Mollie Panter-Downes, a British writer who wrote against American Isolationism
“Will the Americans Come In?”: British Appeals to Isolationist America, 1939-1941

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In September of 1939 the Second World War was just beginning and the fate of Great Britain was to be determined. One factor that would determine if Britain was to succeed was whether the United States, neutral and intent on staying that way, would enter the war as an ally of Great Britain. British policymakers, largely convinced propaganda efforts had succeeded in the First World War also believed this same propaganda that “duped the Americans” was responsible for the failure of American cooperation after the war.\(^1\) The primary mistake made by the British propaganda effort in World War One was that it sensationalized and for the most part depicted the war as the British against barbarism in the form of Germany; one example of this includes a wartime report, later disclosed by the British, in which a German factory was reportedly used to turn human bodies into fat. Many Americans greeted the report with outrage and the *Times-Dispatch* of Richmond, Virginia condemned “the wholesale lying on the part of

trusted governments” with a warning that future propaganda must be more clever if there was to be another war. This belief led British policymakers, propagandists, and other authors to be wary in their efforts to not repeat these same mistakes and alienate the crucial goodwill of the American public. Realizing that blatant propaganda would only defeat their aims, British authors tried to gain American empathy by reporting news stories from the home front and front line until crucial events in the year 1940 caused British writers to change their writing style to outright reflect an earnest plea for Americans to join the war.

The first step to getting America to join the war effort was deciding how the propaganda would be delivered to the United States. British policymakers knew early on their target had to be the American public; Lord Lothian, ambassador to the United States, stated the importance of public opinion in a letter to Foreign Secretary Halifax on September 28, 1939:

The American constitution with its division of coordinate powers between executive and legislature makes public opinion the decisive factor in all the more controversial matters of public policy. To an extent unknown under the parliamentary system it is public opinion as revealed in the press, the Gallup polls, the tornado of telegrams addressed to Congress and the ordinary reports of party and political whips and not the responsible view of the executive which decides…

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2 Ibid., 22.
The British, under the assumption that public opinion was a powerful force, were determined to not let this force wreck their efforts but were also persuaded that the American public could be manipulated and thus rendered effective in furthering the British goal of getting the United States to join the war effort. British politicians and academics were aware of how the advertising industry harnessed public opinion and managed to manipulate it in the commercial sphere. This manipulation of public opinion by advertising led officials to recognize that the gullibility of the American public could just as easily be manipulated in the political sphere as well. Aware of how public opinion had to be closely monitored to ensure Americans would not recognize and resent direct attempts at foreign influence, British policymakers adopted what was known as the “strategy of truth.”

This strategy intended to avoid the mistakes of World War I that caused Americans to distrust the British government’s position and objectives after the war by refraining from sensationalized or fabricated news stories. The “strategy of truth” was a strategy in which the British would report information such as war news and news from the British home front in an orchestrated manner that attempted to lead the American public to sympathize with the British and ultimately get the United States into the war in a manner that would not lead to British resentment after the war had concluded. The method behind the “strategy

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4 Brewer, *To Win the Peace*, 27.
of truth” was to present war news in a way that portrayed Britain as a country with a strong military, economy and morality. This method can clearly be seen in the letters of British writer Mollie Panter-Downes.

Mollie Panter-Downes was a British writer who wrote a monthly column for the New Yorker entitled Letter From London during the Second World War. Panter-Downes reported for the New Yorker about events on the British Home Front and the general feeling among the British people. In her letter from September 10, 1939 Panter-Downes writes, “The public at the moment is feeling like a little boy who stuffs his fingers in his ears on the Fourth of July only to discover that the cannon cracker has not gone off after all.” This letter conveys the feeling that the British people are not so much frightened by war but merely faced with the discomforts of blackouts and toting a gas mask around when leaving the home. The author maintains the feeling that morale among the British is high, which coincides with what British policymakers desired to see exhibited in war news. Panter-Downes’ letter from October 29, 1939 echoes a sense of strength among the British and suggests that the food supply in Britain is abundant. She portrays the feeling among the British people as that the war will be most likely over

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5 Ibid., 31.
by Christmas. In a letter from November 24, 1939 Panter-Downes mentions how the sinking of a Dutch vessel by the Germans ignited feelings of “rage and bitterness” among the people of Britain and how it stirred these feelings because the ship was neutral and not even among the warring nations. This letter is influential in that it is an appeal to the American public and really an embodiment of the “strategy of truth”; it reveals news from the war but it does so in a manner that presents the British as understanding and moral. The letter is an effective way of reaching out to the neutral United States and telling the American public that when a neutral country is attacked the British are repulsed and roused to anger. In a similar sentimental tone, Panter-Downes’ letter from December 22, 1939 expresses the stark contrast between the Christmas season of 1939 and the years past. Such differences in December of 1939 include the lack of midnight services for Christmas because stained windows cannot be blacked out, the lack of children in the cities, and the cancellation of the carol service at Westminster Abbey because the children have been evacuated to the countryside. This letter is above all an appeal to the American public with special attention to moral sentiment.

