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## **A Lifeline for Millions: American Relief in an Age of Isolationism**

Matteo Marsella

***Abstract:** American military involvement in the Great War is a widely discussed aspect of the conflict. The period following the war is often considered an example of American isolationist foreign policy. Lesser well known are American efforts to provide food relief to starving populations in Europe, which began during and continued well after the war's conclusion. This paper seeks to locate American relief efforts within broader postwar foreign policy. Although President Harding's 1920 election victory on a platform of a "return to normalcy" is often construed as a rejection of Wilsonian internationalism and a return to prewar isolationism, there is no scholarly consensus. The American Relief Administration, created by President Woodrow Wilson and led by Herbert Hoover, distributed critical aid to starving millions across postwar Europe. Beginning during the Wilson administration, and continuing while Hoover served concurrently as Harding's Secretary of Commerce, the American Relief Administration not only provided relief but also used conditioned aid to advance US foreign policy goals in Europe. I argue that American relief efforts illustrate that following the Great War, the United States practiced a pragmatic form of isolationism that kept the nation engaged in international affairs.*

"Let us stop to consider that tranquility at home is more precious than peace abroad," then-presidential candidate Warren Harding posited in an address to the Home Market Club of Boston in

May 1920.<sup>1</sup> The Great War was over, and President Woodrow Wilson had set the United States on a path of increasing international involvement: a path which led the United States to become an integral member of the League of Nations and part of the postwar order tasked with keeping the hard-won peace.

Harding's vision for the future stood in stark contrast to Wilson's. Under a Harding administration, the United States did not join the League of Nations, and instead followed a policy of "America First."<sup>2</sup> Campaign posters reflected this distinction; in a poster titled "Under Which Flag?", Harding stands proudly below the stars and stripes holding a copy of his "America First" platform while his Democratic opponent James Cox attempts to raise a flag on which "League of Nations" is written.<sup>3</sup> Harding's message was clear — his priorities lay in the United States with the American people, not with foreign peoples across the sea.

Along with his "America First" platform, Harding vowed that his administration would bring about a "return to normalcy."<sup>4</sup> The 1920

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Harding, "Readjustment" (Speech, Home Market Club, Boston, May 14, 1920). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655168/>

<sup>2</sup> Although in 2020 most commonly associated with the Presidency of Donald Trump, "America First" has also been used as a non-interventionist slogan by President Woodrow Wilson before the United States entered into World War I and by the America First Committee before the United States entered into World War II

<sup>3</sup> Republican State Executive Committee, *Under Which Flag?*, 1920, Poster, Ohio History Connection, Columbus, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/11876>

<sup>4</sup> Elks Make Harding a 'Surprise' Visit," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1920. <https://search-proquest->

election, considered by contemporary observers and historians alike to be a referendum on President Wilson's internationalism and his League of Nations, made the wishes of the American people clear.<sup>5</sup> Warren Harding was elected twenty-ninth president of the United States with a popular vote margin of over twenty-five percentage points and an electoral college landslide of 404-127. Frontpage coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* described Harding's inauguration as "the knell of American espousal of...internationalism."<sup>6</sup>

And yet, despite a Harding presidency ostensibly marking the end of engagement overseas, there is widespread contemporaneous reporting of large-scale American relief efforts in Europe which cost millions in US government money appropriated by Congress and was signed off on by President Harding. This inconsistency begs the

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com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98182605/588FA3B5136B40EBPQ/2?accountid=10362; Arthur Sears Henning, "Thousands Acclaim Harding President," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1921. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/160872122?accountid=10362>.; Bernard Fensterwald Jr., "The anatomy of American "isolationism and expansionism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2 (June 1958):111, <https://www-jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/172971>; Selig Adler, "Isolationism Since 1914," *The American Scholar* 21, no. 3 (June 1952):335, [www.jstor.org/stable/41206917](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41206917).

