



## Episode 1,422: The America First Committee and World War II

Guest: Ben Lewis

**WOODS:** Well, you picked quite a topic here. These are not the world's most popular people.

**LEWIS:** This is true.

**WOODS:** But they did get some attention during the 2016 campaign because Trump used the phrase "America first," and that, of course, calls to mind the experience of America First Committee. And you did see even NPR – I have to say it was interesting to see – saying that it's a mixed bag here, and you shouldn't just assume the worst about these people, that actually there were a lot of very, very prominent Americans, Americans almost everybody admires, who were involved in it, so before you turn on your outrage spigot, stop and listen for five seconds. So I'm interested about what led you down this road to write an article about some of the most hated people in American history.

**LEWIS:** Well, it kind of started with my – I was thinking about the way that noninterventionist and libertarians kind of approach the topic of World War II, and that led me to consider some of the arguments that people at the time were making against interventionism. And so it just kind of blossomed out of a general interest in the topic and how libertarians and noninterventionists, more generally, can make better arguments than we currently do on that topic.

And I was really impressed with the complexity of the noninterventionist movement at that time, because as you say, it's not simply that they were single-issue or were influenced by some foreign country. They had a lot of different reasons, and they disagreed among themselves about what the right reasons were for being anti-interventionist. And I think if you consider their position in the scope of American history and in relation to what other people were saying at the time, you can understand that there's a lot of consonants between what they were saying and what the traditional American foreign policy had been from the founding up through the end of the 19th century.

**WOODS:** I think it's worth noting, just in order to detoxify them for people, the names of some of the people involved. So from politics, you have Gerald Ford, obviously, who eventually became president. And then in terms of people who either belonged or supported it, because I don't think John F. Kennedy was out an outright member, but he did indicate his support. Then you had Herbert Hoover; you had Potter Stewart, who became a Supreme Court justice. You had Robert McCormick of *The Chicago Tribune*. Robert E. Wood from the business world – actually, many from the business world. In the world of literary work, you have

Sinclair Lewis, for instance, E.E. Cummings, Jack Kerouac, Kurt Vonnegut, Robinson Jeffers. These aren't nobodies. These aren't cranks and weirdos. These were ordinary Americans.

**LEWIS:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And you mentioned Kennedy. Kennedy, I think his association with it was to donate money to the America First, so he obviously wasn't out campaigning for them, but he was fairly young at the time, so that probably would have been an irrational expectation to begin with. But as you say, it's not people who were on the fringes of society. I mean, I'm sure we'll talk about Lindbergh, Charles Lindbergh at some point, but even at the time going into the 1940s, Charles Lindbergh was one of the most respected men in America. And so these aren't just cranks. You know, there were cranks in the movement, but that's not who made it up primarily.

**WOODS:** I do want to talk about the coalition of people who were involved, but before that, I think it's more important to say what exactly was their position. What were they saying about what the US should do with regard to international affairs?

**LEWIS:** So it really varies depending on the approach to noninterventionism that the different groups were taking, and also it sometimes differed on an individual basis. So you had some people who were pacifist who just didn't want to go to war ever. You had some people who were more interested in hemispheric defense, so that was a large portion and particularly was the position of people who made up America First, was the idea of – it's kind of a call back to the Monroe Doctrine of: we'll mind our business on this continent, and we're going to let whatever happens in Europe happen, because it's not really our business and we're at a safe-enough distance away from it that we can survive if things deteriorate over there.

You also had, at least at the beginning of the outbreak of war, communists who, when Joseph Stalin and Hitler were partners and attacking Poland and dividing up Europe, communists were opposed intervention, as well. And then, obviously, when Hitler turned on Stalin, they switched their position.

And so it was a very wide range of people who were noninterventionist for different reasons. I think one of the best reasons that they enunciated over the course of the battle over interventionism was the idea that war would grow the power of the state, and it would cause deterioration in traditional social institutions. And in a lot of those predictions after the war, it was hard to say that the noninterventionists had been wrong.

**WOODS:** You quote a couple of people I like very much in describing the diversity of folks who were involved in this movement, the American First Committee, and one of them is Justus Doenecke. I got to meet him once, actually. He's a great historian of this whole thing. And he says, "Pacifists and liberals assumed crucial positions in drafting position papers, but the more vocal members were staunch conservatives." And then you have Robert Nisbet saying that the strongest resistance to intervention came, and these are his words, "from those closely linked to business, church, local community, family, and traditional morality." Kind of an interesting point.

