

Part II: "Isolationism" and Franklin Roosevelt (1935-1941)

Americans watched with both fear and disdain as troubles and conflict escalated in Europe and Asia. Many Americans thought that focusing on problems and issues at home was both easier and more important than becoming caught up in the power struggles of others. These Americans became known as isolationists.

Isolationism

After World War I, much of the American public felt that the country should isolate itself from all further war. Americans felt their interests were different, if not superior to those of Europe. If a goal of American foreign policy was to spread democracy and American values, it would best be done through example and not by military means.

never will be. In matters of finance, unfortunately, we have not been isolationist and never will be. When earthquake and famine, or whatever bring human suffering, visit any part of the human race, we have not been isolationists, and never will be.... But in all matters political, in all commitments of any nature or kind, which encroach in the slightest upon the free and unembarrassed action of our people, or which circumscribe their discretion and judgment, we have been free, we have been independent, we have been isolationist."

—September 1934, Senator William E. Borah, Republican of Idaho, ranking member of Foreign Relations Committee

"In matters of trade and commerce we have never been isolationist and

Isolationists believed there was no need for Americans to feel threatened by develop-

"Isolationism"—A Misleading Term

"Isolationism" was a blanket term used in the early twentieth century. But the term isolationism is somewhat misleading. The term implies that the United States wanted to isolate itself completely from other nations. In fact, that was not the case. Most supporters of isolationism favored international trade and certain bilateral agreements in the 1930s. Most also respected the international laws that had been put in place since World War I.

First and foremost, isolationists wanted to stay out of war; for them, preserving peace was the most important goal of American foreign policy. They believed that the best way to do this was for the United States to have a strict policy of neutrality. They felt that if Americans meddled in affairs overseas, war was more likely to reach American shores. Progress in technology would mean that this war would be more horrible than the First World War. Isolationists worried that the United States, already weakened by the Great Depression, might not be able to weather the demands that another international conflict would put on the economy. They also worried that such a war might destroy freedom and liberty for Americans. Finally, the isolationists thought that the United States should remain a pillar of sanity amidst a quarrelsome and increasingly divided world.

Above all, isolationists did not want to compromise American interests. This group wanted to preserve the right of the United States to act when and where it saw fit. Today we would call this group unilateralists. As you read, keep in mind that the term "isolationism" is used here because it was the term used at the time, but that it means more than its dictionary definition.

ments in Europe and Asia. The vast Pacific and Atlantic Oceans insulated the country from troubles in those regions, and the United States had formed friendly alliances with all the other nations in the Western hemisphere.

“Providence in its infinite mercy and wisdom has been very good to this nation. We have been given a geographical position far removed from dangerous neighbors. The genius of man has not yet created instruments of aggressive warfare which can span the oceans which protect us on either hand, save as those instruments may move upon the surface of these oceans.”

—George Fielding Eliot,
The Ramparts We Watch, 1938

Who were the isolationists?

Some politicians and public figures were outspoken supporters of isolationism. These isolationists had a variety of motives, some nobler than others, for lending support.

The most famous was Charles A. Lindbergh, a pioneering aviator and the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. His aerial adventures made him a widely respected American hero. He spent several years living in Europe in the early 1930s, visiting Germany periodically to consult with German military leaders. He wrote to a friend that Hitler was “undoubtedly a great man” who “has done much for the German people,” and he claimed not to understand the prevalent American views that dictatorships were evil or wrong.

When Lindbergh returned to the United States, he became the most famous supporter of isolationism, traveling around the country to speak to audiences about why the U.S. government should stay out of war. He also stated that Jews had too much influence in the United States and argued that they were the ones pushing the United States towards war.

Most isolationists did not share Lindbergh’s pro-Nazi sentiments or his anti-Semitic rhetoric. They held deep-seated convictions

about staying out of a war that might threaten the democracy and freedom in the United States.

Other famous isolationists included John L. Lewis, a labor leader and head of the United Mine Workers; John Bassett Moore, a famous writer and international law professor; and Senator William E. Borah, Republican from Idaho and the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

What was the Nye Committee?