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Fensterwald Jr., "The anatomy of American "isolationism and expansionism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2 (June 1958):111, <https://www-jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/172971>

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Sears Henning, "Thousands Acclaim Harding President," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1921. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/160872122?accountid=10362>.

question: how does foreign aid fit into the often-held view of an isolationist USA?

The origins of the term “isolationism” are unclear, but the idea of an American postwar retreat into isolation has been thoroughly picked apart by historians who have failed to come to a consensus on what exactly constitutes an isolationist foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Broadly, there appear to be two camps – those who agree that isolationism existed as a foreign policy, and those who contend interwar American foreign policy cannot be classified as isolationism or reject the term as unusable.

Political scientist Ronald Rubin’s description of 1920s and 1930s isolationism provides a concise definition that effectively describes the first camp: isolationism is “not...the complete withdrawal from world affairs but...refusal to make any political commitments infringing on the nation’s freedom of action.”<sup>8</sup> Even among scholars who contend that the United States did practice an “isolationist” foreign policy postwar, the isolationism practiced is not considered absolute. Writing broadly about American isolationism throughout US history, Bernard Fensterwald Jr. states that in contrast to the strict isolation practiced by Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “our

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<sup>7</sup> What is clear is that by the end of the Great War, the idea of American isolationism already existed, with one English journalist lamenting a return to isolation in an article published January 27, 1919

<sup>8</sup> Ronald I. Rubin, “The Persistence of American Isolationism,” *Pakistan Horizons* 19, no. 3 (Third Quarter 1966): 241, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/41393813>

policies never amounted to anything more than pseudo-isolationism.”<sup>9</sup> This is not so much a rebuke of isolationism as it is a qualification. Isolationism as the idea that the United States retreated completely from world affairs and remained strictly within its borders in all matters has little if any credence among scholars.

Scholars who reject the term “isolationism” in general do so for a variety of reasons. Historian David Cameron Watt argues that the term has lost its usefulness because it has “been stretched to cover so much it has lost all shape or form of its own.”<sup>10</sup> He seeks to replace the isolationist versus interventionist dichotomy with idealist versus realist.<sup>11</sup> Watt does acknowledge that idealists and realists could both support the same policy for their own reasons, but he fails to acknowledge that this could lead to policies that produce results which could be described as isolationist. Writing about 1920s and 1930s American foreign policy, political scientist Bear Braumoeller asserts that foreign policy is defined on three axes: isolationist vs. internationalist, unilateralist vs. multilateralist, and neutralist vs. aligned. To make sense of isolationism in this context, he provides this definition: isolationism is the “voluntary and general abstention by a state from security-related activity in an area of the international system

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<sup>9</sup> Bernard Fensterwald Jr., “The anatomy of American “isolationism and expansionism,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2 (June 1958): 111, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/172971>

<sup>10</sup> D.C. Watt, “American 'Isolationism' in the 1920s: Is It a Useful Concept?” *Bulletin new series*, no. 6 (June 1963): 6, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/27553577>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

in which it is capable of action.”<sup>12</sup> He points out that isolation must be general so as to avoid mischaracterization of internationalists as isolationists if they oppose specific instances of intervention. Braumoeller’s absolutist view of isolationism fails to recognize the possibility of nuanced or pragmatic isolationism.

In this paper, I argue that the isolationism practiced in the aftermath of the Great War was not a comprehensive ideology and retained pragmatic elements that might otherwise be contradictory. This paper will initially delve into a close analysis of the meaning of Harding’s “normalcy” and examine Harding’s choice of Herbert Hoover as his Secretary of Commerce. Furthermore, I will explore the creation of the American Relief Administration, its purpose, and its distribution of aid throughout Europe and Soviet Russia.

