

## CHAPTER 25

# THE GLOBAL CRISIS, 1921–1941



**“DEFENDING MADRID”** The Spanish Civil War, in which fascist forces led by Francisco Franco overturned the existing republican government, was an early signal to many Americans of the dangers of fascism and the threat to democracy. Although the United States government remained aloof from the conflict, several thousand Americans volunteered to fight on behalf of the republican forces. This 1938 Spanish war poster contains the words “Defending Madrid Is Defending Catalonia,” an effort by the government in Madrid to enlist the support of the surrounding regions to defend the capital against the fascists. *(Getty Images)*

**H**ENRY CABOT LODGE OF MASSACHUSETTS, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and one of the most powerful figures in the Republican Party, led the fight against ratification of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918 and 1919. In part because of his efforts, the Senate defeated the treaty; the United States failed to join the League of Nations; and American foreign policy embarked on an independent course that for the next two decades would attempt, but ultimately fail, to expand American influence and maintain international stability without committing the United States to any lasting relationships with other nations.

Lodge was not an isolationist. He recognized that America had emerged from World War I the most powerful nation in the world. He believed the United States should use that power and should exert its influence internationally. But he believed, too, that America's expanded role in the world should reflect the nation's own interests and its own special virtues; it should leave the nation unfettered with obligations to anyone else. He said in 1919:

We are a great moral asset of Christian civilization. . . . How did we get there? By our own efforts. Nobody led us, nobody guided us, nobody controlled us. . . . I would keep America as she has been—not isolated, not prevent her from joining other nations for . . . great purposes—but I wish her to be master of her own fate.

Lodge was not alone in voicing such sentiments. Throughout the 1920s, those controlling American foreign policy attempted to increase America's role in the world while at the same time keeping the nation free of burdensome commitments that might limit its own freedom of action. In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt became president, and brought with him his own legacy as a leading Wilsonian internationalist and erstwhile supporter of the League of Nations. But for more than six years, Roosevelt also attempted to keep America the "master of her own fate," to avoid important global commitments that might reduce the nation's ability to pursue its own ends.

In the end, the cautious, limited American internationalism of the interwar years proved insufficient to protect the interests of the United States, to create global stability, or to keep the nation from becoming involved in the greatest war in human history.

## SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

- 1921 ▶ Washington Conference leads to reductions in naval armaments
- 1922 ▶ Fordney-McCumber tariff passed
- 1924 ▶ Dawes Plan renegotiates European debts, reparations
- 1928 ▶ Kellogg-Briand Pact signed
- 1931 ▶ Economic crisis spreads worldwide
  - ▶ Japan invades Manchuria
- 1932 ▶ World Disarmament Conference held in Geneva
- 1933 ▶ Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
  - ▶ United States scuttles World Economic Conference
  - ▶ United States establishes diplomatic relations with Soviet Union
  - ▶ Roosevelt proclaims Good Neighbor Policy
- 1935 ▶ Senate defeats World Court treaty
  - ▶ Neutrality Act passed
  - ▶ Italy invades Ethiopia
- 1936 ▶ Spanish Civil War begins
  - ▶ Germany reoccupies Rhineland
  - ▶ Second Neutrality Act passed
- 1937 ▶ Japan launches new invasion of China
  - ▶ Roosevelt gives "quarantine" speech
  - ▶ Japan attacks U.S. gunboat *Panay*
  - ▶ Third Neutrality Act passed
- 1938 ▶ Germany annexes Austria (the Anschluss)
  - ▶ Munich Conference
- 1939 ▶ Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact signed
  - ▶ Germany invades Czechoslovakia
  - ▶ Germany invades Poland
  - ▶ World War II begins
- 1939–1940 ▶ Soviet Union invades Baltic nations, Finland
- 1940 ▶ German blitzkrieg conquers most of western Europe
  - ▶ Germany, Italy, Japan sign Tripartite Pact
  - ▶ Fight for Freedom Committee founded
  - ▶ America First Committee founded
  - ▶ Roosevelt reelected president
  - ▶ United States makes destroyers-for-bases deal with Britain
- 1941 ▶ Lend-lease plan provides aid to Britain
  - ▶ American ships confront German submarines in North Atlantic
  - ▶ Germany invades Soviet Union
  - ▶ Atlantic Charter signed
  - ▶ Japan attacks Pearl Harbor
  - ▶ United States declares war on Japan
  - ▶ Germany declares war on United States
  - ▶ United States declares war on Germany

## THE DIPLOMACY OF THE NEW ERA

Critics of American foreign policy in the 1920s often used a single word to describe the cause of their disenchantment: isolationism. Having rejected the Wilsonian vision of a new world order, they claimed, the nation had turned its back on the rest of the globe and repudiated its international responsibilities. In fact, the United States played a more active role in world affairs in the 1920s than it had at almost any previous time in its history—even if not the role the Wilsonians had prescribed.

