

ISOLATION VS. INTERVENTION

America's History of Isolationism

There has always been a strong isolationist streak in American political life. Americans have always felt separated by two great oceans since the American Revolution. We see ourselves as different and apart from the rest of the World. From the beginning of the Republic, President Washington warned of "avoiding entangling foreign alliances." He meant that America had the advantage of being geographically disconnected from Europe, which meant we should worry about our own problems first, and worry less about picking sides in the wars the rest of Europe would more than likely continue to start with one another. Gradually the principle of staying out

of European Wars became an accepted principle of the American Republic.



JOHN BULL USES THE AMERICAN FLAG FOR PROTECTION—
From the American (New York)
March 1915

World War I

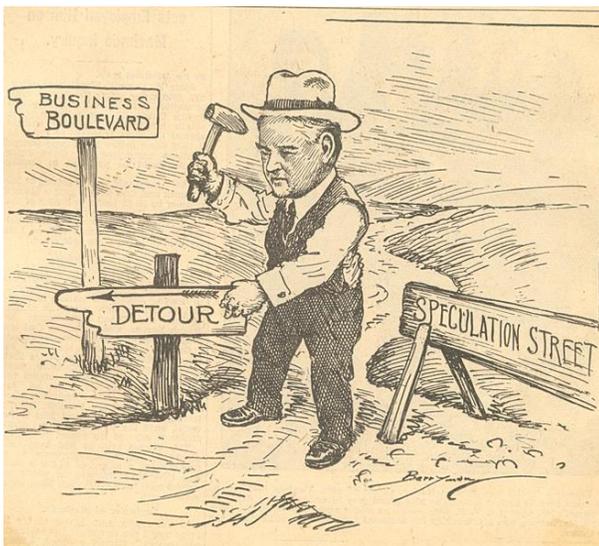
American entry into World War I was a break from traditional American isolation. World War I proved to be a vast killing field, destroying a generation of European men. World War I was America's first involvement in a European War, and the United States played a critical role in helping the Allies to win that War. However, if Germany had not insisted on unrestricted submarine warfare continually attacking American shipping, it is unlikely that America would have entered World War I. At the end of the First World War many Americans felt traumatized from the experience of an industrialized form of warfare and vowed not to become involved in foreign conflicts again.



The Depression (1929-39)

This feeling was intensified with the Depression of the 1930s and the focus

on domestic issues. The Great Depression--a worse calamity than the first world war; started with the Wall Street stock market crash in October 1929. Soon businesses were going under and Americans were losing their jobs. All Americans were affected. Eventually about one-third of all wage earners were unemployed and many who kept their jobs saw their earnings fall. President Hoover who had engineered a humanitarian miracle in Europe during World War I, but was unable to break away from the mindset that the Government should not intervene in the economy. As a result of America's bleak economy, the government had no choice but to stop offering what little help we were providing Germany in repaying their war debts and supporting the reconstruction of their infrastructure. As the American dream crumbled so too did Germany's hope of keeping their newly established democracy the Weimar Republic. As things continued to get more desperate in Germany the rise of a small and fanatical fascist political party continued to raise more and more questions about the direction Germany's future would take. When Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and proceeded to purposely and repeatedly break the conditions set in the Treaty of Versailles, war seemed to be on the horizon for Europe yet again. The question was: Would America take sides against the new totalitarian regimes? Or would America seek to stick with its isolationist traditions?



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President Roosevelt was elected by a landslide in 1932. He brought energy and new ideas to Washington and the Federal Government initiated programs that would have been rejected out of hand only a few years ago. Roosevelt was willing to use the Government to solve economic and social problems besetting Americans. The people loved him, electing him to an unprecedented third and fourth term. The propertied class or "economic royalists" as he called them, hated him. While the New Deal brought relief to many desperate Americans, the Depression lingered until orders for war material from Europe began to flood into America in the late 1930s. The rest of the world was also affected by the Depression. Britain and France also struggled with the economic down turn. The response in Germany and Japan was totalitarianism, militarism, and finally war.