Another prominent political isolationist was Senator Gerald P. Nye, a progressive Republican from North Dakota. In 1934, as Hitler increased his hold on power in Germany and as tensions on the European continent grew, Senator Nye decided to head a committee to investigate the reasons why the United States had entered World War I. Nye hoped that if those reasons could be uncovered and the public made aware, then the United States would stay out of the brewing troubles abroad.

For three years, the Nye Committee investigated both the munitions industry and the banking industry. The committee found that during the First World War bankers were “greedy” and munitions-makers “highly unethical.” Senator Nye accused these groups of profiteering—a term that refers to making excess money from essential goods—in this case war materials, during times of emergency or war.

The Nye Committee did not find any evidence of a conspiracy to drag the nation into the First World War. Nevertheless, the hearings and the extensive newspaper coverage they received created the impression among many that American soldiers had died in World War I because corporations looking to turn a profit had convinced President Wilson in 1917 to go to war. With anger and suspicion about big business and the banking industry already high because of the depression, some Americans worried that powerful business interests would again drag them into war. The Nye Committee hearings increased the isolationist mood in the United States.

“War and warfare since time immemorial have been primarily instituted by a comparatively few of the high and mighty in the political and financial structures of the countries of the world, for political aggrandizement and commercial advantage.”

—Chicago Federation of Labor, official statement, in response to the Nye committee

The Neutrality Acts

The Nye Committee hearings influenced not only the general population, but many in Congress as well. Between 1914 and 1917, the United States had declared itself a “neutral” nation. President Wilson was attempting to preserve the U.S. right to free commerce and freedom of the seas, but Nye believed the United States had to be willing to give up “business as usual” if it wanted to stay out of war. He believed that the U.S. entry into the First World War could be traced to President Wilson’s failure to prohibit the sales of materials to the belligerent nations.

“Neutrality is to be had if we are willing to pay the price of abandonment of expectation of profits from the blood of other nations at war.”

—Senator Gerald P. Nye, January 6, 1936

Congress, which shared Nye’s commitment to neutrality, introduced legislation to prevent the United States from supplying one side or another during a war. The Neutrality Act of 1935 specifically prohibited shipping or carrying arms to warring nations. The act also established a National Muni-

tions Board to bring the armament industry under control of the government. The act, however, did not bar the trade of other potential war materials like steel and oil. President Roosevelt sought amendments that would allow the United States to supply an innocent country against an aggressor. Congress refused, and Roosevelt, not wanting to make enemies because he needed congressional support for his New Deal programs, signed the bill into law on August 31, 1935.

What were the consequences of the Act?

On October 3, 1935, Italy, led by its fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, attacked the African country of Ethiopia. Because Ethiopia was an independent country, not a European colony, and it happened to border the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, Mussolini saw it as



“No Foreign Entanglements!”

Image courtesy Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pmmsc-03396. Copyright 1935 by Herb Lubow. Used with permission.

a perfect target. The rest of the world saw the invasion as an unprovoked act of aggression.

President Roosevelt applied the arms embargo required by the Neutrality Act against both sides, although Italy did not need U.S. weapons and Ethiopia could not afford them. The Neutrality Act did not prohibit the sale of oil. President Roosevelt urged American exporters not to sell Italy any oil, which Italy's armed forces needed, but the exporters went ahead with the sale anyway.

Mussolini declared victory in 1936, and unperturbed by international outcry, withdrew from the League of Nations that same year.

What was in the Neutrality Act of 1936?

The Neutrality Act of 1936 attempted to close the loopholes of the 1935 act that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia had exposed. The new law extended the 1935 provisions for fourteen months and prohibited all loans or credits to belligerents. The act also prohibited the sale of all war materials, including steel and oil. But the act had the effect of treating all parties in a conflict equally and perhaps even harming a side for which the American people might be inclined to have sympathy.

“We have learned that when we deliberately try to legislate neutrality, our neutrality laws may operate unevenly and unfairly—may actually give aid to an aggressor and deny it to the victim. The instinct of self-preservation should warn us that we ought not to let that happen anymore.”

