William Allen White and Verne Marshall: Two Midwestern Editors Debate Aid to the Allies versus Isolationism
Edited by William M. Tuttle, Jr.

The "phony war" period of World War II ended suddenly on April 9, 1940, when German troops stormed into Norway and Denmark, thus exhibiting Hitler's territorial designs for the first time since conquering Poland the previous fall. Just a month later, on May 10, a victorious Hitler ordered his mechanized columns and potent air power into Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The Low Countries subdued, Hitler's troops invaded France the first week in June. On June 22, 1940, Marshal Pétain, the head of the French government, signed a humiliating armistice with his conqueror at Compiègne. Now of the warring nations only Great Britain remained free to resist Hitler.

The United States was stunned. In just two-and-a-half months Hitler had crushed the western European democracies. Although the American public was generally sympathetic to Great Britain and to the plight of the conquered European countries, it was bitterly split over what to do. A tiny minority urged congress to declare war immediately upon Germany. But the American people rejected this proposal almost unanimously. Far more in accord with public opinion, and with the policies of the Roosevelt administration, was the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. Organized in May, 1940, the committee's chairman was William Allen White, the venerable 72-year-old editor of the Emporia Gazette. White was also an influential Republican. And because of his homely editorials and other writings, he was for many Americans the most articulate spokesman for the grass roots of the nation. White's committee advocated a policy of aid to the Allies short of our active military involvement in the war. In addition to utter contempt for Nazism, the basic premise of the committee's program was that Great Britain, and especially the

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British fleet, was America’s first line of defense. With the British fleet dominant in the Atlantic, the United States navy could safeguard the Pacific. But, the committee warned, if Great Britain went under, Hitler would rule the Atlantic seaways, and the security of the United States would be in mortal danger. For self-protection, then, if not to uphold some semblance of international morality, the United States should aid Great Britain with machine guns, planes, destroyers, and other implements of war.

But many Americans, even though bitterly opposed to the Nazi way of life and sympathetic to Hitler’s victims, were skeptical and distrustful of the White committee. Aid to the Allies, they feared, might drag the United States step-by-step into war, much as it had 23 years before.

As skeptical as any American was Verne Marshall. Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Marshall was as thoroughly Midwestern as White, and he also was a Republican. He was a respected newspaper editor, too. Marshall was the fiery editor of the Cedar Rapids Gazette, which under his crusading leadership had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1936 for meritorious public service. The Gazette had exposed a complex graft and corruption ring which extended all the way from the state’s slot-machine operators to Iowa’s state house.2 In still another respect Marshall and White were similar. Each was in 1940 the national chairman of a committee organized to influence the nation’s policies toward the combatants in Europe. But whereas White was the chairman of a committee to aid the Allies, Marshall was to be the chairman of the No Foreign War Committee, an organization of isolationists and pacifists who grimly prophesied that such aid would surely carry us down the road to war.3

On June 13, 1940, Verne Marshall wired William Allen White to inquire about the sources of his committee’s finances, thus setting in motion a provocative dialogue over the role of the United States in a world at war. Over the next five weeks these two men earnestly debated the subject by mail, and from their letters one may apprehend the deep chasm dividing isolationists and internationalists in 1940. Both yearned for peace. Both despised Hitler. Both were determined that the United States should not enter the war. Yet


3. Marshall announced the formation of the No Foreign War Committee on December 17, 1940. New York Times, December 18, 23, 1940. Other members were Sen. Rush Holt of West Virginia; Harry Moorhouse Gage, president of Coe College; Harold Chance, peace secretary to the Friends Service Society; Dr. Charles F. Ross, Jr., executive secretary of the Methodist World Peace Conference; and Harry W. Colmery, Topeka, past national commander of the American Legion.
their antidotes for the world's ills were almost diametrically opposed. White naturally espoused the program of his committee. This, he wrote, would safeguard not only our commerce and security but also the social justice he had long championed. Only by aiding the Allies could the United States avoid a confrontation with Hitler. Marshall, on the other hand, denounced the White committee's propaganda on behalf of Great Britain. Just such propaganda, Marshall claimed, had made the mass American mind amenable to a declaration of war in 1917, and if unchecked it would do so again. The tragic lesson of our entry into World War I should indeed be sufficient to discredit "war mongering." And despite our intervention, World War I was "a war that settled nothing." Marshall, who had enlisted in the First World War with all the fervor of a crusader, was bitterly disillusioned. World War I had certainly not made the world safe for democracy. If anything it had laid the groundwork for the current debacle. World War I, in fact, had just been "the 1914-18 chapter of this present war," and World War II was just one of "the recurring episodes of Europe's perpetual war."

