious.

What might be called the intellectual establishment of the country—the prestige universities, the great foundations, the established publishers and the influential press—was predominantly on the official, the “orthodox” side of the controversy, as Dr. Beard's article indicates, but those not afraid to look behind the accepted version of events and to take an independent position were by no means reduced to silence. What they lacked in foundation grants, academic prestige, official support and recognition by the influential press, they made up for in conviction, resourcefulness, and energy.

The first revisionist book on World War

II was George Morgenstern's *Pearl Harbor: the Story of the Secret War*, published in 1948 by a small New York firm, the Devin-Adair Company. It was the thesis of the Morgenstern book that the Roosevelt administration had deliberately and intentionally provoked the Japanese attack as a means of getting into the European war; that the fleet had been kept at Pearl Harbor against the advice of the admirals directly involved, and that information concerning the probability of a Japanese attack had been withheld from the military commanders for fear that if the proper moves to protect the fleet were taken, the plans of the Japanese might have been changed. Morgenstern's thesis was succinctly stated for him by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson in a passage in his diary describing a meeting of the war cabinet in the White House on November 25, 1941, thirteen days before Pearl Harbor: “The question was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves.”

The Morgenstern book presented the defenders of the Roosevelt foreign policy with a formidable challenge: it was skillfully written, meticulously documented, and its jacket carried the endorsement of two highly respected men, Charles A. Beard and Norman Thomas. In his endorsement Mr. Beard wrote:

Having scrutinized the more than ten thousand pages of sworn testimony and official papers bearing on this disaster before I read the proof sheets of Mr. Morgenstern's book, I can say out of some knowledge of the subject that his volume is a powerful work based on primary and irreducible facts in the case; carefully gathered and buttressed by exact citations of the sources. For his own inferences and conclusions, he gives documentary contexts.

Norman Thomas called the book “a well written, well organized, and well documented story of the events of which the

Pearl Harbor attack was the climax." In view of the foregoing, and the irrefragable nature of the facts of the case, the intellectual establishment found it necessary, in its response to the Morgenstern book, to take refuge in either one or several of the following evasions: to ignore it completely; to treat it as the work of an anti-Roosevelt crank and therefore not worthy of serious consideration; to question the propriety of writing such a book at all; or, finally, to admit that there might be something, in a very limited way, in the author's presentation of facts, but to deny its significance with the assertion that he was incapable of grasping the larger issue.

Such publications as the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Review* chose the first alternative and ignored the book completely. *The New Yorker* ended a brief paragraph with the neither relevant, nor witty remark, "Mr. Morgenstern is a Chicago newspaperman, and you have only one guess as to which paper he works for." *The New York Times* review, which appeared on a back page and was headed "Mythology for the Critics of F. D. R.," was written by Gordon A. Craig, a young assistant at Princeton, who, after pointing out that Mr. Morgenstern was "an editorial writer for the Chicago Tribune," contented himself with the assertion that Morgenstern is propagating "mythology" and "nowhere seriously considers the possible consequences to the United States of an axis victory." That may be true, but there is good reason to doubt that an axis victory was possible, with or without American intervention, and neither Mr. Craig, *The New York Times* nor President Roosevelt appear to have given much, if any, consideration to the far more serious consequences to the United States of the victory of Communist Russia. Craig argues that a "modus vivendi" with Japan in 1941 would have represented the "complete abandonment of the principles underlying American policy in the Far East." After two further wars—Korea and Viet Nam—where, it is fair to ask, are the "principles

underlying American policy in the Far East" now?

