

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>viii</i>
Preface	<i>ix</i>
1. Reluctance	<i>1</i>
2. The Work of War	<i>32</i>
3. Women at Work	<i>61</i>
4. The Home Front	<i>86</i>
5. Rationing	<i>120</i>
6. The Farm and Ranch Front	<i>147</i>
7. Agricultural Labor	<i>189</i>
8. Military Affairs	<i>236</i>
9. Internment	<i>282</i>
10. Prisoner-of-War Camps	<i>312</i>
11. Indians in Wartime	<i>347</i>
12. War's End	<i>373</i>
Appendix of Tables	<i>401</i>
Notes	<i>407</i>
Bibliography	<i>455</i>
Index	<i>477</i>

Illustrations

1. Assembly line at Beech Aircraft assembly plant, Wichita,
Kansas | 36
2. Naval ammunition depot, Hastings, Nebraska | 40
3. Bomber repair, Tinker Field, Oklahoma | 43
4. The first all-female engine repair crew at Tinker Field,
Oklahoma | 63
5. All-female crew working on a B-25, Tinker Field,
Oklahoma | 70
6. Women mechanics working the “line” | 76
7. Servicemen and -women at the North Platte Canteen,
Nebraska | 91
8. Soldiers Recreation Center, Leavenworth, Kansas | 92
9. Schoolchildren collecting scrap, Oklahoma | 94
10. Boy Scouts collecting scrap, Lincoln, Nebraska | 96
11. Oil wells near Oklahoma City | 124
12. Milk delivery without gasoline engine power in Nebraska | 127
13. Tractor and combine, Allen County, Kansas | 164
14. Tractor-drawn combine | 166
15. Businessmen shocking grain near Lincoln, Nebraska | 198
16. Female farm laborers, Nebraska | 228
17. Training planes of British Air School pilots, Miami,
Oklahoma | 238
18. African American women headed for the Colored Recreation
Center, Junction City, Kansas | 255
19. Black service personnel at the USO Club, Lincoln, Nebraska | 257
20. POW camp near Concordia, Kansas | 315
21. Military police at Tonkawa POW camp, Oklahoma | 320
22. German POWs threshing milo, Hays, Kansas | 326
23. German POWs, Fort Robinson, Nebraska | 334
24. Indian farmer on the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation,
Oklahoma | 355

Preface

The Great Plains spreads across the vastness of ten states, or at least portions of those states. It is an amorphous region not easily identified because the boundaries change with the definition of the region. Some locate the parameters of the Great Plains by grass species. Others trace the border by annual precipitation averages. Still others use soil composition or the ninety-eighth or one hundredth meridian to locate the eastern boundary. In 1936 the federal government authorized the Great Plains Committee to survey the drought-stricken, windblown plains for the purpose of recommending socioeconomic changes, including soil conservation procedures and wise land management practices. This committee used county boundaries to identify the region. All the various identifying tools are satisfactory, but none are perfect, and only a rough uniformity links them. In all cases the boundaries ebb and flow. Given the sweep of this book, I have chosen to identify the region as one composed of ten states—North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. My definition includes scientific and environmental determinants, but I also use political boundaries for structure and manageability. Historically speaking, state boundaries make a difference, even though the borders are arbitrary geographic and political lines, because such boundaries help shape the historical developments that are unique to a specific place or region. State and regional boundaries have a powerful symbolic importance and help determine relationships among people and institutions, that is, society, the economy, and the state. Put differently, place makes a difference, and in this study place is the Great Plains. Essentially, my geographic outline of the region traces the Great Plains from the eastern boundary of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma to Dallas before meandering down to the San Antonio area, then heading northwest through Roswell, New Mexico, to Albuquerque and then north along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. For the

most part the Great Plains is a region without large cities, although I include those on the fringe of the Plains, such as Kansas City, Kansas, Omaha, Denver, Albuquerque, and Bismarck.

Although the World War II home front has an extensive national historical literature, and while some scholars have written specialized studies about cities, states, regions, and race during the war, the history of the Great Plains home front has been addressed only in piecemeal fashion. Moreover, although Gerald Nash wrote two important books on the economic history of the West during the war (*The American West Transformed* and *World War II and the West*), he excluded the Great Plains and instead focused on the Far West, that is, the Mountain and Pacific Coast West. Moreover, many studies exemplify top-down approaches, with the scholarship based on government reports, statistical compilations, and institutional policymaking. In contrast my approach has been to study the Great Plains from a grassroots perspective. In order to do so I read widely from a selection of major state and regional newspapers and conducted research in archival collections to learn about home front activities in the Great Plains.

