Harry H. Woodring

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Problems of Neutrality, 1936-1939

Numerous accounts have been written about the United States and neutrality in the 1930s, in which detailed information has been presented on isolationism, neutrality legislation, and efforts to keep the United States out of a foreign conflict. Nearly all such accounts are similar, in that they tend to look upon the problems of neutrality as the concern of only the President and the State Department. So much emphasis has been placed on the efforts of President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull to handle problems relating to neutrality that there has been a tendency to forget that other top administration officials were also vitally concerned with those matters. One such person was Secretary of War Woodring.

Woodring would have preferred to avoid questions relating to neutrality, because he felt that keeping the country out of war was the "primary concern of the State Department and the Chief Executive," not of the War Department. Although he would have liked to avoid such problems, he could not. As Secretary of War, he soon discovered not only that neutrality was of great interest to him, but also that he could do much to see that it was or was not maintained.

Woodring's influence on neutrality was of both an informal and a formal nature. His informal influence stemmed in part from the fact that he was head of the United States War Department. By virtue of that position, his every statement concerning the Army, national defense, and foreign policy was looked upon as being representative of administration policy or
indicative of what that policy might be in the future. A belligerent or offensive statement by such a key member of the executive branch could have a serious effect on the thinking or actions of certain foreign nations, and consequently it could endanger the neutrality of the United States. Another informal influence over neutrality was Woodring's role as a cabinet member. That position gave him ready access to the President; generally he consulted with FDR two or three times every week. That the breakdown of neutrality could ultimately result in the nation's going to war was a fact that Woodring was well aware of, and if there was anything he wanted to avoid, it was war. Therefore, in his capacity as a presidential adviser, he always cautioned against any action that might endanger American neutrality.

Formally, Woodring was able to influence the maintenance of neutrality because the Neutrality Act of 1935 made the Secretary of War a member of the National Munitions Control Board—a body whose purpose was to license and supervise all shipments of arms to foreign countries. As a board member, Woodring had a major voice in determining which war items could or could not be shipped to foreign nations. The Secretary of War had always had the primary responsibility for making decisions about what military supplies were to be sold abroad, but the neutrality legislation of the 1930s made that post more important than it had ever been, especially in regard to maintaining neutrality.

The major problem of neutrality faced by Secretary Woodring centered on the question of selling government arms, ammunition, and implements of war to foreign governments. This had been a problem for Woodring even before he became Secretary, because as Assistant Secretary of War he had been asked by Secretary Dern to recommend what policy the War Department should follow in regard to foreign sales. In preparing his recommendations, Woodring relied on several valuable precedents. A 1920 act had authorized the Secretary of War "to sell to any state or foreign government with which the United States is at peace at the time of the passage of this Act, upon such terms as he may deem expedient, any matériel, supplies, or equipment pertaining to the military establishment . . . which are not needed for military purposes." However, in April 1923 President Harding had established the policy that the government would not sell war equipment to any foreign power. This was done, he said, "to make sure that none of our surplus equipment is employed in encouraging warfare any place in the world." Seven years later, that policy was modified by President Hoover to permit the sale of surplus aircraft and aircraft parts, provided that such sales did not reveal any military secrets and provided that they were approved by the
State Department. This decision was motivated primarily by a desire to enhance foreign trade. Based on these precedents, Woodring developed a new policy on foreign sales in August of 1933. According to Woodring, it was to be “the policy of this government to refrain from disposing of arms, ammunitions, and implements of war in possession of this government to foreign powers or to persons who might be presumed to be about to transfer them to foreign powers.” This was to be the War Department’s contribution to the maintenance of world peace.

Although the War Department refused to sell arms and ammunition abroad, it was not concerned over the sale of such items by United States civilian firms, except when military secrets were involved. The Army not only had no objection to the foreign sale of implements of war made by American manufacturers, it actually encouraged such activity, because this stimulated a number of key war industries. As Woodring explained it, “Such action is considered to enhance the interests of national defense by encouraging the maintenance of facilities for supply in the event of an emergency.”

Before 1935 all requests by civilians to export arms and ammunition were handled by the State Department, but they required prior approval from the War Department. When an export request was received, it was forwarded to the Secretary of War, who then informed the Undersecretary of State if there was any objection, on the grounds of “military secrecy,” to the exportation of the articles mentioned. If the Secretary of War objected, the State Department denied the request; if he had no objection, the request was approved. The identity of the manufacturer making the request or the identity of the country destined to receive the item made no difference in the decisions of the Secretary of War; the test was strictly one of military secrecy. Such a policy explains why, on 23 October 1933, Secretary Dern approved a request from the Boeing Airplane Company to export B-9 airplanes to Japan, while at the same time he turned down a request to send P-26’s to Germany.

In August of 1935 Congress passed the Neutrality Act, which provided that in the event of war between two or more nations, the President would proclaim such a fact; and from that time on, it would be unlawful to export arms, ammunitions, or implements of war to the belligerent nations. The act also made it unlawful to export any war supply without a federal license. To implement this latter provision, Congress established the National Munitions Control Board, which was made up of the Secretary of State, who served as chairman, and the Secretaries of War, the Navy, the Treasury, and Commerce. The board was to supervise and control, through a registration and licensing system, the manufacture, importation, and exportation of all
arms and ammunition. The agency created for carrying out the responsibilities of the Munitions Board was the Office of Arms and Munitions Control—an adjunct of the State Department. The functions of the Control Office were basically clerical, since the licensing procedure was clearly spelled out in federal statutes.