When the letters are combined, they are a clear demonstration of the “strategy of truth” and its approach to presenting the British as a

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7 Ibid., 21-22.
8 Ibid., 25.
9 Ibid., 31.
strong people. Each letter is a picture of Britain that is intended to create a picture in the minds of Americans about how the British are a strong and stable people. When the letters are viewed together it is much easier to see an overarching theme. The theme Panter-Downes constructs is one of a strong British population undergoing tough circumstances but still managing to remain optimistic. She allows the American public to empathize with the British plight while revealing just how strong the British still are. The letters stress similarity between the British and American cultures, and Panter-Downes is able to skillfully appeal to Americans by writing in a manner that brings insight into the American mind without directly asking for intervention.

A significant shift in writing styles can be seen in 1940 after the retreat from the beaches of Dunkirk at the end of May and the fall of France and its occupation by Nazi Germany in June. The amphibious retreat from Dunkirk, which allowed 335,000 British and French troops to escape to safety across the Channel, and the fall of France in merely two months were extremely disheartening to the British. It is no small wonder that the writing style would change from one of sensitivity to direct appeal with the German threat so greatly apparent. Starting in June 1940, British writers largely abandoned following the “strategy of truth” in favor of a straightforward plea for the United States to enter the war.

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This transformation can be seen in Mollie Panter-Downes’ *Letter From London* column starting in June of 1940. In her letter from June 15, 1940 she writes “The answer that Britons make to the new universal question, ‘Will the Americans come in?’, 11 is by no means as hopelessly negative as it would have been a short while ago.” This optimistic line is in reference to hearing President Roosevelt give a speech; it greatly differs from the style of her previous letters by describing his speech in a positive light and then leading into the question that has thus far been veiled: will the Americans join the war? Panter-Downes’ letter from July 14, 1940 does not completely return to the classic “strategy of truth” but it uses news about parents sending their children to America to gain sympathy then concludes with the line: “Britons still have faith in America and the workings of her national conscience, but they hope any such gestures will not be delayed much longer.” This letter is a sort of hybrid between the classic strategy in which Panter-Downes writes about the local news in a manner sure to gain sympathy, but it also contains a plea to Americans that they act quickly because there is not much time.

The Panter-Downes’ *Letter From London* that was written on July 21, 1940 is not as clear-cut as the others from after May and June of 1940 that emphasize an outright request. This letter begins with a charming picture of how the British look up to Roosevelt and how his speech was greeted with hope. Panter-Downes writes that the speech

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cheered the British “for what it said and for what it didn’t say—words which, however, the average Briton was gratefully certain he could read between the lines: that so long as Roosevelt was in the White house help would be forthcoming.”\textsuperscript{12} The author then writes that Roosevelt’s speech overshadowed Hitler’s speech that was largely redundant and old-fashioned in its form. This letter reflects a return to the “strategy of truth” to a degree; she does not come right out and ask once more for the Americans to join the war as she did in the last letter. Instead, Panter-Downes inserts the idea that that Britons, for the most part, see Roosevelt’s speeches as more than just superficial words to lift up the downtrodden heart. The line “the average Britain was gratefully certain he could read between the lines” indicates that the author believes help is forthcoming and certain as long as Roosevelt is in office. It also indicates to the reader that the British place their hope and complete trust in the Americans; this point is important because this allows the writer to dictate a certain amount of responsibility to the American public for the lives of the British population with regard to the expectation that the Americans will aid the British as needed. The aim of the letter is to encourage Americans to send that help as soon as possible undoubtedly but the author knows as well as anyone that a constant plea to the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Mollie Panter-Downes to New Yorker, London, July 21, 1940, in \textit{Letter From England} (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1940), 190-191.}
American public would be ineffective and may in fact spark the opposite reaction.

One thing the letter from July 21 does that is similar to the letters before May and June of 1940 is that it does not focus on how Americans should join the war or even attempt to gain their sympathy. The majority of the letter rather focuses on how strong the British citizen still is and how successful the Royal Air Force have been in their most recent raids. The next letter from August 4, 1940 is a similar continuation of the letter from July 21 with an emphasis on the success of the Royal Air Force but the last line of the letter is the most interesting. Panter-Downes writes, “All classes seem to feel that the United States is already spiritually in the war, and that Japan, without firing a shot at England, has declared for the Axis combination.”13 The appeal in this letter from Panter-Downes is aimed at the notion that there is so much commonality between the United States and Britain that they are already in the war together and it is only a matter of time before the United States makes a formal declaration of war; suggesting that America is spiritually in the war invites the reader to imagine that most Americans morally support the war and it invites the reader to ponder the notion of actually joining the war. In Panter-Downes’ letter from June 1, 1941, she writes,

The minority, which still likes its declarations of war cut and dried in the old, now demoded way, was disappointed that the President had not announced a definite, immediate program

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involving convoys. The vast majority, however, believed that reassurance on this point could be read into his firm promise to get the goods here by any means and in spite of any intimidation. British admiration is profound for the Roosevelt sense of strategic timing, which the people here regard as second to none, not barring Hitler’s.\textsuperscript{14}

