

Policy Gone Wrong: U.S. Neutrality in the Spanish Civil War

“*We have made a mistake*” - Franklin D. Roosevelt’s recap of U.S Foreign Policy towards Spain.^[1]

Introduction:

In 1931, Spain established a parliamentary republic with popular and elite support. Put plainly, it was on a path of democratic modernization.^[2] Five years later, Spain would be at war with itself, marking an end to democratic reforms and a beginning of violent catastrophe. While most civil wars focus on territorial disputes or succession, the Spanish Civil War divided society and cultures. Surely, it was one of the most ideological wars in recent history. It represented a foundational clash of values: economic liberalism or conservatism; religion or atheism; democracy or fascism.^[3] The Loyalists fought for the Spanish Republic and democracy, while the Revolutionaries/Nationalists fought for authoritarianism and fascism. Broadly, the war shows how democracies “*can die from self-inflicted wounds.*”^[4]

Too often do historians minimize the importance of the Spanish Civil War. They characterize it as a pawn in the broader board of fascist uprisings.^[5] They add US-Spanish policy to a long list of appeasement episodes, overlooking its grave implications. It is true — U.S. involvement in the Spanish Civil War was messy and complicated. U.S. coverage of the war was tainted with misinformation and propaganda,^[6] making an objective analysis unfeasible and rare.^[7] Nonetheless, U.S foreign policy toward the civil war has an *instructive modern*

¹ Loewenheim, Francis L. “The Diffidence of Power—Some Notes and Reflections on the American Road to Munich.” *Rice University Studies*, 58, No. 4 (Fall), p. 78, 1972.

² Schatz, Sara. “Democracy’s Breakdown and the Rise of Fascism: The Case of the Spanish Second Republic, 1931-6.” *Social History*, vol. 26, no. 2. 145–65, 2001.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nagel, Robert F., et al. “Arming the People against Revolution.” *Claremont Review of Books*, 2021, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/arming-the-people-against-revolution/>.

⁵ Frank, Willard C. “The Spanish Civil War and the Coming of the Second World War.” *The International History Review* 9, no. 3, 368–409, 1971.

⁶ Orwell, George. “Looking Back on the Spanish War.” *The Orwell Foundation*, 28 Aug. 2018, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/looking-back-on-the-spanish-war/>.

⁷ Laski, Harold J. “The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt.” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 9, no. 3: 379–92, 1942.

significance. This essay aims to use scholarly and credible primary sources to guide one of the few discussions of U.S. policy during the Spanish Civil war.

The extent of foreign intervention shaped the outcome of the Spanish Civil War and the wider balance of global power. Unfortunately, the United States refused to get involved in the conflict, adopting a neutral posture. This made the Spanish Civil War one of FDR's most isolationist episodes. His non-intervention proved to be a tragic mistake — promoting fascists, undermining democracy, and facilitating further disruption in Europe. *Had the U.S. helped the Loyalists, Franco and fascism may not have won*. Ultimately, the failure of neutrality in the Spanish Civil War transformed the fabric of American diplomacy.

The Spanish Civil War was a test: could insurgent, fascist forces breach the core of democracy? More precisely, it was a failed test that capitulated Europe into World War II. It fused an alliance between Mussolini and Hitler — both of Franco's allies — while widening the scale and significance of fascism. Professor Allen Guttman argues that had America abandoned neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, the *Second World War* “*might well have been avoided*.”^[8]

U.S. foreign policy in the Spanish Civil War drove through a three-way street, holding consequential implications for Spain, America, and international politics at large. In today's multipolar world — with Ukraine-Russian and China-US tensions — the war must be remembered. It represents the largest and most recent conflict situated between two world wars.^[9] Moreover, it teaches important lessons about arming, public opinion on foreign policy, and appeasement. In 1940, the State Department recognized that American policy towards Spain would set “a far-reaching precedent.”^[10] For too long, though, historical literature hasn't explored the depths of this policy. This essay explores the precedent set by American non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War and the lessons to be learned.