Close examination of Harding’s central vow to “return to normalcy” reveals that his meaning behind the statement is unclear. At first glance, Harding’s vow to “return to normalcy” seems to indicate a return to a pre-war policy of non-intervention. Bernard Fensterwald Jr. agrees with this understanding, writing that “as far as international affairs were concerned, normalcy meant isolationism.”<sup>13</sup>

The “return to normalcy” associated with President Harding also came from the address Harding delivered in May 1920 to the Home Market Club in Boston. In it, Harding outlined the country’s present

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<sup>12</sup> Bear F. Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 4 (October 2010): 354, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/24909828>

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Fensterwald Jr., “The anatomy of American “isolationism and expansionism,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2 (June 1958):111, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/172971>

needs as he saw them and his hopes for the future. The overarching message of the speech held that the United States needed to take stock of its current position and should return to “normalcy”. The word normalcy itself was used in a series of contrasts that provide insight into its meaning:

America's present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration; not agitation but adjustment; not surgery but serenity; not the dramatic but the dispassionate; not experiment but equipoise; not submergence in internationality but sustainment in triumphant nationality.<sup>14</sup>

In the speech, normalcy was directly contrasted with nostrums, which does not imply a turn away from internationalism in itself. However, his call for “restoration” and “sustainment in triumphant nationality” made it clear that normalcy could be understood to mean a rejection of internationalism and a return to an earlier age where the United States was not bound to foreign powers and American soldiers were not sent across the sea to fight in foreign wars. Nevertheless, despite what this speech appears to suggest, the normalcy Harding spoke of is not so simply understood.

Although his “return to normalcy” address contextually implies a return to pre-war policy, his later definition of the term suggests otherwise. At the time, the word “normality” was more commonly used, so Harding’s use of “normalcy” prompted some newspaper editors to change the word before publication. Because of the controversy surrounding the usage and meaning of the word, Harding was later

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<sup>14</sup> Warren Harding, “Readjustment” (Speech, Home Market Club, Boston, May 14, 1920). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655168/>



asked to explain what he had meant by “normalcy”. This was his response:

By ‘normalcy’ I do not mean the old order, but a regular, steady order of things. I mean normal procedure, the natural way, without excess. I don’t believe the old order can or should come back, but we must have normal order, or as I have said, ‘normalcy’.<sup>15</sup>

This definition seems to be at odds with meaning that can be understood from his speech. Harding is explicitly saying that his “return to normalcy” does not mean a return to pre-war America. This statement would be peculiar, if not completely incongruous for anyone whose politics were fundamentally isolationist.

Harding’s relationship with isolationism is further complicated by his choice of Herbert Hoover for Secretary of Commerce. Herbert Hoover was not isolationist and supported the entry of the United States into the League of Nations. He even lobbied for the League in a meeting with President-elect Harding before he had been offered a cabinet position. As Secretary of Commerce, Hoover was responsible for promoting and developing foreign and domestic commerce as well as manufacturing and industry.<sup>16</sup> Hoover’s decision to accept the position came with conditions. Notably, the Commerce Department would be

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<sup>15</sup> “Elks Make Harding a ‘Surprise’ Visit,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1920. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98182605/588FA3B5136B40EBPQ/2?accountid=10362>

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 40, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

completely reorganized into a larger and more important department, and Hoover would have “a voice on all important economic policies of the administration...business, agriculture, labor, finance, and foreign affairs,” as they related to national development and reconstruction.<sup>17</sup> During the first years of his tenure as Secretary of Commerce, Hoover’s work was primarily domestic with projects including the reduction of waste in manufacturing, simplifying the process of constructing a home, and improving the health of the nation’s children.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of foreign policy, Hoover’s involvement as Secretary of Commerce was rather mundane, managing trade relations with foreign nations and verifying the security of foreign loans. More interestingly, he was involved in the Washington Conference of 1921-1922,<sup>19</sup> and was an advisor to the Dawes Commission.<sup>20</sup> However, Hoover’s most significant foreign policy role lay outside of his department, and outside of government entirely.