While this letter at first indicates that Roosevelt did not outright declare war as some British if not all British hoped, it surprisingly supports Panter-Downes’ strategy by compounding on the idea that the American public is allied at least in heart with the British. By suggesting that most of Britain sees President Roosevelt in a righteous light, understands the United States to support the British war effort, and that America’s timing is superior, Panter-Downes asserts that everything Roosevelt and America do remains the right decision. By suggesting that America’s timing is right and true, Panter-Downes is able to influence the American public by supporting them while at the same time cleverly planting the idea that the next step is a “cut and dried” declaration of war. Her letters are extremely effective in appealing to the reader if they are read in succession mostly due to the fact that she makes appeals, some subtle and others forthright, that complement each other and work together to form a cohesive opinion supporting the British war effort and suggesting that America’s next step should be a move to formally ally itself with Great Britain. By June of 1940, her letters had developed from simply news about the happenings around London and now formed a strong

\textsuperscript{14} Panter-Downes, \textit{London War Notes}, June 1, 1941, 151.
appeal that was no longer disguised but directly approached the American people with a strong request that they enter the war on the side of Britain.

The change in urgency and approach that accompanied British appeals to the American public after mid-1940 can also be seen in the private correspondence from British citizens to their friends in America. Before the fall of France and the retreat from Dunkirk, there is undoubtedly a feeling of anxiety among the British, but the feeling is unparalleled when compared to the feeling found in letters after May and June of 1940. One letter from an English author to an American magazine on April 20, 1940 communicates the feeling of anxiety among the British but lacks the urgency of later letters; the author writes, “Daily life here is what? Damned dull for those who are not in the greater excitements—and there are many of us. That is to say, we feed on headlines, get drunk on them and suffer correspondingly from hangover. War is awfully dull, when it is not beastly.”15 This author’s letter suggests that their life and many others they know is obsessed with the headlines, but the author feels that the average Briton takes the news they receive and worries too much about it. This letter seems to suggest that the lack of normalcy has caused Britons to worry too much about the war; the

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author entirely excludes any sort of appeal for help from America or even a sense that it is desired.

Letters after May and June of 1940 further reflect the change that altered the entire mindset of the British people and reinforced the feeling that American help was needed. In a June 1940 letter from Alec Waugh, an English author who had recently returned with the British expeditionary force from Flanders, to his publisher and friend, John Farrar, in New York City, he writes about the changes that have come about in the most recent weeks. Waugh writes,

Seven weeks ago. It seems incredible now that I could ever have written to you in such a strain. It seems incredible now that not only I but the whole country could have awaited for the long threatened spring offensive in a spirit of such completely complacent confidence. For we did. There is no doubt of that. There was not the least sign anywhere of anxiety.16

In this letter, Waugh is describing how just seven weeks prior he had written to his friend about how happy life was in London even in the midst of war but recent events have proven to him that this happiness is now over. Later in the letter he describes how London is no safer than the frontline he faced in Flanders when he had been fighting against the Germans. His letter is really a perfect example of the change that came about in the months of May and June 1940 not in just a purely military sense but more so in the change in morale of the nation. The fall of an

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ally and the greatness of German success in its blitzkrieg offensive completely transformed a nation from one of high morale and strong faith in its security to one worried that at any time the Germans could attack or invade their home. Another letter from a British commander to a friend in America from July 9, 1940 further emphasizes the change that accompanied the mindset of the British when he states, “One certainly does need courage in these days; not so much the physical kind in action—that is easy—but the sort that can see victory and a successful peace in this hell-stricken chaos which was Europe.”¹⁷

Although the British strategically employed their propaganda with the initial approach of reporting their version of the news, this appeared to render no results by 1940 and writers began to alter their writing styles to form a more outright plea for Americans to join the war after events in the spring and summer of 1940. While the effects of the correspondence between Great Britain and the American public may have had far-reaching impact on the minds of Americans, the fact that they did not come together and produce a decisive result is evident. Their propaganda effort failed to truly succeed in getting the American public to pull together and strongly push their representatives and senators towards declaring war. An interesting aspect of Mollie Panter-Downes’ letter from August 4, 1940, in which she writes, “All classes seem to feel

¹⁷ From a Commander on a British Cruiser to a Friend in America, July 9, 1940, in War Letters From Britain, ed. Diana Forbes-Robertson and Roger W. Straus (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1941), 75.
that the United States is already spiritually in the war, and that Japan, without firing a shot at England, has declared for the Axis combination”, is that she considered America to be already be spiritually in the war, an assumption proved to be historically untrue.18 Ironically, it is Japan’s shot at the United States, in the form of the attack at Pearl Harbor, which would truly be the event that thrust the Americans spiritually into the war. No amount of emotional, moral, or spiritual appeal from a letter or radio program can compare to the effect the surprise attack on December 7, 1941 had on the nation. The United States was determined to stay neutral for as long as possible and although Lord Lothian died in December of 1940 and was not alive to see the United States enter the war, he accurately predicted America’s actions when he said, “the United States, like all other nations, will only act when its own vital interests—which include its ideas—are menaced.”19

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18 Panter-Downes, Letter From England, August 4, 1940, 210-211.