Those who favored American neutrality in the Second World War were treated as pariahs throughout the war years. Saddled with the label isolationists, they were termed narrow-minded, short-sighted, callous, and hopelessly gullible. Some opponents called them subversives, traitors, even Fascists and Nazis. During the war, in fact, a United States Department of Justice investigation suggested that some of the most prominent neutrality leaders, including several congressmen, had cooperated in distributing German propaganda.¹

For years after the war, most historians treated the neutralists as obstructionists to American progress. One writer characterized them as “the seminal power of the reaction against twentieth-century changes in Ameri-


The author wishes to thank LeAnn Neuleib, Otter Tail County Historical Society, for her help in locating materials; and Dr. Kenneth Smemo, Moorhead State University, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article.
can life.” Later scholars more charitably recognized that most neutralists had been no less patriotic than their opponents. Historian Wayne S. Cole presented perhaps the most balanced portrait, emphasizing that “most isolationists were not unpatriotic; most were not pro-Nazi, pro-Fascist, or pro-Axis.” Rather, he concluded, “They believed the United States could more effectively lead the world to the good life by building and sustaining democracy, freedom, and prosperity at home than it could through military involvement in foreign wars. They opposed American efforts to police the world or to rebuild the world in an American image. Many feared that involvement in foreign wars would shatter domestic reform programs at home and could destroy the very freedoms, democracy, and prosperity they were supposed to defend.” Nevertheless, the neutralist movement has never entirely emerged from the shadows. It is not a compliment today to be called an isolationist.

A fair quantity of scholarship exists concerning neutrality activities in Minnesota, one of the mainstays of the movement. As late as mid-1941, some 85 percent of the state’s residents would have voted to stay out of the war, according to a Gallup survey. Most of Minnesota’s congressional delegation and many of the high-ranking officials in state government also favored neutrality before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

These men had the support of hundreds of local leaders. One such man was Henry Nycklemoe of Fergus Falls, a small-town lawyer and aspiring politician. Nycklemoe fought vigorously for American neutrality. He made radio speeches and issued newspaper appeals for nonintervention. He corresponded with members of the America First movement, with political leaders, prominent journalists, and ordinary citizens, urging all of them to support American neutrality in “the European war.” He preserved this correspondence, a collection rich in detail about his efforts. His struggle in favor of neutrality, as traced in these papers, provides a glimpse into the grass-roots debate in Minnesota concerning the war.

NYCKLEMOE’S BACKGROUND and early experiences helped to make him a champion of neutrality. Born in 1892, he grew up in Eagle Lake Township in Otter Tail County. His father, an immigrant from Trondheim, Norway, worked in a shoe-repair shop in Ashby. Young Henry went to a country school, worked on local farms, and spent a winter at a logging camp in northern Minnesota. He eventually took the equivalent of high-school training at Northwestern College in Fergus Falls. He began teaching school in North Dakota in about 1914.

Between school terms, Nycklemoe threshed grain with traveling crews. Some of these men belonged to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and he also met members of the growing Nonpartisan League. These two movements influenced Nycklemoe’s ideas about politics and economics, including his thoughts on war. Both organizations were outspoken in opposing American involvement in World War I. After the United States entered that struggle, many members of these two groups, together with German Americans, were harassed for their opposition to the war; several were imprisoned.

When Nycklemoe returned to teaching in the fall of 1917, he was surprised by “all the hysteria, and the stories that were told about the atrocities of the Germans.” He also found “a letter for me from Uncle Sam.” Preferring to avoid the army, he and his brother arranged to enlist in the navy. Nycklemoe spent most of his service at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago and saw no combat, but he was soon “thoroughly disillusioned about our Country getting involved in the European struggle.” After his stint in the navy, he entered St. Olaf College in Northfield, graduating in 1922. While there, he took several history courses, and he later remembered one of the professors calling the Treaty of Versailles a document “built on nothing else but revenge and hatred against the Germans.” The professor also predicted, “You students are
Henry M. Nycklemoe, about 1935

going to live to see the day when that treaty is torn to shreds.”

