

# The Isolationist as Collectivist: Lawrence Dennis and the Coming of World War II\*

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To most historians, and to much of the general public as well, the name of the late Lawrence Dennis has long been associated with American "fascism." Arthur S. Link calls him "the intellectual leader and principal adviser of the fascist groups." Charles C. Alexander sees him as "the leading intellectual fascist in America." When Dennis's thought is treated in depth, it is usually in the context of anti-democratic political philosophy and elitist theory.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the sixties, some commentators have started to refer to Dennis in slightly more appreciative terms. In 1960 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., while arguing that Dennis's formulas were both authoritarian and romantic, claimed that "his analysis cut through sentimental idealism with healthy effect." In 1969 Frederick L. Schuman, a "popular front" advocate who had debated Dennis in the 1930's, went much further, declaring that his pleas for isolation "would probably have contributed more to the welfare, health and survival of the human race than the course which Washington policy makers did in fact pursue . . . since 1917." Then, beginning in 1972, historians started to find Dennis a forerunner of Cold War revisionism, with Ronald Radosh calling him America's "earliest and most consistent critic of the Cold War." To Radosh, Dennis's stress on market factors alone shows the man's perception.<sup>2</sup>

Despite such fresh examination, scholars have not yet described, much less explained, Dennis's reaction to the rise of the Axis powers, and to the outbreak of World War II. Yet it was his posture toward the totalitarian nations, Germany in particular, that led to much notoriety and in 1944 to indictment for sedition. The unique nature of Dennis's arguments, so unlike those of many isolationists, enabled Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to find him one of the "Quislings who, in pretended patriotism, would cravenly spike our guns and ground our airplanes in order that Hitlerism might more easily overcome us." Dennis's rationale also allowed columnist

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Dorothy Thompson to call him the “braintruster extraordinary to the forces of democratic defeat,” and exposé writer Avedis Derounian, whose pen name was “John Roy Carlson,” to refer to him as “Liberty’s chief hangman.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, if such stereotypes still remain with us, they are more indicative of the political culture of the 1930’s than of Dennis’s own position, one which was in many ways *sui generis*.

Dennis began his career on the lower rungs of the American establishment. Born in Atlanta in 1893, he received his formal education at Phillips Exeter and Harvard, and during World War I served overseas as an infantry officer. Then came several years in the foreign service, followed by employment abroad with J.&W. Seligman and the National City Bank of New York. In 1930, Dennis began to attack the overseas activities of American investment banking, publishing his broadsides in such liberal journals as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

Soon Dennis began to offer sweeping solutions for the Great Depression, solutions that increasingly centered on a corporate state. Like F.A. Hayek and Joseph Schumpeter, he saw the coming world as a collectivist one, but, unlike them, he welcomed this world vigorously. His world was always much closer to George Soule or Stuart Chase than to Ludwig von Mises. In 1934, as associate editor of a right-wing tabloid called *The Awakener*, he attacked the “half-way” measures of the New Deal and called for more centralized economic controls. His “fascist” reputation, however, was rooted in his book *The Coming American Fascism* (1936), as well as in a series of articles written in the mid and late thirties for such journals as *The American Mercury*, *Social Frontier*, and *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

The industrial countries, he said, faced inevitable collectivization. Fascism, communism, even the American New Deal were all parts of a historical process so mechanistic that individual rulers counted for little. Capitalism—once nourished by extensive geographical frontiers and rich world markets—was no longer workable; the New Deal, a mere step on the collectivist road, had little to offer but deficit spending and make-work projects. Given the need for a thoroughly collectivized society, Dennis found America facing the choice of fascism or communism. Of the two, he claimed that fascism was preferable, for—unlike the Soviet system—it offered class unity, utilized the market mechanism, and retained skilled managerial elites.<sup>5</sup>

Dennis, in fact, claimed to be describing “a desirable fascism.” He used the example of Huey Long as “our nearest approach to a national fascist leader” and spoke of gaining initial power through control of varied state governments. A militarized party organization would then compete in national elections. Assuming power legally, the new ruling elite would call private enterprise to “the colors as conscripts in war,” reorganize the Congress on

vocational lines, and replace the two-party system with a single party "holding a mandate from the people." (If the scenario reads a bit like Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), one wonders who Buzz Windrop would be.) Specific economic measures included nationalization of banks and major monopolies, redistribution of wealth and income through progressive taxation, and subsidization of small enterprises and farming. In the new society, all institutions—press, radio, cinema, schools, and churches—would have to foster a "national plan" designed to coordinate the entire economy.<sup>6</sup>

The question of Dennis as a "fascist" proponent depends upon how the term is defined. Dennis would use the noun interchangeably. At times he meant any kind of centralized economy that was not communist. At other times he was referring to the political and economic systems of Germany and Italy and to them alone. At still other times he was outlining his utopian vision for America. Dennis long denied that he was ever a fascist, declaring that he had never joined a fascist movement or backed a fascist cause. Rather he was a neutral observer, trying to analyze events without ideological bias.<sup>7</sup>

If fascism combines a one-party state with strident nationalism, continental autarchy, and centralized economic controls that mould private ownership to public will,—in short, a truly corporatist and organic society transcending localized interests—then Dennis's system might be fascistic. If, however, one defines fascism as involving a clear-cut *Führer prinzip*, a terror system, and permanent purge so often associated with Nazi Germany, then Dennis was not a fascist. He adhered neither to the racism of an Alfred Rosenberg or a Vidkun Quisling; rather his politics centered on the twin poles of economic corporatism and rigid isolationism.<sup>8</sup>