—Roosevelt, January 4, 1939, speaking of 1936 Neutrality Act

Americans, though they did not want war for the United States, certainly had sympathies for particular sides in various conflicts. In one remarkable instance, American volunteers went to fight in another country's civil war. In Spain in 1936, the Spanish army, led by fascist general Francisco Franco, revolted. Mussolini and Hitler immediately promised to aid him in

The Neutrality Acts	
1935	No munitions or arms to belligerents
1936	No potential war materials (e.g., oil, steel) of any kind to belligerents
1937	No Americans on belligerent ships; no American ships in war zones

fighting the Spanish republican government. Approximately three thousand American volunteers traveled to Spain to fight against Franco and his fascist allies.

How did the “lessons” of World War I influence the Neutrality Act of 1937?

With the fascist powers on the march and the threat of conflict looming ever larger, Congress passed additional neutrality legislation in May 1937 that it hoped would keep the United States neutral and out of any war. In response to the Spanish Civil War, Congress expanded the law to include war within a state as well as between states. The law also prohibited American ships from sailing in war zones and forbade Americans from traveling on the ships of belligerents. Congress remembered that the deaths of Americans on British passenger ships at the hands of German submarines during World War I had helped swing public opinion towards declaring war some twenty years before.

FDR: A Political Navigator

Throughout the 1930s, President Roosevelt's focus had been on rejuvenating the U.S. economy. When elected in 1932, his primary goal was to implement his New Deal programs to improve the economic situation for U.S. citizens. But he watched the escalating problems of Europe closely and with concern. Roosevelt was a masterful politician who correctly read the mood of the American public. He continually professed the U.S. intention to stay

neutral if any conflict were to erupt overseas.

“Despite what happens in continents overseas, the United States of America shall and must remain, as long ago the Father of our Country prayed that it might remain— unentangled and free.”

—Roosevelt, late 1935

Did Roosevelt agree with neutrality for the United States?

While Roosevelt professed neutrality, he also saw the need to increase U.S. military strength. Throughout the 1920s, the U.S. had reduced its military personnel and budget. But with the events in Europe and Asia looking more and more ominous, Roosevelt thought it was prudent to order more funding for defense. For example, as early as 1933, Roosevelt

had authorized a dramatic increase in spending to increase the size of the navy to meet the threat posed by a growing Japanese fleet.

“I hate war. I have passed unnumbered hours, I shall pass unnumbered hours, thinking and planning how war may be kept from this nation.”

—Roosevelt, August 1936

Despite his frequent spoken commitments to neutrality and avoiding war, Roosevelt never subscribed to the fervent isolationism that swept the nation. German and Japanese aggression angered Roosevelt, though he was careful not to express his feelings publicly until later in the 1930s.

Roosevelt’s Leadership: Determined or Dangerous?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s domestic political programs changed the role of government in the United States. Convinced that the crisis of a crumbling economy demanded a strong response, he embarked on an ambitious revision of the role of the federal government in the American economy. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, including the introduction of social security and a minimum wage, also increased the role of government in the lives of Americans. Although Roosevelt enjoyed considerable public support, some considered his ideas and plans radical and even dangerous. They worried about an intrusive government and an overly powerful presidency.

Roosevelt was a skilled, patient politician and a charming, charismatic man. He was the first president to understand the power of mass media, and regularly spoke to the nation in his famous “Fireside Chats” over the radio. In addition, Roosevelt had a great deal of experience in government. He had served for seven years as assistant secretary of the navy, and four years as governor of New York. Roosevelt mastered a wealth of details about every policy issue. He was also careful about how he delegated authority. He made appointments and assigned jobs so that the power for making decisions remained with him. When dealing with delicate political issues, Roosevelt was a patient politician. He was a master at balancing and even exploiting the conflicting interests among his advisors, Congress, the political parties, and the public.

Roosevelt won reelection in 1936 by an overwhelming landslide. Bolstered by this result and annoyed by Supreme Court rulings that some of his New Deal legislation was unconstitutional, Roosevelt made a radical proposal. He wrote to Congress that the Supreme Court was overworked, and proposed appointing an additional justice for each justice over the age of seventy. In truth, Roosevelt was looking for a way to “pack” the court with appointees he thought would be more sympathetic to his legislation, which he thought was essential to fighting the depression. Congress refused to go along. His decision to run for a third term in 1940, something no president had ever attempted, further infuriated those who were sure Roosevelt was an overly powerful, and therefore, dangerous president.

What were Roosevelt's primary views on international affairs?

