



*JOHN T. BERNARD and daughter
Marie*

“I STOOD. Tense, nervous, I cried at the top of my voice . . . ‘Mr. Speaker, I object!’ [William B.] Bankhead looked at me with murder in his eyes refusing to recognize me. I shouted again, ‘Mr. Speaker, I object.’ Still he refused to recognize. Again I objected and again four times.”¹

By thus confronting the formidable presiding officer on January 6, 1937, Congressman John Toussaint Bernard of the Eighth District of northeastern Minnesota began his first and only term in the United States House of Representatives. Although he knew this outburst was considered unbecoming to a freshman congressman, Bernard held convictions that would not allow him to accept the attempt of the speaker of the House to hurry through the unanimous-consent resolution in question. That resolution would have permitted the measure on the floor—a “neutrality” measure to prohibit the sale of munitions to either the republican Loyalist or the challenging rebel Fascist factions in the civil war that had been ravaging Spain for the six months since July, 1936—to be considered and voted upon without first being submitted to committee for debate.

Later on the same day, January 6, Bernard further jeopardized his career by voting against the arms embargo resolution. It had been urgently forwarded to Congress by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, passed unanimously by the Senate, and, despite Bernard’s opposition, was to pass 431 votes to 1 in the House. In part because of the delay caused by Bernard’s objection, the Spanish ship “Mar Cantábrico,” carrying some \$2,775,000 worth of munitions bound for the Loyalist forces in Spain, sped unimpeded out of New York harbor. Its coast guard “escort,” instructed to return the ship to port upon notification of the passage of the Embargo Act, turned back helplessly at the three-mile limit as the vessel crossed into international waters.²

It was not until 1940, the year after World War II began in Europe, that popular opinion came to support Bernard’s repudiation of isolationist foreign policy and to call for aid in matériel for the Allied cause. By that time, however, Bernard’s career in the House had been cut short by his votes which sepa-

THE ONE MAN WHO VOTED “NAY”

The Story of John T. Bernard’s Quarrel with American Foreign Policy, 1937–1939

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¹ John T. Bernard, “The Vote,” in *The People Together: A Century Speaks*, 39 (Minneapolis, 1958).

² Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 338 (New York, 1961).

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rated him from his colleagues on both sides of the political aisle, and he was marked for the rest of his career with the stigma of his lone and controversial stand in the first days of the Seventy-fifth Congress.

Quite likely, John Bernard's experiences before entering the halls of Congress destined him to be something of a maverick. His background and interests certainly were catholic, more so than those of most of the midwesterners he represented in Congress. Bernard was born on March 6, 1893, in Bastia on the French island of Corsica, where his political ideas were apparently formed at an early age. When he was only seven, for instance, he marched in the local May Day parade honoring labor and joined French workers in singing the "Internationale." This was an expression, he later maintained, not of communism but of freedom for the laboring man. Bernard's father emigrated to Eveleth, Minnesota, in 1900, and the future congressman's mother and sister followed in 1905. By the time fourteen-year-old John left the care of his grandmother and joined his parents in 1907, he "clearly understood that workers the world over must band together for their own well-being and protection." In 1916 Bernard served for six months on the Mexican border, and then during World War I he served with United States forces in France where he met a French girl, Josephine Dinois. In 1928 he traveled to France again and married Mademoiselle Dinois.³

Bernard's roots were clearly European, but he was nurtured on Minnesota's Iron Range. There he became an active organizer in labor's cause. First employed as an iron miner (1910-1916) and then as a fireman (1920-1936), he served two terms as the first president of the Governor Olson Local of the International Association of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers and joined the International Association of Firefighters. "My work with miners," he later recalled, "was the natural course for me to take."⁴

Personally, Bernard was both romantic and realist. He had a good enough baritone voice to aspire at one point to a career in opera. After spending a summer studying in New York, however, he realized that he could not financially afford the years of work necessary to have even a chance of joining the Metropolitan Opera, so he was forced to give up his dream. Next to music, Bernard loved the poetry of his homeland and delighted in reciting the delicately poignant verse of the French Romantics, Alfred de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine. This literary penchant was apparently acquired early in life when, with other youngsters in Corsica, he read the works of Victor Hugo, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Henri Barbusse, and Jules Payot. Largely self-educated, Bernard was proud of his extensive library in later years and en-

joyed arguing the playwrighting merits of France's Jean Baptiste Racine over England's William Shakespeare.⁵

Bernard had political interests as well. As a working man who allied with labor's cause, he held political convictions in the tradition of the elder Charles Lindbergh and clearly in step with Governor Floyd B. Olson whose Farmer-Labor party reached high tide in Minnesota in the 1930s. Bernard organized the first Farmer-Labor club in Eveleth, served eight years as its chairman, and led the St. Louis County Farmer-Labor Association for two terms. Any thought of a career in politics seemed to vanish, though, when he failed to get the Farmer-Labor party's endorsement for railroad and warehouse commissioner in 1936.⁶