Thus Nycklemoe’s neutralist views evolved from his early education and experiences. He had grown up in a county where the two largest ethnic groups were Norwegian Americans and German Americans. He spoke fluent Norwegian and “a smattering” of German. His natural sympathies lay with the small farmer of the Upper Midwest, who suffered in the agricultural depression that followed World War I. The economic depression of the 1930s made things even worse for the farmers and residents of small towns. Thousands of rural Minnesotans, including Nycklemoe, came to believe that the world marketplace had too much control over their lives; the United States would be better off minding its own business. Nycklemoe followed world events in newspapers and news magazines and listened to several radio commentators. Like many other midwesterners, he was suspicious of Great Britain, which he considered America’s traditional rival, an imperialistic meddler in the affairs of other nations, and a country that had failed to repay its earlier war debts to the United States.

Nycklemoe’s interests in world affairs were supplemented by his political ambitions. After graduating from St. Olaf, he completed a degree in law at the University of Minnesota. He established his practice in Fergus Falls in 1925 and joined the rising Farmer-Labor party. The young attorney was elected a municipal judge for Fergus Falls in 1928, an office he kept until 1940. In 1934 he made his first bid for Congress. His opponents in the Farmer-Labor primary for the ninth district were Richard T. Buckler and the old Nonpartisan League leader A. C. Townley. Nycklemoe carried his home county, Otter Tail, but ran behind the other candidates in the remainder of the congressional district. Buckler won a plurality of the votes in the primary, then trounced his Republican opponent in the general election.

Throughout the 1930s, Nycklemoe remained on the bench as municipal judge and continued his law practice. In 1938 he challenged Buckler a second time. Nycklemoe again carried his own county in the party primary but ran well behind the incumbent everywhere else. Meanwhile, under the Farmer-Labor alliance with the New Deal, he had served as a campaign organizer for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936. But if he hoped to enter Congress, he needed to extend his popularity beyond Otter Tail County.

TRAVEL ABROAD with his family in the fateful summer of 1939 reinforced Nycklemoe’s feelings about neutrality. After touring widely in Norway, Germany, Italy, France, and other parts of Europe, he was back in Norway when the war began in September 1939. On his return home, he spoke about his trip at a local Rotary Club gathering. When he talked about Germany, he complimented its people for their industry, sense of community, and orderly society. He was particularly impressed with the progress of German farmers, the cleanliness of the cities (he had been told that no
slums existed under Hitler’s rule), and the “wonderful highways.” He implied that criticisms of Germany were largely the result of propaganda, probably inspired by the British. He also said that the new European war was the result of the “unjust” Versailles treaty and that the German people were “solidly behind Hitler.”

No record survives of Nycklemoe’s exact words that evening. The local newspaper summarized his Rotary remarks and editorialized on them with some skepticism, noting that he had made no references to the treatment of Jews, labor, or churches. Nycklemoe later said that the paper almost called him a Nazi, and that, as a result, “I was shunned by my friends and I felt worse for my family.”

Nevertheless, Nycklemoe began to campaign actively for American neutrality early in 1940. At first, he simply wrote letters to other Farmer-Labor party figures. But after the German invasion of Norway in April, he started making public appeals. In a speech broadcast from WDAY, a radio station in Fargo, he urged listeners to support the efforts of Norwegian relief groups. He regretted the occupation of Norway but told his audience that Great Britain was as responsible as Germany for the violation of the nation’s neutrality. “It does not make any difference which of the warring factions actually precipitated the invasion of Norway,” he reasoned, “for Europe’s long history of war and strife was the real cause.”

In conclusion, he warned Americans against “drifting headlong into this war.” The United States was not prepared to fight and had “no business to become embroiled in this European conflict,” lest the oceans become “the graveyard of our young boys.” Instead, Nycklemoe advocated playing the role of the good Samaritan. The United States should “extend humanitarian, rather than military, help.”