In his review in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which was headed "Twisting the Pearl Harbor Story," Walter Millis, after the usual references to the *Chicago Tribune*, argues that in all his actions supporting Britain and Russia, President Roosevelt was "repeatedly sustained . . . by Congress as well as by public opinion." If this is true, why were so many of the President's actions done in secret, the joint staff talks with the British and Dutch, the North Atlantic naval patrol, for example; why were such measures as the destroyer deal and "Lend-Lease" represented as means to "keep us out of war"; and why, if public opinion favored war, did President Roosevelt, on October 30, 1940, during an election campaign, assure the mothers and fathers of Boston—"again-and again-and again"—that "your sons are not going to be sent into any foreign wars?"*

The longest, most serious, and probably most significant critical review of the Morgenstern book was that of Samuel Flagg Bemis, professor of diplomatic history at Yale, in the *Journal of Modern History*. Professor Bemis begins his review with a condemnation of the revisionism that followed World War I:

This disillusionist historiography resulted in complete repudiation of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy and in the neutrality legislation of 1935-37. As everybody now can see, that legislation assisted the rise of Hitler's power and his onslaught on western civilization.

Then, after inferring the dire consequences of a "new campaign of revisionism," he carefully warns the reader "not to be prejudiced against the author because he is not a professional historian or because he is a journalist and on the editorial staff of what is considered by many to be a notoriously isolationist newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*."

Bemis accepts Morgenstern's carefully documented thesis that it was the officials

in Washington who were responsible for the disaster at Pearl Harbor, not the military commanders, General Short and Admiral Kimmel, who were made the scapegoats:

The numerous and serious failures of these high officials [Roosevelt, Stimson, Knox and Marshall] to keep the commanders in Hawaii adequately informed of the crisis and fully alerted, at a time when they knew from their breakdown of Japan's secret code that war was a matter of days only, are detailed at great length scrupulously from the record and to the reviewer are entirely convincing.

Bemis, however, is not willing to agree with the second thesis of Morgenthern's book, that the failure to alert the commanders at Pearl Harbor was deliberate and the final act of the plan to provoke a Japanese attack, in order to give the President the *causus belli* he needed. Bemis, rather, asserts that with Lend-Lease we had "deserted American neutrality in the Atlantic," and were, therefore, in fact, if not in name, already at war. This is doubtless true, but after such election promises as "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars," which as he remarked at the time, he had said "again, and again, and again," President Roosevelt needed such an incident as Pearl Harbor to get a formal declaration of war and to mobilize the country behind him. Although unwilling specifically to admit this, Bemis argues that confronted by "the most awful danger that ever faced our country," which, in his opinion, the German-Japanese-Italian alliance represented, Roosevelt's actions were justified.

The most remarkable, and significant, aspect of the Bemis review is not so much his defense of the Roosevelt foreign policy, which, from a Yale professor, could almost be taken for granted, but his attack on "revisionist historiography." In the opinion of this professor of diplomatic history at a great American university, as expressed in

this review, the mission of the historian is not to discover truth, to tell what actually happened, "to winnow fact from fiction," as Beard put it, but to justify the foreign policy of the nation.

The Morgenthern book was followed by Charles A. Beard's *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941*, which was published in 1948 by Yale University Press. This was a sequel to Beard's *American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932-1940*, which the Yale Press had published two years before. The first book was a documentary account of the foreign policy of the first two Roosevelt administrations, a policy which marked a distinct break from that of the previous three administrations, and of which three wars were the immediate consequence. Dr. Beard, in the second book, which carries the subtitle "A Study in Appearances and Realities," uses his unequalled mastery of the documentary material and his long experience in the writing of history to bring those to account who were responsible for the decisions that led to the war with Japan and intervention in the European war. In the first chapter, which is entitled "Moral Commitments to the American People for the Conduct of Foreign Policy," Dr. Beard argues that President Roosevelt, in his public statements and in his acceptance of the 1940 Platform of the Democratic Party, had made an unequivocal covenant "with the American people to keep this nation out of war—so to conduct foreign affairs as to avoid war."¹ In the following chapter, "Representations of Lend-Lease Aid to the Allies," he points out that while, "under international law, as long and generally recognized, it was an act of war for a neutral government to supply munitions, arms, and implements of war to one of the belligerents,"² as many opponents of the bill made clear at the time, Lend-Lease was represented by the President as "just a precautionary measure for continuing American defense,"³ as "not a war policy but the contrary."⁴ The following chapters are a similar contrast of "appearances" with

“realities,” with the successful “maneuvering of the Japanese into firing the first shot” the ultimate consequence.