In spite of the legislative restrictions placed on it, the Munitions Control Board evolved into an increasingly important body, and with the possible exception of Secretary Hull, Secretary Woodring was to emerge as its most important and influential member. The importance of the board stemmed from the fact that its regulations provided that licenses to export arms could not be issued when doing so would violate the Espionage Act of 1917. This law provided that anyone who turned over to a foreign government or to an individual in a foreign country or to any person not entitled to receive it any “blue print, plan, map, model, instrument, appliance, or note relating to the national defense . . . shall be punished by a fine . . . or by imprisonment . . . or both.” This meant that the maintenance of military secrets was the major reason for refusing to grant a license for the exportation of implements of war; furthermore, it was the responsibility of the Secretary of War to make the final decision about whether or not a specific item was a military secret. Thus Secretary Woodring could determine whether or not a particular foreign government would receive a certain type of aircraft, arm, or ordnance item. While the Secretary always consulted the General Staff’s G-2 and the Chiefs of the various Technical Services in deciding whether or not an item should be classified as a military secret, he was in no way bound to follow their recommendations. Under the guise of military secrecy, Woodring could, if he so chose, veto the foreign sale of any item that fell in the category of arms, ammunition, or implements of war. As will be seen, however, Woodring used his Munitions Board powers in an impartial and neutral manner, and he ran into difficulty with his superior only when he refused to follow such a policy.

The experience that Woodring gained as Assistant Secretary on matters relating to foreign sales was utilized almost as soon as he assumed the secretaryship. In October 1936 the British’ Air Attache in Washington called on Woodring and inquired whether it might be possible for the British government to purchase military planes from American manufacturers. Woodring, feeling that British orders would help the sagging United States aircraft industry, favored such sales, provided that the models to be turned over were more than a year old. For the past several years the War Department had followed the policy that no American firm selling planes to the Army could sell similar planes to a foreign government until one year after delivery of the second production plane. It was felt that since experimental

Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring and Chief of Staff George C. Marshall arriving at the White House for a defense conference, 30 May 1940.
The Woodring family making its farewell visit to the White House, 26 June 1940 (left to right): Marcus, Harry, Melissa, Helen, and Cooper Woodring.
and testing work had been completed and production was well under way by the time the second production plane was received, the United States Air Corps would have the aircraft a full two years ahead of any other country. Some Air Corps leaders, feeling that the release period of one year was too long, wanted to reduce it to six months; but Woodring refused to go along with such a change. The Navy's policy on release of aircraft for export was based on what it called "national defense interests." Since such a phrase could be interpreted in many ways, it meant that the Navy had no set time limit; consequently, some planes were released in six months, while others were held for years.

When the British expressed an interest in buying American-built military aircraft in October 1936, Woodring asked the President to decide on a uniform policy with regard to release; thus, on 11 November, Roosevelt met with Secretary Woodring, Secretary of the Navy Swanson, Acting Secretary of State R. Walton Moore, and Solicitor General Stanley Reed for that purpose. After hearing Woodring and Swanson explain the policies of their departments with regard to the release of aircraft, the President decided that the policy of the War Department should be used by both military services. Although Roosevelt agreed that all Air Corps planes should be considered military secrets for one year, and therefore not eligible for release, he did request that a study be made to see if, in the future, the time limit might be reduced. In late November, Britain temporarily abandoned the idea of purchasing American-built planes, and so, for the time being, the release policy slipped back into a position of relative unimportance.

As Secretary of War, Harry Woodring was determined to ensure that all military secrets, especially those relating to aircraft, remain the sole property of the United States government. Woodring, feeling that since Congress had not authorized an Air Corps of quantity, it was essential that it be one of quality, always attempted to provide the Corps with the latest and most efficient planes available. Occasionally, his determination to protect aircraft secrets became a source of difficulty. Such was the case in October 1936, when Eugene L. Vidal, the Director of Air Commerce, publicly criticized Woodring for refusing to permit representatives from a Latin American air-transport company to visit factories at which Army planes were being produced. With regard to this restrictive visitation policy, as with his refusal to cut the aircraft release period to six months, Woodring was guided by his determination to safeguard American aircraft secrets.

In mid 1936 civil war broke out in Spain, and a few weeks later a number of American airplane manufacturers asked the State Department if they could export planes to Spain, since the Neutrality Act did not impose an embargo in case of civil war. William Phillips, the Acting Secretary of State,
informed the manufacturers that sales to Spain "would not follow the spirit of the Government's policy." This "moral embargo" was accepted without question until December. In that month, Robert Cuse, a New Jersey scrap dealer, applied for a license to sell $2.777 million worth of airplanes, airplane engines, and airplane parts to the Spanish government. Since there was no legal prohibition against such sales, the Office of Arms and Munitions Control was forced to issue the export license. The government was widely criticized for issuing the license, but the President explained that nothing else could be done, for although Cuse’s action was unpatriotic, it was legal. Criticism then shifted to the Army, when it was revealed that most of the engines to be exported had been sold to Cuse by the War Department in January 1936. Secretary Woodring defended the Army by pointing out that the engines had been sold as surplus because they had already been overhauled three times and would have been unsafe to place in a plane again. He also pointed out that the sale had been completed months before the Spanish Civil War had begun.