Nycklemoe sought support for his arguments among Minnesota’s major political leaders. United States Senator Henrik Shipstead, a friend in the Farmer-Labor party, was one of the most prominent of the so-called isolationists. He also believed that American participation in World War I, “the European Campaign,” had been an error and that the Treaty of Versailles had wrongly blamed Germany for that conflict. Nycklemoe hoped to convince Shipstead to speak out against Britain as the real danger to American safety. He wrote to the senator, “There were a great number of neutrals over there [in Europe] that shared the same idea that I entertained, namely, that the Polish Corridor Dispute was a local domestic matter between Germany and Poland and that it did not concern England in the least, and that if it had not been for the interference of England, the Corridor dispute would have been settled in a friendly and amicable way between Germany and Poland.”

In addition, Nycklemoe feared that “the unneutral position of our Government in Washington” would endanger American economic interests. A German victory in Europe would leave Hitler free to retaliate against American trade, a logical reprisal if the Roosevelt administration persisted in sympathizing with England. Since “the American producer, be he a manufacturer or a farmer, is not concerned about the color, religion, or political philosophy of the consumer,” Nycklemoe argued, why risk so much by selling goods to the English? Shipstead replied cautiously, agreeing, “I am opposed to sending American boys to foreign lands to fight a foreign war.”

IN PART, Nycklemoe may have been considering his own political situation when he began to speak out. The Farmer-Labor party was in transition by 1940. Shipstead, for example, ran for reelection as a Republican that fall. Nycklemoe was seeking once again to best


Buckler in the fall congressional race. Nycklemoe's decision to buy air time on Fargo's radio station WDAY was probably part of his attempt to win more voters outside Otter Tail County. (Before 1940 he had broadcast his speeches on the Fergus Falls station, KGDE, which had a shorter range.) He may have hoped that his generous remarks about Germany and its citizens would appeal to the large German-American population within his district.13

In any event, Nycklemoe made neutrality a large part of his campaign in the party primary. In a September radio address, he reiterated that he was for "absolute neutrality." Although he supported "an adequate defense," he believed that Americans had already made the "sad mistake" of entering the last war. "And what can we expect to accomplish there now which we failed to accomplish at the time? Absolutely nothing, save and except suicides, heartaches, depressions and eventually National Bankruptcy." A neutral America, on the other hand, could act as a go-between in negotiating an armistice and afterward "help in shaping the future destiny of the troubled civilized world." On domestic issues, he followed the standard Farmer-Labor line.14

For all of his efforts, Nycklemoe again lost the party primary, this time in a four-way race. He carried his own county, as before, but ran well behind Buckler and another challenger in the rest of the district. Buckler was himself not identified as a strong isolationist, but he had opposed the passage of the 1940 Selective Service Act, the first peacetime military draft in the nation's history. Nycklemoe, of course, had opposed this as well. He must have known that President Roosevelt supported the act, and he had already complained to FDR's Minnesota campaign coordinator about not receiving "5¢ worth of work from the administration." But he again helped advance Roosevelt's reelection.15

Once FDR was safely returned to the White House, he became much more outspoken in his support for Great Britain against Germany. He asked Congress to amend the neutrality acts in order to provide financial and military aid to Britain. Calling for a program of extended credit, which came to be known as lend-lease, Roosevelt made clear his belief that the United States could no longer sit on the fence and let the rest of the world go as it would: "The future and the safety of our country and of our democracy are overwhelmingly in-

13Stuhler, Ten Men, 89; Barney J. Lavin (WDAY sales manager) to Nycklemoe, May 9, 1940, Nycklemoe Papers.
volved in events far beyond our borders," he told a national radio audience in January 1941.\footnote{“Buckler to Nycklemoe, July 25, 1941, Nycklemoe Papers; Waldo H. Heinrichs, Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Ent-}ry into World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11. In 1940 no nation had as many as fifty battleships of any age or condition.