In that same year, however, former Congressman-at-large Francis H. Shoemaker decided to run in the Eighth District's Farmer-Labor primary — a move that unexpectedly opened the door of politics to Bernard. Shoemaker had been sentenced to a year and a day in Leavenworth, Kansas, penitentiary for "sending defamatory material [his own newspaper] through the mail." He had also been arrested twice in Washington, D.C., for slugging a neighbor (in a dispute over the latter's radio) and also a cab driver. In Minneapolis he had been arrested for reckless driving and disorderly conduct during the truckers' strike of 1934. In view of his record, party leaders thought it was highly unlikely that Shoemaker's candidacy would be sufficiently appealing to defeat the Republican incumbent, William Pittenger, in the general election.⁷

³ John T. Bernard to Barbara Stuhler, March 25, 1970 (workers quote) (letter in possession of author and hereafter cited as Bernard Letter); Nathan Cohen, "From Iron Ore Mining Pits to Nation's Congress — John T. Bernard," *Duluth News-Tribune*, November 8, 1936, p. 1, 12. In the same article, Bernard was asked about his singing of the "Internationale." He replied, "Do you think the 'Internationale' started with the Russians? That is silly. The Frenchmen sang it long before Lenin or any of the Soviets ever thought of a revolution. That song was the battle cry of freedom for the French workers. . . . It has nothing to do with communism."

⁴ Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970 (quote). The most complete information about Bernard's life may be found in the Bernard Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society. See especially, *America Salutes Our Champion of the New Deal*, published by the Eighth District Farmer-Labor Committee (Duluth, 1938).

⁵ John O'Donnell, "Minnesota's New Baritone," in *Saturday Evening Post*, March 13, 1937, p. 18, 67; Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970.

⁶ Undated clipping from *Eveleth News* and biographical sketch, both in Bernard Papers.

⁷ Sister Mary R. Lorentz, "Henrik Shipstead, Minnesota Independent, 1923-1946," Ph.D. thesis, 1963, p. 45 (quote). The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. In 1933, all Minnesota congressmen were elected at large.

Casting about for someone to contest Shoemaker in the Farmer-Labor primary scheduled for June 15, 1936, a young Eveleth attorney, Morris Greenberg, approached John Bernard for the job. Bernard tried to fend off Greenberg, saying that he had never made a speech and had no money. Greenberg, however, persisted and suggested that they solicit Governor Olson's counsel. Olson left no doubt about how he felt. He pulled two \$100 bills from his pocket and handed them to Bernard so that he could pay the \$100 filing fee and have another \$100 to start his campaign.⁸

The announcement of Bernard's candidacy upset Shoemaker, and he tried to bribe the newcomer not to run. The bribe was Shoemaker's father's watch! Pittenger, the Republican opponent, was so appalled at the possibility of a Shoemaker victory in the Farmer-Labor primary that he even contributed, through a third person, to Bernard's campaign. Bernard gained confidence as the campaign proceeded and, after a tough battle, defeated Shoemaker in the primary by just over 2,000 votes. Then, in October, the state

⁸ Barbara Stuhler interview with Morris H. Greenberg, campaign manager and fund raiser for Bernard's first campaign, on May 9, 1969.

⁹ Interview with Greenberg, May 9, 1969; Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1937, p. 196, 383; *New York Times*, October 4, 1936, p. 1; *Duluth News-Tribune*, November 8, 1936, p. 1 (quote); *Saturday Evening Post*, March 13, 1937, p. 69. See also Arthur Naftalin, "A History of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota," Ph.D. thesis, 1948, p. 325-329. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

¹⁰ All material about the Spanish civil war is taken from the excellent volume by Thomas (see footnote 2).

Democratic committee—in a move to aid Roosevelt's election—withdrew its nominees for governor, senator, and Eighth District congressman and thereby effected a coalition of the Farmer-Labor and Democratic parties. This new combination of previously contending forces, coupled with Roosevelt's presidential sweep, helped Bernard win over Pittenger in the 1936 general election by a margin of 16,000 votes. With optimism, but minus his wife, his daughter Marie, and the sideburns which had characterized his campaign (he told reporters that he had clipped them because he "looked too much like an aristocrat"), Bernard arrived in Washington. He took a second-story room in a boarding house across the street from the House Office Building.⁹

WHEN BERNARD entered the House of Representatives in January, 1937, the issue of United States policy vis-à-vis the belligerents in the Spanish civil war was before the neutrality-minded Congress. Some background is necessary here. In 1931 the last of the Bourbon monarchs, Alfonso XIII, had been driven out of Spain and a democratic government elected. The ill-fated republic had attempted liberal reforms which diminished the power of the Catholic church and secularized education, but the government was consequently unpopular with the church, the army, and the aristocracy. As the world economic depression of the 1930s began to infect Spain, dissatisfaction spread, and the time for revolution—a revolution to re-establish conservative rule—seemed ripe. Then, in 1936, the liberal government was assaulted by Fascist forces led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco. Dictators Adolf Hitler of Germany and Benito Mussolini of Italy, hopeful that Spain would be neutral or would support their ambitions, jumped into the fray, eagerly providing weapons and matériel to help the rebels. In time the destitute liberal Loyalists were aided by the Soviet Union and sympathizers from other nations, including Americans who volunteered their services, and for three years—until the Franco victory in 1939—Spain was a microcosm of the conflict of nations that would engulf the world.¹⁰

