The Internationalist's Hub: Rockefeller Funds and "Being in a Troublesome World" of the 1930s and 1940s

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Liberal internationalists in the United States and elsewhere faced new threats in the 1930s and 1940s. Various Rockefeller funds, particularly the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), had invested in the internationalist community. These monetary investments were also an ideological commitment on the part of the many officers in these organizations. They saw a world being reshaped by new technologies, new political movements, and a nagging Depression. By looking at the scope of RF supported programs that sought to understand this changing globe gives one a sense of the diverse elements internationalists saw as critical to understand if these forces were to be controlled. This led to international efforts to remake the world once World War II began.

The continued problem of the Depression brought an appreciation of how societies and individuals would react to persistent insecurity. Interestingly, this spawned studies of mass media, and the RF was particularly interested in the impact of radio, one of those forces that best exemplified the revolution remaking and shaking modern society. From the mid-1930s the RF had supported programs to understand and extend the understanding of the impact of radio, both domestic and international. Starting in 1935, the RF supported the World Wide Broadcasting Foundation (WWBF), which was conceived of as an educational venture to promote world peace and also as a means to strengthen democratic society in an era of turmoil.

This continued interest in radio by Rockefeller philanthropies, not just as a technology, but also as a social and political force at a critical historical juncture, led in a set of directions and to various investigations. Rockefeller funding should be thanked, in part, for the prominence in our imaginations of Orson Wells' Mercury Theater 1938 Halloween broadcast of the "War of the Worlds." The fictional invasion from Mars itself caused a great deal of consternation, which ginned up considerable press coverage. However, the reason why the event is as well understood as it is, owes much to the RF. Radio research was already ongoing, ironically enough in New Jersey, the beachhead for the Martian assault in the Mercury Theater's production. In 1937 the RF had funded a study based at Princeton University by Paul Lazarsfeld and collaborators such as Hadley Cantril on the impact of radio on society.

The scholars at Princeton were quick to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the Mercury Theater's broadcast. By November 1938, Cantril had worked up a plan to investigate why members of the public had responded to the broadcast as they had. Funding was eagerly extended by the General Education Board (GEB), which had already begun its own studies on the place of radio in education. It was the perfect case study to describe what Cantril and his collaborators were able to hammer out: a timely study, *The Invasion from Mars* appeared in print in 1940.[1]

The study is not only a window into social science research at the time, but also reflects public anxieties about the shrinking, unsteady world elites were already discussing. Researchers found that while many listeners did believe a Martian attack occurred, a rather large number thought the radio announcer had been duped and a terrestrial force, likely the Germans, were responsible for the assault. It was a logical conclusion considering the strong emphasis in public discourse on remarkable scientific and technical advances. It certainly seemed possible that the

United States was now vulnerable to attack by an enemy that would use frightening weapons such as the gas described in the broadcast.

The study also showed that listeners and even the researchers themselves were immersed in a world where social, economic, and political instability had become the norm. People had become used to "being in a troublesome world." Insecurity was rife and affected individuals in a number of ways. The researchers noted that panic was explicable because there had been so much talk of terrestrial conflict over the preceding year. This was coupled by the fact that after nearly a decade of Depression, Americans faced persistent economic and personal insecurity making them more prone to reaction. Although it also provides insight into the researchers who were themselves entangled in these larger national and global problems and assumed they should be critical parts of their analysis.

The work of the WWBF, Lazarsfeld, Cantril, and others, would feed into a series of programs to harness the radio for war work. The propaganda impact of the medium had long been appreciated and there was a need to understand how foes and even friends were exploiting it. The station's international reach showed the potential and peril of the technology. As war loomed, a listening post was spun off the radio research at Princeton University in 1939. There, in New Jersey, the international broadcasts of the Germans, Italians, and even the British, were transcribed and analyzed for content and intent.

Complementing this was research done at the New School for Social Research by a set of European émigrés on "Totalitarian Communication"—the way such regimes employed media. Eventually, they would provide support directly to the U.S. government as it waged its own propaganda campaign against the Axis as part of its own war strategy. There was just one case

where private efforts to understand threats to the United States were eventually absorbed into U.S. government policy.

This was tied to an increasing appreciation of the threat posed by "totalitarian" states. This new form of political organization seemed a direct threat to the liberalism to which many at the RF were committed. As the war in Europe began there was a move to institutionalize the understanding of what totalitarian regimes were, how they operated, and what they wanted. The RF took a step that seemed humble at first, but was important in the long run. Assuming the threat was permanent, the RF convened a series of discussions about collecting the right materials for scholars who explored the question of totalitarian regimes. In certain senses it was creating some of the groundwork for the research that would not only attempt to explain the Axis enemy during World War II, but would be applied to the Soviet Union, also seen as a member of the totalitarian club, during the Cold War.

World War II was not just a culmination of crises of the decade, but also an opportunity to correct the perceived mistakes in international life that had caused and perpetuated those problems. Many rushed to plan for a postwar world as soon as the war began, and the RF was at the forefront of these operations. This can seem naïve, even foolish, when the events of the six-year war are viewed retrospectively. However, in the fall and winter of 1939/1940, those who supported the Western Allies could conceive of a victory by the British and French or at least some sort of general settlement. The lessons of history were paramount here. The peace hashed out after World War I proved that a settlement had to be prepared. Many saw that peacemakers, particularly the United States, were often lacking in the resources and expertise to make the best decisions. There was a need to cultivate research and information that could be useful in making

decisions about a world after war. The RF set out to do this almost from the moment the war started, and did so through a number of programs.