The American Embargo:

⁸ Gutmann, Allen. “Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War.” Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

⁹ Jackson, Gabriel. “Multiple Historic Meanings of the Spanish Civil War.” *Science & Society* 68, no. 3: 272–76, 2004

¹⁰ Kunz, Josef L. “Neutrality and the European War 1939-1940.” *Michigan Law Review*, no. 5: 719–54, p. 728, 1941

On July 17, 1936, Franco and the revolutionaries launched an uprising that would soon erupt into war.^[11] Soon after, Roosevelt implemented a “moral” embargo that would unofficially prevent arms sales to either side.^[12] He believed that the war was a hazardous threat to European security and peace. In December, he also signed the Declaration of Buenos Aires, which promised to stay out of most international affairs.^[13] This was squarely in line with a widespread public sentiment of isolationism in 1936. Nonetheless, many arms dealers *challenged the moral embargo* and attempted to sell weapons to the Loyalists. In response, FDR and many other politicians considered a legal embargo.

In August 1936, many senators urged the president to assert a position of neutrality toward the civil war.^[14] Largely because of the appeal of isolationism and the fear of a Second World War, the public was in agreement. Some Americans however, resisted the Embargo, arguing that the Spanish Republic was deteriorating at the hands of the US government. As congress debated potential neutrality laws, Senator Bernard brought up some piercing points: “if the pending bill passes, Franco is going to be greatly pleased; so will Hitler and Mussolini. If we want to please and promote the forces of fascism, let us pass this bill.”^[15] While these proved to be largely correct, most senators didn’t side with Bernard. In fact, on January 7, 1937, The First Spanish Embargo Act of 1937 was passed with near *unanimity*.^[16] Roosevelt declared that the “civil strife unhappily [that] exist[ed] in Spain” warranted the unequivocal embargo.^[17]

The Spanish Republic needed weapons and resources. However, barely any of their traditional allies provided resources, putting them at a severe disadvantage. Meanwhile, the fascist revolutionaries were aided by Hitler and Mussolini, both of whom bolstered Franco’s military and weaponry. By October 1937, Basque, Cantabria, and Asturias, critical terrains held by the Republic, were attacked by German, Italian, and nationalist forces.^[18] The Loyalists were

¹¹ Doenecke, Justus D. “No Longer a Sphinx: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Spanish Civil War.” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 139–42, 2009.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Patch, Buel W. "Foreign Policy of the Roosevelt Administration." *Editorial Research Reports 1940*, vol. II, CQ Press, pp. 109-28, 1940, library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre1940082900.

¹⁴ Koppelman, Herman M. (CT). "Seventy Fifth Congress, First Sesion." Congressional Record, p. 2395 (Text from: Congressional Record Permanent Digital Collection), 1937.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 2404

¹⁶ Roosevelt, Franklin D. “Proclamation 2236—Forbidding the Export of Arms and Munitions to the Civil War in Spain.” *University of Santa Barbara American Presidency Project*, 1 May 1937.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cueva, Julio. “Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 355–69, 1938.

primarily pushed back due to a lack of reserves and weapons.^[19] In effect, they were disproportionately impaired by the embargo, as the US was the foremost supplier of aircrafts and weaponry. To that end, the American embargo pushed *the Spanish Republic closer to its death*.

FDR emboldened the aggression he aimed to prevent. After the Embargo was placed, fascist general Francisco Franco, joyously announced that:

“President Roosevelt behaved in the manner of a true gentleman. His neutrality legislation stopping the exportation of war materials to either side, the quick manner in which it was passed and carried into effect, is a gesture we nationalists shall never forget.”^[20]

One of the most important lessons of this episode is that *embargoes are by no means neutral*. While America aimed to prevent a wider war through neutrality, its inaction catalyzed greater conflict. Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, concluded that the embargo tipped the balance of the war and led the Loyalists to a horrific defeat.^[21] The Embargo was especially one-sided, given that Italy and Germany, who helped the revolutionaries, were not embargoed. In effect, they used American weapons to destroy the Spanish Republic. American foreign policy was deeply flawed not only in its method of containing conflict — neutrality — but also in maintaining a leak proof posture of neutrality.