Isolationism in fact developed naturally from Dennis's corporatism. Dennis argued that a self-sufficient and disciplined United States would not have to venture outside the Hemisphere. In contrast to the fascist powers of Europe, the United States could sustain full employment without the need for additional markets and territory overseas. Dennis was far from being a pacifist, and in 1936 his foreign policy included control of the Panama Canal, "naval parity with the greatest power, a professional army of at least four hundred thousand men fully equipped, and universal compulsory military service." The United States, by maintaining a strong war potential, could "rope off a large section of the globe within this hemisphere as territory in which outsiders may not come and fight." Far better, Dennis believed, to construct a Fortress America than to fight "another holy war" that could only result in "world revolution and chaos."<sup>9</sup>

Despite the unconventional nature of some tenets, Dennis did not always have a bad press. Several reviews of *The Coming American Fascism* were quite respectful, with *The Times Literary Supplement* of London claiming

that the book had "substantial value as a fresh and penetrating analysis of the present situation." Such critics as Ernest Sutherland Bates and Dwight Macdonald denied that Dennis was advocating a European form of fascism. What Dennis meant by fascism, said Macdonald, appeared to be "a kind of Technocracy and not at all what Hitler and Mussolini meant." As late as June 1940, *The New York Times* covered his addresses before foreign policy groups, always referring to him as a "banker," "economist," or "former member of the diplomatic service"—never as a fascist.<sup>10</sup>

Even in 1940 and 1941 Dennis was not entirely excluded from mainstream political forums. True, Harper and Brothers, finding Dennis 'too hot' a property, dropped sponsorship of a Dennis volume that they had intended to publish, and Dennis had to publish it himself. However, Dennis addressed the prestigious Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Virginia in 1940. The next year *The Nation* featured a debate between Dennis, Frederick L. Schuman, and journalist Max Lerner on the forces acting in the wartime order, and *Fortune* magazine welcomed his participation in a roundtable forum on the world economy.<sup>11</sup>

It was only, however, after the fall of France that Dennis was opposed by the very groups that had once tolerated, and at times welcomed, his views, and it is doubtful whether any isolationist except Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh so aroused the interventionists' ire. Such opposition might have been inevitable, for as Germany, Italy, and Japan began to assault the Versailles system, Dennis devoted increasing attention to foreign policy. In *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* (1940), and in a privately circulated bulletin entitled *The Weekly Foreign Letter* (1938–1942), Dennis propounded the doctrine that wars of conquest were inevitable. The British Empire, now a status quo power, had been founded by "pirates, slave-traders and fighting men"; the United States had stolen its territory from the Indians. As aggression was rooted in human nature and in the world's unequal distribution of goods, it was folly to think in Wilsonian terms of a "war to end wars."<sup>12</sup>

Even before the outbreak of World War II, Dennis had placed himself squarely on the side of the so-called "have-not" nations. The breakdown of world capitalism, he said, forced the "socialist" nations—Germany, Russia, Italy, and Japan—to conquer territories and to develop economies totally independent of traditional trade and financial networks. The Munich pact was therefore an act of rationality, a "realistic attempt" to secure "peaceful change." If, in the process, it made Germany master of all Europe, it avoided a general war and the accompanying triumph of communism.<sup>13</sup>

By the same token, Dennis found England's guarantee to Poland, made in late March of 1939, sheer stupidity. The British, having just given Hitler the keys to eastern Europe, were suddenly forbidding him to use them. Not only was it the height of folly to fight the world's greatest military power without

an alliance with the Soviet Union, but Britain's action delivered the small Baltic nations over to "the tender mercies of Moscow."<sup>14</sup>

Once hostilities started, Dennis gave several reasons why he believed that Germany was bound to win. First, he claimed that the Reich, unlike the Allies, possessed dynamic leadership. Dennis called Roosevelt "a semi-paralyzed country squire," one who lacked the toughness necessary to lead a major war effort. Such policymakers as Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson were superannuated and confused, America's military and naval heads "mostly gold-braided senior Civil Service clerks." Winston Churchill, as incompetent as Roosevelt, was "a senile alcoholic who [had] never been a success at anything except writing alibis for his failures," and most of England's parliamentary leaders were equally inept.<sup>15</sup>

Dennis found Hitler, however, a man of "genius." Rather than vying to be "the darling of American women's groups," the *Führer* had dismembered Czechoslovakia, isolated Russia, and secured food from eastern Europe for his "eighty million German bellies." Later evidence of Hitler's brilliant leadership, said Dennis, could be seen in his ability to unite the "have-nots" against "the capitalistic pluto-democracies."<sup>16</sup>

Second, Dennis asserted that only the totalitarian nations possessed the *élan vital* necessary for victory. He said that the British and the French, unlike the Germans, lacked "the willingness to die by the tens of thousands." True, Germany's armed manpower, industrial mobilization, and geographical location contributed to its superiority, but there was more as well. While the American laborer would strike to secure benefits, the Nazi worker—knowing that the industrialists were being (according to Dennis) equally disciplined—willingly accepted low wages and long hours.<sup>17</sup>