This study emphasizes the region's social and economic history during the war years. The political history of the region during that time merits study, but the limitations of time and space precluded that analysis. Each chapter could easily be expanded into a book centered on the region, yet only in the case of the Indians have several books been written on the subject. In addition to the political history of the region during the war, more work needs to be completed on the African American and Mexican American experience and the cities and labor unions. Moreover, historians of World War II usually begin their studies with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. I start with the isolationist debate during the late 1930s and the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, which brought the Great Plains into the war in terms of mobilization, industrial production, and social change. Yet, if World War II was a "good war," the question must be asked, For whom? Certainly, the United States contributed, often single-handedly, to the destruction of political and military totalitarianism. But it was

not a good war for people of Japanese descent, nor did it substantially change working conditions for migrant agricultural workers or dramatically alter race relations between blacks and whites. Racial discrimination and rent and price gouging indicated some responses that did not conform to the all-for-one-and-one-for-all patriotic publicity of the day. Still, community projects, such as scrap drives, rationing, and practice blackouts, provided residents with shared experiences that, in turn, gave their lives a public significance that they had not experienced before as well as a sense of participation in the war effort.

In analyzing the effects of World War II on the Great Plains and the responses of the region's residents to the war on the home front, I have written a narrative history. I also have written topically within a chronological structure to enable readers to pursue a subject from the beginning of the war to the peace that followed. My approach is broad and sometimes necessarily impressionistic. It is a narrative of regional mobilization to help defend the nation and improve the lives of Great Plains residents in the process. Much of this book, then, is the story of the interaction of Great Plains men and women with the federal government and the response of the people in the region to economic and social changes wrought by the war. Certainly, the people of the Great Plains were not mere recipients of federal policies.

World War II was not transformative for the Great Plains, in contrast to the experience of the South and the Far West. It accelerated trends already apparent, such as the expansion of the aircraft industry, surplus agricultural production, and out-migration, but it did not bring revolutionary change, that is, a lasting military-industrial complex. When the war ended, much of the federal defense spending left to enhance military research, development, and building activities in the Far West, particularly California. Fundamentally, the Great Plains was an agricultural region when the war began, and it remained so at war's end. Even so, the total effect of the war on the region was, at least temporarily, significant. Military and industrial construction created boomtowns that taxed city services and mandated new attention to city planning backed with federal dollars. The aviation industry expanded rapidly, as did the number of mili-

tary bases in the region, all of which meant jobs and large payrolls, which, in turn, meant disposable income. Among the previously underemployed, white workers found multiple job opportunities, while African American and Mexican American workers confronted continued discrimination, unskilled positions, and unequal wages, conditions much like those they experienced in the South. Moreover, the war opened doors of economic opportunity for women, but many of those doors closed quickly when the war ended. Still, the people of the Great Plains had welcomed the federal government during the 1930s, so the arrival of new agencies and programs did not cause a conservative political backlash among them. They were accustomed to receiving federal dollars for various projects. World War II enabled the federal government to increase its financial support for the region even more, particularly for construction, jobs, and agricultural commodities, and residents of the Great Plains welcomed it.

My purpose has been to allow the residents of the Great Plains to speak so that we can hear their words and see the days and years through their eyes and minds. I wanted to tell the story of the daily concerns of ordinary people who have become part of the nation's World War II history. At the same time, this is neither a history of unbounded support for federal policies nor a coming-of-age saga similar to that of the Far West during the war years. It is not the history of unbridled economic and social change. It is not a story crafted in black-and-white absolutes. Certainly, the war years were a time of prosperity that provided the economic boom to lift the region from the economic morass of the Great Depression as New Deal programs had not. But in the Great Plains the war years were also a time of racism, the denial of civil liberties, and greed as well as personal self-interest to the point of selfishness and hope against hope that the wartime largesse would last. Put differently, the history of the Great Plains during World War II is the story of patriotism and bonding and perseverance in homes, towns, and cities as well as on the job, but it was not a time of unmitigated self-sacrifice and stellar personal commitment.

I am grateful for the support of many people who helped make this book possible. Travel to archival collections remains essential for

any historian even in the age of Web-based research. I could not have completed the project without a research fellowship from the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma and a fellowship from the Center for Digital History at the University of Nebraska through the Plains Humanities Alliance as well as a travel grant from the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. Iowa State University also aided my research with a Big XII Faculty Fellowship and a research grant from the Council on Scholarship in the Humanities. Purdue University provided essential travel and research support.