Overall, this record of failure held significant implications for the war. Throughout 1936-37, Roosevelt never expressed a determined pro-Loyalist policy and thus, inadvertently helped Franco. The Spanish Embargo was a shift away from conventional foreign policy in which the US aided governments facing rebellion. It proved that non-interventionism would fail, especially when other foreign actors play a role in a civil war. FDR even acknowledged his mistake in his 1939 State of Union address: “Neutrality laws may operate unfairly, . . . giv[ing] aid to an aggressor and deny[ing] it to a victim.”^[22] At the beginning of WW2, FDR learned from these mistakes by aiding democracies and victims of aggression with methods short of war.

Causes of Neutrality:

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bernard, John T. (MN). "Seventy Fifth Congress, First Sesion." Congressional Record, p. 2406 (Text from: Congressional Record Permanent Digital Collection), 1937.

²¹ Ickes, Harold L. "The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes." *New York: Simon and Schuster*, 1953.

²² Roosevelt, Franklin D. "State of the Union Address 1939." *Mount Holyoke College*, 4 Jan. 1980 <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/WorldWar2/fdr.htm>. Transcript.

If American neutrality had such disastrous effects, what prompted FDR and other lawmakers to adopt such policies? The following two sections analyze the causes of this miscalculated neutrality and how to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

In 1935, FDR said America had to get its “economic house in order before we can do anything in the foreign field.”^[23] America, in essence, took the safer option of neutrality rather than protecting the Spanish Republic from ruin. The years between 1937 were a low point for Roosevelt and American policy. With the “Roosevelt recession,” failed court-packing attempts, and public disillusionment, both FDR and Democratic politicians resorted to *a cautious foreign policy*.^[24] Little did they know, this non-interventionist policy would prop up fascists and trigger a world war. Roosevelt also faced dwindling political support because of these issues. Thus, in the upcoming elections of 1936, he pursued an isolationist Spanish policy to avoid public backlash. This, however, came at the expense of international stability. He certainly understood that democracy and peace were at risk. So, had Roosevelt taken the politically hazardous route, he could have potentially prevented a Second World War through intervention.^[25] Ultimately, FDR’s policy-evaluation process demonstrates that *politically risky laws, if the best option, should be pursued*. It also sets a precedent that, for the most part, domestic affairs should be independent of foreign affairs.

The U.S. wasn’t alone with its non-intervention policy in Spain. According to Dominic Tierney, “twenty-seven nations agreed not to intervene in Spain” — most consequentially, France and Britain.^[26] France was afraid of internal divisions that could be caused by the civil war and chose neutrality. Britain also refused to support the Loyalists, adopting a broader policy of appeasement that is historically known to have failed. Meanwhile, Italy was all but neutral, providing the fascist Revolutionaries with 759 aircrafts and nearly 100,000 troops.^[27] America had its role clearcut: intervene, combat fascist aggression, and aid the Loyalists when most nations wouldn’t. Instead, *Washington succumbed to the pressure of London and Paris to stay*

²³ Farnham, Barbara Rearden. *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gutmann, Allen. “Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War.” Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

²⁶ Tierney, Dominic. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America*, Duke University Press, p. 20, 2007.

²⁷ Ibid.

neutral in the civil war. Put simply, the US used non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War as a means of improving relations with major powers. This isolationist decision wreaked havoc on global order, uniting the Axis powers and triggering conflict beyond Spain. Josephus Daniels, American Ambassador, concluded that Britain, France, and the US were responsible for Spanish crimes.^[28] The Spanish Civil War develops a clear message: countries shouldn't conform to prominent international actors, especially when the policy concerns key values such as democracy and order.

America's unsettled relations with the Spanish Republic also played a vital role in a non-interventionist posture. For one, Spanish Ambassador Laughlin for the U.S. had always been antagonistic towards the Spanish Republic. Furthermore, a previous tariff dispute in the early 30s roiled the relations between the US and liberal Spain.^[29] This seemingly small conflict almost erupted into a full-scale trade war, pitting FDR against the liberal Loyalists. When the right-wing, eventually fascist side, entered government before the civil war, Roosevelt said he was "glad to see that Spain seems to be going along all right with the change of the government."^[30] Put bluntly, Roosevelt supported the to-be fascists that would fight against the US later in WW2 due to relatively trivial economic disputes. What's more, this trade dispute must've clearly influenced FDR's refusal to support the liberal loyalists. Future lawmakers should use this as a lesson: putting aside personal and trivial economic clashes for a larger global concern can promote peace and democracy.