Hoover’s final condition to join Harding’s cabinet was that he keep his position of Director General of the American Relief

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<sup>17</sup> Hoover Accepts Place in Cabinet; Keeps Relief Post,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 1921. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98510790/6BAF773E5C2C486FPQ/38?accountid=10362>, Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 36, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 61-97, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Naval Disarmament Conference

<sup>20</sup> Restructured German War Reparations

Administration. Hoover had been involved with relief efforts in Europe since 1914, first as Chairman of the Belgian Relief Commission and from 1919 onwards as Director General of the American Relief Administration.<sup>21</sup>

Created by an executive order from President Wilson, the American Relief Administration's mission was to distribute food aid to the starving peoples of Europe.<sup>22</sup> The organization received a congressional appropriation of one hundred million dollars to help fund its efforts.<sup>23</sup> The executive order empowered Director General Hoover to choose how and where relief would be distributed.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of 1919, an estimated one hundred twenty-five million people were in need of aid, in territories stretching from Belgium to the Baltic, Finland to Armenia.<sup>25</sup> Between 1919 and 1921 the American Relief

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<sup>21</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure 1874-1920* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 152-154, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v1\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v1_full.pdf)

; *The New York Times Current History: The European War Volume XIX* (New York: The New York Times Company, 1919), 50-51, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/\\_/X\\_p9AAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/X_p9AAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1)

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 18, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "Hoover Made Head of American Relief," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1919. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/100351880?accountid=10362>

<sup>25</sup> Associated Press, "All Relief Work Put Under Hoover," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1919. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/100527993/E67C4A37C9654E02PQ/2?accountid=10362>

Administration provided food for millions across eighteen countries, saving the lives of at least an estimated fifteen million children.<sup>26</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, Harding viewed Hoover's relief work very positively. As a senator, Harding voted against the one-hundred-million-dollar appropriations bill that provided the American Relief Administration with the funds required to begin feeding the starving peoples of Europe. After Hoover accepted his place in Cabinet, Harding commented that Hoover was "performing a big service to the world, rivalling in importance a Cabinet position," and that relief work was "America playing her part in the world."<sup>27</sup> These statements seem out of step with the message of Harding's campaign; how can America be "first" when the overseas work of a Cabinet member's private charitable organization is of equal importance to their responsibility to the American people?

When the American Relief Administration was created on February 24, 1919, it became a stabilizing force in Europe and stood as a bulwark against Bolshevism. In a statement following his appointment as Director General of Relief, Hoover stated that aid from the United States could "banish the spectre [sic] of Bolshevism," and offered millions "the kernel of democracy."<sup>28</sup> During the last two

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 22, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Hoover Accepts Place in Cabinet; Keeps Relief Post," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1921. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98510790/6BAF773E5C2C486FPQ/38?accountid=10362>

<sup>28</sup> Associated Press, "All Relief Work Put Under Hoover," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1919. <https://search-proquest->

years of the Wilson administration anti-communism by way of food had been stated rather overtly. Hoover described the distribution of food to the starving population as “a race against both death and Communism.”<sup>29</sup> In response to fears that communists would attempt to overthrow the nascent Austrian government on May Day 1919, Hoover authorized the posting of a proclamation that read, “Any disturbance of public order will render food shipments impossible and bring Vienna face to face with absolute famine.”<sup>30</sup> The uprising Hoover feared never materialized as the “fear of starvation held the Austrian people from revolution.”<sup>31</sup> In March 1919 communists lead by Béla Kun took control of Hungary. Allied leaders initially considered using military force to dislodge the communists, but Hoover urged restraint and drafted a statement intended to rouse anti-Kun forces. The statement released July 26, 1919, read in part:

If food and supplies are to be made available, if the blockade is to be removed, if economic reconstruction is to be attempted, if peace is to be settled it can only be done with a Government which represents the Hungarian people and not with one that rests its authority upon terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

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com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/100527993/E67C4A37C9654E02PQ/2?accountid=10362

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure 1874-1920* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 394, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v1\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v1_full.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 400