Third, Dennis asserted that the totalitarian states had more attainable war aims. He always denied that Hitler sought world conquest; rather Germany merely wanted additional *lebensraum* in eastern Europe. By integrating the agricultural Balkan states to an industrialized Reich, a prosperous continent could remain independent of an Anglo-American commercial system. Such German domination of Europe, Dennis maintained, preserved—not threatened—the world balance of power. Fragmented continents, packed with small sovereign states, were economically unworkable; world prosperity of necessity depended upon continental blocs. Here Dennis envisioned an expanded Russian zone, an Asia dominated by Japan, a somewhat reduced British Empire, a Western Hemisphere controlled by the United States, and a Europe run by Germany. The Americas were in no danger, he maintained, for German or Japanese efforts to extend their domain overseas would be ruinously costly.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast Dennis claimed that Allied war aims were both Carthaginian and messianic. Britain, anxious to preserve world hegemony, offered Ger-

many only perpetual foreign domination. Sometimes Dennis would portray America as an unwitting underwriter for England's bankrupt system. Sometimes he would claim that the United States hoped to inherit Britain's naval supremacy. Sometimes he would assert that the United States sought "a closed door at home and an open door abroad." Accusing Roosevelt's "knights of the round table" of attempting to internationalize New Deal relief through a series of overseas credits, he tersely remarked, "The Germans are fighting for groceries; if we fight it will be for the right to give away groceries." The United States, he declared, was foolishly hoping to restore Anglo-American supremacy based upon the gold standard, international capitalism, and a monopoly of raw materials.<sup>19</sup>

To Dennis the utopian rhetoric of the Allies was even more infuriating. Establishing the Four Freedoms everywhere, he said, was "about the craziest enterprise any nation ever embarked upon in modern history." America's own racial hypocrisy and the British suppression of India's nationalism revealed the "real" aim of the interventionists: to supplant the Nazi *Heerenrasse* with "a world system in which the Heerschaft of the Anglo-Saxon is implicit."<sup>20</sup>

Dennis was particularly acid concerning the treatment of American blacks. He accused the United States of expediently "soft pedaling" its blatant discrimination rooted as far back as the time of the Declaration of Independence. Yet, once racial equality becomes part of the nation's propaganda arsenal, the blacks—like the inhabitants of India—would rebel against "broken promises."<sup>21</sup>

Since, according to Dennis, the totalitarian nations possessed the advantages of dynamic leadership, superb organization and morale, and feasible war aims, it was hardly surprising that their military strategy was superior.<sup>22</sup> The British, he said, suffered from an "acute case of Mahanitis and Maginot mindedness," not even realizing that their continental blockade merely served to starve the peoples of the occupied countries. Air combat was simply "the Hollywood grand strategy": upper class "R.A.F. lads" could never conquer German territory or destroy enemy armies, while the working classes of London's East End were receiving such a pounding that Great Britain would be forced to seek a truce. And win or lose, England's empire and capitalistic system would vanish. Socialism and autarchy lay ahead.<sup>23</sup>

The United States, Dennis said, could actually benefit from a Hitler victory and a quick peace. While America developed its own self-sufficiency, it could conduct a prosperous trade with Axis Europe. Furthermore, the nation could come to the rescue of the ailing British ("a grand people," Dennis mused) by admitting some twenty million immigrants, and by taking over both Canada and Australia as well. Although England would surrender all decision-making to the United States, it would help to form a viable Anglo-Saxon bloc. ("The royal family," he remarked, "might be kept as a

tourist attraction like the quintuplets in Canada.") Such an America could also serve as a refuge for persecuted Jews, though he later noted that his countrymen preferred "a Hitler lynching party."<sup>24</sup>

In his linking of national survival to a rigid neutrality, Dennis denied that his position was immoral. He wrote Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas in 1944, "I shared your moral indignation against Hitler's brutalities," but he claimed that "violent diatribes" merely fanned dangerous interventionist flames. He found the castigations of the interventionists highly selective, for they did not apply similar indictments to Soviet persecutions or to the British in India. Such hypocrisy, claimed Dennis, even extended to domestic life. Noting how conservative interventionists had opposed New Deal welfare measures, he told columnist Dorothy Thompson, "Your passion for an unhappy minority is proportionate to their distance from you. It is great enough to condemn millions of our youth to die for Jews in Poland or Chinese in Asia but not great enough to insure adequate nourishment to American babies within a block of where you live."<sup>25</sup>

Dennis knew several prominent leaders of the isolationist movement. Colonel Lindbergh, who occasionally met with Dennis, found him "brilliant," although the aviator did not know how much they were in agreement. Dennis in turn praised Lindbergh for opposing all aid to Britain, a position far more militant than that of most isolationists. Several commentators noted that Dennis's writings contained themes of Nazi invincibility and Western weakness also propounded in Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Wave of the Future* (1940) and in the Colonel's speeches.<sup>26</sup> Dennis was acquainted with General Robert E. Wood, chairman of the America First Committee, and with historian Harry Elmer Barnes, both of whom recommended his work. Chicago industrialist Sterling Morton, a member of the national committee of America First, claimed that if one overlooked Dennis's apparent bias, his writings were "informative and to the point." According to Dennis correspondence quoted by O. John Rogge, prosecutor in the sedition case of 1944, Dennis served as ghostwriter for the isolationist monthly *Scribner's Commentator*, prepared a hundred page memorandum on the world economy for General Wood, and collaborated with journalist Freda Uteley on an isolationist essay for the *Reader's Digest*.<sup>27</sup>

Although Dennis contributed ten dollars to the America First Committee, he found most isolationists unreceptive to him and to his ideas. America First, he said, was foolish to advocate limited aid to Britain or to attempt to hold Roosevelt to his peace pledges. Far better to recognize realities, which meant mourning the loss of traditional neutrality and acknowledging that the United States was already in the conflict. Only by combining a program of absolute non-participation with promises of either a welfare state or the annexation of the entire continent could isolationists ever secure mass appeal.<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt's alternative, commented Dennis in March 1941, was staggering. The very phrase "all-aid-short-of-war" was self-contradictory, for the United States could not afford both guns and butter. Its living standards were bound to decline. Big business and labor might flourish, but the middle classes and farmers faced ruin.<sup>29</sup>