By 1940, Roosevelt viewed the world as highly interconnected. He felt the United States would be a factor in any war involving a major world power, because the United States was a major world power as well. To ignore the events and decisions of others around the globe would eventually be detrimental to the peace that Americans valued, he thought.

Roosevelt also believed that the United States should shape its own foreign relations. In this regard, he and many isolationists were on the same page: no laws made in the world were superior to those set down in the Constitution. He felt that the United States was entitled to make decisions that served itself first. Unlike the isolationists, Roosevelt did not believe that supporting the Allies, making treaties, and peacefully persuading countries to comply with certain agreements would compromise U.S. sovereignty and security. Finally, Roosevelt believed the United States could not depend on its geographic isolation from Europe and Asia for protection from the new technologies and military ambitions of the Japanese and the Nazis.

“What worries me especially is that public opinion over here is patting itself on the back every morning and thanking God for the Atlantic Ocean (and the Pacific Ocean)... Things move with such terrific speed, these days, that it really is essential to us to think in broader terms and, in effect, to warn the American people that they, too, should think of possible ultimate results in Europe and the Far East.”

—Roosevelt, in a letter to Kansas editor William Allen White, end of 1939

World War II Begins

While Roosevelt and his advisors worried about the threats from across the oceans, the mood in the country remained strongly anti-war. The Neutrality Acts remained in effect and limited U.S. action. But the military



Japan drives through Manchuria to reach the center of China.

Reg Manning in The Arizona Republic.

agenda of the Japanese and the Nazis began to force a rethinking of U.S. policies.

In 1937, Japan's armies moved deeper into China. By the end of the year, Japanese forces had taken Nanking, the capital of Chiang Kai-shek's government. As hundreds of foreign residents watched, the Japanese unleashed a campaign of murder, rape, and looting against the civilian population. The Japanese massacred more than 200,000 Chinese and burned much of the city to the ground.

The massacre at Nanking (re-labeled four years later as the "Rape of Nanking") turned the American public against Japan. Public opinion polls showed support for banning the sale of war-related materials to Japan. Racial attitudes against Japan also hardened in the United States. For example, the press commonly portrayed the Japanese as vicious and devious little yellow men.

Roosevelt refused to recognize the conflict between Japan and China as war. His reason for this was to avoid invoking the Neutrality Acts, which would not permit sending any military aid to China. Public pressure from anti-war groups forced Roosevelt to back off

from using U.S. government ships to transport aid, but he allowed private ships to carry materials at their own risk to aid the Chinese.

Over the next few years, the Japanese tightened their hold over much of coastal China. American officials worried that Japan and its military would continue to seek new conquests. Some in Congress called for an economic quarantine against Japan.

Why did Japan seek an alliance with Nazi Germany?

When Japan suffered a military setback in a border clash with the Soviet Army in 1938, it decided that an alliance with Nazi Germany would provide protection against the Soviet Union. An alliance would also limit the influence of Britain and France, which would allow Japan to continue to expand in Asia. Hitler saw that the threat of a potential attack from Japan would preoccupy Britain and France with defending their colonies in Asia, which would allow him to pursue his plans in Europe. Japan held out for concessions from Nazi Germany that would keep Japan out of a European war. Hitler grew impatient and made a pact with the Soviet Union instead. The Nazi-Soviet pact of August 23, 1939, also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, shocked the Japanese.

The pact shocked the rest of the world as well, but dramatic events in

Europe soon overshadowed developments in Asia.

On September 1, 1939, Hitler's troops marched into Poland. Two days later, England and France, in defense of Poland, declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun and the debate about the U.S. role reached a deafening clamor in the United States. As the U.S. public increasingly sympathized

with the Allies, politicians in Congress argued over the appropriate steps to take.