Marshall's letters reflect also some of the biases which motivated isolationists. He was anti-Eastern Seaboard and especially suspicious of Wall Street's influence. He was anti-New Deal; "Dictator Roosevelt," while squandering billions of dollars, had misled the American people about Hitler and had neglected our national defense. Marshall was also an Anglophobe, alleging that Great Britain had always had others fight her battles. As an isolationist, finally, he was certain that a heavily fortified New World could insulate itself from the maladies of the Old.

In reply to telegrams from Marshall on June 13 and 14, asking for the names of the most generous contributors to the White committee, White sent the following wire:

**TELEGRAM, WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE TO VERNE MARSHALL, JUNE 14, 1940**

Our records are in New York at 8 West Fortieth Street. I have however signed a score of checks none over $500 so far as I can remember, mostly from ten to fifty dollars, lots of dollar bills pinned to penciled letters. I assure you on my honor that there is no financial nigger in this woodpile. We have collected as near as my records show something more than $30,000 and the average subscriptions would be under $50. Not more than a dozen, probably half of that have been as much as $500. In the eight checks before me this morning mostly from no one I ever heard of the largest is for $500 from Mrs. Christopher Graham, Rochester, Minnesota. In the mornings mail I found
a one dollar bill and checks for five, three, ten, one, twenty, five, ten. Yesterday or the day before I had a check for $25.00. These checks are spotted all over the country and for your personal information I have not detected any Jewish names though probably they are about in proportion of Jewish subscribers as there are Jewish inhabitants in the country.

A full report of all receipts and expenditures will be made soon when this war is over which now seems likely in a few weeks. I understand that Robert Sherwood, the playwright, raised $24,000 quite independent of our fund to pay for the Stop Hitler advertisement. It was his copy and not ours. He has given his profits from his new play to the cause we are supporting and honestly believes as do all of our committee that this is the way to keep us out of war and to shield our boys from the hell that is in France today. As you know there are two schools of thought, the internationalists and the isolationists with two different ways of avoiding war. Each is an honest view, each is held by patriotic men. We think the isolationists will lead us to war quicker than our plan but we may be wrong or you may be wrong. God only knows and time will tell. So why beat our breasts and make soots at each other and call one another war mongers. We are all equally patriotic and not until next year or maybe the next decade can anyone say which group was wiser. Each must go ahead following his own conscience and I hope each deeply and sincerely respecting the other's motives. I trust you will not think it necessary to publish this but if you do feel that way, publish it all please.

MARSHALL TO WHITE, JUNE 14, 1940

This letter follows my telegram of yesterday, thanking you for your consideration in sending me the names of the members of your "Stop Hitler" committee as of June 1. This morning I received New York correspondence carrying the membership list. I should have waited one more day before telegraphing you.

By this time you should have received tear sheets from this paper, on one of which was a column that reflected my reactions to the series of advertisements sponsored under your leadership. I tried to make it plain that I was in no way criticizing the demand for all possible aid to the Allies, short of war. But I also tried to make it clear that I felt the advertisement which prompted my column and the telegram to you was as certainly a step toward war as anything that might be done outside of Washington.

Perhaps I have some right to criticize what I fear as procedure preliminary to our active participation in a war that has lasted in Europe for centuries, and will last for centuries to come, if governments over there insist on trying to change, with force and violence, the thinking of the human race. Whatever right I may have to inflict my opinions on others might derive from the fact that I was so pro-Ally in 1916 that I paid my own way to France, joined the American Field Service, and drove a first-line ambulance, first in the Toul sector and later at Verdun, where I helped evacuate wounded Frenchmen from


the first line at Dead Man's Hill. I have ducked plenty of shells, and know what it is to be under an enemy plane whose missiles made no distinction between whoever might get in their way.

When America got in the war I enlisted as a private, although I was offered, from Washington, all the support I needed to obtain a commission as an intelligence officer. I wound up in a machine gun camp at Camp Cody, New Mexico. The powers that be at Washington yanked me out of that outfit and sent me all over the country as a war monger, generating hate, and doing my damndest to get the American public aroused to a full fighting frenzy.