But in January, 1937, the American people were decidedly isolationist. They were convinced by the revisionist argument, most notably popularized by Senator Gerald P. Nye's investigating committee, that the nation's involvement in World War I had been motivated not by idealism but by a conspiracy of profiteers. People were in no mood to support either side in this new threat to neutrality. So great was America's fear of becoming embroiled in another "foreign" war that a resolution was drafted by the State Department—with the full approval of President Roosevelt—going

HEAR CONGRESSMAN JOHN T. BERNARD

OF THE EIGHTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
Director of Steel Workers' Organizing Committee of Iron Ranges

BIG C. I. O.

MASS MEETING

Ironton Village Hall
FRIDAY, JUNE 11

7:30 P. M.

FIND OUT---

What rights you have under the Wagner Law.

Why you should join the C. I. O.

What benefits you will gain by joining the C. I. O.

About the strike in Republic Steel Mills

BE WISE! ORGANIZE THE C. I. O. WAY!

 By Steel Workers Organizing Committee of the C. I. O.

BERNARD'S
work for the
CIO on the
Iron Range
cost him AFL
support in the
1938 election.
This handbill
advertised one
of his speaking
engagements.

beyond the Neutrality Act of 1936, which had outlawed only the sale of arms to belligerent nations, to include the sale of arms to parties engaged in domestic conflict, in this case specifically to Spain. The sale of "arms, ammunition, or implements of war" to other countries for transshipment to Spain was also forbidden. In drafting this measure, the Roosevelt administration reversed the established law of nations which permitted munitions to be sold to established governments faced with civil insurrections.¹¹

When Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Representative Sam McReynolds of Tennessee hurriedly introduced resolutions proposing the Spanish embargo to the Seventy-fifth Congress, John T. Bernard refused to concur in the unanimous-consent procedure to limit debate on the measure. That exchange, as reported in the *Congressional Record*, went like this:

The SPEAKER . . . Is there objection? (After a pause) The Chair hears none, and it is so ordered.

Mr. BERNARD. Mr. Speaker, I object.

Mr. BOILEAU. Mr. Speaker, a point of order.

The SPEAKER. The gentleman will state the point of order.

Mr. BOILEAU. I may state that the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. BERNARD) was on his feet and tried two or three times to gain the attention of the Speaker and to object. I am sure the Speaker did not see the gentleman from Minnesota, but he was on his feet attempting to make objection. I therefore request the Speaker to give further consideration to the gentleman's wishes in this respect.

Mr. McREYNOLDS. I think the gentleman's objection came too late.

Mr. BERNARD. Mr. Speaker, I objected four times.

Mr. McREYNOLDS. I understood the Chair had already ruled.

The SPEAKER. Does the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. BERNARD) state to the Chair that he was on his feet objecting to the unanimous-consent request?

Mr. BERNARD. Mr. Speaker, I objected four times.

The SPEAKER. Was the gentleman on his feet when the Chair put the unanimous-consent request?

Mr. BERNARD. I objected, yes.

The SPEAKER. Objection is heard to the unanimous-consent request.¹²

Following this interchange, Speaker William B. Bankhead of Alabama recessed the House and, according to newspaper accounts, asked the new Minnesota

congressman the reason for his objection. Bankhead explained that the unanimous-consent request did not eliminate debate or the possibility of amendment from the floor. Bernard stood his ground, however, and the House Rules Committee was forced to adopt a special—and more liberal—rule specifically permitting amendments and allowing one hour for general debate and five minutes per member on any amendments. As a consequence, the debate prolonged House action until late in the afternoon and (as already mentioned) enabled one ship to set sail for Spain bearing arms for the Spanish Loyalists. When the roll call was finally taken on the measure, the tabulation was 431 to 1 in the House (it had been unanimously approved by the Senate), and Bernard had cast the solitary "nay."¹³

WHY DID Bernard choose, as many claimed he did, to commit political suicide by deviating from the conventional isolationist views of his party, his state, and, indeed, the nation on this matter? It was partly a matter of conviction: he was fiercely partisan against fascism. It was partly a matter of indignation: he was incensed by the tactics used by the House leadership to propel the resolution through Congress. It was partly a matter of definition: to call the Spanish arms embargo an act of neutrality when it, in effect, boycotted "both the police and the underworld" was, in his judgment, at best a misnomer and at worst an outright lie. Finally, Bernard felt no sense of dependence on a congressional career. While caucusing before his "no" vote, he told fellow Farmer-Laborites and Progressives: "I've been in Congress two days. I've lived without being a Congressman before and I can again." (In a 1969 taped interview with a long-time friend, Irene Paull, Bernard claimed that at least six other congressmen felt as he did about the Spanish arms embargo resolution. He said that six Progressives from Wisconsin and four Farmer-Laborites from Minnesota caucused before the vote and that seven admitted the

¹¹Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Short History of American Foreign Policy and Diplomacy*, 584 (New York, 1959).

