

Discussion on Isolationism in the United States in the 1920s: a revival or a disaster

Chunjiang Li

Hamden Hall Country Day School, 15 Deer Run Road, North Haven, CT 06517, United States

angela@cas-harbour.org

Keywords: Isolationism policy, International political context, Economy development, Benefits.

Abstract. Isolationism is a set of foreign political policies the United States established to protect its benefits in the global community. This paper analyzes isolationism in the 1920s when it was employed by President Harding after World War I. This paper reviews the historic background of isolationism, explores its causes and how the United States has benefited from it. The last section presents a discussion on whether isolationism is a right choice at its time.

1. Introduction

After World War I (WWI), the U.S. government were hedged about with problems both locally and globally. On one hand, the U.S. government wanted to keep its international political position. On the other hand, it needed to consider people's sentiments to on economic development. Against this backdrop, President Harding announced the isolationism policies in the 1920s in order to maintain its political leadership in the world and boost economic development at the same time. These policies have drawn heated discussions. This paper will explore the causes for these policies and analyze how the U.S. has benefited from these policies both politically and economically.

2. Overview of isolationism policy

Isolationism is a foreign political policy the United States used to protect its international benefits. It was first proposed by President Washington and later employed by President Harding in the 1920s. The isolationism policy was aimed to improve the country's domestic condition in the 1920s. President Harding promised to the American people during his campaign that "I am happy to assure you that the administrative departments are now in full sympathy with the program of rigorous and unremitting economy" [2]. American people preferred improving the domestic conditions to cooperating with other countries in the 1920s. The isolationism policy proposed by President Harding helped the United States gain unprecedented prosperity in the 1920s.

3. Causes for isolationism policy

3.1 International political context

The reason why the American people were not willing to join the League of Nations was that in 1920s America experienced what is known as "the roaring twenties" and "Red Scare". After WWI, America refused to cooperate with European countries because it believed most of the communist ideas were rooted in their European counterparts. Because of the fear of the European communist ideas and the distrust of European countries, the American government decided to take the neutral position on the world issues, just like what Washington once suggested as regard to their relationship with the European countries. In other words, isolationism has remained one of the American foreign policies for many years. It was first mentioned in George Washington's retirement speech. The isolationism policy was employed as a political strategy during the 1920s. It is reasonable to say the policy was employed at the right time and sufficiently helped lead the United States to prosperity in the 1920s. Many political cartoons were also created to reflect how the American people responded to the "red scare" age. The image on the bottom is one of the political cartoons created in the 1920s. In this image,

the “anarchism” and “communism” were described as a giant cloud intending to invade the United States. This image vividly depicted how the American felt toward anarchism and communism. The idea of communism and anarchism frightened the American people. With the presence of the “red scare”, it was hard to persuade the American people into joining the League of Nations as a way to prevent wars like WWI. Instead of adding tensions between the United States and the Europe, it was wise to shift the focus from international cooperation to domestic improvement [5].

3.2 Economy development

After the war, the United States thought it would be better to step outside of the troubles and shift its focus to the economy. Frederick Lewis Allen in the 1920s once commented that “the war had impoverished Europe and hardly damaged the United States at all; when peace came the Americans found themselves the economic masters of the world. Their young country, with enormous resources in materials and in human energy and with a wide domestic market, was ready to take advantage of this situation” [1]. This comment revealed that the United States was approaching prosperity after WWI. At that time, the United States’ economy was “simmering” waiting to be “boiling”. With the isolationism policy proposed by President Harding, the long “simmering” economy “boomed” in the 1920s. Without the isolationism policy, the other countries badly damaged by the war would sought help from the U.S., which means the United States would have had to aid the other countries even its own economy was still recovering. If the U.S. agreed to join the League of Nations and did not declare its neutrality on the issues of European countries who were the proposer of League of Nations, then the United States would devote a large amount of time to helping the countries, and they would ended up missing the prosperity in the 1920s and having a greater “Great Depression” in the 1930s. WWI helped the U.S. improve the economy because of the huge demands of supplies during the war. Thanks to the increased demands, the U.S. economy soared during the 1920s. Choosing not to cooperate with the European countries got America out of unnecessary troubles the European countries might bring. If cooperating with the European countries, domestic rebellions might bring lots of troubles to the U.S. government because the American people feared the spreading of communism at that time. Moreover, the people were more concerned with having the things to their likings with rather than involving with the international interactions or the unnecessary affairs. Isolationism at that time helped the U.S. to maintain its political position and gave it enough time to reap the fruits of the economic boom.

4. Benefits from isolationism

Isolationism in the 1920s indirectly brought money to spend and the power to secure the international position of the U.S. By employing the isolationism policy in the 1920s, the U.S. was able to secure its wealth and power. Isolationism means dispensing with unnecessary interactions with foreign countries so that the domestic profits can be secured. Isolationism is used to protect a country’s wealth and power it has gained. In the 1920s, the U.S. was the most prosperous economy in the world. By employing isolationism, it was havened from disturbance by other countries and ensured domestic security. The isolationism policy not only protected the economy of the United States in the 1920s, but also secured its international political clout after the WWI.