Charles A. Beard was a man of great independence of mind and of strong convictions, character traits he had demonstrated by resigning his professorship at Columbia to protest the dismissal of two professors during the hysteria of World War I and supporting himself and his family for some years thereafter as a dairy farmer. Such a man is capable of moral indignation, not to say outrage, of a high order, as the Epilogue of the present book makes clear. Beard felt, and felt strongly, that President Roosevelt had not only deceived the American people, but by arrogating unto himself complete control of foreign policy, including the power to make war, had subverted the Constitution and the orderly process of government. In addition, he strongly objected to the habit of certain American presidents, and President Roosevelt in particular, of moralizing on an international scale, of proclaiming that “it is the duty of the United States to assume and maintain the moral leadership of the world.”⁵ As a rather old-fashioned American, Beard felt that moral leadership began at home, and was best exerted by example.

Such a book, coming from a man who had been president of both the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, and had long been regarded as the dean of American historians, reduced the academic establishment to a state of utter irrationality. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., after characterizing the book in *The New York Times* (April 11, 1948) as a “phillipic against Franklin D. Roosevelt,” loftily suggested that it “cannot fail to provoke criticism on grounds of historical method,” without specifying what such grounds might be, and finally remarked, “as a devotee of reality against appearance, he should have inquired into the realities of alternatives.” The alternative to going to war, obviously, is not going to war, an alternative Dr. Beard was quite willing to accept, and had unhesitatingly

recommended. There were equally strong, and sometimes more unrestrained objections to the book from Harry D. Gideonse, Max Lerner, Quincy Wright, Percy Miller and Peter Levin, among others. Commenting on the reviews in the professional journals of *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War*, Howard K. Beale, in an article in the *Pacific Historical Review*, observed:

There are in the profession people of standing who agree with Beard’s interpretation, and others who disagree but feel the book has much of the impressive quality of the early works on the Constitution and Jeffersonian democracy that made Beard’s great reputation. Curiously, no editor could find any of these people to review the book.⁶

It remained for Samuel Eliot Morison, professor of history at Harvard and official historian of the United States Navy in World War II to return the final verdict of the orthodox historians on the Beard thesis.

Professor Morison’s review appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1948), is seven full pages in length, is entitled “Did President Roosevelt Start the War?” and subtitled, “History Through A Beard.” The *Atlantic* review, it must be said, for all its urbanity, is no credit to its author. The review begins with a tribute to Dr. Beard’s generosity and independence, as well as to his great achievements in the writing of history—*The Rise of American Civilization* is described as “the most brilliant historical survey of the American scene ever written”—but soon degenerates into a personal attack. Morison makes much of Beard’s belief, which had been expressed in articles and particularly in his presidential address to the American Historical Association,⁷ that no historian can write truly “objective” history; that he must make choices from the vast mass of historical evidence, and in so doing, consciously or unconsciously, acts in accordance with some frame of refer-

ence. As Professor Beale put it in the article just referred to:

What Beard contended was that, since all historians, being human, write subjectively, they would come nearer to the truth if they would recognize their points of view and try to write fairly within them instead of pretending they do not have any.⁸

On the basis of this quite logical, straightforward, and honest conception of objectivity in historical writing, Morison asserts that Beard's "standards of truth and objectivity differ from those of any other professional historian," and that this is the source of his "inconsistencies and tergiversations." Morison furthermore asserts, without offering any evidence whatever for such an assertion that in Beard's view, the "object of history is to influence the present and the future, in a direction that the historian considers socially desirable."

Morison is "astonished" that Beard should have used "so solemn a word" as "covenant" for "flimsies like party platforms and campaign promises," but he had no reason to be astonished. Morison needed only to remember that Beard was the sort of man who took pledges seriously. While Morison admits that President Roosevelt did, perhaps, mislead the American people and "utter soothing phrases in 1940 in order to be re-elected," that this was justified in view of the "isolationist" campaign against intervention; the President, as he put it, was compelled "to do good by stealth."