So what then would they say, what was the America First position, then, on measures short of war, which is what Franklin Roosevelt said he was supporting? He just wants to help the British, and then that way the Americans can stay out of the war. Is that all right?

**LEWIS:** So there wasn't unanimity of opinion on those topics. I think that what was common to all of them was that there was very strong distrust of Roosevelt and distrust in him to limit himself to measures short of war. And so I think that there was always this suspicion on the part of noninterventionists that everything that Roosevelt was doing was geared towards actively involving the United States in the war.

And so when you talked about what those measures short of war might be – and a lot of that had to do with supporting Britain, as they were more or less standing alone against Germany – you had differences of opinions. Some people didn't want to help Britain at all, not because they wanted to Britain to lose, but just because they thought it was unnecessary. Either they thought that Germany was destined to win or that Germany couldn't defeat Britain anyway, so there was no reason to give them support.

You had other people who intentionally wanted to support the British, partly because they recognized that Germany was a threat to civilized people, and partly because, as Herbert Hoover said, that the American opinion was very strongly in favor of the British. So even at a time when roughly 80% of the population did not want to actively be involved in the war, you had large majorities who did want to support Britain in some way. And so Hoover thought that it was advisable to give the people of the United States some outlet to vent their sympathies with the British. And he thought that something like Lend-Lease was a way to do that, where you could give moral and material aid to the British and kind of serve as that outlet valve for the passions that the people had in the United States for Britain.

**WOODS:** There's also the question of how the American First folks felt about the way FDR was carrying out his various policies and the nature of those policies. So for instance, there was the Lend-Lease program. Now, I've got in my *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* – I was kept to a very, very strict word limit. It had to be no more than 80,000 words for the whole book, which sounds like a lot, but it's not. And so for World War II, I had just barely the time to say what I wanted to say, so I had to really pack it in there with no fluff whatsoever. So I go through, point by point, all the different things that FDR did that were of dubious constitutionality or whatever. And I know some people say, *Oh, who cares about the Constitution in an emergency time like that?* Yeah, I know, I know. That's what they always say. But there were legitimate reasons for saying, well, you shouldn't be doing this or you shouldn't be doing that. I mean, I think it was Clare Boothe Luce who said something like – I mean, this is a real paraphrase, but: if you really want to rally the country to war, then go ahead and do it. Go ahead and rally the country to war.

**LEWIS:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** Don't be misleading them and then basically be trying to maneuver them in by engaging in what are obvious provocations month after month after month. Just say we need to do this and have confidence that the American public will make the right decision.

**LEWIS:** Yeah, and for people who question the value of constitutionality and concerns about constitutionality at a time of emergency, it is worth remembering that FDR had been saying that there was a state of emergency since 1933. And so there was an entire six-, seven-year history of FDR doing monstrously unconstitutional things under the guise of, *Well, it's an emergency, so we kind of have to do it and worry about the law later.* And so for the people who were at the time worried about that, it was as much reflective of their concerns just in general about the Constitution as it was about his history of subverting the

Constitution during his entire presidency. And so that's not an irrational fear, to focus on that kind of an issue.

But there was a lot of concern, even for people who were more or less inclined to go along with Lend-Lease, that it gave FDR basically dictatorial powers. And Justus Doenecke wrote that the language of the Lend-Lease bill that gave FDR the power to give this aid to people who were fighting the Germans and their allies, the bill was phrased in such a way that FDR could interpret it in such a way that he could give anything to the people that he thought needed aid. So it could be ships; it could be military secrets; it could be anything. And somebody made the point, I can't remember exactly who, but you could actually give away the entire army under the language of the bill, and that would be at FDR's discretion. And so there were some real problems with the language of the bill and with the scope of the powers that were given to Roosevelt.

And the problem, again, was not simply that a president had these powers, because it would have been a problem for any president, but they were given to a president that had already shown that he would take new power and expand it to their fullest scope. And so there was a real distrust of Roosevelt himself and what his underlying intentions were. And even Roosevelt's defenders have criticized Roosevelt for not being honest about what his true intentions were, as he was pushing for these new powers and angling for the United States to be more overt in their support of the British than he was telling the American people was actually happening.

**WOODS:** Now, let's get into the heart of the question about – well, first of all, let's talk about one of the accusations against the American First Committee at the time, was that it was made up of Nazi sympathizers, and of course, we can't credit these people because that's an enormity. I mean, there's no anybody should respect an institution like that. What was the truth of that?