Nycklemoe fought the lend-lease proposal vigorously. He wrote to national radio commentator H. V. Kaltenborn to criticize his "biased" reporting in favor of Britain, asking, "Do you adopt the President's remark that there is nothing wrong in lending your neighbor the hose when his house is on fire. . . . Would your answer be the same if you knew beforehand that your neighbor had set his own fire?" England, he assured Kaltenborn, had fought a war with Germany. Nycklemoe also corresponded with a number of U.S. senators and representatives from both major parties, asking them to hold fast to neutrality and forbid "sending supplies to one nation to be used for the purpose of killing the people of other nations."\footnote{“Nycklemoe to H. V. Kaltenborn, Dec. 23, 1940, Nycklemoe Papers; Nycklemoe to Senator Gerald P. Nye, Dec. 7, 1940, Nycklemoe to Senator Thomas [sic] Ball, Dec. 21, 1940—all Nycklemoe Papers.}

The neutralist took to the radio again, asking listeners to lobby against the lend-lease bill. He argued that it would be better "to declare war on the economic and social evils that beset our own country" than to aid Britain in maintaining its empire. He also condemned the 1940 "destroyer deal" with Britain, calling it "the trading of fifty battleships for the right to lease British Bases in the Western Hemisphere." A former navy man, he surely knew the difference between a battleship and a destroyer, but he insisted that the ships were indeed battleships and called the deal "a deliberate act of war" aimed at Germany. Finally, he endorsed the efforts of the midwestern senators fighting the lend-lease proposal, especially Burton K. Wheeler (Montana), Gerald P. Nye (North Dakota), Robert M. LaFollette, Jr. (Wisconsin), and Minnesota's own Shipstead.\footnote{“Nycklemoe to His Excellency the President, June 18, 1941, Nycklemoe Papers; buckler to Nycklemoe, July 25, 1941, Nycklemoe Papers; Carlisle, “Minneapolis Unit of the Committee to Defend America.” 276n23.}

But for all of their—and his—efforts, Americans were beginning to turn away from the extreme neutralist position. After a protracted and bitter debate, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941 to permit greater aid to Britain and China. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, lend-lease was extended to the Russians as well.

Nycklemoe decided to present his arguments in a letter to the president. After detailing his services in FDR's election campaigns, he turned to foreign policy and made some startling statements: "In the last war, I too was spurred on to enlist on being told of the many brutalities of the German soldiers. Sufficient to say, that argument is not being used today. In my opinion, there is a new Social Order, which is sweeping over the world, very much like your New Deal sponsored by you in 1933, and no power on earth is going to stop it. . . . It grieves me to inform you, Mr. President, that I am afraid of your foreign policy."\footnote{“Nycklemoe to Senator Gerald P. Nye, Dec. 7, 1940, Nycklemoe Papers; Waldo H. Heinrichs, Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11. In 1940 no nation had as many as fifty battleships of any age or condition.}

How Nycklemoe thought that comparing the New Deal to nazism would convince Roosevelt to see his errors is a mystery. Suggesting that no evidence existed for German brutality in Europe was equally strange,
Germany was dangerous to the United States and that the allies must therefore be given material aid. Poll results had repeatedly supported the acts taken to send such aid. In a survey conducted in late May, 80 percent of the respondents said they did not want the United States to enter the war, but, significantly, 66 percent also said that the country should intervene "if it appeared certain that there was no other way of defeating Germany and Italy." Nycklemoe would not accept this. An isolationist, he had himself become isolated from the course of events.  

But Nycklemoe still hoped to sway ordinary citizens to see the dangers he saw ahead. On September 25, 1941, he sent an appeal to newspapers across the state. Addressed to "Fellow Americans," it warned his readers, "Do not be misled by all the hysteria emanating from these so-called 100 per cent American organizations who are clamoring for intervention." He identified himself as an "ex-serviceman."  

This letter stimulated several people to respond. Some agreed with his remarks, including C. A. Gewalt of Breckenridge, who wrote: "We drove the British out of Washington once and its dam [sic] near time we were doing it again." Others disagreed. The St. Peter Herald had published Nycklemoe's letter, and the paper's printer, Francis C. Flint, responded personally. His exchanges with Nycklemoe are reproduced below almost in their entirety. Here, in the argument of two private citizens, is a summary of the debate that had divided the nation for more than a year. Flint's first letter to Nycklemoe:

The letter addressed to "Fellow Americans" and sent to certain newspapers, to me is sickening. The postal Rules & Regulations would prevent me from expressing myself as I should like to regarding those who are insipid enough to believe that the slaughter of human beings, altho in Europe, is no concern to our American people. As a matter of policy I'd damn sight rather we face a battle today—no matter at what cost—than have to prepare and fight 20 years hence; providing the G. D. Nazi[s] reach their objective of dominating all Europe, Asia, and Africa. Of course, we all arrive at conclusions differently, but it is impossible for me to fathom the gutless stand of our pacifists and do-nothingists. I also am an exService man and would go again if possible.