The propagandists in Washington thought enough of my effort to team me with Ernestine Schumann-Heink. From coast to coast she drew enormous crowds that paid to hear her magnificent voice. After she got them in shape for my harangue, I spread anti-German propaganda up and down the aisles and across every row of seats. The Washington Post, to cite one instance, reported that ten or twelve persons in the audience that heard Schumann-Heink and the enlisted soldier who had seen something of war in France fainted and were carried out. We made our appearance in the Billy Sunday tabernacle, which was jammed to the rafters. Later she sang and I talked to crowds as large as 50,000. Many of those who wanted to attend the meeting in San Francisco could not get into the Civic Center auditorium there. At Balboa Park there were 35,000; at the intersection of Broad and Wall streets, 50,000, one noon.

This tiresome information is given you in order that you may know that I, too, have exerted what little influence I may possess in the generation of the propaganda of hate. I despise brutal aggressors as vigorously today as I did in 1916, when I joined the French army in demonstration of my attitude. But I most emphatically put American interests ahead of all others.

And I say to you, in all earnestness, that any propaganda which corresponds to that used before we got into the 1914-18 phase of Europe’s everlasting war, and by reason of its tendency to kick us back into the same war, is almost certain to lead to the same disaster as over took us when we wasted American lives and American billions to help win a war that settled nothing, save as it laid the ground work for today’s calamity.

America must arm to the teeth, to protect this hemisphere against an aggressor whose power has been developed entirely within the period during which this government has been controlled by the New Deal, spender of 800,000,000,000, part of which might have been used to create the national defense which our President now confesses he overlooked. He is the man who has repeatedly assured us that he knows all about European conditions. But he duplicated Chamberlain’s blunder, failed to take Hitler’s warnings of the catastrophe to come. But recrimination does no good. What we must do now is our best to repair the damage confessed at Washington.

Meanwhile, every effort to influence American thinking fertilizes the people of this country for a declaration of war against Germany and Italy. Yesterday’s tragic events in France should put an end to all consideration of such a declaration, but it will not so long as hysteria continues in Washington. We could

6. Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink, a famous contralto, was a naturalized American citizen who had been raised in Austria. During World War I she conducted a singing tour of army training camps and was a Liberty Loan campaigner.—New York Times, July 31, 1917, April 11, May 16, 17, September 19, 1918; and Mary Lawton, Schumann-Heink: the Last of the Titans (New York, Macmillan, 1929), pp. 272-274.

accomplish nothing by entering this war physically, except the slaughter of soldiers sent to France without the mechanized equipment which would defend them against Hitler’s terrible machine.

Well I realize that you have no anticipation of our actual physical involvement in a war for which we have no responsibility, over conflicts in ideology and governmental philosophies we are in no position to end. We could not end those conflicts if we had an army of 10,000,000 men, each one supported by a tank and a bombing plane.

Now the White House asks the Congress to adopt a resolution amending the Monroe Doctrine so as to warn every foreign power that the United States will tolerate no change in the ownership of any territories in this hemisphere presently owned by foreign nations. In other words, the crazy foreign policy at Washington is going to become crazier still. We are going to tell every government outside of this hemisphere to mind its own business, so far as our status quo is concerned, and at the same time we are sticking our noses into the European affairs of governments in the Old World.

I fear, my dear friend, that the eastern seaboard war mongers have used the name and prestige of a venerable and widely beloved mid-westerner to further ends which are poisonous to the American way of life.

White To Marshall, June 18, 1940

I have read and reread with interest and I hope profit and instruction your letter. We just see things differently. You are not a fool and I hope I am not a senile old idiot. We are just temperamentally different. It takes a lot of people to make up God’s world. I admire your kind and hope you can put up with my kind.

It boils down to this: I was always for that social and industrial justice which is necessary if there shall be peace in the world. So back thirty years ago and more I joined Taft and Hughes and Root and a lot of hard-boiled Republicans in organizing what is known as the League to Enforce Peace. You would call it sticking our snouts in other people’s business. Then came along the League of Nations and I supported that and joined Hoover and Root and a lot of other Republicans who signed a letter to Harding in the campaign of 1920, supporting the League of Nations. Then when Hoover and Coolidge advocated our interest in the world court, I played ball with that outfit of good hard-boiled Republicans who were supported by pretty prudish-minded business men. And now again I am on the same old treadmill.