Historians have long seen the importance of the RF's support to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and its "War and Peace Studies." The CFR collected an impressive roster of establishment voices and created a set of study groups that explored a wide and sometimes divergent set of topics. The "War and Peace Studies" were started with the blessing of the State Department. Hence they aimed to explicitly channel expertise into government hands. The work of the program would gain high praise from its participants and has often been seen as an important statement of how the United States aimed to shepherd the world in its direction.

However, the RF supported much more than just American work on the issue, at least in the war's first phases. What is interesting about this first phase of postwar planning is that it was international. Through the RF's Paris office the staff was able to keep tabs on European planning for peace. In the fall of 1939, an important member of the Paris office, Tracy Kittredge tracked planning efforts around the continent, including Germany and Italy. Of course, the RF itself sponsored some of the efforts. Considerable funds were granted to organizations like the Royal Institute of International Affairs (commonly called Chatham House) to explore postwar possibilities. The RF also made a concerted effort to feel out other institutions, particularly in Great Britain, that were seeking answers to the question of what was to follow.

Even the struggling League of Nations was franchised. The politically hobbled body had been attempting to revive its legitimacy through its technical work. This work, particularly work that dealt with economic subjects, had been valued by the RF. Indeed, the RF had made enormous investments in the League, particularly in health and economics. League officials, with encouragement from RF staff, sought to retask some of their economic research toward the

question of the postwar order. Generous RF funding also supported larger efforts to implement a broader plan to reform the overall structure of the League that had been laid out just as the war began in 1939.

These efforts were diverse and not solely focused on the political and diplomatic questions that would be raised by a peace settlement. The Depression haunted much thinking. The prolonged crisis was seen to have primed the conflict; having created the instability that allowed aggressive regimes to take hold or expand their reach, particularly the Nazi regime in Germany. However, the experience of the Depression had also pushed questions of social welfare and the standard of living to the fore. The questions of what was to follow the war were also about how to create societies and a liberal world economy that could not only function effectively, but deliver rising standards of living.

In perspective, this more international approach was logical. The RF had spent much of the interwar period building up international research centers in many fields. The RF regularly saw the funding of universities and institutes, particularly in Europe, as being connected to supporting organizations in the United States that were also devoted to international affairs. International relations as a field had to be global in practice. This meant that as war began, the RF's experience with many European partners allowed a sensitivity to their ability to contribute to pressing international questions. This does not mean that members of the RF staff were always fully aware of the best institutions and individuals to contribute to the discussions that they were attempting to cultivate. The head of the RF's Social Science program, Joseph Willits, place numerous calls to reliable English counterparts for suggestions of trustworthy collaborators in Britain

Of course, this first phase of postwar planning in the Allied camp was shattered by the German offensive in May 1940 and the collapse of France and with the Western alliance that had confronted Hitler. Much thinking that had prevailed had to be discarded and American primacy, already prominent in some quarters, became accepted. Institutional shake-ups occurred since some organizations could not continue the work as they hoped and others even had to flee a Nazi-dominated continent. In a story worthy of a Hollywood film of the era, the RF aided the League's economic section as it uprooted from Geneva and replanted itself in Princeton, New Jersey.

As the Germans completed their subjugation of France in June 1940 there was a fear that valuable information held by the League's technical bodies might get locked up in Switzerland. There were also fears that the League itself might be coopted by the fascist powers—fears not assuaged as the League's sitting Secretary-General, Joseph Avenol, made contacts with the emerging collaborationist regime in Vichy. Internationalists appealed to the U.S. government for aid, but Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) would not do anything overt for the League. FDR did give tacit approval to a plan hatched by a set of League officials, American academics, advocates, and RF staff to move the League offices to the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.

Avenol initially refused the appeal. Desperate, the head of the League's economic bureau sought to get the vital economic information out of Geneva. The RF offered aid to use a cutting edge information technology to do so—microfilm. The RF had seen the potential this media had to profoundly change the ways information was accessed. Enthusiasm was great for the valuable ability to scale down reams of data in a moment of crisis and quick grants were extended by the RF to get the work done in Geneva.

In the end, the economic bureau was able to bring its microfilm and data to the U.S. Avenol was compelled to resign and in August 1940 the unit was able to dash from Geneva, across France and Spain to Lisbon where members were able to catch the Pan Am Clipper to America. The RF paid for the journey and an average of $50,000 a year to keep the League's economic bureau functioning at the IAS for the duration of World War II.

The work of the CFR and other organizations continued and even took on greater importance as the United States was drawn further and further into the conflict. It was one of the initiatives from the first phase of postwar planning that survived and thrived through to the end of the conflict. As the United States entered the war, the CFR continued its studies, funneling expertise and opinion into the State Department, which had embarked on its own extensive efforts at postwar planning that increasingly became bound up with Allied war aims and grand strategy.

However, international connections remained. The League staff, brought to the U.S. in 1940, was able to contribute to discussions on the shape of the postwar world in a number of manners, including attending the CFR's study groups on the subject. It was another sign that American thinking about the post-war world was influenced by international trends and perspectives.

These international connections were the product of efforts by RF staff who were committed internationalists. The RF and GEB funds are not simply a set of sources to explain the evolution of American views of the world and the policies influenced by those views, but are a major part of the story itself. It is hard to talk about major strands of internationalism without seeing the hands of Rockefeller organizations at work. The RF and the GEB were not just tills from which entrepreneurial actors could draw funds, but important centers that initiated and

sustained a broad spectrum of action. The interrelated and interconnected nature of these studies that structured and informed American global engagement are a product of the understanding accrued by RF and GEB officers. Their commitment to a liberal strand of internationalism made them sensitive to ideologies, such as the fascism and communism, which were increasingly linked under the rubric of totalitarianism. This pushed them to understand the forces that were reshaping the world and also to aid efforts to reshape the world that would follow a global conflict.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1940.