Nycklemoe replied immediately. Acknowledging that "different opinions will be held by our people on such a momentous issue," he refuted Flint's reasoning:

We advocate that Europe should stay out of the Western Hemisphere and by the same token we should extend to them the same privilege. In other words, we have no business to become involved. However, I
would hold nothing against you if you, as an individual, want to enlist in a foreign war, but you have no right to drag in the entire nation. It is a simple matter to go across the line into Canada and enlist in the Canadian forces.

I am sorry that I cannot share your views, but I enjoyed receiving your card.

Flint quickly replied to Nycklemoe:

Your letter arrived today. I was interested in what you had to say but never, never will I agree that you are right. When pirates and insane folk run amuck it is our business, yours and mine and all of us, to see that their depredations are brought to an end.

I suppose this question of war to us is like religion and politics are to some people—it is a matter of belief and not of reason. I'll readily admit that to me there is only one side to this war and of course that is my side. While I believe I'm quite tolerant in most matters I am not in this. I can see only that the German-Nazi war party have brought about this war as a war of revenge and they are out to slaughter, slaughter, slaughter until they command everything or else are squelched.

No doubt you have formulated other bases for your conclusions and maybe are just as correct in your opinion as I believe I am in mine. I just cannot understand the how any person can condone the overpowering of those smaller European countries and the stripping of those countries of foods and supplies to further the advancement of Germany.

I cannot believe that all the German folks are in sympathy with Hitler and his cohorts. They are in the power of the military machine and must comply with the dictator's orders—or else.

But I don't expect you to be influenced by any statements I may make nor, I am sure, will I be changed one whit by any you may make.

Possibly if we were to meet and get acquainted we could discuss many points and might get along quite amiably but never will we agree on this war question.

I am not sorry I can't share your views—I am glad I can't but even tho we may violently disagree on this point I shall try not to hold any animosity toward you, but damn—I just can't fathom your reasoning.

Nycklemoe then decided to write a complete account of his reasons for pushing for neutrality, even at the cost of German victory in Europe. He also related the story of his trip to Europe, and it is the most complete account in his own words:

I received your very interesting letter and I am just going to try to hit the highlights, so to speak, in my short answer to show you how I arrived at my convictions.

I have always been interested in our international politics. I supported Wilson in 1912–16, and I had charge of Roosevelt's campaign in this county in '32–36, and I supported him in his fight with the Supreme Court. But I simply cannot go with him on our foreign policy. In 1939, I made up my mind to take a trip to Europe. Both my wife and myself are of Norwegian parentage, and we have a great number of relatives in Norway; so I loaded the wife and three children in the car here in Fergus Falls; drove to New York; loaded the family and the car on the ship and after ten days, we arrived in Oslo. I covered about 3,000 miles in Norway. Then on July 25, I left my wife and family with her uncle at Kongsvinger, Norway, and in company with a Norwegian from Trondheim, I drove down through Sweden, ferried across into Denmark and ferried from there into Germany. I had my own car with me, and I drove wherever I wanted to—on side roads as well as the famous German Highway known as the Auto-Strada, also known as the Reich's Auto Bahn. I spent one week in Berlin, and we traveled through Leipzig and Wittenberg and Munich; then across the Brenner Pass Italy; then down through Tyrol to Milan and Genoa and along the Riviera, across to Marsailles, across into Germany at Saarbrucken; to Worms and up along the Rhine to Cologne; east again to Hanover; from there north to Hamburg; and finally to Denmark and back to Oslo, arriving in Oslo in the 22nd day of August, 1939. This was a wonderful trip, but before I left Fergus Falls, I had made up my mind that I wanted to see Germany if possible.