¹²*Duluth News-Tribune*, January 7, 1937, p. 1; *New York Times*, January 7, 1937, p. 1; *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 89. Pittman and McReynolds were chairmen, respectively, of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Gerald J. Boileau was a Progressive party representative from Wisconsin.

¹³*Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 90, 99; *Duluth News-Tribune*, January 7, 1937, p. 1, 2; *New York Times*, January 7, 1937, p. 1. The "Mar Cantábrico," sailing from New York harbor with a half-dozen airplanes and one airplane engine, was eventually captured by rebel forces who executed the Spaniards of the crew. See Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 338.

resolution was "damnably wrong." They refused, however, to "commit political suicide" with him.)¹⁴

A major motivation for Bernard's unpopular vote was his conviction that America should not hide like "an ostrich in No Man's Land" behind a foreign policy of isolationism. Like many radicals of his era, Bernard blamed the "plutocrats" for World War I, but he differed with them in his willingness to admit that there might be necessary and just wars. American survival, in his opinion, was dependent on a foreign policy which "will try to preserve and protect the democratic forms of government in the other parts of the world." As for the embargo resolution, it was counterproductive. It satisfied the antidemocratic forces in Spain and did not enhance the prospects for peace. Fascism, to Bernard, represented the last-ditch effort of the capitalists, munitions makers, and bankers to maintain control in Germany, Italy, and Spain. In practice it shackled the press, suppressed workers, was hostile to neighbors, and combatted "the whole system of demo-

¹⁴ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, Appendix 66 (first quote); Bernard, in *The People Together*, 38 (second quote). The *New York Times*, January 7, 1937, p. 11, gives the impression that Bernard's objection was primarily motivated by the tactics employed. Tapes of the 1969 interview are in the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁵ John Bernard, "Neutrality and Unneutral Diplomacy," in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 3:668 (August 15, 1937) ("ostrich" quote); *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, Appendix 67 ("preserve" quote), 140 ("system" and "menace" quotes).

¹⁶ Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970.

¹⁷ *Time*, January 18, 1937, p. 15; *New York Times*, January 7, 1937, p. 1; interview with F. C. Daugherty, former commissioner of Duluth, September 5, 1967, conducted by author; *Duluth News-Tribune*, March 27, 1937, p. 12.

¹⁸ Re-enacting and extending the provisions of its forerunners, this bill forbade the export of arms, munitions, and implements of war to belligerent states and those engaged in civil strife; prohibited the lending of money and extension of credit to any belligerent governments; enjoined American citizens against travel aboard vessels of warring states; forbade the arming of American merchant ships; and ordained that once the president had proclaimed the existence of a state of war, no nonmilitary materials could be exported to belligerents, except in foreign vessels and after American citizens had yielded all ownership and interests. See United States, *Statutes at Large*, 50:121-128; Donald F. Drummond, *The Passing of American Neutrality*, 46 (Ann Arbor, 1955). This last so-called "cash and carry" proposal, supported by the administration in order to head off a drive for an automatic embargo on all goods, had the unneutral effect of favoring the maritime powers, notably Britain and Japan, and of closing American markets to interior nations, notably Germany and China. See John M. Blum *et al.*, *The National Experience*, 683 (New York, 1963).

¹⁹ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 2291 ("boycott" quote), 2406 (other quotes).

cratic principles." Fascism, he insisted, was "the greatest menace that we have toward world peace."¹⁵

Bernard was labeled "Communist" because of his tirades against fascism, his close ties with labor, his radicalism, the beliefs of some of his associates, and his vote against the Spanish embargo. And while his rhetoric could be construed as reflecting the Communist party line (before the Soviet-Nazi Nonaggression Pact of 1939), such a conclusion must be tempered with the qualification Bernard himself offered: "I never abandoned a worthy cause just because the Communists were espousing it, and there were many."¹⁶

Washington society, on the other hand, soon dubbed Bernard "the little corporal" in reference to another famous Corsican politician with internationalist leanings. Undaunted by the Napoleonic designation and dismissing the "Communist" epithet as mud-slinging by his political enemies, Bernard continued to be a vocal and vigorous first-term congressman. He complained about his treatment in Minnesota only once — on an occasion when he pointed out that his vote cost him certain political patronage rights such as suggesting appointments for postmasterships.¹⁷

In March a new joint resolution was brought before Congress, the purpose of which was to toughen the existing neutrality legislation (as passed August 31, 1935, and amended and extended on February 29, 1936) by giving it a permanent and less improvised character.¹⁸ In the House the measure was met by Bernard's impassioned opposition. He maintained that the legislation, as proposed, was not "neutral"; it was "pro-Fascist." Reasserting his devotion to peace and neutrality, he warned that a neutrality that made no value judgments about the intentions of fascism was irresponsible. Isolationist neutrality would lead only to war. The United States, he continued, could avoid war by dedicating its resources to the defense of countries attacked by totalitarian forces. Unless the nation did so, those forces would become "bolder, more arrogant, and more bloodthirsty." Bernard argued that Hitler and Mussolini and their "gangster accomplices" in Lisbon and Tokyo were free to purchase all the supplies they needed, secure in the knowledge that "the American Government would place an absolute arms boycott and possible general boycott against any country which the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Fascist international should decide to invade." In a speech just prior to the House vote, Bernard closed with this peroration:

"If we want to please and promote the forces of fascism, let us pass this bill. If, on the other hand, . . . we are actually interested in democracy, liberty and human progress, then let us defeat this damnable, diabolic, un-American, pro-Fascist measure."¹⁹

On March 18, 1937, when it came time for the House vote on the new neutrality resolution, Bernard found that he was no longer alone in his protest, but his congressional company was small. The Neutrality Act was passed 376 to 13.²⁰

Bernard's unyielding opposition to the prevailing mode of American neutrality, now more isolationist than ever before, jeopardized his standing with both his Farmer-Labor party and a large number of his northeastern Minnesota constituents who regarded neutralism and isolationism as the guarantees of peace. On January 8, after Bernard's vote against the Spanish embargo, the *Virginia Daily Enterprise* voiced its editorial indignation:

"Given a few more Bernards in Washington and it would not be long ere the United States would again be embroiled in the affairs and wars of the European nations. His single vote in Congress, an impudent and unparalleled affront to the President of the country, put the seal of American approval upon a shipment of contraband that before very much longer will be em-

BERNARD spoke before many organizations supporting the Loyalist forces who opposed Franco and fascism in Spain. Note misspelling of Toussaint below.



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JOHN TOUSSANT BERNARD
"One Against 404"

404 in Congress voted FOR the embargo against Spain
Congressman Bernard voted AGAINST

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Director, Institute of the History of Medicine
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ployed to kill and to maim defenseless men, women and children in Spain. Congressman Bernard may be and undoubtedly is a strong partisan of the Communist or Loyalist forces in Spain, but he has no right to let that sympathy involve the neutrality integrity of the United States. . . . The truth is that his very first vote has been cast against peace."

Another rebuke, signed only "Grand Rapids Constituents," read sardonically: "After careful perusal of your so-called legislative stand, we earnestly recommend that you resume mining as a profession."²¹

Bernard defended himself against such criticisms with the following statement published in the *Duluth News-Tribune*: "You sent me down there to work for you. Your welfare is going to come before mine. . . . I have been accused of getting something for my vote in Congress. I did get something—the satisfaction of knowing I was true to myself and you." Intent on persuading the public to accept his view that the United States' neutrality policy did not serve the nation's interest, Bernard also scheduled fourteen speaking engagements in one three-week period after the Neutrality Act became law and continued to appear before such groups as the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee.²²

Seemingly indifferent to his political future, Bernard continued on his own course, protesting nitrate shipments to rebel forces and asking "in the name of justice" that they be stopped. In late April, 1937, when the Germans bombed the Basque town of Guernica and killed 1,654 persons, Bernard was again moved to denounce American policy toward Spain, terming American neutrality a crime. He castigated the State Department for spinning "diplomatic fairy stories" with its refusal to admit that Germany and Italy were warring for the rebels in Spain. Finally, in October, 1937, he and Representative Jerry J. O'Connell, Democrat from Montana, sailed for Spain and became the first congressmen to visit that country since the outbreak of hostilities. After returning to the United States, both

²⁰ In opposition, Bernard was joined by fellow Minnesotan Henry G. Teigan (F-L), Robert L. Bacon (R., N.Y.), Usher L. Burdick (R., N.D.), John M. Coffee (D., Wash.), Everett M. Dirksen (R., Ill.), Louis Ludlow (D., Ind.), Noah M. Mason (R., Ill.), Jerry J. O'Connell (D., Mont.), John M. Robison (R., Ky.), Edith N. Rogers (R., Mass.), George H. Tinkham (R., Mass.), and James W. Wadsworth (R., N.Y.). See *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 2410.

²¹ *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, January 8, 1937, p. 2; *Saturday Evening Post*, March 13, 1937, p. 18.

²² *Duluth News-Tribune*, April 1, 1937, p. 1 (quote), March 27, 1937, p. 1; circulars in Bernard Papers.

men urged President Roosevelt to exempt Spain from the provisions of the Neutrality Act.²³

Although Bernard was preoccupied with the Spanish civil war, he was not indifferent to other—though related—foreign policy concerns. He was distressed by the American public's attitudes that were being reflected in national policy, especially by what he regarded as the confusion between "peace" and "neutrality." While the national mood appeared to consider the two inseparable, Bernard did not so equate them. In a radio speech, he argued that "the slogan, 'keep the United States neutral,' is itself a sell-out to war. It assumes that war is inevitable. . . . war is not inevitable. It is only the Fascists who try to weaken the cause of peace by insisting that it is."²⁴

Bernard scorned appeasement as an invitation to war. Failure to act against aggressions by Japan in Manchuria in 1931 and by Italy in Ethiopia in 1936, he felt, had invited Fascist intervention in Spain. In turn Axis success in Spain had encouraged Japan's attack on China in 1937. Japan, Bernard told his countrymen, was interested in conquest, not peace. The besieged governments in Peking and Madrid were, for him, "the frontline trenches of world democracy and world peace." Bernard publicly regretted that few of his fellow progressives in the House of Representatives shared his conviction that peace was to be found only "along the road of collective security." He prophesied that if action were not taken against Fascist aggression, the United States would be "sucked into the maelstrom, as we were in 1917."²⁵