The extent to which Professor Morison felt obligated to go to justify the Roosevelt foreign policy is well illustrated by his bland explanation of Secretary Stimson's remark about "maneuvering" the Japanese into firing the first shot. Mr. Stimson's "unfortunate use" of the word "maneuver," we are told, was due to his imperfect knowledge of semantics—what he might have meant to say, however, we are not told. Professor Morison furthermore asserts: "Throughout modern history Western na-

tions in danger of war choose to await the first blow rather than to give it," and that maneuvering the Japanese into firing the first shot was entirely comparable to Captain Parker's command at Lexington: "Stand your ground. Don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here." All this may not be an example of the "tergiversation" of which Morison accuses Beard, but to compare all that was involved at Pearl Harbor—the breaking of the Japanese code, the withholding of information from the commanders, the secret understandings with the British, General Marshall's mysterious disappearance at a critical moment—with the command of an honest captain at Lexington Green is pure sophistry. Is it any wonder, then, that in a letter to George Morgenstern about the reviews of the latter's book Dr. Beard remarked, "Such, my young friend, is life in the 'intellectual world.'"?

It was into this intellectual world, in the Fall of 1950, that the Henry Regnery Company launched its first revisionist book, William Henry Chamberlin's *America's Second Crusade*. Chamberlin was a distinguished and respected writer—he had been Moscow correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor* from 1922 until 1934, after which he served as a correspondent in the Far East and in France, and was the author of eleven previous books. His *History of the Russian Revolution*, published by Macmillan in 1935, is recognized as one of the authoritative books on the subject. His former publishers, however, which included, besides Macmillan, Scribner's, Knopf, and Little, Brown, were not interested in his new book, and on March 10, 1950, he wrote the following letter to me:

I recently completed a book entitled "America's Second Crusade," dealing with the origins, course and final results of our involvement in the last war. It runs to about 400 typewritten pages and the enclosures will give you an idea of its character and outlook. . . .

Through the mediation of Harry Elmer Barnes I contracted for the pub-

lication of this work with the University of Oklahoma Press. However, they seem rather lukewarm about going ahead with it because of the vigorous criticisms of Roosevelt's foreign policy. They have intimated that the contract will not stand in the way if I can find a more sympathetic publisher.

The book is based on a careful examination of the more important books about the diplomatic and political side of the war which have appeared in this country and England and also on private talks with a number of men who were active in the making of policy. Among these were former Ambassadors Bullitt, Lane and Grew; George Kennan, Charles Bohlen and Philip Mosely, of the State Department, former Assistant State Secretary A. A. Berle, General Donovan, and Allen Dulles, of the OSS, and others. Former President Hoover was most helpful in making available to me a kind of secret diary of the war containing much interesting unpublished material. This must be regarded as quite confidential.

I am convinced that the book is unique in its field, as there has been a strong justification complex in most of the published works on the subject. It drives home steadily, with a final summing up in the last chapter, an idea that must be appealing to more thoughtful people all the time: that the late victorious war was a colossal political and moral failure. Its net result has been to strengthen an equally vicious and more dangerous form of totalitarianism as a substitute for those we destroyed.

Although I feel there is an irresistible factual logic behind this idea (how ironical to think that we went on a crusade for China, Poland, Czechoslovakia, in view of their present regimes!) I can appreciate that a book which frankly upholds this view is strong meat for the average publisher.

In view of your own courage in publishing books like Freda Utlery's and

Montgomery Belgion's I hope this work may appeal to you. I should be glad to know whether you would like to see the manuscript and whether, if it appeals to you, there would be a good prospect of early publication.