Isolationist Sentiment Grows as Europe Gets Closer to War

Many Americans during the 1920s came to feel that America's entry into WWI was a mistake. After the rise of the NAZIs in the 1930s and Germany's rearmament, it became increasingly clear that Europe was moving toward another war. There was considerable talk of war profiteering. Many were determined that America should avoid war at any cost. This feeling was intensified with the Depression of the 1930s and the country's focus was on domestic issues. The anti-war sentiment in America and the memories of the men lost convinced many people that America must not get involved in any future European war. These sentiments combined with long-standing American isolationism resulted in the passage of a series of **Neutrality Acts**. The Neutrality Acts were laws passed in 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1939 to limit U.S. involvement in future wars. They were based on the widespread disillusionment with World War I in the early 1930s and the belief that the United States had been drawn into the war through loans and trade with the Allies. *These Acts prohibited United States companies to trade with warring nations.*



As a result, while German powers aided Franco's fascist take-over of Spain, the Neutrality Acts tied America's hands from supporting the Spanish Republic by being unwilling to sell them the arms they needed to defeat Franco. The show of German arms in Spain, especially the Luftwaffe air force bombings of Spanish cities terrified many. With the growing military might of a rearmed Germany, war talk in Europe began.

The America First Committee (AFC) was organized in September 1940 to oppose America's potential intervention in World War II. Hitler's invasion of Poland had started the war in September 1939. A year later, the only major military force resisting the Nazis was Britain. The smaller nations had been quickly overrun, France had been conquered, and the Soviet Union was using its nonaggression pact with Germany to pursue its own interests in Finland and elsewhere. At the time, a majority of Americans felt that while the world would be a better place if Britain prevailed over Germany, they were not inclined to declare war and repeat the earlier experience of American soldiers fighting on European soil. This fueled the desire of many Americans to remain neutral. Isolationist leaders opposed any involvement in a European war and clashed with President Roosevelt who increasingly saw the need to confront the NAZIs and Japanese militarists. Some like Charles Lindbergh, thought that America could not win a war against Germany's vaunted Luftwaffe. Many not only opposed American involvement, but even military preparedness and military expenditures were strongly opposed in the Congress.

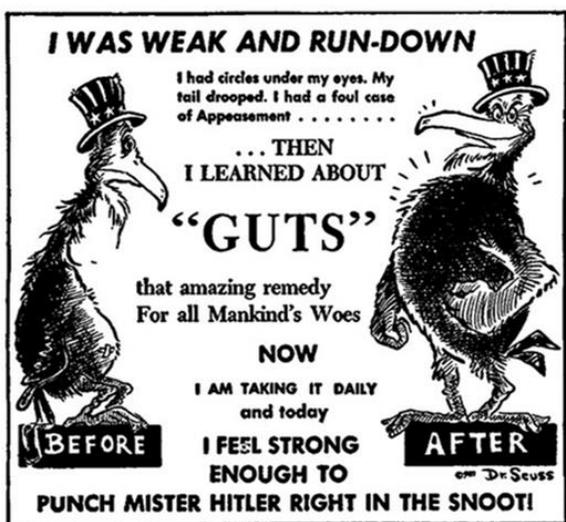
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Struggle against Isolationism

Against this backdrop, President Roosevelt who did see the dangers from the NAZIs and Japanese militarists, with great skill and political courage managed to not only support Britain in its hour of maximum peril, but with considerable political skill managed to push through Congress measures that would lay the ground work for turning American into the Arsenal of Democracy, producing a tidal wave of equipment and supplies not only for the American military, but for our Allies as well in quantities that no one especially the Axis believed possible. The Neutrality Act of 1937 allowed warring a war-prone countries to purchase any goods from the United States except for war materials such as arms. Fighting nations could, however, purchase important wartime resources such as oil from the United States. There was a provision in the act that said the goods had to be transported, or "carried," on non-American ships. Another provision required that the fighting powers had to pay for the goods with cash. It was referred to as the "cash-and-carry" principle