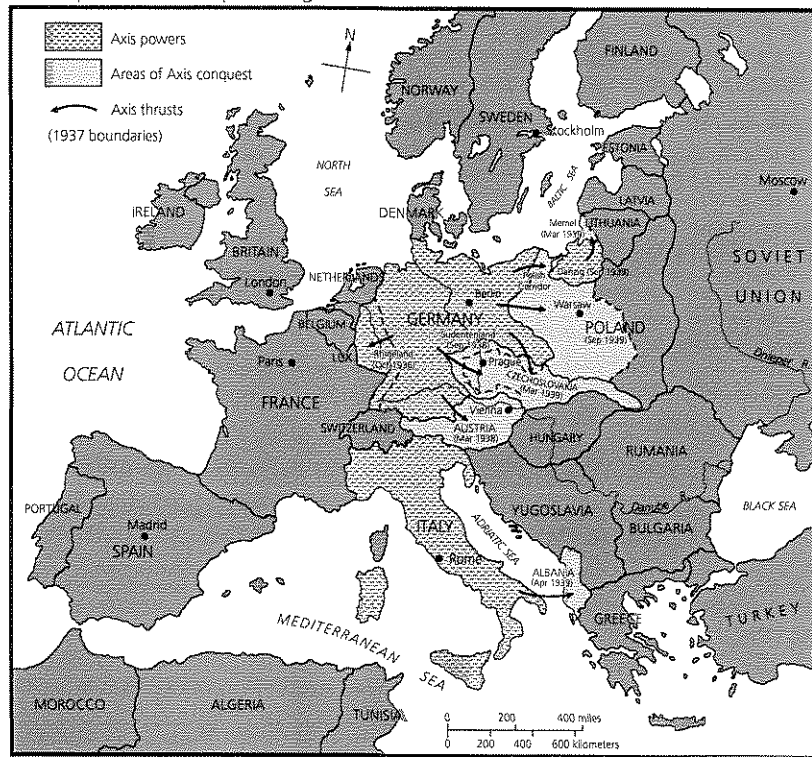
How did the German invasion of Poland affect public opinion?

When war broke out, 82 percent of Americans questioned thought Germany was to

“Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what is their right. Their existence must be made secure. The strongest man is right....”

Adolf Hitler, August 22, 1939, to his generals before they invaded Poland

Axis Expansion in Europe through 1939



blame for what happened. In October of the same year, *Fortune* magazine took a poll and found that 83.1 percent of Americans wanted England and France to win the war. But while Americans were willing to send supplies and money, they were not willing to send American soldiers.

Despite the growing consensus in support of the Allies, there was still much disagreement as to how to “aid” Europe without getting directly involved. Although Americans were reluctant to send soldiers, some began to think that as Hitler marched through Europe, two oceans might no longer be enough to protect the United States.

Who were the interventionists?

Although anti-war feeling remained strong, a different group began to gather strength in the United States. Known as the interventionists, they saw that U.S. intervention in the ongoing conflict was likely and even necessary to protect the United States. They believed that neutrality and isolationism would not keep Japan and Germany at bay for long. Many of Roosevelt’s advisors favored taking strong action against the Japanese and helping Britain and France, even if it meant that this would eventually lead to war. Roosevelt himself thought it would be possible to prepare the people for the possibility of war without suggesting that the United States would actually join in the fighting. He turned his considerable political and oratorical skills to the task of convincing the people of this seeming contradiction.

How did President Roosevelt react to the invasion of Poland?

After Hitler claimed Europe as a “greater Germany,” Roosevelt professed that it was the responsibility of the United States to counter the Nazi juggernaut by being the “arsenal of democracy.” Roosevelt said the United States would not commit troops, but proclaimed that the struggles in Europe were American struggles.

“When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger. [It is easy] for you and for me to shrug our shoulders and to say that conflicts taking place thousands of miles...from the whole American hemisphere do not seriously affect the Americas – and that all the United States has to do is to ignore them and go about its own business. Passionately though we may desire detachment, we are forced to realize that every word that comes through the air, every ship that sails the sea, every battle that is fought does affect the American future.”

—Roosevelt, fireside chat of September 3, 1939

Germany’s defeat of Poland in just twenty-seven days also fueled the interventionists’ argument. Many in the Senate and House even worried about a German invasion of the United States, although that was well beyond Nazi Germany’s capabilities. With a growing tide of support from the American public, they pushed through legislation called the Neutrality Act of 1939.

“Cash and carry” was the main thrust of the act, passed in November, 1939. This new Neutrality Act allowed the United States to continue trading with belligerents, but required that the warring nations pay cash for what they wanted and that they carry the goods themselves. This meant they had to travel to U.S. shores, pick up what they had bought, and transport it back on their own ships. Unlike the previous Neutrality Acts, it allowed the sale of arms and ammunition. Congress, still intent on avoiding being dragged into war, believed that American businesses would be able to sell their goods abroad without running the risk of submarine attack.