Another salient cause of isolationism was the *hesitancy* with a Second World War and the Spanish Civil War's role in accelerating a wider war.^[31] Right before the civil war, Roosevelt wrote that "there will be no war,"^[32] falsely predicting the outcome of the most consequential buildup to WW2. On the international scale, Roosevelt didn't believe that Mussolini, fascist leader of Italy, was a threat. In fact, Roosevelt characterized him as an "admirable Italian gentleman."^[33] There was also a similar American consensus that the negative economic effects

²⁸ Furlong, Patrick J. "Review of Sehlinger, Peter J.; Hamilton, Holman, Spokesman for Democracy: Claude G. Bowers, 1878-1958." Aug. 2001.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Roosevelt and the Lessons from the Spanish Civil War." *The Volunteer*, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 15 Dec. 2019, <https://albavolunteer.org/2019/12/roosevelt-and-the-lessons-from-the-spanish-civil-war/>.

³² Tierney, Dominic. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America*, Duke University Press, p.14, 2007.

³³ Miller, James Edward. "'That Admirable Italian Gentleman': The View from America (and from Italy)." *Diplomatic History*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 547-56, 1989.

of German rearmament would limit Hitler's fascist tendencies. Furthermore, Hitler constantly talked about his desire for peace, misleading many American leaders.^[34] Overall, these factors made FDR hesitant about the likeness of war. Furthermore, it contributed to his neutral position in the Spanish Civil War. In his Quarantine Speech, he declared that "we are adopting such measures as will minimize our risk of involvement [in the Spanish Civil War]"^[35] with no consideration to the potential World War. Had he evaluated the clear, evident growth of fascism and authoritarianism, he would realize that the Spanish Civil War could tip the balance of international stability. Perhaps then he would have abandoned neutrality and intervened in the civil war. In all, FDR's mistake teaches politicians that they must take into consideration the broader condition of international politics, as well as distinct incidents.

Political consideration, international pressure, economic dispute, and uncertainty therefore promoted a neutral position from the U.S. Each cause holds its own crucial lessons for how any nation should handle international relations in the future.

Divided Public Opinion:

The Spanish Civil War sparked the largest debate among Americans since the Versailles Treaty. Herbert Matthews's *Half of Spain Died* recounts that "No event in the outside world, before or since, aroused Americans to such... controversy and burning emotions."^[36] There was an overwhelming public outcry that the conflict in Spain could spark WW2. Thus, while America was never physically involved, the war held a sacred place in the American public.

The American tradition of a political administration sensitive to public opinion plays a key role in the story of U.S. foreign policy. Most American Catholics supported the Nationalists or Revolutionaries, asserting that the civil war was a communist war against religion.^[37] In practice, Catholics laid the groundwork for an isolationist policy that, de facto, helped the Nationalists. FDR enjoyed a new coalition of Northern Catholics as part of his voter base.^[38] In

³⁴ Rothman, Lily. "World War II Adolf Hitler October 6 1939 Speech: Phony Peace Plea." *Time*, 6 Oct. 2014, <https://time.com/3461961/hitler-peace-speech/>.

³⁵ "October 5, 1937: Quarantine Speech." *Miller Center*, 26 Apr. 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/october-5-1937-quarantine-speech>.

³⁶ Matthews, Herbert. *Half Of Spain Died; A Reappraisal Of The Spanish Civil War*. New York Times, 1, Jan. 1973.

³⁷ Crosby, Donald F. "Boston's Catholics and the Spanish Civil War: 1936-1939." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 82-100, 1971.