Less than a week later, on August 1, 1919, Kun's government was overthrown and Hungary was declared a republic.<sup>33</sup> By the time Hoover entered Harding's Cabinet in 1921, he had already begun to be credited with stopping the westward spread of Bolshevism into Europe.<sup>34</sup>

The beginning of the Harding administration signaled a shift towards a more covert form of anti-Bolshevist aid. It is important to understand that by this point the American Relief Administration had been restructured into a private charitable organization.<sup>35</sup> This move did not fundamentally change the organization; the funds and relief supplies of the government-led American Relief Administration were turned over to the new organization with its mission unchanged.<sup>36</sup> However, this did lead to a situation where Hoover simultaneously served as the chairman of a private relief organization and as President Harding's Secretary of Commerce.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 400

<sup>34</sup> "Hoover Accepts Place in Cabinet; Keeps Relief Post," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1921. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98510790/6BAF773E5C2C486FPQ/38?accountid=10362>

<sup>35</sup> A legal entity titled "The American Relief Administration" was created to keep the accounting of the Congressional appropriation separate from other payments. When its legal life expired, the decision was made to privatize the organization

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 18-19, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> "Hoover Accepts Place in Cabinet; Keeps Relief Post," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1921. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98510790/6BAF773E5C2C486FPQ/38?accountid=10362>

Hoover's concurrent roles resulted in the blurring of private and public business. During a series of negotiations between the American Relief Administration and the Soviet Russian government, the level of Russian government involvement in relief efforts proved to be a point of contention. The Soviets insisted that their government participate in the distribution of food while the American Relief Administration insisted that it have control over food distribution. Despite the private and independent nature of the organization, a Cabinet meeting was held to discuss developments in the negotiations. The *Associated Press* reported the attitude of the Cabinet as "[insisting] upon the freedom of American control of food distribution in Russia."<sup>38</sup> Also, in an interesting reversal from his time in the Senate, President Harding signed a bill appropriating twenty million dollars to the American Relief Administration for Russian relief efforts.

If the anti-Bolshevist foreign policy of the Harding administration was more understated than it had been during the Wilson administration, the question that naturally follows is: why? It may reflect a general decline in public support for aid amongst the American public. In testimony delivered to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in December 1921, Hoover reported that the money collected from public charity since August amounted to seven hundred fifty

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<sup>38</sup> Associated Press, "Hoover Rejects Bolshevist Terms; Harding Backs Him," *The New York Times*, August 17, 1921. <https://search-proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98413633/6BAF773E5C2C486FPQ/15?accountid=10362>

thousand dollars.<sup>39</sup> This may not seem like a small amount of money raised for aid; however, a fundraising drive that lasted from December 1920 to March 1921 raised almost thirty million dollars.<sup>40</sup> Hoover adeptly summarized attitude of the American public at the time rather effectively in his memoirs, “The American people were not too enthusiastic over saving people who were starving because of their Communist Government.”<sup>41</sup>

In addition to a growing antipathy towards foreign aid, the argument that the government should focus on domestic problems first before venturing beyond our borders, which we so often see in political debates, was alive and well. Although not writing specifically about aid, in a letter to the *New York Times* titled “No Entanglements with Foreign Nations,” Idaho Republican National Committeeman John Hart wrote, “our government should spend more time in adjusting our agriculture and live stock [sic] business and give less time to conditions in foreign countries.”<sup>42</sup> Even supporters of aid expressed this view. Senator Ashurst of Arizona, who supported the twenty-million-dollar appropriation for aid to Soviet Russia, believed that although the United

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<sup>39</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 67<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1921, vol. 62, pt.1: 455.  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1922-pt1-v62/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1922-pt1-v62-12-1.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 124,  
[https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22

<sup>42</sup> John W. Hart, letter to the editor, *The New York Times*, June 3, 1923