Although the Act applied to all belligerents, the “cash and carry” clause helped the Allies more than the Axis powers, because it required that ships travel across the Atlantic Ocean, which Britain’s navy controlled.

How did the fall of France further imperil the Allies?

By June of 1940, Nazi Germany had conquered Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. This was a tremendous blow to the Allies. Hitler controlled most of continental Europe. Great Britain was entirely on her own. Britain's new leader, Winston Churchill, spoke about what was likely to come.

“The Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin.... Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all of Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age....”

—British Prime Minister,
Winston Churchill, June 1940

In addition, on June 10th, Italy, which had previously declared itself a non-belligerent, joined with Germany and entered the war.

“Some indeed still hold to the now somewhat obvious delusion that we of the United States can safely permit the United States to become a lone island, a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force. Such an island may be the dream of those who still talk and vote as isolationists. Such an island represents to me and to the overwhelming majority of Americans today a helpless nightmare of a people without freedom—the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitiful masters of other continents.”

—Roosevelt, June 10, 1940

How did events in Europe affect events in Asia?

Germany's victories in Europe had a profound effect on Japan's leaders. Japan had invaded China in hopes of a quick victory. Instead they found themselves bogged down in an unwinnable war. The fall of France and the Netherlands meant that those countries' colonies in Southeast Asia were unprotected. Japan saw this as an opportunity to obtain the resources it thought it needed to win in China. Japan particularly coveted the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina. Britain alone remained in Europe and its survival was hardly certain. British colonies in Hong Kong, Burma, Singapore, and even Australia and India were also temptations to Japan.

Japan's military planners found Hitler's rapid military successes inspirational. They were convinced that it was the proper time to expand into Southeast Asia as a means of achieving economic self-sufficiency.

In July 1940, Fumimaro Konoe returned to power as prime minister with wide support from all political factions in Japan. Konoe, who had been part of Japan's delegation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, thought that events in Europe had created the situation that would allow Japan to assume its rightful place as a leading power in Asia. Konoe appointed like-minded ministers and began to implement his plan to dominate Asia. The government increased its control over the media and dissolved all political parties. The new government proposed the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which would eject the western nations from the region and establish Japan as the regional leader.

In July 1940, President Roosevelt thought that the United States could stop the Japanese from further aggression by prohibiting the sale of aviation fuel and scrap metal to them. This move in fact had the opposite effect. The Japanese felt they were being “strangled,” and at the end of September 1940, Japanese troops moved into Northern French Indochina with the permission of Germany's puppet government in France, known as Vichy. This area

of Indochina was a good source of oil, which Japan sorely needed for its military occupation in China, as well as for general maintenance of its empire.

This move was the last straw for Roosevelt. When Japan occupied Indochina, Roosevelt immediately froze Japan's assets, meaning the Japanese could no longer use investments or money they had in the United States. Japan responded by freezing American assets in Japan.

As tensions with the United States increased, Japan sought an alliance with Germany and Italy. Hitler was now ready to deal with Japan. He was anxious to turn his armies on his supposed ally, the Soviet Union, and needed the British and the Americans pre-occupied in Asia. Japan, Italy, and Germany signed the Tri-partite Pact on September 22, 1940. The pact said that the three nations would come to each other's aid if attacked by another not already involved in the war in Europe. More and more, it appeared to Roosevelt and his advisors that the United States would be pushed into war.

America First

Roosevelt took what he saw as the necessary precautions to protect the United States. He arranged to send fifty World-War-I-era destroyers to Great Britain in return for eight British naval bases in the Caribbean. On September 16, 1940, Congress passed an act instituting the first peacetime draft in American history, registering all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six. This was a bold move, for the presidential election of 1940 was in full swing and Roosevelt had opted to run for a third term, another unprecedented act in American history.

The looming threat posed by Germany and Japan contributed to Roosevelt's decision to run. The Republican candidate running against him was Wendell Wilkie. Although Wilkie was not an isolationist, he accused Roosevelt of leading the country towards war. With much of the public still anxious to avoid entanglements overseas, Wilkie's political strategy forced Roosevelt on the defensive.