The letter from Chamberlin, as I have said, was dated March 10, 1950; before the end of that month we had agreed to publish the book and on the terms of a contract. Much work was involved in getting the manuscript ready for publication—checking quotations, straightening out matters of style and presentation, etc.—which was complicated by the fact that the original copy was lost in the mail on one of its trips between Cambridge and Chicago, but we were able to send page proofs to reviewers in July and finished books in late August, and to publish the book in October. Chamberlin was well known, of course, through his years as a correspondent and his previous books, and had built up a following, particularly among conservatively-inclined businessmen, through his regular column in the *Wall Street Journal*. In addition, he was a regular contributor, and listed as "associate editor," of the socialist, but strongly anti-communist, *New Leader*. In launching the book, therefore, we had the great advantage of an established and respected author; an author the reviewers, however strongly they may have disagreed with him, would have to take seriously.

Like Charles A. Beard, Chamberlin was a man of strong convictions, and his years in Soviet Russia had made him, if possible, even more critical of the manner in which the war and its objectives were represented to the American people by the administration and the liberal press. Chamberlin had seen both forms of totalitarianism in action and had himself experienced the fall of France and its consequences. He had no illusions whatever, therefore, about Nazi Germany, but the claim, which was made on the highest levels of government, that peace, freedom, and the brotherhood of man were to be secured by an alliance with

Communist Russia was for him, knowing what he did about Communism in practice, the rankest form of misrepresentation. The Beard book was the work of an experienced, highly skilled historian who, by the nature of his profession, relied heavily on official documents. Chamberlin was also a historian, but his approach was broader: he was able to supplement the ample documentation of his book by information and knowledge acquired from his many years of experience as a correspondent.

The Chamberlin book begins with a brief account of the circumstances of America's First Crusade: of the manner, that is, of our intervention in the first Great War, the glowing promises, the hysteria aroused in its behalf, and the disillusionment that followed. He wrote:

By no standard of judgement could America's First Crusade be considered a success. It was not even an effective warning. For all the illusions, misjudgements, and errors of the First Crusade were to be repeated, in exaggerated form, in a Second Crusade that was to be a still more resounding and unmistakable political and moral failure, despite the repetition of military success.⁹

Chamberlin, after so disposing of Mr. Wilson's war, concludes his book with the following unequivocal judgment on Mr. Roosevelt's:

It is scarcely possible . . . to avoid the conclusion that the Roosevelt Administration sought the war which began at Pearl Harbor. The steps which made armed conflict inevitable were taken months before the conflict broke out.

Some of Roosevelt's apologists contend that, if he deceived the American people, it was for their own good. But the argument that the end justifies the means rests on the assumption that the end has been achieved. Whether America's end in its Second Crusade was assurance of national security or the estab-

lishment of a world of peace and order or the realization of the Four Freedoms "everywhere in the world," this end was most certainly not achieved.

America's Second Crusade was a product of illusions which are already bankrupt.¹⁰

Such statements, more than a generation after the end of World War II, with all that has happened since, may not appear either particularly startling or to say anything that is not fairly obvious and generally accepted, but in 1950, only five years after an overwhelming military victory, when American power and influence seemed to dominate the world, and when the memory of Franklin D. Roosevelt—the sound of his soothing voice and the feeling of security engendered by the magnetism of his personality—was still cherished, such assertions were regarded as a particularly repulsive form of blasphemy. In spite of his years of experience in the "intellectual world," even Chamberlin was taken aback by the violence of the attacks on his book, from which he was also not spared.

The *New York Post* based its case against the book not on what it said, but on the devise of guilt by association—Colonel McCormick's *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News* liked the book, which was enough to condemn it. The reviewer called Chamberlin a "totalitarian conservative," and implied that he justified or apologized for things that were done in Germany and Japan which he found execrable in Russia. J. M. Minifie in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 18, 1950, commented, "To anyone who had to endure over a number of years the daily dose of Virgilio Gayda or Dr. Goebbels, it comes as a shock to find Mr. Chamberlin ladling out the same dish." Harry D. Gideonese, then president of Brooklyn College, in the *New Leader*, November 27, 1950, called the book "another rehash of the 'Chicago Tribune history of World War II,'" and was "not surprised to discover" that Robert M. Hutchins was "Chairman

of the Editorial Board of the publishers of the volume," a discovery, I must say, which came as a great surprise to me.