³⁸ Losos, Joseph, and Leo V. Kanawada. *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 98, no. 3, 1983, pp. 514-16. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150506>

fact, Roosevelt placed greater importance on Catholic voters than on foreign policy in his agenda.^[39] Thus, he prioritized catholicism, for the sake of political clout, over Spanish and global security. Harold Ickes recalled that Roosevelt and other Democrats "said frankly that to raise the embargo would mean the loss of every Catholic vote next fall and that the Democratic members of Congress...didn't want it done."^[40] Put differently, Roosevelt refused to remove the Embargo — which was causing the Republic's demise — in order to preserve his catholic voters. Catholics also supported when the Texaco Oil Company promised Franco to provide all the oil the Nationalists needed.^[41] The fascist owner, Colonel Riber, ultimately fueled the Nationalist's war industry. All such activities were legal under the embargo, as it only covered military weapons. On the whole, the Spanish Embargo certainly sparked a religious controversy. This incident holds an instructive and common theme today. *Religion shouldn't be mixed with consequential foreign policy*. While they may have been well-intentioned, most American Catholics revoked their positions when Nationalists went on to support Hitler, concentration camps, and violent atrocities between 1941-1945.

Well past the creation of the Embargo, in late 1937, a Gallup poll showed that double the amount of Americans supported the Spanish Republic as opposed to nationalists.^[42] Well-known proponents of the Republic included Albert Einstein and Helen Keller. Nevertheless, US isolationists refused to take down the Embargo.

On the flip side, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade represented a sharp defiance to a flawed U.S. foreign policy. The 2,800 men and women who volunteered to fight against Franco resembled a fresh spirit of courage and activism. However, FDR censured these brave individuals saying, "The enlistment of American citizens in either of the opposing sides in Spain is unpatriotic."^[43] Furthermore, the Justice Department even considered prosecuting those who were part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.^[44] Overall, had the U.S. adopted the courage and stance that the Brigade embodied, the outcome of the war would have profoundly changed.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Cook, Blanche W. *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

⁴¹ Tierney, Dominic. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America*, Duke University Press, 2007.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Taylor, Foster Jay. *The United States and the Spanish Civil War*. Bookman Associates New York, 1956

Covert Aid and Shifting Policy:

As international tensions kept brewing, Roosevelt and the rest of America had a change of mind. The Munich Crisis prompted Roosevelt to reevaluate Hitler's power and imperialistic tendencies. The prospects of a fascist victory also lead to rumors of intervention in Latin America. Put simply, the Spanish Civil War was thought to be a blueprint and prelude for the Latin American conflict — Germany would foment disorder, revolution, and civil wars in order to justify an intervention, just as it did with Spain.^[45] Finally, the scale of fascist intervention in Spain was at a near tipping point, and the Loyalists looked close to their fall. German and Italian bases in Basque, Spain, led America to believe that Franco would win the war. By April 1938, the nationalist drove “eastward through Teruel, reaching the Mediterranean and splitting the republic in two.”^[46] The Republic looked closer to military collapse.

Roosevelt increasingly identified with the Loyalist Cause. In a conference before his Cabinet, FDR said that his policy was mistaken. He argued that they should've helped Loyalist Spain from the beginning and fought for “democracy.”^[47] Disheartened, Roosevelt crafted a plan to privately aid the Spanish Republic. This *covert aid is incredibly hard to dissect* given, that it was never leaked to the public. For decades, historians saw indications of the US shipping American aircrafts to Spain. In April 1938, the New York Times reported that FDR planned export 200 planes to France if the French would send the planes to Spain.^[48] These planes would carry military supplies and resources. In addition, there was found to be an excess of the Spanish silver supply that ended up in the US, suggesting that the aircraft shipment went through.^[49] At the end of the day, Roosevelt was willing to put his career on the line for covert aid because it violated the Embargo act. This demonstrates how much importance he placed on a Loyalist

⁴⁵ Doenecke, Justus D. “No Longer a Sphinx: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Spanish Civil War.” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 139–42, 2009.

⁴⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. “Spanish Civil War”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 10 Jul. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-Civil-War>.

⁴⁷ Ickes, Harold L. “The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes.” *New York: Simon and Schuster*, pg. 569, 1953.

⁴⁸ Peter Wyden, *The Passionate War: The Narrative History of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39*, pg. 465, 1983.