And by fighting totalitarianism overseas, Dennis predicted (along with John Dewey, Norman Thomas, and a host of "liberals"), America would succumb to it at home. The nation would experience the "wrong kind" of fascism, one imposed without debate or direction. In fact, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had just released a White Book on German operations in the United States, inadvertently revealed the nation's drift. Since the Dies Committee lacked the evidence that could support legal conviction, Dennis accused it of serving as a true "People's Court."<sup>30</sup>

Yet, as the nation drew increasingly closer to actual fighting, Dennis found it woefully unprepared. The United States lacked the strategy needed to conquer Europe, was barely ahead of backward Italy in technology, and could never raise the needed ten million men. Even American convoys prolonged England's agony without seriously harming Germany. By the time that the United States spent the two years necessary to raise a competent army, Hitler could have conquered all Russia, the Mediterranean, and the Near East.<sup>31</sup>

Dennis found America's opposition to Japan equally foolish, for with its natural economic expansion blocked by Western trade and immigration barriers, Japan was forced to follow an imperialist course. Roosevelt, by aiding China's "military gangsters," had revealed that he was out to ruin the island kingdom. Dennis predicted that the Chinese would eventually force Japan out of their land; at the same time, a sudden Japanese withdrawal would throw some two million demobilized soldiers into a nation whose trade prospects were already poor. Given their predicament, the Japanese were driven into an alliance with Germany and forced to seek territory in southeast Asia.<sup>32</sup>

To Dennis, Roosevelt's last-minute diplomacy was particularly irresponsible. Knowing that a Pacific war would make interventionism popular, the President—so Dennis claimed—refused to allow a face-saving truce. Moreover, after presenting the Japanese with unacceptable terms, he allowed his navy to be "caught napping" at Pearl Harbor. Such activity could only hasten America's day of reckoning: communism would triumph in Asia, proving that the Open Door was "a suckers game at which we cannot possibly win."<sup>33</sup>

In the long run, predicted Dennis, Americans would revolt against their warring leaders. Returning soldiers and a suddenly employed managerial class would seize control, and the nation's entire ruling elite would go the

way of the Bourbons and the Romanovs. While Dennis was vague on the particulars—sometimes calling the revolt communist, sometimes fascist—he was certain of one thing: the United States invariably faced civil strife, class warfare, eventual disintegration.<sup>34</sup>

Events soon forced Dennis to modify some of his analysis. On June 22, 1941, German armies invaded Russia. During the 1930's Dennis had opposed Soviet Popular Front efforts, declaring that Russia was unrelentingly plotting war against the capitalist powers. Once war broke out in 1939, he continually warned that conflict within western Europe was suicidal, only serving to bring the world closer to Bolshevism. He made no secret of the fact that he preferred "a new order in Europe with Hitler and without a second A.E.F. to any adventure involving a second A.E.F."<sup>35</sup>

Yet, even before Hitler's attack, Dennis was of two minds. In 1939 he had linked Stalin and Hitler as the two main leaders of the world "socialist" revolution (although at one point he claimed that Russia's combination of collectivism and ardent nationalism really made it a "fascist" regime). Germany and Russia, he frequently repeated in 1940 and early 1941, were in "permanent partnership." Just twelve days before Germany struck, Dennis claimed that the Reich had stationed *Wehrmacht* troops on the Rumanian border simply in order to divide the spoils with the Soviets. But when Hitler moved, Dennis found the German attack additional evidence of the *Führer's* "decision, daring, surprise and speed." Nazi armies, he predicted, would certainly reach Leningrad and Moscow by the end of the summer.<sup>36</sup>

Only when Hitler's troops became bogged down in the Russian snows did Dennis call the German ruler a "fanatic," one "who would die for his dragon-slaying act." Hitler had been victimized by his anti-Semitic and anti-Communist ideologies, and had thereby betrayed his nation's interest. The Reich's potential backing, said Dennis, lay with Asians, blacks, and Communists—in short, with "the Jim Crow section" of the world. By foolishly admiring the "white ruling classes of Europe," hoping in a sense "to join the Carlton Club," Hitler had refused to crush Britain and divide its empire with "Bolshevik, Asiatic Stalin and Negroid Spain and Italy." Had the *Führer* given Stalin free rein in the Dardanelles, the Aegean, and the Persian Gulf, he could have brought Britain to its knees. And had Hitler scuttled his racism, he could have made Germany a leader of a "socialist" Europe.<sup>37</sup>

Dennis soon filled *The Weekly Foreign Letter* with tributes to Russia's leader. Stalin, head of "the Russia First Committee," was the only national leader who was fighting for concrete, not messianic, aims. Since Stalin's forces were engaged in the bulk of the fighting, Dennis nominated him as head of an allied war council. Indeed, the Soviet dictator could serve as "generalissimo of the United Nations' military forces." Since the war was

creating a revolutionary situation throughout the world, Dennis sardonically commented that the United States was fortunate in having a major ally whose ideology could cope with it.<sup>38</sup>

Over the long run, however, Dennis was pessimistic. Although America could obviously defeat the Axis, it could never achieve the world it sought. Even if Stalin could not gain all of Europe, he could so dominate the continent as to "make our investments and trade interests there most insecure and unprofitable." In 1944, Dennis warned that within five years, the United States might be at war with Russia. He denied seeking any anti-Russian crusade, writing, "I don't want to fight Stalin for the Poles any more than I wanted to fight Hitler on account of the Jews."<sup>39</sup>

With America now in the war, Dennis was more shunned than ever. In July 1942, he discontinued his weekly bulletin. He denied that the administration had made overt moves to suppress *The Weekly Foreign Letter*, but claimed that in wartime his patriotism was bound to be questioned. He was soon investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a suspected German agent and threatened with removal from the Eastern Military Area.<sup>40</sup>

In 1944, Dennis was indicted for sedition, an event that made national news. For example, the lead story of *Life* magazine carried the headline "U.S. Indicts Its Top Fascists." The picture caption referred to him as "America's No. 1 fascist author," while the story compared him to Alfred Rosenberg, a prominent Nazi theorist. Before war had broken out in Europe, Dennis had written for a German-financed publication, *Today's Challenge*, and had spoken before the German-sponsored American Fellowship Forum. Even after the European conflict began, he had received small sums from the German embassy.<sup>41</sup> The sedition charges against him, however, were quite different ones: violating the Smith Act of 1940 by being part of a world-wide Nazi conspiracy that, amid more cosmic aims, plotted insubordination in America's armed forces. The prosecution, unable to show that the twenty-eight defendants acted in concert, spent much time drawing parallels between their propaganda motifs and those of the Nazis.