Keeping the United States out of war became a central issue of the election. While he prepared for war, Roosevelt simultaneously said the United States would not go to war.

“We will not participate in foreign wars and will not need our army, naval or air forces to fight in foreign wars outside of the Americas except in case of attack.”

—Roosevelt, October 29, 1940

Roosevelt won the election decisively. After resuming office, he moved away from the rhetoric of the final weeks of his campaign. Roosevelt had little doubt that a confrontation with Nazi Germany was on the horizon. Ever mindful of public opinion, he began to prepare the public for the possibility that the United States would have to assert itself outside of its borders.

“The experience of the past two years has proven beyond doubt that no nation can appease the Nazis. No man can turn a tiger into a kitten by stroking it. There can be no appeasement with ruthlessness.... We know now that a nation can have peace with the Nazis only at the price of total surrender.... The history of recent years proves that shootings and chains and concentration camps are not simply the transient tools but the very altars of modern dictatorships. They may talk of a ‘new order’ in the world, but what they have in mind is but a revival of the oldest and the worst tyranny. In that there is no liberty, no religion, no hope. The proposed ‘new order’ is the very opposite of a United States of Europe or a United States of Asia. It is not a government based upon the consent of the governed. It is not a union of ordinary, self-respecting men and women to protect themselves and their freedom and their dignity from oppression. It is

an unholy alliance of power and pelf to dominate and enslave the human race."

—Roosevelt, December 29, 1940

What was the America First Committee?

Despite Germany and Japan's growing power, the isolationists increased their fight to stay out of war. The America First Committee (AFC), formed in September of 1940, devoted itself to keeping the United States out of war. At one point, it had close to 800,000 members. Charles Lindbergh was its most famous spokesperson, but it also boasted the membership of poet E.E. Cummings, Senator Gerald Nye, and actress Lillian Gish.

More than two-thirds of the AFC membership came from the midwest. For many in this area of the country, the problems overseas seemed even farther away than for those who lived on the coasts. There was also a greater mistrust of banking and industry, which midwesterners saw as eastern institutions motivated to go to war in order to make a profit.

In its first public statement the AFC advocated four ideas:

“1. The United States must build an impregnable defense for America;

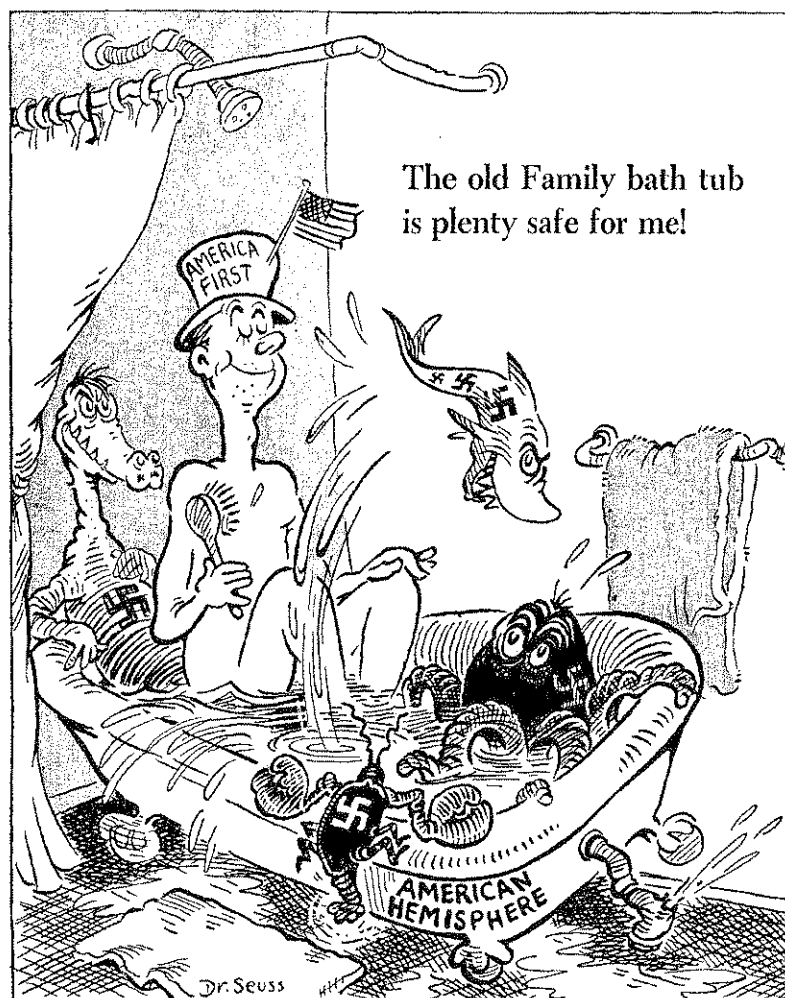
2. No foreign powers, nor group of powers, can successfully attack a prepared America;