Marshall To White, July 2, 1940

Thanks kindly for your letter of June 18. As you say, “We just see things differently.” And apparently we read history differently. At any rate, I see in current developments an exact duplication of the situation which took us

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8. To discourage Hitler from trying to cede parts of the New World, the State Department drafted a joint resolution which was sent to the foreign relations committees of congress on June 3. This resolution stated: “That the United States would not recognize any transfer, and would not acquiesce in any attempt to transfer, any geographic region of this hemisphere from one non-American power to another non-American power.” On June 17 this resolution passed the senate unanimously, and on June 18 the house approved it by a vote of 380-8.—Langer and Gleason, op. cit., pp. 556, 626, 627.


10. Ibid.
into the war in 1917. At that time I was so determined to do my part to save
the world for democracy that I enlisted in the French army in 1916. . . .

In short, I, too, subscribe to the democratic ideal. But I never will admit
that it can be forced down men’s throats at the point of bayonets, or that if
we sent an army to Europe once every five years we could make those who
do not subscribe to the democratic way of life accept it under our violent
pressure. Nor will I ever admit that so long as we try to help one side in any
of the recurring episodes of Europe’s perpetual war, we are not actually in
that war ourselves.

Whether or not it is true, I heard at Philadelphia, last Friday, just as the
convention was adjourned, from a man who had received a private message
from Washington, that a plan was afoot to bring certain units of the British
and French fleets into our waters, perhaps within the next week or ten days—
this as a means of bringing the war to us, since we refused to go to it. This
sounds fantastic to me, but so have many of the other things we have read
and heard about these last few months, including committees to carry out the
same old 1914, 1915 and 1916 program of preparing America’s mass mind for a
disastrous adventure abroad.11

WHITE TO MARSHALL, JULY 5, 1940

I have your letter and note that you heard . . . that a plan is afoot to
bring certain units of the French and British fleets into our waters. Probably
that was a fact but not quite the truth as you interpret it. You will probably
find that parts of the French fleet fled to the French bases in South America
as some of them fled to the French bases in North Africa. And very likely if
the French fleet hasn’t come out of these western hemisphere island harbors
the British fleet will come here and burst at them.

I have no idea what attitude the administration will take and I am not
going to get into a sweat about it. I just hope that the British will get these
ships and use them as a front line trench for our own defenses. The Lord
knows I have no great love for the British but so long as they fight they are
saving our skins and if they are licked, we will have to go on with the battle
or let Hitler control our commerce which is unthinkable.

About reading history: On our committee are several competent scholars
who have read history for a living. You could get up a committee with
equally competent scholars who have read history for a living who would
disagree with them. Reading history is like reading the Bible. You get out of
it what you put into it. It is just a case of temperament and fundamental
belief. People have to be what they are in this world. I hope it will be
better in the next.

Until then, let me sign myself,

Most sincerely yours,
WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE 12

MARSHALL TO WHITE, JULY 8, 1940

. . . You and I do not differ at all about the part Britain is playing in
defending America. Nor do we differ about the part we should play in help-

11. Ibid., Box 238.
12. Ibid.
ing Britain. The point on which we definitely are at loggerheads concerns the propaganda and strategy which are capable of getting us into war, despite Dictator Roosevelt’s panicky admission, a few weeks ago, that we aren’t even prepared to defend ourselves on our own soil.

My recollection of what happened to us in 1914-19, inclusive, is crystal clear. I recall the propaganda which prepared us, mentally, for war. I recall the circumstances that led to our entrance into war, after Wilson was re-elected because he had kept us out of war. I remember that I was tremendously enthused over our entrance into war, in April, 1917. The record shows that I was in the French army as early as February, 1916. No one knows better than myself why I was in that army. It was because I felt that men everywhere who believed in democracy should demonstrate their belief by doing everything within their power to save democracy. . . .

Frankly, I go along with Lindbergh, and am willing to support his doctrine of Americanism anywhere and at any time.

