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Book Review

by Richard M. Ebeling

Defend America First: The Antiwar Editorials of the Saturday Evening Post, 1939–1942 by Garet Garrett (Caldwell, Idaho, 2003); 285 pages; \$13.95.

It has now long been taken for granted by the American citizenry that the president of the United States, in his role as commander in chief, has the authority and power to send American armed forces into harm's way anywhere in the world, at any time, for practically any purpose, and at virtually his own discretion.

Americans do not realize how relatively new a power this is for the executive branch of the U.S. government.

It is true that in the 19th century American forces intervened in various parts of the world. For instance, in the 1870s America briefly fought its first Korean War. An American merchant vessel went aground along the coast of Korea, and the survivors of the ship were hacked to death by the local natives.

The U.S. government demanded an apology and an indemnity for the loss of life. When the Korean government refused, an American naval task force was sent to Korea. The American warships bombarded the forts at the mouth of the Han River leading up to the Korean capital of Seoul. Only when the American forces threatened to advance up the river to the capital did the Korean government accede to the American demands.

Most of the interventions during the 19th century were at the discretion of naval and marine officers who had to make decisions on their own, since they had no way of rapidly communicating with Washington to ask for formal instructions.

For instance, America's first intervention in Vietnam was in the 1850s. A French priest was threatened by a Vietnamese mob in the old imperial city of Hue. The commander of an American naval vessel that happened to be in the port ordered a unit of marines ashore to go to the rescue of the priest.

These two examples of American military intervention in foreign lands, and many others, can all be read about in great detail in the official history of the United States Marine Corps.

But up through the First World War, it was always taken for granted that while the commander in chief was responsible for the execution of war under the U.S. Constitution, it was the Congress that declared war and formally sent America off into a conflict with another nation.

This was considered part of the Framers' wisdom in designing the Constitution in such a way that the power over war and peace was not in the hands of a dominating executive.

A president might present the case for going to war before the American people, but it was the people's elected representatives who were constitutionally responsible for deciding whether or not such a grave course should be followed.

The deliberation over war and peace in the congressional chambers would, it was hoped, cool any immediate passions and allow reason to work its power in deciding on such an important matter.

The turn away from these constitutional procedures began in the years leading up to America's entry into the Second World War at the end of 1941.

How this change came about is the theme of the essays included in *Defend America First*. The volume contains many of the articles penned by Garet Garrett in the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1939 to 1942.

Garrett was a strong opponent of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies during the earlier years of the 1930s. When the winds of war began to blow on the shores of the Atlantic in 1939, he challenged the emerging unofficial policies and hidden strategies of the Roosevelt administration that were moving America into the European conflict between Nazi Germany and Great Britain. (Britain and its empire were standing alone against Hitler after the fall of France in June of 1940.)

Garrett was in no way an apologist for Hitler and his Nazi regime. Indeed, he believed that Nazi Germany was a threat that America had to take seriously.

He was not anti-British, in that he considered that the cause of Britain as a force for freedom was certainly far superior to the Nazi dream of totalitarian order.

He was not anti-Jewish, in that he wanted to preserve an America under which everyone was secure in his constitutionally protected rights to individual liberty, private property, and freedom of exchange.

And he was not a pacifist, in that he actually argued for a strong national defense, so strong that America would be ready and able to successfully deter and defeat even a simultaneous attack by Germany from across the Atlantic and Japan from across the Pacific.

What he was against was the policy of Franklin Roosevelt to use deception and unconstitutional means to bring America into the Second World War. As Garrett expressed it in one of his editorials,

There is a disaster worse than war. We are concerned only with how it was done. We are thinking of how your government, instead of telling the people what it meant to do or what it was doing until it was done, by indirection, by subterfuge, by cleverness, by beating the law, uncontrollably pursuing its own will, did involve this country in the European war it was resolved to stay out of.

He reminded his readers of the many times FDR had promised, again and again and again, during the 1940 presidential campaign in which he ran for an unprecedented third term in office, that he had not made and was not entering into any secret alliances or agreements to bring the United States into the war. And that he was determined to see that American boys did not fight in foreign wars.

Yet, Garrett explained, week after week, as events unfolded in 1940 and 1941, Roosevelt was bending the laws, evading the laws, defying laws, and breaking the laws passed by Congress and signed by himself that were meant to maintain America's neutrality and prevent any course of action that might be grounds for a foreign power to declare war on the United States.

He made a mockery of the laws prohibiting the federal government's directly selling arms to a belligerent power by "returning" armaments owned by the U.S. military to the manufacturers so they then could be sold by a "private" enterprise to the British government. FDR transferred military equipment and ships to Canada, with whom he had entered into an informal alliance, so those armaments could be passed on to the British.

He used a twisted meaning of words and executive power to undertake the famous transfer of 50 U.S. destroyers to Britain in exchange for use of British military bases in the Americas, without informing Congress or seeking its approval. (See the review of *Hard Bargain: How FDR Twisted Churchill's Arm, Evaded the Law and Changed the Role of the American Presidency*, by Robert Shogan, in [Freedom Daily](#), August 1995.)

Roosevelt then placed American forces in harm's way, again in violation of congressional law, by sending military "patrols" — "convoys" by another name — across half of the Atlantic to escort British vessels carrying military equipment and other supplies to Great Britain.

What Garrett could not know at the time that he wrote these *Saturday Evening Post* editorials was the extent to which FDR had in fact given promises to Winston Churchill and entered into alliances in all but name with Churchill's government for America's entry into the war against Nazi Germany. He was able to add these parts to the narrative only in his later works, *The People's Pottage* (1953) and *The American Story* (1955).

What Garrett was most deeply concerned about in these editorials from 1940 and 1941 and in his writings after the Second World War was that FDR's actions were creating an imperial presidency, outside the restraint of the Congress and beyond the control of the American citizenry and their wishes as a free people.

For instance, after Roosevelt successfully pressured Congress to pass the Lend-Lease Act, Garrett warned that it gave the president a range of new powers:

Power in his own discretion, on his own terms and as he may see fit, to conduct undeclared war anywhere in the world. *Power* in his own discretion to make friends and enemies of other nations. *Power* in his own discretion to employ the total resources of the country to such ends. *Power* in his own discretion to make military alliances with other governments; and to lend, lease or give to other governments any of the military resources of the United States, nothing excepted save man power, and that only by not being specifically mentioned. *Power* to make by edict such laws as he may deem necessary in order to carry out his intentions. *Power* to command money in any amount. *Power* himself to delegate any or all of that power to whom he likes.

Through these expanded powers, some given to FDR by loose laws passed by Congress at this time and others merely taken by the president in defiance of existing laws, Garrett argued that by the early part of 1941 America was, in fact, already at war on Great Britain's side against Nazi Germany.

Increasingly unrestrained executive powers in foreign affairs resulted in the president of the United States leading the American people into a war that all the public opinion polls clearly showed a vast majority of them did not want to enter.

The newspapers at the time, Garrett lamented, seemed to take all this for granted. They referred every day to such developments as, "the president has decided," "the president has done," "the president has declared," when all of these things were presumed to traditionally lie beyond presidential authority without congressional approval and agreement, as specified under the Constitution.

The republic was increasingly being whittled away, with nothing but unrestrained and concentrated power in the hands of the president being left in its place.

This is what makes these editorials from more than 60 years ago so relevant and fresh today. They explain the origins and processes of presidential power that enables the person occupying the White House to arrogantly take America into wars in our own time and even to declare his intention to remake the rest of the world in America's image through political and military force. It is all nothing less than the logical outcome of the road started down by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s.

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