The *New York Post* failed to print Chamberlin's reply to their slanderous suggestion that he had justified or apologized for Nazi behavior. In this letter, he reminded the *Post* that he had been "one of the first American writers who pointed out the many common traits of Communism and Fascism," and in his book had listed ten "deadly parallels between Fascism and Communism." The *New Leader*, to its everlasting credit, did reprint a long "Reply to My Critics" from Mr. Chamberlin. In this letter, he remarked that he was not discouraged by the fact that the reception accorded the book was largely critical—"there is endless room for difference of opinion"—but that "all but a small minority of the reviewers [failed] to face the challenge of the book head-on, to debate specific points of fact and opinion instead of flying into fits of stratospheric emotionalism or lapsing into vague generalities."

We published two further books by William Henry Chamberlin. For all his strong convictions, he was a thoroughly reasonable man, and, unlike some authors I came to deal with, easy to get along with. He was by no means the swashbuckling, trench-coated foreign correspondent sometimes depicted in novels, but quiet, reserved, completely without pretensions of any kind, and of uncompromising integrity, as he demonstrated many times during his career. An account of William Henry Chamberlin would be incomplete without some mention of his love of chocolate, of which he ate quantities, always of the best quality—no five cents candy bars for him; he was a good tennis player, and in spite of his rather innocent appearance, an expert at poker, as a correspondent who had known him in China once told me he had learned to his regret.

In 1953, three years after *America's Second Crusade*, we published William Henry Chamberlin's *Beyond Containment*,

in which, based on his long experience in Russia, he set forth his conception of a positive foreign policy for the United States. While not willing to forgive him for his "revisionism," the reviewers, for the most part, treated the new book with respect. The following from *The New York Times* review by Samuel Flagg Bemis (October 11, 1953), who had been sharply critical of Chamberlin's earlier book, is a good example of the way in which the new book was received:

Mr. Chamberlin's present book echoes the revisionist school of writers including himself who believe that it was a mistake for the United States to have embarked on "America's Second Crusade." . . . It would be so much healthier and helpful for the nation if writers like Mr. Chamberlin would bury their old bones and pour their talents into such excellent books as this one is in all other respects. Nowhere will you find a better primer on the threat of Communist power abroad and Communist conspiracy within our midst, and the terrifying objective of enslaving the whole world.

Following the publication in 1947 of the editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post* referred to at the beginning of this article, in which Charles A. Beard objected to the policy of granting access to official papers only to those who supported government policy, the historian responsible for the State Department archives, I was told, informed Dr. Beard that if he would submit a list of historians he considered competent and independent, one would be given permission to work in the State Department papers. From this list, to complete the story as it was told to me, Charles C. Tansill, professor of diplomatic history at Georgetown University, was selected. Professor Tansill later told me that he was given complete freedom to see and copy anything he wanted in the State Department archives. He did not gain access to the Roosevelt papers at Hyde Park, and had no

idea if certain papers had been removed from the archives, but he felt that he saw enough, with what he knew and could learn from other sources, to put together a fully documented diplomatic history of the events that led to World War II and of American participation in it.

Tansill had first become seriously interested in the causes of World War I and of American intervention when he prepared a special study on the subject in the early twenties for the Foreign Policy Committee of the U.S. Senate. One result of this study was his book *America Goes to War*, published by Little, Brown in 1938, which Allan Nevins, in the *Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1938), called "absolutely indispensable to an understanding of three critical years in our history," and no less a figure than Henry Steele Commager, in the *Yale Review* (Summer, 1938), described as ". . . the most valuable contribution to the history of the pre-war years in our literature, and one of the notable achievements of historical scholarship of this generation." When Professor Tansill's book manuscript on World War II was finished, however, which represented a detailed, carefully documented study of years that were even more critical in our history, and was an achievement of historical scholarship on the same level of quality as his much-praised earlier book, none of the large Eastern publishers were interested, and the manuscript came to our firm. We brought it out in 1952 under the title *Back Door to War*. It made a book of nearly 700 pages, and in every respect is a formidable work of historical scholarship. After twenty-five years, it is still in print, and still stands as the most thoroughly documented and complete account of American participation in World War II by a revisionist historian.