4.1 International political position

American diplomats regarded isolationism as a smart policy to be employed in the 1920s. “The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was only the most threatening of the postwar events that persuaded most Americans that their intervention had clearly failed to make the world safe for democracy. It thus appeared to demonstrate the wisdom of the contention that meddling in the affairs of others was useless and self-defeating” [4]. This summary of the goals clearly demonstrated the wisdom of employing isolationism in the 1920s. According to the source, the U.S. was one of the strongest countries after WWI and the war helped increase its power and wealth. If the United States continued to develop on its own without meddling with the other countries’ chores, it can secure the

“fruits” they got after WWI. It was reasonable to conclude that the United States made a wise decision to employ isolationism in the 1920s.

The policy helped the United States to gain a stable international status as the winning countries in WWI and the policy also helped the U.S. to maintain its status as one of the most powerful countries in the world. In order to fully enact the isolationism policies, the U.S. started to limit immigrants to the its mainland. According to Norwich University, “in 1921, Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act set numerical quotas for the number of immigrants coming to the United States. In 1924, Congress enacted the Johnson-Reed Act to replace the Emergency Quota Act. The Johnson-Reed Act further reduced the percentage of immigrants eligible for admission to the U.S.” [3]. With the limitations on the immigrants, native workers enjoyed more employment opportunities and the domestic economic condition would not be disturbed by immigrants. In other words, the isolationist policy was an “American-only” policy employed in the 1920s.

4.2 Economy development

The isolationism policy not only secured but also prompted the U.S. economy in the 1920s. The U.S. economy was booming and many electronic devices were invented during the 1920s. According to Frederick Lewis Allen, many industries started to produce more and more products and the employment rate went up significantly. “The phenomenal activity of this one part of the body economic which was responsible, directly or indirectly, for the employment of nearly four million men pumped new life into all the rest.” [1]. According to the source, the economy improved after WWI and the living conditions in the U.S. started to get increasingly better. The staggering rate of industrial growth in the U.S. was a proof of the country’s booming economy in the 1920s. Admittedly, the economy of the U.S. in the 1920s was not as prosperous as it seemed because the period was teeming with the false loans and the false promises from banks, which led the economy to collapse in the 1930s. However, if isolationism was not employed, the U.S could have suffered more problems than it was in the 1930s.

5. Discussion

The positive influences of isolationism are protecting the countries from unnecessary contacts with the other countries so the U.S. has a neutral stand in the international issues and insulates itself from unnecessary troubles. Nevertheless, the isolationism policy could be a disaster for a country if it was not used at the right time. This is because isolationism could undermine a country’s international clout and invite blames for not helping maintain the international security. Moreover, wrong isolationism policies can close the door for a country to success and advancement. However, in the 1920s, there were no other policies better than isolationism. In the 1920s, the U.S. just finished the war and the idea of “Red Scare” put the Americans off the vision to cooperate with the European countries. The domestic condition could not stand competition from international corporations. The tariffs in the 1920s made sure that the Americans could enjoy their country’s own wealth. Additionally, the tariffs also made sure that the British government could not steal any American wealth. The tariffs in turn lead other countries to resist American products. However, the U.S. was in a time of recovery and a time of fast development. Other countries were affected by WWI much worse than the U.S. Thus, selling the products to other countries in the 1920s after WWI would not be a wise decision. Cooperating with other countries in the 1920s would allow them to steal America’s strong wealth. Choosing not to cooperate with other countries ensured that only American citizens are entitled to enjoy America's wealth. The isolationism policy also made sure only the native people could get the jobs and the people from foreign countries could not take the jobs away from American citizens.

6. Conclusion

Because of both domestic and international conditions in the 1920s, it was wise for the U.S. government to use the isolationism policy. Isolationism has allowed the U.S. to secure its international political clout and facilitated its economy development. However, this study only analyzed the causes and the benefits of isolationism policies from the angles of international political position and economy development of the United States. Further studies will be devoted to more factors that influenced the isolationism policy, as well as the influences it had on other parts of world outside the United States.

References

- [1] Allen, Frederick Lewis. Speech, "The Twenties in Contemporary Comments." 1931.
- [2] Seth Kaller, "Harding's Return to Normalcy – and Isolationism – after World War I".[Online] Available:
<https://www.sethkaller.com/item/303-21124-Harding%E2%80%99s-Return-to-Normalcy-%E2%80%93-and-Isolationism-%E2%80%93-after-World-War-I>. [Accessed May 23, 2019].
- [3] "Isolationism and U.S. Foreign Policy After World War I", November 6, 2017. [Online]. Available:
<https://online.norwich.edu/academic-programs/resources/isolationism-and-us-foreign-policy-after-world-war-i>. [Accessed May 23, 2019].
- [4] "The Triumph of Isolationism". [Online]. Available:
<https://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Isolationism-The-triumph-of-isolationism.html>. [Accessed May 23, 2019].
- [5] Lewis Crumley Gregg, "The Twenties in Political Cartoon." 1919. [Online]. Available:
<http://americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/prosperity/text1/colcommentary.pdf>. [Accessed May 23, 2019].