I am appreciative of the help that I received from the staff at the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Kansas State Historical Society, the Oklahoma Historical Society, the University of Nebraska Library, the Purdue University Library, the Iowa State University Library, the Western History Collections and the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma, the Wyoming State Archives, the Wyoming State Library, the University of Wyoming Library, the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University, and the University of Central Oklahoma Library. The interlibrary loan departments at Iowa State University and Purdue University provided timely and essential help.

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As always I am thankful for the support of my wife, Mary Ellen, who understands the historian's need for time to travel, write, and reflect.

ONE | Reluctance

World War II became the pivotal event in twentieth-century American history, after which life seemed more complex and dangerous than ever before, both at home and abroad. The political, economic, and social changes wrought by the war, such as the centralization and regulation of economic affairs from business to agriculture by the federal government, new roles for women and minorities in American life, and the world leadership of the United States, remain. Certainly, the relationship of the federal government to individuals and the way people perceive freedom and security as well as the public good changed as a result of World War II. Yet those transformations were not readily apparent during the 1930s as the nation teetered on the threshold of a new world war. Moreover, the necessity to enter the European war, once it began, and prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, was not obvious to most men and women who lived in the Great Plains. Although they would become staunch, unflinching patriots in pursuit of victory after the attack and following the declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Italy, their enthusiasm for international affairs and foreign policy that could drag the nation into war ran cold.

Indeed, the Great Plains had a well-known reputation for supporting isolationism by the time Germany, Italy, and Japan began threatening world peace during the 1930s. *Isolationism*, of course, is a slippery term, and its meaning can be less precise than apparent. For the people of the Great Plains *isolationism* meant everything from the complete withdrawal from world affairs to nonintervention-

ist internationalism that supported economic and political suasion abroad in order to aid the interests of the United States—all short of war. For others, it meant neutrality in the sense of simply not taking sides in the quarrels of other nations. Collectively, these groups can be termed *isolationist* because they wanted a foreign policy that would categorically keep the nation out of foreign conflicts.¹

Certainly, by the late 1930s the Great Plains had a reputation for being more isolationist than the rest of the nation. In this region, plains men and women frequently recalled George Washington's admonition to avoid entangling alliances, and they considered Europeans largely incapable of keeping the peace. The people of the Great Plains favored *defense*, but they could not precisely define what the term meant or the context in which it should be applied. By 1939, like most Americans, they favored a British and French victory if war came, but, unlike most Americans, they could not agree whether the United States should provide military support to ensure success because such action would be nonneutral and could easily draw the nation into the war. They believed, however, that the military should be strong enough to prevent an attack. Some even favored a fortress America approach to foreign policy in which the nation withdrew from all world affairs and became impervious to invasion. For most men and women of the Great Plains, isolationism in some degree seemed a logical solution to avoid world problems that constantly led nations to war.

The reasons for this isolationist sentiment among the people of the Great Plains are complex, and they are influenced by a host of causes such as ethnicity, education, Republican partisanship, rural residency, economics, and religious beliefs. Many farmers in North Dakota, for example, feared an internationalist foreign policy because eastern capitalists would make them an "economic goat" while earning billions from defense contracts. These farmers believed that they had been "farmed by a capitalist class" during the Great War. This strongly held opinion overshadowed any sympathy for Germany based on national or ethnic heritage. Overall, however, the people of the Great Plains were isolationist because they did not want their sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands killed or maimed

on European battlefields. Even the German-Russians favored isolationism because they hated war, not because they feared the United States would commit them to fighting against their homeland. Moreover, plains men and women were more concerned about domestic economic policy that would end the Great Depression and improve their standard of living after more than a decade of want. They preferred a federal government that would solve domestic problems rather than engage in foreign affairs.²

Comparatively speaking, the northern Great Plains states gave the strongest support to isolationism, with North Dakota arguably the most isolationist state in the region. Kansas and Nebraska followed as the next most isolationist, with South Dakota and Wyoming close behind. Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas were the least isolationist Great Plains states, with Montana somewhere in between. In the Senate and the House, then, the core area for isolationism on the Great Plains extended from North Dakota to Kansas, and party affiliation apparently had minimal effect on voting behavior, although Republicans tended to support isolationist issues more frequently than Democrats and rural people were more isolationist than urban residents.³