3. American democracy can be preserved only by keeping out of the European war;

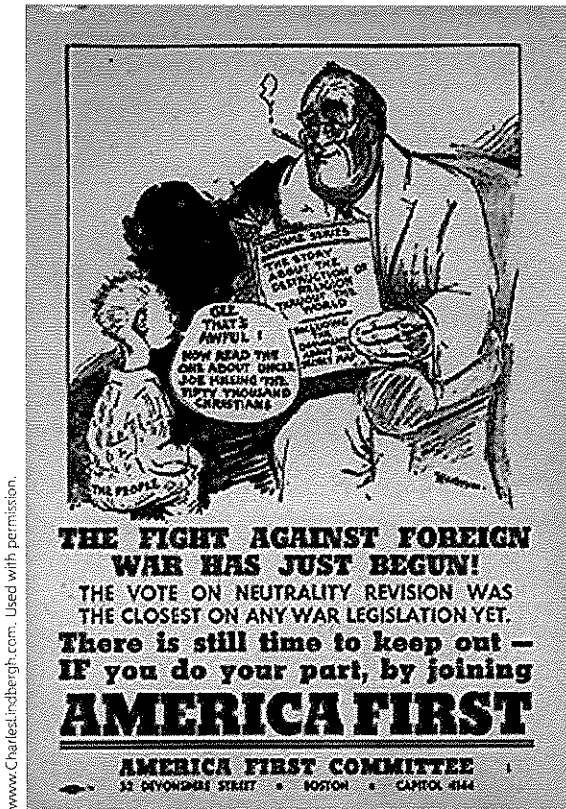
4. ‘Aid short of war’ weakens national defense at home and threatens to involve America in war abroad.”

The AFC claimed that FDR had been two-faced. AFC members pointed out that on the one hand, FDR had made numerous public promises during the 1930s and the 1940 election that the United States would absolutely not go to war. On the other hand, the AFC argued that he pushed Congress continually to pass legislation that would support the Allies and that would incite German or Japanese anger.

Members of the America First Committee also believed that it was not necessary for the United States to aid Britain, because the United States could survive a Nazi victory and even have prosperous economic relations with Germany. They also argued that Nazi power was overestimated and that three thousand



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... and the Wolf chewed up the children and spit out their bones ...
But those were Foreign Children and it really didn't matter."



These political cartoons illustrate the debate between the America First Committee and the interventionists.

miles of ocean would help protect the United States. Finally, they asserted that although the Nazi ideology was repugnant, this was not a reason to go to war. After all, they argued, many in the United States also found the ideology of the Soviet Union offensive, but the United States and the Soviet Union remained at peace.

enough for us to stay out. If we are forced into a war against the wishes of an overwhelming majority of our people, we will have proved Democracy such a failure at home that there will be little use fighting for it abroad."

—Charles Lindbergh, April 23, 1941

“War is not inevitable for this country. Such a claim is defeatism in the true sense. No one can make us fight abroad unless we ourselves are willing to do so. No one will attempt to fight us here if we arm ourselves as a great nation should be armed. Over a hundred million people in this nation are opposed to entering the war. If the principles of Democracy mean anything at all, that is reason

The emergence of the America First Committee, Roosevelt’s war preparations, and the news of events in Europe and Asia combined to heighten tension in the American public. Families struggled to remain optimistic that world events would stay away from America’s shores, yet many were concerned war might be close at hand. In the coming months, decisions about how to respond, if at all, to the world crisis would become increasingly contentious.