In early January 1937 Congress passed a resolution to expand the arms embargo provision of the Neutrality Act to civil wars, but before the legislation went into effect on 8 January, Cuse was able to export six planes and one engine. Although the furor over the Cuse matter quickly subsided, Woodring was determined that such a thing should not happen again. Therefore, in early March he directed that steps be taken to ensure that in the future, surplus arms, ammunition, and implements of war were to be sold only to citizens of the United States and "then only under a contract specifying that such articles will not be resold, transferred, or mortgaged to any foreign government or power and provided further that such matériel or equipment will not be shipped outside the United States." In the event of resale the same provisions had to be adhered to by the new owner. These principles were incorporated in Army regulations in the spring of 1937, and for the next three years they were implemented without being questioned. Eventually, however, those regulations were to become a major source of controversy between Secretary Woodring and President Roosevelt.

On 1 May 1937 the President signed the 1937 Neutrality Act, which provided the nation with permanent neutrality legislation, the 1935 and 1936 acts having been only temporary. On the same day that the new legislation went into effect, President Roosevelt expanded the list of arms, ammunition, and implements of war to be included in an embargo. Most of the items added were gases and explosives. The recommendation for expanding the list had come from the Munitions Control Board, but their decision on it had not been a unanimous one. Woodring had voiced opposition to expanding the list on the grounds that a number of the articles
and materials to be added were not designed or intended for military purposes. The Secretary of War maintained that restrictions should be placed only on the exportation of items that were definitely for military use. He feared that if the line were not drawn somewhere, the United States might eventually come to define contraband as broadly as Britain had during the World War. In opposing expansion of the embargo list, Woodring stood alone—the board voting 4 to 1 in favor of the new items. 27

That Woodring did not wish to stand in the way of exports unless they had a definite military advantage to the recipient can be seen by examining his position in the helium controversy of 1937–1938. On 6 May 1937 the German dirigible Hindenburg, which was using highly inflammable hydrogen, exploded and crashed as it was landing at Lakehurst, New Jersey, after a trans-Atlantic flight. A few days later the German Zeppelin Company, desiring to utilize a safer noninflammable gas, contacted Secretary of Interior Ickes and inquired whether it could purchase helium from the United States for a second dirigible then under construction. Ickes was consulted because the production and sale of helium was under the control of the Bureau of Mines, which was within the Interior Department. 28

At a cabinet meeting on 14 May, Ickes informed those who were present of the German request. The cabinet members had mixed emotions concerning the possible sale. With the Hindenburg tragedy still fresh in their minds, they tended to look with favor on such a sale for humanitarian reasons, but at the same time they did not wish to sell helium to a foreign government that might use it for military purposes. In order to examine the matter more closely and then make a policy recommendation, the President appointed an ad hoc committee composed of the Secretaries of State, War, Navy, Interior, and Commerce. 29 A week later the committee reported in favor of exporting helium, provided that there were safeguards to ensure that the gas was not used for military purposes. 30 On this recommendation, Woodring was in complete accord with the rest of the group. 31 On 25 May the President, who favored legislation permitting the foreign sale of helium, submitted to key congressional committees the recommendations of his ad hoc committee. 32 Congress was impressed with the report and responded by incorporating its ideas into the Helium Act. Under that measure, which went into effect on 1 September, the Secretary of the Interior retained responsibility for the production and sale of helium, while export control was given to both the National Munitions Control Board and the Secretary of the Interior. 33

In October the Zeppelin Company requested 17.5 million cubic feet of helium for one year’s operations. The Munitions Control Board quickly gave its approval, and on 31 January 1938 the State Department issued an
export license. The only thing that now remained was for Secretary Ickes
to sell the helium. Ickes, however, refused to do so, because he feared Hitler's
intentions and did not want to do anything that might aid the German
military machine. Then, when the Germans invaded Austria on 12 March,
he was more determined than ever to refrain from selling the gas.84

Throughout the spring of 1938 a controversy raged over whether or not
Ickes should sell the helium to Germany. President Roosevelt and Secretary
Hull pressured him to do so, because the German government was becoming
increasingly irritated over the delay, and Roosevelt and Hull wanted to
maintain peaceful relations with the Reich.35 Ickes, however, refused to back
down. Woodring also urged that the sale be made, but he did so because
he saw no reason to discriminate against a nation merely because one dis­
agreed with its policies. He maintained that since Congress had provided
for sale of the gas, any nation requesting it should receive it as long as such
action did not endanger the security of the United States. On 4 April and
again on 27 April, Woodring wrote to Ickes, urging him to make the sale.
Woodring argued that the United States should make the helium available
to Germany because of humanitarian reasons, and he assured him that the
amount to be sent was "not sufficiently great to represent jeopardy to the
National Defense."86 After the second letter, Woodring saw that he was
making no progress with Ickes, and realizing that under the law there was
no way of circumventing him, he gave up and stopped pursuing the matter.
During the spring and summer, Ickes continued to resist all pressures to
make the sale, and in September, after Hitler's success at Munich, those
pressures came to an end.