During the 1930s, then, the men and women who lived in the northern Great Plains expressed an overwhelming sentiment for isolationism, including the variations of noninterventionism and neutrality. By holding this belief they were little different from most Americans, who felt betrayed by the European powers at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. They adamantly believed that the United States should avoid all European disputes. Like most Americans, they favored trade with other nations, but nothing more. Few plains men and women believed that the United States had any obligation to become involved in international affairs, and certainly not foreign wars. They remained convinced that the Atlantic and Pacific oceans provided nearly all the national security the country needed. The current strength of the army and navy would provide the remaining protection against attack. They saw no reason to depend on alliances or military power to ward off potential enemies and ensure peace. Rather than worry about distant enemies and entangling al-

liances, Great Plains men and women confronted economic hardships brought by the Depression. The loss of jobs, low agricultural prices, little manufacturing, and the multiplier effects of each on the creation of want, uncertainty, and fear in daily life occupied their attention and took their energy.⁴

In 1938, when Adolph Hitler annexed Austria and occupied the Sudetenland before seizing Czechoslovakia in 1939, Great Plains residents became alarmed. Like most Americans, they responded by strongly voicing their belief that the United States should do nothing, other than declare its sympathy for the European democracies. Central Europe and Germany were far away, and Americans were safe, particularly those who lived deep in the heart of the nation. The Europeans, once again, merely savaged each other's throats, and they should be let alone to solve their own problems.

In January 1939 more than thirty teams of local businessmen in Bismarck, North Dakota, solicited funds for the relief of displaced Jews, particularly those who had been forcibly removed from Germany and Austria and released at the Polish border without adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Raising money, of course, was far different from advocating interference with Germany's policies against the Jews and expansionist designs. In May, Senator John C. Gurney from South Dakota reported that "numerous" constituents had urged him to support a strict neutrality law that would deny the president discretionary enforcement powers and prohibit "foreign entanglements." One constituent argued that the United States could not oppose Germany since Great Britain had acquired its empire by "aggression." Another wrote, "The people are looking to our congressmen to keep the U.S. out of war with Europe." South Dakotans generally believed that the United States needed to focus on solving domestic economic problems and that it did not have any business interfering in European affairs. As one Aberdeen resident observed, "We have no business in Europe. Let us mind our own business." A Gallup poll taken at the time found that Coloradoans believed that the United States again would be "played for a sucker" by Great Britain and France in another European war.⁵

Hope, of course, springs eternal. On August 30, 1939, the editor

of the *Salina Journal* in Kansas predicted that war would not come. He reasoned that Germany would not attack Poland because Italy would not support Germany. If Italy joined the fight with Hitler, he reasoned, “France would try to sever northern Italy and the British navy would decimate its cities.” Moreover, neither Russia nor Japan would support Germany against Poland, and Hitler’s advisers opposed war. Since the democracies of the world already condemned Germany for its oppressions and aggressions after Hitler took power in 1933, and since the German people now understood the danger to peace, he argued, “the chance that Germany will risk war grows less as each day passes.” At the same time, Germany’s prospects grew dimmer for seizing Danzig, the Polish Corridor, and its own lost colonies. He professed, “Everyday it appears to be just a little bit more certain that Hitler has gambled for big stakes—and lost.” A day later he wrote, “Unless the wiser and better informed Mussolini can stop him [Hitler], he will soon be in a position where his own ignominious retreat becomes the only alternative to war.” The next day, Germany invaded Poland.⁶

On September 3, the first Sunday following Germany’s invasion of Poland, and with Britain and France now in the war, ministers across the Great Plains led congregations in prayers for peace. In Texas, Governor W. Lee O’Daniel urged loyalty to President Roosevelt. He would be Americans’ “earthly guide” while they let “true patriotism reign supreme” during this time of crisis. Education officials in Texas did not think that the war would affect college enrollments. In Salina, Kansas, residents responded to the war with the belief that Britain and France must fight but that America should remain “aloof.” Yet a “depressing fatalism” seemed to weigh heavy on their minds because they feared the United States would eventually be drawn into the war, just as it had been during the last European conflict. Everyone seemed to express the desire to “keep out” and “stay out,” but all Salina residents, as well as everyone across the Great Plains, worried about the response of Italy and Russia and what it all meant for their lives.⁷