**LEWIS:** So one of the main that the primary historians of the American First movement was Wayne Cole, and he did a tremendous amount of research into this. And basically, his finding was that there were certainly people involved in America First or at least supportive of America First that had Nazi sympathies or fascist sympathies. But he said that it was a joke to act like that was the primary driving force of that movement. The movement was made up of people who were genuinely concerned about American foreign policy, about what was going to happen domestically and around the world if the United States intervened.

And he notes in several cases the lengths to which the American First movement went to keep Nazis and fascists out of the organization. So there was an organization called the German American Bund, which was basically a front for Nazi propaganda in the United States. And America First people told them: we don't want anything to do with you; stay away; you're going to discredit our organization. The first press release of the America First Committee specifically said we do not want anything to do with fascists or Nazis or communists or anybody who is guided by concern for anything other than American interest. And just over and over and over again, the most impressive people in America First were open about rejecting any sympathies, any people who had sympathies with the Nazi regime. And so I think, ultimately, you have to conclude that, whatever influence there was, was incredibly small and was mitigated by the efforts of the committee's leadership.

And there are people who are going to say: but yeah, if there's any influence, then that discredits the organization. But I think it's worth remembering that at the same time, you had literally dozens of communists working inside Roosevelt's administration, helping to formulate foreign policy towards World War II, towards Soviet Russia. And those people, I think, were much more influential in guiding American policy and directing the path of interventionism than anybody who might have had some level of fascist sympathies was within America First. And so there's a lack of appropriate response to both of those, the communists within the administration of Roosevelt and whatever fascist sympathizers there might have been in America First. So I think a lot of that is terribly overblown.

**WOODS:** How did they respond to the argument that Hitler's regime was odious and he was aggressive, and so therefore, it makes sense that we should have a hostile posture toward him and we should consider war and all that? How do they respond to that, because there's no denying those things?

**LEWIS:** No, and they were perfectly open in their condemnation of Hitler. Lindbergh, who is I think most often accused of being a Nazi sympathizer, was open in his denunciation of what Germany was doing in Poland, for instance. And so you had basically nobody in the noninterventionist movement who was openly saying that Germany was not at fault and had no problems that they would object to.

I think the difference was that, first of all, they did not consider that this was an American problem, and a lot of that has to do with, again, understanding the continental European history for centuries past, where there were all these historic animosities between nations and peoples, and so they viewed World War II as not something new; it was just a continuation of the endless battles that have happened in Europe for centuries. And so they were open to supporting the side that they hoped would win, which was Britain, but they were not interested in militarily intervening. And so that there is the primary difference, is that it was not simply that they didn't care who won. They did care who won. But the question was: what is the appropriate American response, and what change can we effect? And Herbert Hoover was especially good on this topic, where he said that you can't cure the problems of ideology with bombers and missiles, that there had to be a change in the hearts and the minds of people, and that war can't bring that about, so we need to have a measured approach and a realistic understanding of what our military intervention is going to accomplish.

**WOODS:** Of course, as you indicated earlier, the man whose name comes up in this context most frequently is Charles Lindbergh because of some remarks he made about who was really beating the drums for war. And you address this in your article, and I'd like to have you say a word about it now.

**LEWIS:** Yeah. I think the way that I phrase it in the article is that Lindbergh was extremely inarticulate as he addressed this question. So his comment was that there were a few different groups who were pushing America towards war. It was the British, the Roosevelt administration, and then he cited Jewish influences in the United States. And he went on and said that, you know, I don't hate the British, I don't hate Jewish people; I just see this as this is who is moving the country towards war. And the reaction to that was huge, both within and outside the interventionist movements. So outside, predictably, people said that, well, this just shows that everybody who is a noninterventionist is an anti-Semite and only is fueled by this hatred of other people, and that's why they don't want to get involved in the war. There

is some – and I do think it's fair to criticize Lindbergh on this count. Lindbergh seems to have been not necessarily great at choosing words. I think that there are real questions about his intentions to offend people with the speech. I don't think that that was his intention.

And Wayne Cole went through this and showed that, afterwards, the American First Committee came out and said, hey, we don't hate anybody of any racial or religious group. That's not what we're about. It's actually the other side that's injecting this into the argument. The only thing we care about is the issue of war and whether or not the United States based on its own interests should be involved in the war. Lindbergh came out afterwards and said that his words had been misconstrued and that's not the way he intended it to come out. There is a lot of evidence from people who knew Lindbergh who said that he didn't have antipathy towards Jewish people, and so there's a lot of credible refutation to the idea that Lindbergh meant this as some sort of racist remark. But it was, unfortunately for him and for the America First movement, it was unfortunate to give the opposing side this ammunition that took the focus off of the underlying issue, and put it on this thing that they could just color the entire movement with. And certainly, that is what happened. The issue got diverted from whether or not there should be intervention to whether or not everybody who was against intervention was a racist.