In January 1938 a series of events began that marked the beginning of the
breakdown of United States neutrality and brought about one of the most
controversial issues of the Roosevelt administration. On 16 January, French
Senator Amaury de la Grange, a long-time friend of Roosevelt's met with
the Chief Executive and asked if France could purchase one thousand planes
like those being used by the United States Air Corps.89 The President
pointed out that restrictions of the Neutrality Act would "hinder" French
procurement in the event of war, but he indicated a willingness to assist the
French all that he could. Upon leaving the White House, de la Grange
wrote: "The President will thus be completely in favor of all measures that
the French Government might believe necessary to reinforce its air formations in time of peace and in time of war."

France’s Minister of Defense, Edouard Daladier, doubted whether Roosevelt would be as helpful as de la Grange had indicated; therefore, he asked the American Ambassador, William Bullitt, to sound out the President on the matter. In February, Bullitt and Daladier’s representative, French industrialist Jean Monnet, traveled to Washington in an effort to find out how much support Roosevelt was willing to give France. When Bullitt and Monnet met with the President, he told them of his efforts to repeal the arms embargo and that if war should come before repeal, he would push through such legislation immediately. The President then stated that in the event that he could not bring about repeal of the embargo, he would get around the legislation by sending planes from the United States to Canada, whence they could be sent to France. Since both this meeting and the earlier one, with de la Grange, were confidential, neither Secretary Hull nor Secretary Woodring, nor any other top administrative official, knew what Roosevelt had pledged.

A close examination of the American aircraft industry by French officials revealed that it was barely superior to that of France and that the only American-built plane that could meet their needs was the Curtiss-Wright P-36. When Curtiss-Wright officials were approached by French representatives concerning a sale, they indicated that even if the War Department released the aircraft for export, their limited production facilities would allow no more than one hundred planes to be sent abroad prior to March 1939. Although the number was quite small, Monnet favored making the purchase. A number of technicians in France’s Air Ministry were hesitant about buying the planes, because they doubted that the P-36 could stand up against the newest German aircraft; thus, the French Minister for Air concluded that the only way to settle the dispute was to have his leading test pilot, Michael Detroyat, fly the plane and then recommend whether or not the order should be placed.

In early March 1938 the French requested permission for Detroyat to make the flight, but the War Department, following the one-year release policy approved by the President two years before, denied the request. The department also pointed out that since the second production plane had not yet been received, it would be at least a year before such a flight could be made. Chief of the Air Corps Arnold, Chief of Staff Craig, and Secretary Woodring all agreed that the request should be denied. On 10 March the President, acting as Commander in Chief, directed the Chief of Staff to permit Detroyat to fly the P-36. The flight, he said, should be limited to twenty minutes and “should be conducted from some outlying field, with
utmost secrecy." The President also directed that anything of a confidential or secret nature should be removed from the plane before the flight.\textsuperscript{44} The flight subsequently took place, and when Detroyat reported favorably upon the plane's performance, France's Air Ministry placed an order for one hundred export models of the P-36. The export models, with their name changed to the Hawk 75-A, were essentially the same as those received by the Army Air Corps except for the omission of secret instruments and equipment such as the retractable landing gear.\textsuperscript{45}

Nations other than France were interested in purchasing American-built planes at this time, for in March, Britain sent an air mission to explore the possibilities of making such purchases. When the British mission expressed an interest in the B-18 and the War Department refused to permit a test flight because it was still classified as a military secret, the President again overruled his Army advisers and ordered that the British representatives be permitted to make the flight.\textsuperscript{46} Unimpressed with the B-18, the British did not order any. However, in June they did place an order for four hundred American-built military aircraft. The planes that were to be supplied, half of which were bombers and half of which were pursuit planes, were no longer classified as military secrets; therefore, there were no problems involved in selling them.\textsuperscript{47} Three months after this transaction the Munich Conference took place, and thereafter the British preferred to develop their own aircraft industry rather than to rely on the United States. The British restricted their American purchases, because they feared that if they became involved in a war with Germany, the Neutrality Act would come into effect and cut off all the planes ordered. France, unlike Britain, was willing to take that risk.\textsuperscript{48}

On 25 October 1938, while President Roosevelt was in the midst of making plans to expand the United States Air Corps, he met with Ambassador Bullitt, Secretary Morgenthau, and Jean Monnet to discuss the Nazi menace. They discussed what the United States could do to augment France's air strength. Roosevelt told the group that the American aircraft industry could supply France with one thousand pursuit planes and one thousand bombers. Since the French were especially short of bombers, Monnet returned to France and urged Premier Daladier to place a large order. Consequently, on 5 December, Daladier told his Defense Council that there was "the possibility of receiving about 1,000 planes of the latest model in use by the American Army. The American government has formally promised delivery but it must be kept absolutely secret."\textsuperscript{49} After a few days of budget juggling, it was decided that Monnet should head a mission to the United States with the funds and authority to purchase one thousand modern aircraft.
When the new French air mission arrived in Washington in mid December 1938, President Roosevelt, remembering the earlier opposition of Woodring, Craig, and Arnold to French efforts to test the P-36, directed Monnet to work through the Secretary of the Treasury. According to Secretary Morgenthau, Roosevelt directed them to his office because "he knew the Treasury [Department] would take a less parochial view of national policy in the sale of aircraft than either War or Navy." The nominal reason given by the President was that the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department was experienced in large-scale purchases.