I can tell you now that I had no trouble in Germany. I found a thrifty, hard-working, and an industrious people. I found also that there were large tracts of light sandy soil in Germany. I observed German Farmers spreading by hand chemical fertilizers on the fields. Traveling as I did and with a smattering of German, I had an opportunity to visit and talk with all kinds of people—farmers, mechanics, wine growers, business men, and a great number of veterans from the German army. There is no question in my mind but what the German people felt very intensely that they were given a raw deal at Versailles and never again was that to happen. Another thing to bear in mind is that Poland and Germany had effected an amicable settlement of the Corridor Dispute and then the Western Powers influenced the Leaders in Poland to stand their ground against the Germans. You must bear in mind that there were 3,500,000 German people living in the so-called Polish corridor who were clamoring to rejoin the Reich. It is impossible to condone the acts of one nation towards a smaller nation, but we must also realize that war is no respector of either persons or nations.
We occupied Iceland without the consent of the natives, basing our occupation upon strategic military bases in the Western Hemisphere. The Germans drove the English out of Norway for the same reason. They did not want the English to obtain a foothold on the European continent. Upon my return in 1939, I made several talks and was severely criticized. The people here were dumb-founded to hear that the German people were solidly behind their leader, Adolf Hitler. Subsequent events must convince the most obstinate that there can be no question about that fact.

My letter is getting too lengthy, so I will have to draw it to a close. It is my candid opinion that a new social order is sweeping over Europe and the old order is passing out of the picture.

I did not see a silk hat in Germany. Rich and poor alike were compelled to register for work. Only on Saturday of last week when the Duke and Wally were arriving in St. Paul, I heard over the radio that the guests in St. Paul were still wondering what kind of dress to wear for the occasion when they were to meet the Duke and the Duchess with their retinue of servants, maids, lap dogs, etc. This is not said in a spirit of ridicule, but I believe it conveys my opinion that this old order is fast fading out of the picture.

Your name, Flint, indicates that you are either of Norwegian or Swedish ancestry, and I might add that the new order in Europe had, when we were there, a large following in the Scandinavian countries.

THIS EXCHANGE provides an interesting reflection on isolationist-interventionist differences. Flint’s approach approximates the “mad-dog” rationale for go-

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5The Duke and Duchess of Windsor passed through St. Paul en route from their ranch in Alberta, Canada, to New York. The couple received a great deal of attention while in the United States. See Philip Ziegler, King Edward VIII (New York: Knopf, 1991), 400-403.
ing to war: Hitler was incapable of civilized behavior; he and his nation were determined upon conquest; war with Germany was inevitable anyway; and it would be better for America to fight Germany now, with allies, than alone later. Other Americans who advocated war might have provided more elaborate reasons for their stand; many, including Franklin Roosevelt, did. But Flint's short remark that, under Hitler, Germany was "out to slaughter, slaughter, slaughter until they command everything or else are squelched" was a fair summary of the interventionist argument.

Statesmen have used such an argument—that their opponent is a mad, warmongering tyrant—to justify wars for centuries. But in the case of nazism, the contention seemed particularly apt. Hitler had, after all, announced in his 1925 publication, Mein Kampf, that Germany must expand into eastern Europe by means of war, must make war on France in order to avenge Versailles and gain a free hand to expand, and must eliminate all "non-Aryans," especially the Jews, from its territories. This was not the platform of a pacifist. The world would not know until after 1945, when the allies examined the Nazi archives, that Hitler had reiterated his intent on war to his military commanders in 1936 and had said on several occasions in 1939 that he would make war on Poland no matter what concessions that country might offer. By late 1941, when Flint wrote, German forces had invaded and occupied more than ten European nations, most of them neutral like Norway. Germany was at war with England and Russia, and Hitler had told his commanders that the United States must eventually be attacked.

Nycklemoe did not know much of this and ignored the rest. He chose both to refute the points made by Flint and offer his own view of the situation. By relating his visit to Germany, he attempted to counter Flint's belief that the German people must obey "or else." Nycklemoe saw Germans who were not cowering in fear of their leader. He stressed the evidence of accomplishment that had so impressed him: the good roads, productive farms, and clean cities that might have impressed many rural Americans. Nycklemoe relied on personal experience for his viewpoints: his background, his own military service, his travels. Even when he referred to the Versailles treaty and the English guarantee to Poland, he drew upon his college experience and his trip abroad as much as his reading.