Although public sentiment remained decidedly isolationist during the term that Bernard served on Capitol Hill, the United States government embarked on

a program of unprecedented naval expansion which President Roosevelt had called for in his 1938 inaugural address. This commitment angered and alarmed many Americans, especially those for whom isolationist formulas seemed the proper prescription for dealing with world crises. Despite Bernard's rejection of these formulas and his confidence in the concept of collective security, he, too, opposed the big navy program. Although he acknowledged that armaments might make the United States safer, he maintained that the stockpiling of weapons in a hemispheric fortress could not prevent war from being generated in Europe: "I do not believe that a navy can be built large enough and strong enough to keep America out of war. Long before the ships . . . can be built, the issue of war and peace will have been decided."²⁶

Speaking on the floor of the House, Bernard proposed that "the way to peace in international life, like the way to order in domestic affairs, is through the organized cooperation of decent people and decent nations." War could be averted, Bernard believed, only if the United States became "bold in leadership, strong not in arms but in moral force." Urging the United States to offer the nations of the world constructive, international leadership, he suggested dusting off the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 which outlawed war and also resurrecting the Nine-Power Treaty of 1921 which recognized the territorial integrity of China. If these instruments were taken seriously and enforced, he thought, there could be peace. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Chicago speech on October 5, 1937, suggesting a moral, diplomatic, and even an economic, quarantine of aggressor states made good sense to Bernard. In his opinion, the application of this policy in the 1930s would have made naval expansion unnecessary, and, with its application in the future, "the need for rearming will diminish."²⁷

Although Bernard admitted that America might have to build a military machine and asked, in that event, that it be a "people's army" devoted to the defense of democracy and free from "traitor generals" (probably a reference to Franco) and fascist sympathizers, he more closely aligned with the radical isolationists of his home state on the big navy question. Like them, Bernard preferred that the money being spent on battleships be allocated instead "for relief and work relief, for roads and schools, and the myriad immediate needs of our citizens." He vowed to abstain from voting on arms appropriations bills until democratic nations acted together for peace and until taxation for arms was made the burden not of the people but of "the rich . . . who look for huge profits from the next war to exceed even their profits from the last war."²⁸

²³ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, Appendix 1820 (first quote), 1020; Bernard, in *Vital Speeches*, 3:668 (second quote); *New York Times*, October 18, 1937, p. 9, November 9, 1937, p. 12. Nitrate, an important element in the production of fertilizer, is also used in the manufacture of high explosives. For a vivid description of the bombing of Guernica, see Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, 419–21.

²⁴ Bernard, in *Vital Speeches*, 3:668.

²⁵ Bernard, in *Vital Speeches*, 3:669 (first and last quotes); undated clipping (*New York Times*, 1937?) (second quote), Bernard Papers.

²⁶ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, 3498.

²⁷ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, 3498 (first quote), 852 (other quotes); Bernard, in *Vital Speeches*, 3:669.

²⁸ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, 852 (first quote), 3498 (other quotes). In an appearance before the House on March 18, 1937, Bernard singled out the capitalist Du Pont and Morgan families as forces of fascism in America. See *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 2382.

AS THE YEAR 1938 unfolded, Bernard's reading of its events evoked a rhetoric of increasing urgency and alarm. Hitler's bloodless invasion of Austria prompted this assessment: "The policy of the world's Tories, and particularly the policy of Neville Chamberlain, was exposed in all its callous brutality, its criminal connivance at criminality. There is no policy of peace." Bernard reasoned that even in "simple self-interest" the American people could not afford to neglect events in Europe and Asia. In addition, they had a moral obligation to the principles of freedom and democracy and could not be indifferent either to the transgression of national principles or to the murder of men. Neutrality was an unreal option for Americans whom Bernard knew to be "passionate partisans of democracy, of peace, and the right of men and nations to be free." Hence, Bernard urged a different course of action on policy-makers:

"I wish I could stand here today and proclaim that I was wrong in voting against the Spanish embargo and against the Neutrality Act. How tragically have events proved the correctness [of] my solitary 'no.' I want peace, as all our people want peace. And peace is not won by solo votes. . . . Peace can now be saved only by amending the Neutrality Act, only by American embargoes against aggressors and war makers."²⁹

Hoping to influence both policy-makers and public opinion, Bernard publicized the contradictions in America's enforcement of the Neutrality Act. In Ethiopia and Spain, the United States had quarantined the victims of aggression by embargoing arms shipments. In the Far East, however, the president had refused to declare a state of war between China and Japan so that the United States could continue to aid China. Yet, at the same time, American exports were sustaining Japan's war machine. (In 1937 and 1938 the United States supplied more than half of Japan's imported war materials and, with the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, America's importance as a supplier for Japan's war effort increased.)³⁰ In these inconsistencies, Bernard felt, the United States was violating its own traditions and, indeed, teetering on the brink of disaster.