Secretary Woodring was completely unaware of the presence of the French mission until December 21, when Deputy Chief of Staff Marshall informed him that General Arnold had been requested to grant permission to the French officials to inspect the latest Army planes that were under construction. At a cabinet meeting that afternoon, Morgenthau referred to, but did not discuss, the presence of the Monnet mission. After the meeting, Woodring, Morgenthau, and Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles held a long discussion. Saying that the French wanted to purchase a thousand of the latest planes, Morgenthau proposed that the French aviation experts be permitted to inspect and test three late models: the P-40, the Martin 166 bomber, and the B-12 Douglas bomber. Woodring immediately objected to the proposal, claiming that it was unwise to show the mission any planes that were under construction or ready to test. Furthermore, he added, the War Department's policy, which the President himself had approved, prohibited the foreign sale of planes until a year after the second production plane had been received. At this point, Roosevelt acknowledged that the French request violated the established policy on sales, but he considered France to be the nation's first line of defense and therefore expected every effort to be made to supply it with the planes it desired. After Woodring again expressed fear that French purchases would interfere with future Army orders, the President wrote on a memorandum of Morgenthau's that for "reasons of state" the French should be permitted to inspect and purchase the planes, provided that procurement of them did not interfere with United States orders. Woodring reluctantly replied that if that was what the President wanted, he would see that it was done.

The following morning, after discussing the President's directive with his military advisers, Woodring was even less enthusiastic about carrying it out. That afternoon he, General Marshall, and General Arnold went to see Secretary Morgenthau. At that meeting, the Army officials reluctantly agreed to release the P-40, because it was already in service and would be eligible for foreign sale in a few months anyway. They did not, however, want to reveal, let alone release, either the newly produced Martin bomber
or the Douglas bomber, which was still under development. Woodring and Arnold then argued that if the French were permitted to buy the one thousand planes that they desired, the orders could not be filled in less than eighteen months, which meant that Army procurement would be hindered. Morgenthau said that he intended to carry out the President's order whether the War Department "liked it or not." Woodring replied that he, too, would carry out the President's wishes, but he wanted Roosevelt "to know all the facts and not be mixed in his reasoning" by the information that Morgenthau was giving him. The meeting ended with Morgenthau renewing his pledge to aid the French but agreeing that for the time being there would be no inspection of the secret bombers.

One week later, on 29 December, Woodring wrote to Morgenthau, informing him that the bombers would not be revealed until he was assured of two things: first, that the French had the money to put on the "barrel head" for the planes; second, that the orders would not interfere with future Army orders. Morgenthau considered these demands an attempt by Woodring to place obstacles in the path of the French mission. Therefore, he immediately wrote to the President and informed him, "I am unable to proceed further in this matter as long as Secretary Woodring maintains his present attitude." On the following day, Morgenthau telephoned Woodring and expressed his displeasure with the demands being placed upon him. He charged the Secretary of War with attempting to put him "on the spot by writing a letter placing such limitations... on the program of assistance to the French." Woodring replied that he was under pressure from his military advisers not to release the bombers and that he was also afraid that Congress would "raise hell" over their release. He then said, "All I wanted to do, Henry, was simply to protect you in the matter." To this Morgenthau replied, "I don't want to be protected." After an extended discussion, during which the Treasury Secretary mentioned the President's instruction of 21 December, Woodring finally agreed to let the French see the Martin, but not the Douglas, bomber. Two days later Morgenthau informed the French that although it had not been easy to arrange, the mission could inspect the Martin 166. As he explained to Monnet, "The whole United States Army is opposed to what I am doing and I am doing it secretly and I just cannot continue... forcing the United States Army to show planes which they say they want for themselves."

During the first two weeks of January 1939, while Morgenthau was on vacation, the French undertook the aircraft inspections. In that period they made a tentative decision to purchase one hundred additional export models of the P-36 and sixty Martin 166 bombers, but they could make no decision on the Douglas bomber, because it remained under wraps. When Morgenthau
thau returned to Washington and found that the War Department was still procrastinating on the matter of the Douglas bomber, he proposed to the President that all purchasing of planes for the United States government be turned over to the Treasury Department. Morgenthau urged such action because it would enable him to release any plane that he wanted to release. The President was unwilling to take such a drastic step, but Morgenthau’s protests over the War Department’s opposition necessitated his taking some action.

On 16 January 1939 Roosevelt summoned Secretary Woodring, Assistant Secretary Johnson, Secretary Morgenthau, and William Bullitt, the United States Ambassador to France, to the White House. Bullitt opened the meeting by stating that time was running out for France and that the United States should give it all possible assistance. It was especially important, he continued, that the Douglas bomber be made available. Woodring then opposed inspection or release of the bomber because it had secret elements and because it had been built partially with government funds. Its release, he said, “might put the President in an embarrassing position.” In the discussion that followed, Roosevelt indicated, but did not actually say, that he favored the release of the plane. Finally, Assistant Secretary Johnson, whose bluntness could occasionally be an asset, said to the President, “Do you mean, sir, that you wish the Douglas light bomber released to the French government?” Roosevelt quickly replied, “I mean exactly that.”