The sole evidence offered against Dennis consisted of six of his articles reprinted—without his permission—in the weekly of the German-American Bund, *Deutscher Weckruf Und Beobachter*. These articles included strong attacks upon the British and the Dies Committee, but contained nothing to link Dennis to any conspiracy. Indeed, Dennis did not know most of the other defendants, a varied assortment of Bundists and anti-Semitic pamphleteers, and contemptuously referred to them as "senile" and "psychopathic." Acting as his own lawyer, Dennis challenged the court's case. Even in Germany, Dennis said, Hitler's movement had not gained power through undermining morale in the *Wehrmacht*. Still less verifiable was the prosecu-

tion assumption that Germany was plotting a series of armed revolts in order to Nazify the entire globe.<sup>42</sup>

The trial dragged from April 17, 1944 to early December. By then only thirty-nine of some 200 government witnesses had been called, and some liberal interventionists were strongly objecting to the proceedings. For example, *The Washington Post*, in pointing to the conspiracy charge and the seemingly endless testimony, belatedly called the trial "a black mark against American justice." The Truman Administration realized that a Supreme Court decision legalizing speech which did not present a clear and present danger had made conviction unlikely, and it dropped the case once the presiding judge suddenly died of a heart attack.<sup>43</sup>

During the Cold War, Dennis resumed his isolationist newsletter, giving it the title *The Appeal to Reason*. In it he strongly opposed America's Cold War militancy, harkening in vain for the nation's withdrawal to the American continent.

Dennis's indictment, and the metaphors used to describe him in such popular journals as *Life*, well illustrate what Leo Ribuffo has called the "Brown Scare," the belief prevalent in the early 1940's that native "fascists" were part of a global web of subversion originating in Berlin. From the time that Father Charles E. Coughlin and Huey Long had drawn mass audiences, liberal and left writers had expressed fear of an ill-defined domestic "fascism," and the outbreak of World War II merely increased their anxiety. Dennis was particularly susceptible to accusation. In the thirties, he had preferred the term "fascism" to that of "technocracy" or "corporatism," and it had cost him dearly a decade later.<sup>44</sup> In addition, interventionists such as Ickes and the Luce publications had deliberately linked some of the more bizarre isolationists to mainstream leaders, thereby suggesting that such sober critics as Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., economist John T. Flynn, and General Wood were aligned with a fifth column. Before Pearl Harbor, *Life* ran pictures of Dennis alongside those of the Lindberghs and financier Joseph P. Kennedy. After America entered the war, Derounian attempted to link Senators Gerald P. Nye and Burton K. Wheeler and Congressman Hamilton Fish to Dennis.<sup>45</sup>

The ideas Dennis propounded were more rooted in America than in Europe. If he used Rosa Luxemburg's theory of imperialism and Marx's stress upon centralized state planning, his other themes had domestic parallels.<sup>46</sup> Proponents of both the New Nationalism and what some historians call the First New Deal had combined comprehensive social welfare measures with centralized economic planning. Only a strong national state—such commentators as Herbert Croly, George Soule, and Stuart Chase had claimed—could transcend competing interest groups and supply the direction needed for survival. John Dewey as well as Dennis criticized the

Roosevelt administration for betraying the instrumentalist gospel by its lack of doctrine. In the early 1930's a good many pragmatic liberals admired the planning they saw in Mussolini's Italy.<sup>47</sup>

Nor was Dennis alone in preaching the necessity of elitist rule or in advocating a thoroughly pragmatic ethic. Harold Lasswell and Thurman Arnold showed how skilled use of patriotic symbols could inculcate mass allegiance, and progressive educator George Counts called upon the schools to indoctrinate students with what he called the values of "social regeneration." Publicist Max Lerner, in defending heavy-handed uses of New Deal power, asserted that ends indeed justified the means.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, certain motifs of Dennis's foreign policy are found in others. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr posited a world of inevitable conflict. Historian Charles A. Beard had long called for continental autarchy while law professor Edwin M. Borchard declared that departures from traditional neutrality led to tragic embroilments. People as diverse as international lawyer John Foster Dulles and pacifist leader A.J. Muste found world justice demanding economic and territorial concessions to "have-not" powers.<sup>49</sup> A host of isolationist spokesmen, both of the left and of the right, warned that intervention overseas would lead to dictatorship at home.<sup>50</sup> Dennis's overt *Realpolitik* found overtones in political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman, who advised statesmen in 1942 not to let ethical considerations interfere with power objectives.<sup>51</sup> And six years after Dennis terminated *The Weekly Foreign Letter*, Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* juxtaposed the doctrines of national interest and global crusading.<sup>52</sup>