States should help relieve suffering in Russia, “the needs of...disabled soldiers...claimed first attention.”<sup>43</sup>

A policy of contingent aid began during the Wilson administration and continued during the Harding administration. The original executive order and corresponding appropriation that created the American Relief Administration explicitly excluded enemy nations from receiving aid. The executive order stated, “An act for the relief of such populations in Europe, and countries contiguous thereto, outside of Germany, German-Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey.”<sup>44</sup> Potential food aid was used as leverage to win concessions from nations otherwise unable to receive relief. In a statement in early 1919, Hoover asserted that since the desperate need for aid throughout Europe was due to German aggression, “the Germans should be called upon to provide ships to transport food supplies...and it will certainly be made a condition of the allowance of any food supplies to Germany that their ships shall be ultimately turned over to carry food for all the liberated territories.”<sup>45</sup> The conditioning of aid was very clearly shown in negotiations between Hoover and the Soviet Russian government.

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<sup>43</sup> “Famine Relief Bills Goes to President,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1921. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98505183/EB2B6B2A91F54D96PQ/4?accountid=10362>

<sup>44</sup> *The New York Times Current History: The European War Volume XIX* (New York: The New York Times Company, 1919), 50-51, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/\\_/X\\_p9AAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/X_p9AAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1)

<sup>45</sup> Associated Press, “All Relief Work Put Under Hoover,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1919. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/100527993/E67C4A37C9654E02PQ/2?accountid=10362>

Considering that the American Relief Administration was an independent charitable organization, most of the conditions presented to the Soviet Russian government were not particularly surprising. Among the conditions were freedom of movement of American Relief Administration representatives, the ability to organize local committees without government interference, and assurances that the government would not interfere with the liberty of members, to name a few. An additional condition is of the most interest: the release of any Americans held in Soviet prisons.<sup>46</sup> The inclusion of this condition resulted in the release of almost one hundred Americans from custody.<sup>47</sup> Conditional aid made achieving American policy objectives possible.

A peculiar coincidence hints that there may have been ties between American aid and Soviet New Economic Policy reforms. In the December 24, 1921 edition of *The New York Times*, several back-to-back articles cover economic reforms in the Ninth All-Russian Soviet Congress and President Harding's signing of a bill that would appropriate \$20 million to the ARA for use in Russia. The reforms were described as foreshadowing the abandonment of socialism and consisted in part of "the partial re-establishment of private trade and industry," and the adoption of "commercial principles" by remaining state-owned enterprises.<sup>48</sup> This is by no means conclusive, but

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<sup>46</sup> Associated Press, "Russia Must Free Captives to Get Aid," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1921. <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/98376816?accountid=10362>.

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 23, [https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2\\_full.pdf](https://hoover.archives.gov/sites/default/files/research/ebooks/b1v2_full.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> "New Soviet Economic Policy Under Fire," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1921. <https://search-proquest->

considering the anti-Bolshevist nature of previous American aid to Europe and the conditions imposed on Germany for aid, ties between US government aid money and Soviet economic reforms are not implausible.<sup>49</sup>

The election of Warren Harding in 1920 signaled a step back in American participation in international affairs. However, despite rejecting the League of Nations and ostensibly returning to “normalcy,” the United States remained engaged in the post-war world. Analysis of American postwar relief provides an additional layer of information in our understanding of isolationism. Unlike slogans such as “America First” or “return to normalcy,” or support or opposition to the League of Nations, aid cannot be categorized into such a binary. The varying levels of support and implementation of aid allow for the grey area required when describing foreign policy. The American Relief Administration distributed millions of dollars’ worth of food throughout Europe in an effort to save lives and prevent the Bolshevist wave from sweeping across Europe, signaling the advent of a pragmatic isolationism that saw the United States engage with the international community without embracing it.

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<sup>49</sup> Associated Press, “All Relief Work Put Under Hoover,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1919. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/100527993/E67C4A37C9654E02PQ/2?accountid=10362>

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