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Book Reviews

Sarles, Ruth

A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed US Intervention in World War II

(Edited with an Introduction by Bill Kauffman). Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2003. Ixii, 238pp..

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The America First Committee was set up in September 1940 with the principle aim of keeping the United States out of war. Although the America First failed, and disbanded just days after Pearl Harbor, its story was written in 1942 by Ruth Sarles, a former researcher and lobbyist for the committee. When it was completed, the wartime climate meant that publication was not viable, and the book was shelved, until now.

The book is effectively a single volume archive, beginning with the America First Creed and the preamble to the Committee's Principles and Objectives. These are followed by original chapters describing the creation and structure of the committee, and others devoted to reprinted speeches and the winding up of the organization. New appendices describe and list the National membership, and there is a new interview from 2000 with America First National Director Robert Douglas Stuart, Jr. While this certainly makes the book an interesting resource for those researching the America First Committee, it creates a rather disjointed volume, one that adds information but offers no original overall perspective on the AFC. The only real analysis of America First comes in the lengthy introduction by Bill Kauffman. Sarles's approach only adds to the dry tone of the text, as she followed the advice of America First figurehead Charles Lindbergh who argued that "it would be a mistake to attempt too much explaining" (p.xliv). Kauffman admits in the introduction that the book "might have benefited from a dash of partisanship", and whether you agree with the aims of America First or not, he has a point. (p.xliv)

Sarles raises some interesting issues, but offers few original insights into the committee. Sarles describes America First as "the greatest *aggregate* revolt against war in history", highlighting the diversity of the committee and acknowledging that the group was not, as one opposition organization put it, a Nazi Transmission belt (p.5). Instead, it contained pacifists, socialists, isolationists, Republicans, Democrats, pro and anti New Dealers, all drawn together by a desire to keep out of war. However, this is no great revelation, and Justus Doenecke's *Storm on the Horizon*[\[1\]](#) does a more effective job of describing the "many mansions of anti-interventionism".

Kauffman's introduction raises some interesting issues but he is unable expand on them at length, such as the place of America First in the history of American peace movements and the

need to place America First in the context of anti-war history, not just anti-“Good War” history. Unfortunately, Kauffman goes too far in his description of interventionist organizations as British fronts, as these organizations were no more controlled by the British than America First was led by the Germans (xxx, xxxvi).

In the end, Kauffman admits it is “a” story, rather than “the” story of America First, describing it as a “valuable supplement” to the existing literature and this is certainly the case (xlvii). While the book offers valuable source material on the committee, it lacks both the narrative focus of Wayne Cole’s *America First*^[2], and the breadth and analysis of Doenecke’s *Storm on the Horizon*. As a result, the book will probably remain little more than an appendix to the existing historiography.

[1] Doenecke, J. *Storm on the Horizon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000)

[2] Cole, W. *America First* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953)