His statements about the new order in Europe, however, offended many who heard or read them. Several people interpreted his remarks to mean that Nycklemoe was a full-fledged Nazi sympathizer. This is doubtful. His reference to the "silk hats" underscores his grass-roots suspicion of wealth and privilege. He applauded the National Socialist rhetoric in favor of working folk; this was his understanding of the new
order. He was naive in his belief that Hitler intended an amicable settlement with Poland, and his hope that the United States could coexist with a triumphant Hitler was, at best, debatable.  

However debatable, these points were crucial to Nycklemoe's belief that Americans could "do business" with a victorious Germany. These claims, along with the arguments expressed in the questions he had asked President Roosevelt—that war with Germany would be too dangerous, too expensive, and unnecessary to protect American interests—constituted the essence of the neutrality argument.

Nycklemoe and Flint had remained civil throughout their exchanges, despite great differences of opinion. This was not the case with others who reacted to Nycklemoe's statements. One of the most virulent letters he received came from a former officer in the Norwegian army, who signed himself "A loyal American." The writer accused him of an "open attitude for Hitlerism," concluded he was "an American traitor," and offered to "test my old marksmanship or swordsmanship against your canine carcass."  

**THE ATTACK on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 effectively ended the isolationist-interventionist debate. Nycklemoe was at the time making plans to run again for Congress on what he called the "Republican 'Isolationist' Ticket." Like many of his contemporaries, he had given little attention to the situation in the Far East. On December 10, he sent out another press statement calling for "unflinching National Unity" during the war. Nevertheless, he viewed the war as a great and unnecessary tragedy and never reconciled to American participation. In 1942 he ran as a Republican for Congress. This time he failed to win even his own county in the primary. His papers from 1942 to 1945 contain many appeals for a negotiated peace and criticisms of American war policy.**

After the war, Nycklemoe made great efforts to restore his political fortunes. He returned to Farmer-Laborism, now part of the merged Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, and achieved partial success. He was never again a contender for Congress, but he slowly mended his fences. Campaigning on domestic social issues, he won terms in the Minnesota Senate in 1955 and 1957. Retiring from politics in 1959, he continued to practice law well into his eighties.

In 1973 he looked back on his career and spoke about his campaign for neutrality. "It was hard to see those German boys come in here [as immigrants to the U.S.] and have to be sent over to fight their own blood," he told an interviewer. He recognized that his 1939 speech on his trip to Europe was the turning point in his career and poignantly wished he would have done it differently: "I should have confined myself to Norway, and Sweden and Denmark, instead of bringing Germany in." But however much an isolationist might have wished it so, Germany in 1939 could not be ignored—neither in speeches in a western Minnesota town, nor in the reality of America's place in the world.

In 1982 the ninety-year-old wrote an open letter, entitled "To: The History Students in Our Public and Private Schools," in which he reviewed a half-century of dissenion with American foreign policy. He wrote that he had condemned American involvement in Korea and Vietnam. He argued that the Vietnam conflict was a civil war in which Americans had no business and that the federal government was "trampling on the Constitution." After it had "defoliated millions of acres" and lost thousands of lives, American policy had failed to bring any peace to Asia. Likewise, American use of force in Iran and Libya was "interference in the internal affairs of other countries."

In this, his final public reflection on the subject, written six years before his death in 1988, Nycklemoe made his last appeal for peace and isolation. The United States, in his view, had paid too high a price—in lives, resources, and reputation—for its role as a world power. If World War II was in most American memories the "good war," for Henry Nycklemoe it was the beginning of a world in which he never felt truly safe.

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*"A loyal American to Nycklemoe, Nov. 28, [1941], Nycklemoe Papers.*

*"Nycklemoe to Monte Appel, Nov. 26, [1941], Nycklemoe Papers.*


*"Nycklemoe transcript, 29–30, Nycklemoe Papers.*

*"Nycklemoe, "To: The History Students," 14–18, Nycklemoe Papers.*


All illustrations are from the MHS collections.