John Bernard's continuing critique of American foreign policy was perhaps his most notable contribution to the Seventy-fifth Congress, but he also was an energetic advocate of domestic reform. With Congressman Wright Patman of Texas he coauthored the famous bill to tax chain stores.³¹ He backed minimum wages, low-rent public housing, an antilynching law, rural electrification, aid to tenant farmers, and relief and welfare legislation.³² He sponsored a bill to expand Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps

and to remove them from army control which, to him, smacked of fascist youth camps.³³ He also took care of his own district by securing the necessary funds for a public bridge to replace the toll bridge between Duluth and Superior, Wisconsin, and for a coast guard station on the North Shore of Lake Superior.³⁴

When the time for reckoning with his constituents came in 1938, John Bernard's prospects for re-election were bleak. He had antagonized the Congress, his party, and the voters of his area who were still intent on resisting entanglements in the affairs of other nations. Despite endorsements from such diverse sources as Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia of New York, academician Paul H. Douglas, anthropologist Franz Boas, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Bernard could not overcome the opposition. The Eighth Congressional District chose to return the more conventional William Pittenger to his old congressional seat. In the election of November, 1938, Pittenger polled 67,960 votes to Bernard's 54,381 (Democratic candidate Merle J. McKeon had only 8,945 votes). Bernard became a one-term congressman.³⁵

John Bernard attributed his defeat to three main factors: the opposition of William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL); the charges leveled against him of being a Communist; and the Catholic church. In an insightful pre-election analysis made for the Democratic national committee in 1938, Democratic candidate McKeon noted that, under ordinary circumstances, Bernard's election would have been assured, but his work as an organizer for the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) had antagonized the AFL. In 1937, while in Congress, Bernard had been appointed to head an

²⁹ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, 3498 (first and last quotes); Appendix 1671 (second and third quotes).

³⁰ T. A. Bisson, "American Trade and Japanese Aggression," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 211:123 (September, 1940).

³¹ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, Appendix 3199. This statement appears in a summary of Bernard's accomplishments in Congress.

³² *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 1 session, 4935, 4780-4783; 2 session, 1668, 1290; 3 session, 6833, 6836, 2080, 7449, Appendix 2434. See also campaign literature, Bernard Papers.

³³ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, Appendix 3199.

³⁴ *Congressional Record*, 75 Congress, 3 session, Index 514 (HR 10632); 1 session, Index 790 (HR 5040). See also campaign literature, Bernard Papers.

³⁵ *America Salutes Our Champion of the New Deal*, Bernard Papers; *Legislative Manual*, 1939, p. 392.

expanded campaign of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee on Minnesota's Iron Range. The older union was outraged at Bernard's activities (it had a gentleman's agreement not to organize Iron Range workers in exchange for United States Steel's quiet benediction), and it refused to let Bernard address the state AFL convention. Despite Bernard's plea for the restoration of unity in the house of labor, the AFL considered him an outcast and determined to defeat him. According to Bernard, Green dispatched a fire captain from Minneapolis to organize labor opposition in the Eighth District's campaign and made funds available for that purpose. In his history of the Farmer-Labor party, Arthur Naftalin noted that the AFL newspaper, *The Labor World*, labeled Bernard "the sacred cow of the Communist Party" and that the Duluth Central Labor Union's political committee went so far as to endorse Bernard's Republican opponent, William Pittenger.³⁶

The persistent impression that Bernard was a Communist sympathizer, if not in fact a Communist, was a second factor in his failure to win re-election. He was accused of having given the Communist clenched-fist salute during his visit to Spain, and his consistent

advocacy of radicalism and the singing of the "Internationale" raised questions in the minds of many Minnesotans. In his analysis for the Democratic party, McKeon also singled out Bernard's close ties with persons known to be or suspected of being Communists. McKeon mentioned the incumbent's acceptance of speaking engagements "from organizations of a strong Communist flavor" and wrote that Bernard's "militant espousal of the loyalist cause in Spain has, rightly or wrongly, added fuel to the Communist fire." The Democratic challenger concluded that, although Bernard—except for the Spanish embargo—had consistently supported the Roosevelt administration, he had nevertheless allowed the Communist label to stick, and, consequently, liberal voters of all parties were "deserting" him. Pittenger, also alert to Bernard's vulnerability, kicked off his campaign with a statement challenging "Bernard or his secretary, Tony Steffano, to deny that Bernard was a Communist, and that he addressed Communist meetings and that he represented Earl Browder while he was in congress." The

CONGRESSMAN BERNARD'S foreign policy views ran counter to the isolationist temper of the times. Groups such as the students photographed at the University of Minnesota (below, left) opposed U.S. involvement in "Europe's problems." When it came time for re-election in 1938, Bernard and radical Governor Elmer Benson emphasized their allegiance to President Roosevelt and the New Deal (newspaper advertisement, below, right).

³⁶Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970; unidentified, undated clipping (1938) reporting on Merle J. McKeon's letter to the Democratic National Committee, Bernard Papers; Donald G. Sofchalk, "The Origins of the United Steelworkers of America on the Minnesota Iron Ranges," Sofchalk Papers, Minnesota Historical Society; Naftalin, "Farmer-Labor Party," 377.