The President had made his position clear, and Woodring could hold back no longer. The Secretary directed Johnson to make sure that the War Department cooperated 100 percent with the French air mission, and on that note the meeting ended. A few hours later Johnson informed General Arnold that the members of the French mission should be given access to the Douglas bomber. On 19 January, Arnold telegraphed the military authorities at Los Angeles and informed them that French representatives would arrive the following day. Arnold’s telegram concluded: “Authority granted for them to inspect Douglas attack bomber less secret accessories, fly in same, and open negotiations with Douglas Co. relative to purchase.”

On 20 January three members of the French mission, including the test pilot, Paul Chemidlin, arrived at the Douglas plant in Los Angeles, and on the following day they began to inspect the new aircraft. “On January 23 all hell broke loose,” according to General Arnold. On that day the Douglas bomber, with Chemidlin aboard, crashed in a Los Angeles parking lot, killing the pilot and destroying a dozen cars. Miraculously, Chemidlin survived the crash and was taken to a nearby hospital. At first the Douglas Company attempted to keep the Frenchman’s presence on the plane a secret by announcing that the survivor was a company mechanic.
named Smithins; however, reporters quickly learned the survivor's true identity, and when confronted with the information, the Douglas officials admitted that the French test pilot had been aboard the plane. As the Chemidlin story appeared in newspapers across the country, everyone began to ask the same question. What was a member of the French air mission doing on the experimental bomber?

The crash on 23 January was just what congressional isolationists needed in order to attack the administration, because it was now public knowledge that the executive branch was not being neutral but was assisting the French by granting them special privileges. Isolationist Senator Bennett C. Clark of Missouri had been informed of the presence and activities of the French mission by Secretary Woodring prior to the crash, but he could not mention it publicly without revealing the source of his information. The secrecy that surrounded the French mission prior to 23 January was so tight that not only were newspapermen unaware of it, but even Secretary of State Hull had no knowledge of its activities.

Three days after the crash, at a secret hearing before the Senate Military Affairs Committee, General Arnold, who had been testifying in regard to Air Corps needs for the following year, was placed on the hot seat by Senator Clark, who was quite upset that President Roosevelt had ignored the advice of the War Department and had permitted the French to test the Douglas bomber. During the course of the discussion, Clark turned from the subject at hand and asked why a French aviation expert was on the secret bomber that crashed. Arnold replied: “He was out there under the direction of the Treasury Department, with a view of looking into possible purchase of airplanes by the French mission.” The Air Corps Chief then explained that while the visit was under the direction of the Treasury Department, the actual authorization had come from the War Department. After asking Arnold questions whose essence was “Does the Secretary of the Treasury run the Air Corps?” and “Does he give orders about Air Corps procurement?,” Senator Clark asked that the committee call Secretary Morgenthau to appear before it, so that he might explain “what the Treasury Department had to do with authorizing the disclosure to any government, however friendly, of American military secrets.”

On the following day, 27 January, Morgenthau and Woodring testified before the committee. Morgenthau told the group that the President had desired that the French be given access to the Douglas bomber, and when informed of this decision, the Secretary of War had directed General Arnold to send the authorization for inspection. When Woodring was asked whether the War Department had declined or discouraged the efforts to make the secret plane available to the French, he tried to side-step the issue.
by saying that all considerations had been discussed. However, in the gruel­
ing questioning that followed, Woodring revealed that he and his military
advisers had opposed the plan.71

The testimony of Morgenthau and Woodring, which revealed that
President Roosevelt had been the man responsible for making the secret
bomber available to the French, caused considerable alarm among a number
of members of the Senate Military Affairs Committee; thus, they asked their
chairman, Morris Sheppard of Texas, to approach the President to get his
side of the story. After visiting Roosevelt, Sheppard reported back that
“there was absolutely nothing to worry about”; but one pessimistic member
stated that if the President was that convincing, then perhaps the entire
committee should go to talk to him. To this proposal Senator Sheppard re­
plied, “That’s just what you ought to do”—and that is exactly what they did.72

On 31 January the entire Senate Military Affairs Committee went to the
White House for a private conference with President Roosevelt. At that
meeting, the President surprised and alarmed a number of Senators when,
after discussing the menace that Hitler presented to Europe and the world,
he said, “Our first line of defense is in France.”73 He claimed that France
could not be permitted to fall, because if it did, England would be next;
and if England fell, Germany could then turn her attention to the world
sphere. “Therefore,” he continued, “it is to our interest to do what we can
to help the French and British maintain their independence.” The President
then vowed that he would send to the two nations anything and every­
thing that they could pay for. When asked if such a policy was unneutral,
Roosevelt replied, “Yes it might be called that,” but it was necessary, “be­
cause self-protection is part of the American policy.”74 When asked who
had actually authorized the French mission to see the Douglas bomber, the
President answered:

You need not worry about who authorized that order. . . . I am frankly
hoping that the French will be able to get the fastest pursuit planes . . . and the
best bombers they can buy in this country. It is not a question of secrecy. We
have just one secret, and that is the question of a bombsight and that has not
been disclosed to the French and won’t. And I hope to God they get the planes
and get them fast and get them over there in France. It may mean the saving of
our civilization.75