In Bismarck delegates to the national convention of the American Legion urged neutrality because the loss of American lives during

the First World War had been “fruitless.” A. D. McKinnon, the commander of the North Dakota Legion, proclaimed that war could easily be avoided because “there is no geographical or economical reason for us to go into it.” Yet this sentiment was not universal across the Great Plains. In Kearney, Nebraska, for example, members of the Cosmopolitan, Rotary, and Kiwanis clubs favored changing the Neutrality Act of 1937 to remove the embargo on the sale of arms and move to a cash-and-carry basis, provided the nation remained neutral. A poll of *Kearney Daily Hub* readers found them divided on cash-and-carry, but many reasoned that such a policy would be truly neutral because all belligerents would be treated alike. One resident spoke for many when he said, “My idea is cash on the barrel, and let them get home with it if they can.” He also advised that Americans should “keep [their] mouths and pocketbooks shut.” Even so, from Abilene, Texas, to Bismarck, North Dakota, enlistments in the army and the navy dramatically increased as the War Department began strengthening its forces and as many Great Plains men sought the excitement of serving at a time when war seemed a real possibility.⁸

Three weeks after the war began, however, Senator William J. Bulow of South Dakota reported receiving letters opposing repeal of the arms embargo by a ratio of sixteen to one. His constituents feared that repeal would lead to war, but some advocated support for Britain and France through cash-and-carry in the form of food and clothing because they favored the Allied cause and because such a policy would boost employment without risking American lives and property. Others worried that this approach would let the moneyed interests lead the nation into a world war once again. Still others contended that, with a \$40 billion national debt, largely resulting from New Deal programs during the Depression years, the country could not afford war. Not only would American entry into the conflict substantially increase the national debt; it would lead to regimentation, and even totalitarianism, at home. These critics argued that a balanced budget and attention to domestic affairs offered enough problems to keep the government busy.⁹

Soon after Germany attacked Poland, Bula Swartz of Tulsa, Oklahoma, spoke for many when she wrote to Senator Elmer Thomas,

saying, "European countries have always had their quarrels and probably will continue to have them until the end of time. America has nothing to fear from foreign invasion. . . . America's danger is from within." For her, Nazis and Communists in the United States posed the greatest threat to national security, and they had to be "weeded out." She concluded, "May the good work of the Dies committee continue." By the late 1930s, then, most Americans, Great Plains residents included, considered isolationism, or at least noninterventionism, an article of faith. Between 1935 and 1939, polls by the American Institute of Public Opinion indicated that large majorities across the nation believed that everything possible should be done to maintain neutrality. Interestingly, these polls revealed a new concept of neutrality. Most Americans now hoped that neutrality would mean restricting commerce, particularly in war materials, with belligerents instead of demanding traditional rights such as freedom of the seas, defended by diplomacy and force of arms if necessary. Although a majority of respondents sympathized with Britain and France, 71 percent of those polled in October 1939 opposed policies that risked war, and they believed that the United States had made a mistake when it entered the last conflict.¹⁰

When Germany invaded Poland, most Americans, Great Plains residents included, wanted to stay out of the war. By December, a *Fortune* survey found that residents of the northern plains remained the most opposed to war "under any circumstances," and 45 percent of those polled favored only cash-and-carry trade with the belligerents. The people of the Great Plains, however, began to split about how the nation should respond to the war. The isolationists quickly voiced opposition to the provision of aid that might commit the United States to an Allied victory, as happened, they believed, in 1917. Only a few, such as Kittie Sturdevant in Oklahoma City, advocated maximum support for Britain and France. In a letter to Senator Elmer Thomas she concluded, "Since November 11, 1918, we have only had an armistice. . . . The present affair is the breaking of that armistice on the part of Germany and the more we can do to help the Allies eliminate the Nazi mind from off the face of the earth, the more we will be serving humanity and keeping faith with the

ones we lost in France.” For her, “Germany ought to have been laid waste” during the last war rather than treated magnanimously at the Paris Peace Conference. Yet, while the isolationists of the Great Plains disagreed with her position and advocated remaining aloof from the new European war, many residents supported President Roosevelt’s incremental commitments to Britain and Russia because they still hoped against hope that the United States could remain out of the conflict.¹¹