Some historians now support several of Dennis's specific arguments. A new generation of Cold War revisionists argue that America's World War II involvement was rooted in a desire to sustain global capitalist expansion amid the closed economic blocs of the totalitarian powers.<sup>53</sup> Japanese expansion, in particular, has recently been explained in terms of Western strangulation.<sup>54</sup> Other claims made by *The Weekly Foreign Letter* receive support from some members of the academy: the intransigency of American negotiations with Japan,<sup>55</sup> the genuineness of Hitler's social revolution,<sup>56</sup> the folly of allied military strategy and likelihood of Britain's eventual defeat,<sup>57</sup> United States indifference to the fate of Europe's Jews,<sup>58</sup> and the dictatorial powers assumed by Roosevelt.<sup>59</sup> A Yale political scientist has gone so far as to claim that America might well have been wiser to avoid full-scale belligerency.<sup>60</sup>

Yet many people still could not be at ease with Dennis's writing. On one level, a large number of scholars—certainly a majority—would question his indictment of liberal capitalism and his understanding of the totalitarian powers, in particular Nazi Germany. One might argue that while the rhetoric of fascism was generally anti-capitalist, the system itself strove to dominate, not transcend, the world market. On another level, Dennis was so loose with his definitions, and so vague about his own "fascist" vision, that it is often

difficult to grasp what his real ideology was. The term "fascism" has seldom been used with precision; Dennis did little to elucidate it.

On a still deeper level, Dennis never separated his espousals from his supposed objectivity. Sometimes he claimed that national survival depended upon keeping ethical principles analytically distinct from unbiased assessments of national interest. Hitler's racism, he said, was less of a "sin" than an "error," a blunder interfering with efforts to organize a genuine anti-capitalist coalition.<sup>61</sup> At other times he would feign indifference. He declared that he cared little, for example, whether or not America entered the war, whether Germany or Russia emerged triumphant in Europe, or even whether Reich emissaries were treated fairly in American courts. He was simply an observer, one who called "a spade a spade" and who believed that "it is better to face facts than to shut one's eyes to them."<sup>62</sup> At still other times, he was avowedly partisan. Once he compared himself to an early Christian who, peering out of the catacombs, exulted in the realization that his ideas "were among the most active agents of the rampant disintegration about him."<sup>63</sup>

If others—yesterday and today—can find support for some of Dennis's observations, few would take his arguments to the lengths he took them. As much of a determinist as any Marxist, he saw in "fascist" corporatism the most rational of all state systems. Here the means—central collectivist direction—were in most harmony with the ends, national power and security. Dennis projected his own faith in human rationality on to the world's ruling elites. Hence he could never comprehend how Hitler could have been so blinded by anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism that he would "throw away" a chance to lead the world's "revolutionary" forces.

All in all, however, Dennis still remains provocative. Writing in terse, elliptical prose, Dennis attempted to cut through conventional rhetoric in order to pierce prevailing illusions. Like George Fitzhugh a century earlier, he posed inescapable dilemmas, and then claimed to show the path of escape. Given current anxieties over the relationship between a warfare and a welfare state, it is surely ironic that Lawrence Dennis, sedition defendant and supposed "fascist" apologist, was one of the first to think about the unthinkable. It is equally ironic that a man given so much attention in his time found even his bitterest enemies unfamiliar with the assumptions behind his foreign policy and why he adhered to them.

## NOTES

1. Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890's* (2nd ed. rev.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 448; Charles C. Alexander, *Nationalism in American Thought, 1930-1945* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), p. 12. For Dennis's general political philosophy, see Alan Pendleton Grimes, *American Political Thought* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), pp. 415-428, and David Spitz, *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 59-92.

2. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 78; Frederick L. Schuman, "Reflections of a Pragmatist," *Nation*, CCIX (December 8, 1969), p. 641; Justus D. Doenecke, "Lawrence Dennis: Revisionist of the Cold War," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, LV (Summer 1972), pp. 275-286; Ronald Radosh, *Prophets on the Right* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 332.
3. Ickes, *New York Times*, February 26, 1941, p. 13; Thompson, *Life*, X (January 20, 1941), p. 27; John Roy Carlson [pseud. Avedis Derounian], *Under Cover* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943), p. 499.
4. "Lawrence Dennis," in Maxine Block, ed., *Current Biography* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1941), pp. 218-220.
5. Dennis, mimeographed memorandum on "Peace Aims," February 14-16, 1941, 8th Fortune Round Table, Princeton, N.J. (hereafter cited as "Peace Aims"); Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (New York: Harper, 1936), pp. 169-173.
6. Dennis, "Portrait of American Fascism," *American Mercury*, XXXVI (1935), pp. 407-408; *Coming American Fascism*, esp. pp. viii, 137, 198-199, 211-212.
7. For Dennis's varied use of the term "fascism," see Leo Ribuffo, "Progressive Manqué: Lawrence Dennis and *The Coming American Fascism*" (unpub. manuscript), p. 20. For Dennis's denial that he was ever a fascist, see *New York Times*, December 19, 1940, p. 22; letter to *Harvard Crimson*, March 26, 1956, copy in the Papers of Harry Elmer Barnes, University of Wyoming.
8. Dennis declared that race was no disqualification for citizenship but at the same time insisted that no religious, racial, or cultural minority could "inculcate doctrines or impart social attitudes violently inconsistent with social order." *Coming American Fascism*, pp. 109-11, 119.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 281, 277, 296.
10. *London Times Literary Supplement*, March 28, 1936, p. 276; Bates, *Books*, January 12, 1936, p. 3; Macdonald, *Common Sense*, V (February 1936), 26-27. For sample stories from *The New York Times*, see April 11, 1938, p. 24; April 5, 1939, p. 10; June 18, 1940, p. 23.
11. For the initial Harper commitment to publish Dennis's *Dynamics of War and Revolution*, see *The Weekly Foreign Letter*, supplement to no. 97, June 6, 1940. For the Institute of Public Affairs, see *The New York Times*, June 18, 1940, p. 23. For *The Nation* debate, see "Who Owns the Future?," *The Nation*, CLII (January 11, 1941), pp. 39-41 (January 25, 1941), p. 111. Dennis's participation in the *Fortune* forum is found in his "Peace Aims."
12. *Weekly Foreign Letter*, no. 166, October 2, 1941 (hereafter cited as *WFL*); no. 154, August 14, 1941; no. 88, June 13, 1940; "Peace Aims." The author is indebted to James J. Martin for the loan of this journal.
13. "Peace Aims"; *WFL*, no. 85, March 14, 1940; Dennis, "After the Peace of Munich," *American Mercury*, XLVI (January 1939), pp. 12-21.
14. *WFL*, no. 117, October 24, 1940; no. 85, March 14, 1940.
15. *Ibid.*, no. 106, August 8, 1940; no. 149, June 5, 1941; no. 157, July 31, 1941; no. 115, October 10, 1940; no. 92, May 2, 1940. Dennis did apologize for his remark concerning Roosevelt's affliction, declaring that he admired the President for overcoming his paralysis. At the same time, he repeated his claim that "cripples" could not sustain a wartime pace. *Ibid.*, no. 107, August 15, 1940.
16. "After the Peace of Munich," pp. 115-116; *WFL*, no. 103, July 18, 1940.
17. *WFL*, no. 86, March 21, 1940; no. 93, May 9, 1940; no. 107, August 15, 1940.
18. Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in the Papers of the National Council for the Prevention of War, Swarthmore College Peace Collection; *WFL*, no. 136, March 6, 1941; Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* (New York: Weekly Foreign Letter, 1940), p. 210; "After the Peace of Munich," p. 20.
19. *WFL*, no. 152, June 26, 1941; "Peace Aims"; *WFL*, no. 170, October 30, 1941; no. 168, October 16, 1941.
20. *WFL*, no. 166, October 2, 1941; Lawrence Dennis to Dorothy Thompson, December 9, 1940, in the Papers of Lawrence Dennis (in the private possession of Mr. Dennis, Garnerville, New York).
21. *WFL*, no. 194, April 16, 1942.
22. Dennis did not have the same enthusiasm for Italy and Japan that he did for Germany. In 1936 he had praised Mussolini's regime for offering "a dynamic social system" that