A CHALLENGE



The Republican Candidates "Must" Be LIBERALS



WE CHALLENGE THEM TO STATE THEIR STAND ON THE NEW DEAL

MINNESOTA STANDS ON THE NEW DEAL

In 1932, under the NEW DEAL, Minnesota's economy was the worst in the nation. It has not recovered since. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned.

Their positions are not as stated in the NEW DEAL. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned. We must not let the NEW DEAL be abandoned.



"We Support Roosevelt and the New Deal!" say

"Down With Roosevelt and the New Deal!" says

Deny Your Party If You Can!

fact that the Farmer-Labor party was simultaneously suffering from charges of Communist infiltration hardly helped Bernard in his denials.³⁷

In some respects, Bernard's most devastating opposition came from the Catholic church which had been on the side of the Fascist rebels in the Spanish conflict. According to Bernard, whose vote against the Spanish embargo brought him the church's enmity, he was verbally attacked from the altar by every priest but his own: "Father [W. J.] Powers, my own priest, refused to obey the order of Bishop [Thomas A.] Welch of Duluth." A friend, writing to Bernard a few days after the election, commented on the unified opposition of the church to the congressman and the Farmer-Labor party and told of Catholics who greeted the Farmer-Labor parade in Split Rock with "the kiss-me-ass sign." In a letter of sympathy after Bernard's defeat, Congressman John M. Coffee of Washington wrote: "I suspected that the A.F.L. and the Catholic hierarchy and the red-baiters had reviled you and danced with naked feet on your shivering soul. Damn them all! God, when will people wake up?"³⁸

Back in Eveleth after the concluding days of the Seventy-fifth Congress, John Bernard continued to work for a time with the CIO Steelworkers Organizing Committee. On December 17, 1941, he volunteered his services to his country in a personal letter to President Roosevelt. For the next two years, however, he was unable to find employment. The man who earlier than almost everyone else had recognized the evils of fascism and courageously called for its destruction was not accepted by the armed forces, by the government, or by private industry. Although he could speak, read, and write English, French, Italian, and Spanish, he could not even get a job as a common laborer. After moving to Chicago in 1943, he worked for several years as Illinois legislative director and Chicago director of the political action committee of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. In the mid-1950s, Bernard became chairman of the Illinois Civil Rights Congress.³⁹

Never free from the stigma of disloyalty and radicalism, Bernard was called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in September, 1952. The investigating attorney charged that Bernard had subversively changed his name from Bernard John Toussaint.⁴⁰ Bernard invoked the Fifth Amendment rather than answer some questions.

Bernard retired to Long Beach, California, where he continues today to reject the charge that he was a Communist: "I was not a member of the Communist

party and am convinced that the F.B.I. knew it well." As for his congressional career, he has no regrets: "I have never thought since that I would have done anything differently. I do remember that my vote against the Spanish Embargo and my criticism of the so-called American Neutrality were my most important acts on international issues."⁴¹

But in 1938 the voters of Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District, like most Americans everywhere, were not ready to accept Bernard's views on the dangers of neutrality in a world where military aggressions were going unchallenged. Public opinion began to shift only in 1940 when Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France fell to Nazi power. (It was in that year, too, according to the secret diary of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, that President Roosevelt admitted to intimate advisers that the Spanish arms embargo had been a mistake.)⁴²

When England seemed threatened, the United States began to deviate from its heretofore unyielding neutrality. But the American determination not to get involved held firm until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941.

³⁷ Naftalin, "Farmer-Labor Party," 377; *New York Times*, August 20, 1938, p. 1; clipping about McKeon Letter; *Duluth Herald*, September 28, 1938, p. 15 (Browder quote); *Midwest Labor*, October 14, 1938, clipping in Bernard Papers. Earl Browder was the Communist party's candidate for president in 1936 and 1940. On Communist infiltration in the Farmer-Labor party, see Naftalin, "Farmer-Labor Party," 335-382.

³⁸ Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970; letter from Herbert J. Hubert to Bernard, November 11, 1938, letter from John M. Coffee to Bernard, November 29, 1938, Bernard Papers.

³⁹ Biographical sketch and extensive correspondence, Bernard Papers. After articles concerning Bernard's employment difficulties appeared in several workers' papers in June, 1942, Bernard received letters from individuals who also were black-listed for their previous political activities. See also the letter about Bernard's plight from former Congressman Thomas R. Amlie to John M. Coffee, June 14, 1942, published in the *Congressional Record*, 77 Congress, 2 session, Appendix 2284.

⁴⁰ *Chicago Sun Times*, September 4, 1952. A reproduction of the clipping is in the Bernard Papers.

⁴¹ Bernard Letter, March 25, 1970.

⁴² Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 3, *The Lowering Clouds: 1939-1941*, 217 (New York, 1954).

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Bernard and his daughter Marie on page 82 is from the *Saturday Evening Post*, March 13, 1937, p. 18. The documents are from the Bernard Papers, and the photo on page 91 is from the society's collection.





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