The desire of the isolationists to remain uncommitted to the Allies had been influenced by the Nye Committee of the U.S. Senate, which in 1934 investigated the reasons for America’s entry into World War I and lambasted the Woodrow Wilson administration for committing the nation to war for economic purposes. Senator Gerald P. Nye represented North Dakota, and the findings of his committee placed the blame for America’s entry into the war on the bankers, financiers, and munitions makers who, motivated by greed, helped commit the United States to a foreign policy that inevitably led to armed conflict in order to protect their investments and guarantee enormous profits, albeit with the lives of American men. Nye arguably held stronger isolationist views than many residents of the Great Plains, but he had considerable support. On October 3, 1934, when he called war “incorporated murder” and the “makers of machinery of war the incorporates,” his words reached sympathetic ears across the region, although even his most ardent admirers must have winced at his lack of proof. Nevertheless, when the final assessment of the Nye Committee appeared in seven parts during 1935 and 1936, Great Plains residents essentially believed that it reported the truth, and they did not want the nation dragged into a new war for the selfish, economic purposes of a corporate America.¹²

In addition to shaping public opinion in the Great Plains, the Nye Committee played a major role in the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1936. This legislation expanded a similar act of the previous year that authorized the president to embargo munitions, that is, prohibit their sale or transport to belligerents, after he proclaimed that a state of war existed between them. The Neutrality Act of 1936 also prohibited loans and credits to belligerents except for ordinary com-

mercial transactions. In Nebraska Senator George Norris supported Nye and the isolationist position among Great Plains residents by saying, "We cannot take sides." Congress agreed, and the Neutrality Act received approval by a voice vote in the Senate and passage by the House 353–27.¹³

When the American First Committee organized in September 1940, Nye became a popular speaker on the organization's behalf. He advocated America for Americans and attributed war to a failure of political leadership. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor destroyed the American First Committee and ended Nye's public career; that is, he was not reelected in 1944, and political observers attributed the loss to his uncompromising isolationist position prior to Pearl Harbor. Yet, before the Japanese attack, when most Great Plains residents thought about the possibilities of a new European, not an Asian, war, many agreed with Nye's isolationist views. Moreover, when the United States entered the war, his work helped prevent the profiteering that characterized industrial mobilization during World War I. Nye served as a vocal opponent of President Roosevelt, whom he and many other isolationists in the Great Plains believed was maneuvering the country into war. Ultimately, Nye, like other Great Plains residents, supported war after the Japanese attack and the declarations of war against the United States by Germany and Italy a few days later.¹⁴

Other Great Plains leaders voiced isolationist sentiment, although not as uncompromisingly as Nye. His colleague from North Dakota, Lynn J. Frazier, who served in the U.S. Senate from 1926 through 1940, also advocated isolationism. Frazier supported international trade so long as American foreign policy did not place the nation in a position that would lead to war. He, too, like many plains men and women, believed that only trouble could come from entangling alliances, collective security commitments, and international organizations, such as the League of Nations. Moreover, he argued that military appropriations and preparedness could lead only to an international arms race that made war inevitable. In 1939, Frazier said, "In my opinion, it has largely been the example set by the United States Government that has caused the world scramble

for increased armaments on the part of all the great nations of the world.” He concluded, “We are making preparations for war.” He opposed not only military appropriations during the late 1930s but also the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 and compulsory military training in wartime, and he also advocated scrapping the army and the navy.¹⁵

Few Great Plains residents would go that far, but they agreed that the assets of the United States should be used to end the Depression, not strengthen the military. North Dakota farmers needed federal aid in the form of feed and seed loans to help overcome drought and crop failures as well as policies that would improve the agricultural economy. They did not need expenditures for battleships, armor, and munitions that would ultimately commit their sons and daughters to a foreign war. North Dakotans also agreed with Frazier that the United States had the moral responsibility to champion peace, freedom, and prosperity for all nations and that disarmament, even unilateral disarmament, offered the key to peace and security, not rearmament. Frazier also considered the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1929, also known as the Treaty of Paris, a seminal event in the history of civilization because it renounced war as an instrument of national policy and advocated settling conflicts by peaceful means. Idealistically, the Kellogg-Briand Pact made war illegal, but Frazier believed that it offered great hope for the people of the world. Frazier, like Nye, served as a strong isolationist voice from the northern Great Plains.¹⁶

To the South in Kansas, Senator Arthur Capper also advocated his own brand of isolationism, but in contrast to Nye and Frazier he considered himself an internationalist who opposed war. Capper, for example, supported reciprocal trading agreements and the Good Neighbor policy toward Latin America, but he did not want the extension of these programs to Europe or Asia. Capper’s isolationism sprang from Washington’s admonition to avoid entangling alliances and Jefferson’s embargo policy prior to the War of 1812. He opposed any buildup of the army and navy because buildup would lead to war. As Capper saw it, the country needed a military only for the defense of American shores. He agreed with the report of