To the isolationist Senators present at the White House conference the
President’s remarks were cause for real alarm. Instead of being convinced
that they should curtail their current investigation and support the sale of
planes to France, they felt that the President was pursuing a policy that was
unwise and dangerous. They considered it unwise because it would take
out of the country many airplanes and other valuable military supplies that might ultimately be needed by the United States Army, and they considered it dangerous because such sales might draw the country into a European conflict, much as they had during World War I.\textsuperscript{76}

Although the Senators who attended the 31 January meeting had pledged themselves to secrecy, that pledge was immediately broken by a few isolationists who were convinced that the President’s policy would lead the nation into war. On 1 February the \textit{New York Times} reported that President Roosevelt had told the conferees “to regard France as the actual frontier of America in an apparently inevitable showdown between democracies and dictatorships.”\textsuperscript{77} Immediately, there developed widespread criticism of what was called an extension of the American frontier to the Rhine-land. The reaction to the President’s alleged statement became so bitter that, on 3 February, Roosevelt called a news conference and branded as a “deliberate lie” the claims that he had said anything to the effect that the Rhine was the United States frontier.\textsuperscript{78}

The isolationist Senators had forced the President to back down publicly on his Rhine statement, but they were not through. Seeing an opportunity to embarrass him, they continued their investigation of the Douglas-bomber matter for another two weeks. During that period the Military Affairs Committee, meeting in secret session, again called on Woodring, Morgenthau, Johnson, and a number of military leaders in order to rehash the entire story of the French air mission.\textsuperscript{79} On 16 February the committee concluded its investigation and began to release portions of the testimony. Two days later the \textit{New York Times} reported that the released transcripts revealed that “President Roosevelt authorized the demonstration to the French air mission of the Douglas 7-B attack bomber . . . against the judgment and over the protests of the War Department.”\textsuperscript{80} In the weeks that followed, Roosevelt came under heavy attack for pursuing a foreign policy that was anything but neutral.

In February and early March the Monnet Mission placed orders for 555 military planes, including one hundred Douglas and one hundred Martin bombers.\textsuperscript{81} On 23 March the mission returned to France, and the controversy surrounding its presence vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

As they concerned Secretary Woodring, the events surrounding the French air mission are significant in that they reveal his determination to ensure the superiority of United States defense and his desire to be neutral in deed. He had opposed release of the Douglas bomber for two basic reasons. First, he wanted to ensure that his country had the best military planes; therefore, he did not want to “give away” to any foreign nation America’s latest aircraft. Second, he wished to live up to the spirit of the neutrality legis-
lation—something that he felt the President was not doing. Woodring did not feel that, when it came to the inspection, sale, or release of arms, ammunition, or implements of war, the War Department was “empowered, per se, to discriminate between friendly foreign governments,” a friendly foreign government being any nation not at war with the United States.

Although he was more than willing to sell military aircraft to France, Woodring felt that France had to be governed by the same rules and regulations that applied to all other nations. Therefore, he did not wish to show members of the French mission any planes that were still classified as military secrets. Since such views ran counter to those of President Roosevelt, Woodring was overruled. Even though the President was upset by Woodring’s opposition to the release of the Douglas bomber to France, the publicity that surrounded the affair after the crash on 23 January made it impossible for him to dismiss his Secretary of War without bringing the wrath of the isolationists down upon himself.

Although Woodring did all that he could to be neutral in deed, he was not neutral in thought. He was sympathetic toward the democratic nations and critical of the fascist countries, and his expression of such views was to cause him considerable difficulty in May 1938. Early in that month he used a speech before the Chamber of Commerce of the United States to criticize, and then warn, Germany, Italy, and Japan that if they continued their present aggressive policies, the Democratic nations might be forced to go to war to stop them. Woodring said: “At present the democracies are strongly pacifistic. They have not always been so. If pressed too far a wave of indignation might sweep over them that would make it extremely difficult to keep the peace.” On the next day the press carried accounts of the address under such headings as “War Secretary Warns Dictators to Beware” and “Don’t Push Democracies Too Far, Woodring Warns Germany, Italy, and Japan.” The controversy was under way. Press reaction was generally hostile, with the Secretary being criticized for “inflaming a bad situation” or confusing “an international picture which is cloudy enough.” On the floor of the House, Congressmen Roy Woodruff and Hamilton Fish condemned the Secretary’s action; even Congressman Sam D. Reynolds, a Woodring supporter and the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, called the address “ill-timed and ill-advised.” Criticism of Woodring’s speech was not limited to the United States, however, for the German and Italian Foreign Offices used their semiofficial mouthpieces, Diplomatische Korrespondenz and Giornale d’Italia, to attack it; and on 14 May, Mussolini himself replied to it by warning that in the event of war, the “totalitarian states will immediately form a bloc and march together to the end.” As usual, President Roosevelt made no comment throughout the controversy.