**WOODS:** I think it's hard for people to find sympathy for the American First Committee, just because they look at the way history came out. And the US – well, the Russians, primarily, but the US defeated the Germans, and an evil was wiped off the face of the earth. And there was a lot of – I mean, there's no denying that that was a terrible evil and that it is a good thing that that doesn't exist anymore. So it's hard to imagine, well, what if we hadn't intervened? I mean, who knows what could have happened? And we already know what happened to the Jews up to that point, so what other horrors might have happened to the absence of the intervention? It's a very hard question for a lot of people to answer, and I don't think it's an unreasonable question.

**LEWIS:** No, I completely agree. And that's one of the challenges of dealing with this period from a noninterventionist standpoint, because if you if you come out and say the United States should not have been involved ever, then what people interpret, whether or not you mean that, is that you think that the United States should have done nothing about the Holocaust. And again, whether or not that's what you mean, that's an extremely difficult barrier to overcome. And I think it's worth taking into account, then, that even if you think that American intervention was necessary to defeat the Nazis and completely agree that the Nazis needed to be defeated, you can look at the war and you can look at what the noninterventionists said was going to happen as a result of the war and not conclude that fundamentally war is a good thing.

And you look at specifically the way that Soviet Russia was empowered during the war, primarily to the way that Roosevelt negotiated with them – although I think "negotiation" is probably too strong of a word on the Roosevelt's side – and you see all the oppression and all of the horrors that that regime then embarked on at the end of the war and after the war. In one case, at least one case, there was a German concentration camp that was just simply repurposed by the Russians, and they just put their own political prisoners in there. And so it is true that one tremendous evil, Nazi Germany, was destroyed. But having one evil destroyed does not mean that evil itself was destroyed.

And the way that I think about this is the locus of evil in Europe just simply shifted. It shifted from Germany to Russia. You had the same problems, which are just the problems of mankind. It's just the problems that we deal with in human nature, because we're fallen people and that's something that we have to deal with. So evil itself wasn't destroyed, just this particular form of evil. And it was a vile form of evil, absolutely, but we have to reconsider the effect that the entire war had and really deromanticize the notion that beating Nazi Germany, even though it was a worthy goal, did not fix all the issues, and in particular did not fulfill the promises that Roosevelt and people in the interventionist camp promised during the war and during the lead-up to the war.

**WOODS:** You have a couple of very compelling quotations toward the end from prominent people looking back on the war and wondering about the long-term consequences and how good they were. I mean, again, these people I'm about to quote are not exactly pro-Hitler. That should go without saying. George Kennan was the architect of the containment policy that dominated the Cold War for half a century. He's obviously as mainstream a guy as you could possibly ask for in the US establishment. And he said, "When you tally up the total score of the two wars, you find that if there has been any gain at all, it is pretty hard to discern." And that's not a crazy man. That's George Kennan.

But then the other quotation is this: "The human tragedy reaches its climax in the fact that after all the exertions and sacrifices of hundreds of millions of people and of the victories of the righteous cause, we have still not found peace or security, and that we lie in the grip of even worse perils than those we have surmounted." That's Winston Churchill.

**LEWIS:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** So in other words, it is possible to not be crazy and look back and say, well, even if we're glad at the outcome, we don't have to be at the mental level of a seven-year-old. We can also say that, as you say, we are confronted with the intractable problems of the wickedness that can lie in the human heart, and that if only it *were* possible to say that there's one magical policy that can obliterate that. But there isn't, and even if you thought this was the best conceivable outcome, and that it wouldn't have been better to let the totalitarians fight it out among themselves, even if this is the best conceivable outcome, there's no reason to go around spitting on people who thought, well, if we could have had an approach to this that might have led to fewer than 50 million deaths, let's at least, as a contrary-to-fact intellectual exercise, think about it. I think we have to be a lot more humble in the face of the staggering human toll involved here as opposed to saying that this is the only possible approach that could have been taken. The only possible approach leads to 50 million deaths? Really? Like we can't even think of any other possibilities of what it might have looked like, for example, if the Germans and the Russians had just fought it out? I mean, there are all kinds of ways you can think about it, but unfortunately, we are not taught to think that way.