Arsenal of Democracy

President Roosevelt first used the term "Arsenal of Democracy" on December 29, 1940 in a radio broadcast to the American people. He explained the importance of supplying the people of Europe, at the time primarily Britain with the "implements of war". He said that the United States "must be the great arsenal of democracy". The very day he spoke, a Luftwaffe raid on London severely damaged famous buildings and churches in the city center and engulfed St. Paul's Cathedral in flames. [Gilbert, p. 356.] Hitler feared America more than any other country, but was convinced that Britain could be defeated before America could be mobilized or American industry could be effectively harnessed for the war effort. Neither the NAZIs nor the Japanese had any idea just how effectively American production could be converted to war production. German Air Marshall Goering sneered. "The Americans only know how to make razor blades." Four years later with the Luftwaffe in tatters, Goering said he knew that the War was lost when American P-51 Mustangs appeared over Berlin escorting waves of bombers. The record of American war production is staggering and in large measure determined the outcome of the War.



End of Isolationism (December 1941)

The Isolationists were one of the most powerful political movements in American history. Beginning with President Washington, there has always been a strong isolationist movement in America, one that is still present today. For about 4 years President Roosevelt had been fighting the isolationists who had come to see him as a war monger, determined to drag America into the European war. Republican Congressmen were important isolationists. There were also Democrats, including the Ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph P. Kennedy. Perhaps the most important isolationist was aviator Charles Lindbergh, an influential voice in the most important isolationist group--the American First Committee.

The President won the major battles against the isolationists, including repealing the Neutrality Acts, aiding Britain through the Cash & Carry Policy, beginning the first ever peace-time draft, and the Lend Lease Act. The Lend-Lease Act was passed by Congress on March 11, 1941. It provided that the president could ship weapons, food, or equipment to any country whose struggle against the Axis. By retooling U.S. industrial output to the demands of war, Lend-Lease formally eliminated any semblance of neutrality. President Franklin D. Roosevelt summarized the Lend-Lease Act as "helping to put out the fire in your neighbor's house before your own house caught fire and burned down." In effect, it turned the U.S. into an "arsenal of democracy" following the eruption of hostilities. Even so, the isolationists significantly impeded his efforts to resist Axis aggression.

Even as the bombs were falling at Pearl Harbor, the American First Committee staged a major rally in Pittsburgh. In a hall festooned with red, white, and blue wall banners, the American First Committee Members engaged in anti-Roosevelt cheers awaiting the main address by Congressman Gerald Nye. He brushed aside the first news reports of the attack and delivered an anti-Roosevelt tirade, charging that the President was leading us into War and included the standard isolationist line that the munitions makers were behind the War. Immediately afterwards Nye would blame the British. Few of the isolationists including Nye knew as they filed out of the auditorium that their movement that had been so powerful and influential had literally evaporated as soon as the American public learned about the Japanese sneak attack on America.



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FOCUS QUESTION:

Given America's isolationist attitude in the pre-world war II years, why did America move from isolationism to intervention by 1940?

Directions: Keeping the focus question in mind, use the article above to complete the chart below.

Isolation

Intervention

What would an American who is an ISOLATIONIST have to say about the war in Europe?	What would an American who is an INTERVENTIONIST have to say about the war in Europe?
<i>Name some famous Americans who were on the isolationist side?</i>	<i>Name a famous American who was on the interventionist side?</i>
How did the Great Depression affect isolationist attitudes in America?	How did the Great Depression affect interventionist attitudes in America?
<i>What actions did America take to eliminate the possibility of getting involved in another world war?</i>	<i>What actions did Franklin D. Roosevelt take to continue America's support of Britain against the Axis powers?</i>
Now that you have thoroughly investigated the focus question please explain how America gradually shifted from an isolationist to interventionist?	