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tary Woodring made the speech on his own or as a trial balloon for the Chief Executive is uncertain, but one thing is clear: it got him into hot water, and from that time on, he carefully avoided making public statements, pro or con, about any foreign government.\textsuperscript{89}

Prior to the summer of 1939 Secretary Woodring encouraged foreign nations to purchase American-produced planes, arms, and military equipment. Although he did not want the War Department to become a “purchasing adviser for foreign governments,” he did want to see American war industries expanded, and he felt that the best way to bring that about was by increased foreign orders. For that reason he directed his department to do all that it could to put foreign purchasers in touch with American producers.\textsuperscript{90} Representatives from nations throughout the world, from Australia to Argentina and Belgium to Bolivia, were authorized to visit American aircraft factories, and Secretary Woodring approved the sale of any model plane to any country requesting it, as long as it was no longer classified as a military secret.\textsuperscript{91} However, when a secret was involved or when a request was made to release a certain aircraft or other weapon before the date set for its release, Woodring would refuse to back down.\textsuperscript{92} Only when the President overruled him did the Secretary of War make an exception.

By the summer of 1939, because of the threat of war in Europe, the United States government began to receive numerous requests, especially from Britain and France, for airplanes and other war supplies. On 5 July the President gave to the Army and Navy Munitions Board the task of coordinating all foreign purchases. The board established a clearance committee, whose responsibility was to gather information on all foreign orders and, after determining which orders could be filled, decide where to place the orders so that they could best promote American arms and aircraft industries. The establishment of the clearance committee did two things. First, it enabled foreign orders to be secured more quickly than ever before, since the foreign governments no longer wasted time in establishing contacts and negotiating with American producers. Second, orders were distributed to producers in a manner best calculated to build up and strengthen war industries.\textsuperscript{93} For example, if one aircraft company had been receiving more orders than it could possibly handle and another such company had been idle because of insufficient orders, the clearance committee could send any new orders for aircraft to the second plant, thereby ensuring that it would have modern equipment and trained personnel, should an emergency arise and rapid expansion be necessary.

In the early morning hours of 1 September 1939 Germany attacked Poland, and within a few days all Europe was at war. Roosevelt responded, as
required by the Neutrality Act, by applying an arms embargo on all the belligerents; however, he then called Congress into special session and, on 21 September, asked for an immediate repeal of the embargo provision. After six weeks of bitter debate his request was granted on 3 November, with the requirement that all sales of arms, ammunition, and implements of war had to be on a cash-and-carry basis. Secretary Woodring was pleased with the repeal of the embargo, because he was becoming increasingly convinced that the neutrality legislation contained certain shortcomings; thus, as early as 17 July he had written to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that “the arms embargo provision does not actually advance the cause of neutrality and may, under some conditions, serve to involve us in war rather than to accomplish its purpose of keeping us out.” Therefore, he asked for its repeal.

When repeal actually came, however, it meant something different to Secretary Woodring than it did to President Roosevelt. To the former it meant that the American arms and aircraft industries could grow and expand as a result of increased foreign orders and, therefore, be better equipped to produce for the United States Army, should war come. The President, on the other hand, saw repeal primarily as an opportunity to help Britain and France arm so that they could successfully meet the Nazi menace.

With the repeal of the arms embargo there came a new flood of orders from Britain and France for military aircraft and other implements of war; thus, on 7 November, Britain established a purchasing commission to facilitate the procurement of American goods. At about the same time, France set up a similar body, but after a few weeks the two groups agreed to merge to form the Anglo-French Purchasing Commission. With a single purchasing commission, Britain and France no longer found themselves bidding against each other for American war goods.

By the end of November it was evident that the Clearance Committee of the Army and Navy Munitions Board could not keep up with the work imposed by the increased foreign orders. Therefore, on 6 December, Roosevelt created the President's Liaison Committee to handle all foreign orders. Remembering the reluctance with which Woodring and Johnson had accepted the French air mission the year before, the President organized the committee so that neither the Secretary nor the Assistant Secretary of War had any control over foreign sales. The President chose Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau to serve as liaison between foreign purchasers and American producers. In this position Morgenthau had a tremendous responsibility, because he not only had to see that Britain and France received the implements of war that they so drastically needed, but he also had to see that the United States rearmament program did not suffer as a result of the foreign orders. This was a difficult task, and, as will be seen in chapter 12,
it was made even more difficult by increasing obstructionism on the part of the Secretary of War.

Secretary of War Woodring was vitally interested in having the United States maintain strict neutrality, because he believed that this was the only way to avoid war. He was afraid that if the country followed a partisan policy and aided the Allies, the ultimate result would be entrance into a war on their side. Therefore, Woodring did everything that he could do to see that the United States government, and especially the War Department, followed a neutral policy when dealing with all foreign governments. An examination of Woodring's actions in regard to the helium controversy, the Spanish Civil War, the March 1938 French and British air missions, and the December 1938 French air mission reveal his determination to see that all nations were treated in a fair and equal manner. He tried to make neutrality a reality.

Beginning in 1938 Woodring's desire to be entirely neutral came into conflict with the views of President Roosevelt, who made no secret of his desire to assist Britain and France. The President had come to feel that the best way to avoid war was to help the European democracies defeat Germany, so that the United States would not have to become involved. The Secretary of War, however, believed that the same ends could best be achieved by not aligning with either side. Throughout 1938 and 1939 Roosevelt and Woodring increasingly came into conflict over the issue of neutrality, but the worst was yet to come. The first six months of 1940 were to bring the controversy to a head and ultimately were to play a major role in the removal of Woodring from the secretaryship in June 1940; but before that was to transpire, Woodring was to make some additional contributions to the strengthening of the United States Army.