If there's a righteous conflict – like for example, with the War Between the States. There you have a side that is obviously morally objectionable because of the institution of slavery. And it's perfectly understandable why somebody would say that institution has to be obliterated. But given the figures we now have – it's more than 630,000 deaths; it's more like 800,000 – not to mention just decimation of all imaginable kinds, suffered by all kinds of people, and the deformation of the American government forever, and the presidential office and war-making powers forever, when there were countless countries, almost every country in the

Western – every country that in the 19th century ended slavery in the Western Hemisphere did it without a war. And just the idea that, well, Americans so perverse; they're the only ones who absolutely had to have a war. That just seems like careless thinking. Can't we just think?

Like, for example – I'm talking too much, but I remember as a professor, I used to ask as an exam question, an essay question: was the American Revolution inevitable? The answer was always yes. Every single student, the answer was yes. Because the way things actually turned out people just assume is the way things had to turn out. They cannot conceive of another path. That was absolutely inevitable. There was no possible way around it. Really? I mean, how can that be? The American Revolution absolutely had to happen? Why?

**LEWIS:** Yeah. There are interesting inconsistencies with the way that people think about history and then American history in general. So if you think that, for instance, Americans are so evil that we're the only people who needed a war to end slavery, how does it turn out that we are the only people who are righteous enough to go around the world in World War I and World War II and bring righteousness to other continents? And so there's a lot of inconsistencies with the way that people think about our own role in the world and what the benefits of war are.

And I think that in World War II, if you prioritize the destruction of Germany and specifically the Nazi regime, I think that you can still understand that, in total, war doesn't fix underlying issues. So if there's something so monstrous as the Holocaust happening, and military intervention is the only way to bring that to an end, then I see the validity in the argument that, all right, let's go end it. But there's no validity in the argument that: and we brought peace and prosperity. Roosevelt talked about the four freedoms and how there's going to be no more fear and all these kind of ridiculous Wilsonian ideas. And if we begin to understand that there's a limitation to what war can accomplish, that you've cut off one head of the serpent, but it's still got four or five other ones, you begin to realize that there's a way to look at a topic like World War II that doesn't require you to sympathize with evil people, but that does help you to not romanticize the war itself and overstate what it accomplished.

And for the people who think that way, I think it's telling that the war at its beginning was intended to save Poland and China. Well, at the end of the war, Poland was lost. Poland had half of its territory or almost half of its territory taken by the Russians. China was completely abandoned to the communists within their own country who were supportive of Russia. Mao took over that country. Tens of millions of people died as a result of his regime. So if we cut the end date in August of 1945, then we can say, yeah, World War II was a smashing success and we ended these evil regimes. But if you expand your scope and you understand what happened after the war, you see all these problems that were there before are still there.

And again, as you said, this is because it's in us. It's in human nature to be evil. And so you can't obliterate that with war. That has to come through more subtle forces. And so there's a case to be made for noninterventionism being proven by World War II, that even if you allow for the involvement of the United States in the war, all of the arguments that the noninterventionists made about what was going to happen at home and the impossibility of destroying evil by military force, to a large degree, those came true. And that lesson, I think, is fairly well ignored by a lot of modern Americans.

**WOODS:** Tell me briefly about *Austrolibertarian*, the magazine in which your article on the subject appeared.

**LEWIS:** Sure, so *Austrolibertarian*, this comes from the spring edition, and the theme of the edition is the ravages of world war. And obviously, this is the brainchild of C. Jay Engel, who's been on a couple of times. And so actually the spring issue is the first print issue of the magazine. There was a digital-only run back in the winter. And so there will be a summer edition coming up in, I believe, August, and this will be on socialism. There will be an interview with Gene Epstein in this one, and then there's also more changes and editions planned and more features and things like that, exciting stuff coming up.

**WOODS:** I have heard nothing but rave reviews about this publication, absolutely nothing but rave reviews. You can get a digital version. This is a 2019, after all. But for those of you who still like holding a physical magazine in your hands, you can also do that. So it's definitely worth checking out. And of course, as you would expect, there is a coupon code, coupon code WOODS. Go to [Austrolibertarian.com](http://Austrolibertarian.com), coupon code WOODS gets you \$10 off an annual subscription. So come on, now. I mean, how could you not do that? [Austrolibertarian.com](http://Austrolibertarian.com). Ben Lewis, thanks so much for your time and for your interesting article. I appreciate it.

**LEWIS:** Thanks, Tom.