Back Door to War begins with the provocative sentence, which is characteristically Tansill: "The main object in American foreign policy since 1900 has been the preservation of the British Empire."¹¹ A few pages later, so that there might be no mistake about where he stood, he adds:

American intervention in World War I established a pattern that led America into a second World War in 1941. . . . Our intervention [in World War I] completely shattered the old balance of power and sowed the seeds of inevitable conflict in the dark soil of Versailles. We had a deep interest in maintaining the political structure of 1919. Thousands of American lives and a vast American treasure had been spent in its erection. . . . The bungling handiwork of 1919 had to be preserved at all costs, and America went to war again in 1941 to save a political edifice whose main supports had already rotted in the damp atmosphere of disillusion.¹²

Professor Tansill gives us a detailed account of the decisions, in which stupidity, arrogance, pride, selfishness, and lack of vision played their customary role, which led to the outbreak of war in Europe in September, 1939. In telling all this, he displays his mastery of the documentary material and skill in putting the pieces together, but the greatest original contribution of his book, perhaps, is his account of Japanese-American relations, of the long chain of events which culminated in an unnecessary, brutal war, of which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the most appropriate symbols, and the rise of Communist China the most conspicuous result. While Tansill shows that the history of American economic and diplomatic pressure against Japan goes back at least to the Wilson administration, he ascribes a major role in this tragic episode to Henry L. Stimson. "Some scholars like Charles A. Beard," Tansill writes, in the Preface to *Back Door to War* (page viii) :

have pointed out that presidential pronouncements from 1933 to 1937 gave scant encouragement to ardent one-worlders, but they underestimated the importance of the Chief Executive's conversion to the explosive non-recognition doctrine so strenuously advocated by Henry L. Stimson. This was the bomb

whose long fuse sputtered dangerously for several years and finally burst into the flame of World War II. It was entirely fitting that Stimson became Secretary of War in 1940; no one deserved the title quite as well as he.

Later in the book (page 110) Tansill remarks, "The main barrier across the road to friendly relations [with Japan] was the Stimson doctrine itself."

The last chapter of *Back Door to War* is devoted to Pearl Harbor. Tansill's conclusions concerning the causes of this disaster are generally the same as those of Morgenthorn and Beard, as the title of the chapter indicates—"Japan is Maneuvered into War"—but he was able to add some important details in confirmation of his thesis from official sources which were not available to his predecessors. He ends his book as provocatively as he began, with the following paragraph:

But the President and Harry Hopkins viewed these dread contingencies with amazing equanimity. In the quiet atmosphere of the oval study of the White House, with all incoming calls shut off, the Chief Executive calmly studied his well-filled stamp albums while Hopkins fondled Fala, the White House scottie. At one o'clock Death stood in the doorway. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. America had suddenly been thrust into a war she is still fighting.¹³

While the Tansill book was hardly greeted with open arms by the liberal reviewers, it did not arouse the violent, almost irrational condemnation evoked by the books by Morgenthorn, Beard and Chamberlin. It was given quite a fair review in *The New York Times* (May 11, 1952), for example, by Dexter Perkins: "When he is at his best, he is unfolding a diplomatic narrative with considerable skill, and with an excellent command of his sources. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Tansill is not always at his best. . . . Yet let it be cheerfully conceded that speculative