As you say, “People have to be what they are in this world.” I join you in the hope that the next world will be a better one than this one. You and I both think it will. Each of us has gone through Gethsemane as death entered his home. You lost a lovely daughter. I lost the mother of four daughters, ages two to eight. Men who have suffered such experiences should understand one another.13

White To Marshall, July 10, 1940

Well, we are getting together. I am not only for arming to the teeth but the back teeth, Just for your soul’s good, I am sending you a statement of the program of our Committee. Not that I expect you to agree with it, but so that you will know exactly what we are driving at. So far, we have gone pretty well, And that was because we do not go any further than the main body of troops. Willkie, Landon and Hoover are with us, [but] not members, of course! But Hoover’s speech declared for giving every legal aid to the Allies, and that’s all I wanted. And Landon cut out any isolationist nonsense in the Republican platform, and that’s all I wanted. And Willkie has said a dozen times that he wants to give every legal aid to the Allies, and that’s all I wanted. And that’s all our Committee is trying to do—to crystallize public opinion and implement it in Congress. So far we have batted a thousand.

I talked with a man who was on the battle fields of France just before the fall of Paris and he is satisfied that the English have been holding back their reserve and now have three million and a half men armed and equipped. They are getting five hundred American airplanes a month, paying cash on the barrel head. They have four or five billions of good cash and securities in this country to go on. Every day that Hitler waits hurts his cause. And every day that Stalin makes a pass to go on to the Dardanelles scares the daylight out of Hitler. I wish to God those two tyrants could get in each other’s hair. It would be a great day for free men.

In the meantime, you are dead right that we should quit monkeydoodling and arm. And that’s why I want Willkie and not Bert Wheeler.14

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. Burton K. Wheeler, Democratic senator from Montana, was perhaps the leading isolationist in his party.
William Allen White  
(1868-1944)  

The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies was organized in May, 1940. Its chairman-spokesman was Emporia editor William Allen White, who ably supported the Roosevelt policies. The committee, although often sharply criticized, obviously did help to influence American opinion for aid to the allies. Photo courtesy Life magazine.
Verne Marshall
(1889-1965)

Some Americans opposed any United States participation in World War II. Marshall, editor of the Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Gazette, in 1940 became the outspoken chairman of a No Foreign War Committee. His newspaper later acknowledged that the movement “ran into a stone wall. American sentiment against Hitler and the Nazi regime was overwhelming.” Photo courtesy Cedar Rapids Gazette.
MARSHALL TO WHITE, JULY 11, 1940

Thanks again for a fine letter from you.

So long as Uncle Sam can give every aid, short of war, to the effort to defeat totalitarian tyrants in Europe, I am for it. But the fact remains that history proves that almost inevitably it is impossible to actually keep out of war under such circumstances as those about which you and I have been corresponding with each other.

Undoubtedly, the man with whom you talked, and who was on the French battlefields before the fall of Paris, tells the truth. The British did hold back their reserve strength, and the result was the fall of all of the European continental democracy. If you read the article under “National Affairs,” in last week’s Time Magazine, about Lord Lothian,19 you noted that the British policy is to encourage other peoples to fight for their security, and to help them only when their fight is threatened with failure; then to help them primarily with financing, rather than with arms. England has let other countries fight her wars for centuries. We helped her fight the 1914-18 chapter of this present war. What did we get out of it?16

WHITE TO MARSHALL, JULY 15, 1940

One last shot: I have said a thousand times you were played for suckers in the last War and I still think so. I wouldn’t be in favor of going to war nor sending men to Europe under any circumstances that I could imagine now. And honest to God, all I am trying to do is to sell Great Britain what material we can to fight their own fight because I know if I know anything, that the Hitler totalitarian economy will catch us by the throat within a year after he breaks Great Britain. We may have to defend the Monroe Doctrine in the Caribbean and almost certainly in Mexico. The totalitarian state, whether it is Communist or Nazi or Fascist has to have action and a lot of it to keep going. The Lord help us if that outfit wins this war.17

White’s parting “shot” of July 15 was the concluding argument in the debate. But on December 19, 1940, Marshall, whose No Foreign War Committee was just two days old, challenged the chairman of the White committee to a “public debate . . . on the question of aid to Britain and of possible involvement in this war.”18 White never accepted this challenge. At a time when innuendo and acrimony emotionalized most discussions of these issues—when indiscriminate use of the dirty words “warmonger” and “appeaser” blurred arguable differences—such a public debate would have been valuable. Unfortunately, the debate which did take place between White and Marshall was confined to the secrecy of private letters.

15. This was Time’s cover story, “Lord Lothian’s Job,” Time, New York, v. 36 (July 8, 1940), pp. 10-18.
17. Ibid.