⁴⁹ Tierney, Dominic. “Franklin D. Roosevelt and Covert Aid to the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 299–313, pg 310, 2004.

victory. By one measure, covert aid was successful — it avoided a clash with Britain, American Catholics, or the foreign policy bureaucracy. *Unfortunately, the aid was too delayed.* It proved deeply defective because the Loyalists were already on the brink of defeat — not even foreign intervention could save them.^[50]

The Spanish Republic was also experiencing mass starvation. Therefore, after the failure of covert aid in June 1938, Roosevelt and his cabinet devised a plan to send hundreds of thousands of barrels of wheat to Spain.^[51] This not only was riddled with mismanaged planning and coordination but did little to help the Loyalists militarily. FDR's cabinet also drafted a mediation document that suggested an armistice and end to the conflict. However, Franco didn't agree with the idealistic proposal. Generally, the plans to supply resources and mediate the conflict were a failure and great disappointment to Roosevelt.

In mid-December of 1938, Franco was about to make a final and decisive offensive. Franco sanctioned a major destruction that caused the collapse of the Republic's Catalonia and led to the capture of Barcelona.^[52] This was aided by German forces. *But only as the Spanish Republic was ravaged did America become more pro-loyalist.* In early 1939, over 250,000 telegrams were sent urging the embargo to be removed.^[53] "Lift the embargo week" started on January 9th and exemplified the massive pro-loyalist force in America.^[54] Roosevelt even appeared before his cabinet and mentioned that the "embargo had been a grave mistake [and that]...we would never do such a thing again."^[55]

By January and February of 1939, though, the loyalists had effectively lost, and the war was over. The need for repeal was gone. And Franco would lead with the Axis powers, kindling the Second World War. Quite simply, America was too late. Had the push for arming the Loyalists and repealing the embargo occurred sooner, perhaps the winds of the war would have changed direction. Rushed covert aid couldn't fix the irreparable harm done by U.S non-intervention.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Leslie, Stuart T. "The Formation of Foreign Public Opinion in the Spanish Civil War: Motives, Methods, and Effectiveness." 2004.

⁵² "Franco Captures Barcelona." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 9 Feb. 2010, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/franco-captures-barcelona>.

⁵³ Tierney, Dominic. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America*, Duke University Press, p. 128, 2007.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ickes, Harold L. "The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes." *New York: Simon and Schuster*; p. 569 1953.

Conclusion:

In 1944, Assistant Secretary of State Welles argued that America's stance in the Spanish Civil War "constitutes the greatest error in [U.S.] foreign policy during the past twelve years."^[56] In all, U.S. neutrality was not neutral. The embargo, by default, helped Franco and the fascist revolutionaries, who the US would have fought only a few years later. The Spanish Civil War should be added to the list of FDR's well-known policy blunders — refugee policy, treatment of Japanese Americans, and appeasement. After all, Professor Allen Guttman once again argues that had America abandoned neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War "might well have been avoided."^[57]

Today, the war ought to be remembered for its valuable lessons. *First*, nations should provide weapons only at a time when the outcome of conflict *can* be affected. In light of modern situations — the Ukraine War, NATO expansion, Ethiopian divisions, and Iran-Israel tensions — this should hold a lot of weight in foreign discussions. FDR was too late with the covert aid which never affected the outcome of the civil war. *Second*, politicians should avoid religiosity and fickle public opinion in drafting foreign policy. This is especially salient considering that racism and islamophobia shapes public opinions about troop deployments in Syria and Iraq. *Third*, neutrality, inaction, and appeasement rarely protect global security or entertain national interests. *Finally*, powerful actors must remember that the policy of arming has strategic and value-laden implications beyond just providing weaponry. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, the absence of arming shook global stability and promoted fascist forces.

As Nathan Pinsoki put it, "The fall of the Spanish Republic reminds us that history remains tragic."^[58] Hopefully, the lessons it ushered can inform today's foreign policy and forestall a tragic future.

⁵⁶ Tierney, Dominic. *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America*, Duke University Press, 2007.

⁵⁷ Gutmann, Allen. "Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War." Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

⁵⁸ Nagel, Robert F., et al. "Arming the People against Revolution." Claremont Review of Books, 2021, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/arming-the-people-against-revolution/>.

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