- subordinated private ownership to public desires. "What Is Mussolini?," *American Mercury*, XXXVII (March 1936), pp. 372-375. Yet once Italian forces in North Africa began to be routed, Dennis claimed that Mussolini was far too influenced by the Vatican, the monarchy, and the feudal landlords to sustain a revolution or to adopt an innovative war strategy. See *WFL*, no. 123, December 5, 1940; no. 140, April 3, 1941. Japan, dominated by traditionalist naval officers and industrialists, would eventually be led by its generals into national socialism. It could never defeat China and would eventually be forced to yield to a Russian-backed revolutionary regime. *Ibid.*, no. 115, October 10, 1940; no. 146, May 15, 1941; no. 134, February 20, 1941.
23. *WFL*, no. 102, July 11, 1940; no. 113, May 16, 1940; no. 203, June 18, 1942; no. 118, October 31, 1940; no. 153, July 2, 1941; no. 116, October 17, 1940; no. 85, March 24, 1940; no. 175, December 4, 1941.
  24. *Ibid.*, no. 118, October 31, 1940; no. 101, July 3, 1940; "Peace Aims"; *Dynamics of War and Revolution*, p. 159; *WFL*, no. 108, August 24, 1940; *WFL*, no. 131, February 3, 1941; Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in NCPW Papers.
  25. Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 4, 1944, copy in the Papers of Oswald Garrison Villard, Harvard University; Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in the NCPW Papers; Lawrence Dennis to Dorothy Thompson, December 9, 1940, Dennis Papers.
  26. For Dennis's meetings with Colonel Lindbergh, and for their views towards each other, see Lawrence Dennis to Harry Elmer Barnes, September 29, 1941, Barnes Papers; entry of September 17, 1940, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 391; *WFL*, no. 131, January 30, 1941. For stress on similarities between Dennis's thought and the Lindberghs, see Dorothy Thompson quoted in *Life*, X (January 20, 1941), 27; O. John Rogge, *The Official German Report* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), pp. 282-283; Kenneth S. Davis, *The Hero: Charles A. Lindbergh and the American Dream* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 401-402, 409, 509-511. Lindbergh later claimed that Dennis's influence was "negligible." See Memorandum of Lindbergh, August 21, 1969, cited in Wayne S. Cole, *Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle Against American Intervention in World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 255. Dennis, on the other hand, claimed that Lindbergh undoubtedly learned much from him. Interview with Lawrence Dennis, 1967, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University.
  27. For Dennis and General Wood, see Lawrence Dennis to Robert E. Wood, October 10, 1941, copy in Barnes Papers; Robert E. Wood to Robert E. Wood, Jr., May 5, 1941, and Robert E. Wood to J. Edgar Hoover, January 30, 1943, the Papers of Robert E. Wood, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa. For Dennis and Barnes, see Lawrence Dennis to Harry Elmer Barnes, September 29, 1941, Barnes Papers; Harry Elmer Barnes to John T. Flynn, September 16, 1943, the Papers of John T. Flynn, University of Oregon. For Morton, see Sterling Morton to Robert E. Wood, May 12, 1941, the Papers of Sterling Morton, Chicago Historical Society. Dennis correspondence is cited in Rogge, *Official German Report*, pp. 282, 348-349.
  28. For Dennis's critique of the isolationist mainstream, see *WFL*, no. 127, January 2, 1941; no. 132, February 6, 1941; Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in NCPW Papers; *Dynamics of War and Revolution*, p. xv. The Flynn papers contain a master list of all contributors to the America First Committee.
  29. *WFL*, no. 119, November 7, 1940.
  30. *Ibid.*, no. 121, November 20, 1940; no. 191, March 26, 1942; no. 117, October 24, 1940; no. 122, November 28, 1940.
  31. *Ibid.*, no. 140, July 25, 1940; no. 185, February 12, 1942; no. 106, August 8, 1940.
  32. *Ibid.*, no. 155, July 17, 1941; no. 115, October 10, 1940; no. 173, November 19, 1941; no. 113, September 25, 1940.
  33. *Ibid.*, no. 174, November 27, 1941; no. 179, January 2, 1942; no. 103, July 18, 1940.
  34. *Ibid.*, no. 95, May 23, 1940; *Dynamics of War and Revolution*, p. xxx; Lawrence Dennis to Seward Collins, February 22, 1943, copy in NCPW Papers.
  35. Lawrence Dennis, "Soviet Russia Goes on Sale," *American Mercury*, XXXIX (December 1936), 469-478; Dennis, "Russia's Private War in Spain," *ibid.*, XL (February 1937), 158-166; *WFL*, no. 123, December 5, 1940; no. 136, March 6, 1941.