though Mr. Tansill's judgements must be, the discussion which he will stimulate will be useful." The *Library Journal* (May 1, 1952), recommended "caution as to his conclusions . . . since he is sometimes as unjust as Charles A. Beard was in his last works," and suggested that the book "should be read in conjunction with William Langer's recent *Challenge to Isolation*, which does more justice to F.D.R. and his collaborators." In the *Yale Review* (Autumn, 1952), *Back Door to War* was reviewed by Charles Griffin together with Langer and Gleason's *Challenge to Isolation*. Professor Tansill, in Mr. Griffin's judgment, "adds nothing convincing to those whose minds are not already so disposed to uphold his theory of Rooseveltian rash irresponsibility." After remarking that Langer and Gleason, "Like most men of our age," were "awed" by Roosevelt's "towering personal force," Mr. Griffin goes on to say, "but beyond this, they chronicle events and policies with conscious and sober restraint . . .," which reminds me of Roy Campbell's famous couplet

You praise the firm restraint with which
they write—

I'm with you there, of course:

They use the snaffle and the curb all
right,

But where's the bloody horse?

One of the sillier reviews of *Back Door to War* was that of Michael Straight in the *New Republic* (June 16, 1952), who suspected a Jesuit conspiracy: "This book is part of the devious attack on American diplomacy directed by Dr. Edmund Walsh, S.J., from Georgetown University."

Professor Tansill doubtless opened himself unnecessarily to criticism by the rather strident tone his book sometimes assumes, but this must be considered together with the circumstances under which it was written. He wrote his book fully aware that the position he was taking was completely in opposition to the views of those who largely controlled opinion, and doubtless felt, therefore, that to make himself heard he

would have to raise his voice. Professor Langer, on the other hand, writing with the self-confidence of a Harvard professor, with the assurance of favorable treatment by the reviewers, and the comfort of a \$139,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, was in quite a different situation and could afford to be more restrained. Tansill's access to the archives had to be opened by a vigorous assault; Langer, on the other hand, was greeted as a friend and collaborator, and offered every possible official assistance. Tansill was not in a position even to hire a secretary; with his Rockefeller grant, Langer could employ a staff. In the case of the Tansill book, however, no one will ever have to ask Roy Campbell's question about the whereabouts of "the horse."

Charles C. Tansill, as his book makes clear, was a man of decided opinions which he never hesitated to express. He was born in Texas and the grandson of a Confederate general, a fact of which he was inordinately proud; he was also the proud possessor of Thomas Jefferson's rabbit foot. Through some hideous misunderstanding,

he was invited, some time in the thirties, to give the Lincoln Day Address at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Facing "Arlington," General Lee's old mansion on the other side of the Potomac, Professor Tansill took full advantage of the situation to deliver a ringing defense of the Confederacy, with appropriate oratorical flourishes. In the ensuing scandal—people probably took such things more seriously then than now—Tansill, he told me, might well have lost his Georgetown professorship had it not been for the intervention of an influential southern bishop. In getting his manuscript ready for publication we tried hard, I remember, to induce him to remove some of the rather overblown metaphors with which he adorned his pages, the dark soil of Versailles, the exotic wench of collective security, for example, but to no avail—he loved his metaphors, and was quite proud of them. For all that, Charles Callan Tansill was his own man, and a man of courage and integrity. He was a tireless and resourceful searcher for historical truth, and wrote history as the facts led him.**

*Robert E. Sherwood, one of President Roosevelt's speechwriters, on the subject of this speech was later to remark: "I burn inwardly whenever I think of those words 'again-and-again-and-again' . . . unfortunately for my own conscience, I happened at the time to be one of those who urged him to go to the limit on this, feeling as I did then that any risk of future embarrassment was negligible as compared with the risk of losing the election." *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*, New York, 1948, p. 874.

**Part II will appear in the Fall issue.

¹Charles A. Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941*, New Haven, Conn., 1948, p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 595.

⁶Howard K. Beale, "The Professional Historians," *Pacific Historical Review*, August 1953, p. 249.

⁷Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *American Historical Review*, 1934, pp. 219-231.

⁸Beale, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁹William Henry Chamberlin, *America's Second Crusade*, Chicago, 1950, p. 22.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹¹Charles C. Tansill, *Back Door to War*, Chicago, 1952, p. 3.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 652.