36. Lawrence Dennis, "Is Fascism the Way Out?," in John N. Andrew and Carl A. Marsden (eds.), *Tomorrow in the Making* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1939), p. 107; *WFL*, no. 150, June 12, 1941; no. 152, June 26, 1941; no. 155, June 17, 1941.
37. *WFL*, no. 200, May 28, 1942; no. 178, December 24, 1941; Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in NCPW Papers; Dennis to Seward Collins, February 22, 1943, copy in NCPW Papers. In the letter to Collins, Dennis denies that the Jews were Germany's natural enemies.
38. *WFL*, no. 187, February 28, 1942; no. 195, April 23, 1942.
39. Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in NCPW Papers.
40. *WFL*, no. 188, March 5, 1942; Robert E. Wood to Lawrence Dennis, January 9, 1943; Major David Tiger to Lawrence Dennis (copy), January 18, 1943; Robert E. Wood to J. Edgar Hoover, January 30, 1943, Wood Papers.
41. *Life*, XVI (January 17, 1944), 15. Dennis's address to the American Fellowship Forum, delivered on April 19, 1939 and entitled "America and Germany: Contrasts Without Conflict," is found in *Today's Challenge*, I (June-July 1939), pp. 5-9. The matter of German money channelled to Dennis can be found in Alton Frye, *Nazi Germany and the American Hemisphere, 1933-1941* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 145-146, and in Klaus Kipphan, *Deutsche Propaganda in den Vereinigten Staaten, 1933-1941* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1971), pp. 174-175.
42. Dennis describes his role in the trial in Lawrence Dennis and Maximilian St. George, *A Trial on Trial: The Great Seditious Trial of 1944* (Chicago: National Civil Rights Committee, 1946).
43. "Mass Trial" (edit.), *Washington Post*, July 16, 1944; *Hartzel v. U.S.*, 320 U.S. 756 (1944).
44. Ribuffo, "Progressive Manqué," pp. 71-80. For liberal and left fears of domestic fascism, see Frank A. Warren III, *Liberals and Communism: The 'Red Decade' Revisited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 89-102.
45. *Life*, X (January 20, 1941), pp. 26-27; Derounian, *Under Cover*, pp. 486-490.
46. For Dennis on Luxemburg, see Lawrence Dennis to Harry Elmer Barnes, June 16, 1932, Barnes Papers; on Marx, see *Coming American Fascism*, pp. 7-12.
47. John P. Diggins, "Flirtation with Fascism: American Pragmatic Liberals and Mussolini's Italy," *American Historical Review*, LXXI (1966), pp. 487-506.
48. For discussions of Progressive and New Deal centralization and elitism, see Otis L. Graham, Jr., *The Great Campaigns: Reform and War in America, 1900-1928* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), and Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *Ideologies and Utopias: The Impact of the New Deal on American Thought* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969). Lerner's attitude is found in his book *It Is Later Than You Think* (New York: Viking, 1939), p. 126.
49. For discussions of Dulles and a host of pacifist leaders, see Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971). For Muste, see Noam Chomsky, "The Revolutionary Pacifism of A.J. Muste: On the Background of the Pacific War," in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Vintage, 1967), pp. 159-220.
50. Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), chapter III.
51. Nicholas J. Spykman, *American Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), p. 18.
52. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948).
53. Lloyd C. Gardner, "New Deal Diplomacy: A View from the Seventies," in Leonard Liggio and James J. Martin (eds.), *Watershed of Empire: Essays on New Deal Foreign Policy* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Ralph Myles, 1976), pp. 95-131, and Robert Freeman Smith, "American Foreign Relations, 1920-1942," in Barton J. Bernstein (ed.), *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), pp. 232-262.
54. See, for example, Geoffrey Barraclough, "Hitler and Hirohito," *New York Review of Books*, XX (May 31, 1973), pp. 9-14.
55. Paul W. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations, 1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958).

56. David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966); Geoffrey Barraclough, "The Liberals and German History: Part II," *New York Review of Books*, XIX (November 2, 1972), pp. 32-37.
57. B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: Putnam, 1971).
58. David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968); Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970).
59. Ekirch, pp. 254-255.
60. Bruce M. Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: The U.S. Entry Into World War II* (New York: Harper, 1972).
61. Lawrence Dennis to Norman Thomas, February 27, 1944, copy in NCPW Papers.
62. *WFL*, no. 188, March 5, 1942.
63. Lawrence Dennis to Dorothy Thompson, October 9, 1940, Dennis Papers.