### Myth of Isolationism

## Replacing the League

It was clear when the Harding administration took office in 1921 that American membership in the League of Nations was no longer a realistic possibility. As if finally to bury the issue, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes secured legislation from Congress in 1921 declaring the war with Germany at an end, and then proceeded to negotiate separate peace treaties with the former Central Powers. Through these treaties, American policymakers believed, the United States would receive all the advantages of the Versailles Treaty with none of the burdensome responsibilities. But Hughes was also committed to finding something to replace the League as a guarantor of world peace and stability. He embarked, therefore, on a series of efforts to build safeguards against future wars—but safeguards that would not hamper American freedom of action in the world.

The most important such effort was the Washington Conference of 1921—an attempt to prevent what was threatening to become a costly and destabilizing naval armaments race between America, Britain, and Japan. In his opening speech, Hughes startled the delegates by proposing a plan for dramatic reductions in the fleets of all three nations and a ten-year moratorium on the construction of large warships. He called for the scrapping of nearly 2 million tons of existing shipping. Far more surprising than the proposal was the fact that the conference ultimately agreed to accept most of its terms, something that Hughes himself apparently had not anticipated. The Five-Power Pact of February 1922 established both limits for total naval tonnage and a ratio of armaments among the signatories. For every 5 tons of American and British warships, Japan would maintain 3 and France and Italy 1.75 each. (Although the treaty seemed to confirm the military inferiority of Japan, in fact it sanctioned Japanese dominance in East Asia. America and Britain had to spread their fleets across the globe; Japan was concerned only with the Pacific.) The Washington Conference also produced two other, related treaties: the Nine-Power Pact, pledging a continuation of the Open Door policy in China, and the Four-Power Pact, by which the

### Washington Conference of 1921

United States, Britain, France, and Japan promised to respect one another's Pacific territories and cooperate to prevent aggression.

The Washington Conference began the New Era effort to protect the peace (and the international economic interests of the United States) without accepting active international duties. The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 concluded it. When the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, asked the United States in 1927 to join an alliance against Germany, Secretary of State Frank Kellogg (who had replaced Hughes in 1925) instead proposed a multilateral treaty outlawing war as an instrument of national policy. Fourteen nations signed the agreement in Paris on August 27, 1928, amid great solemnity and wide international acclaim. Forty-eight other nations later joined the pact. It contained no instruments of enforcement but rested, as Kellogg put it, on the “moral force” of world opinion.

### Kellogg-Briand Pact

## Debts and Diplomacy

The first responsibility of diplomacy, Hughes, Kellogg, and others agreed, was to ensure that American overseas trade faced no obstacles to expansion and would remain free of interference. Preventing a dangerous armaments race and reducing the possibility of war were steps to that end. So were new financial arrangements that emerged at the same time.

The United States was most concerned about Europe, on whose economic health American prosperity in large part depended. Not only were the major European industrial powers suffering from the devastation World War I had produced; they were also staggering under a heavy burden of debt. The Allied powers were struggling to repay \$11 billion in loans they had contracted with the United States during and shortly after the war, loans that the Republican administrations were unwilling to reduce or forgive. “They hired the money, didn’t they?” Calvin Coolidge once replied when asked if he favored offering Europe relief from their debts. At the same time, an even more debilitated Germany was attempting to pay the reparations levied against it by the Allies. With the financial structure of Europe on the brink of collapse, the United States stepped in with a solution.

In 1924 Charles G. Dawes, an American banker and diplomat, negotiated an agreement under which American banks would provide enormous loans to the Germans, enabling them to meet their reparations payments; in return, Britain and France would agree to reduce the amount of those payments. Dawes won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, but in fact the Dawes Plan did little to solve the problems it addressed.

It led to a troubling circular pattern in international finance. America would lend money to Germany, which would use that money to pay reparations to France and England, which would in turn use

### Circular Loans



**A FORD PLANT IN RUSSIA** The success of Henry Ford in creating affordable, mass-produced automobiles made him famous around the world, and particularly popular in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s, as the communist regime strove to push the nation into the industrial future. Russians called the system of large-scale factory production “Fordism,” and they welcomed assistance from the Ford Motor Company itself, which sent engineers and workers over to Russia to help build large automobile plants such as this one. (Bettmann/Corbis)

those funds (as well as large loans they themselves were receiving from American banks) to repay war debts to the United States. The flow was able to continue only by virtue of the enormous debts Germany and the other European nations were accumulating to American banks and corporations.

Those banks and corporations were doing more than providing loans. They were becoming a daily presence in the economic life of Europe. American automobile manufacturers were opening European factories, capturing a large share of the overseas market. Other industries in the 1920s were establishing subsidiaries worth more than \$10 billion throughout the Continent, taking advantage of the devastation of European industry and the inability of domestic corporations to recover. Some groups within the American government warned that the reckless expansion of overseas loans and investments, many in enterprises of dubious value, threatened disaster; that the United States was becoming too dependent on unstable European economies.

The high tariff barriers that the Republican Congress had erected (through the Fordney-McCumber Act of 1922) were creating additional problems, such skeptics warned. European nations, unable to export their goods to the United States, were finding it difficult to earn the money necessary to repay their loans. Such warnings fell for the most part on deaf ears, and American economic expansion in Europe continued until disaster struck in 1931.

The United States government felt even fewer reservations about assisting American economic expansion in

Latin America. During the 1920s, American military forces maintained a presence in numerous

Economic Expansion  
in Latin America

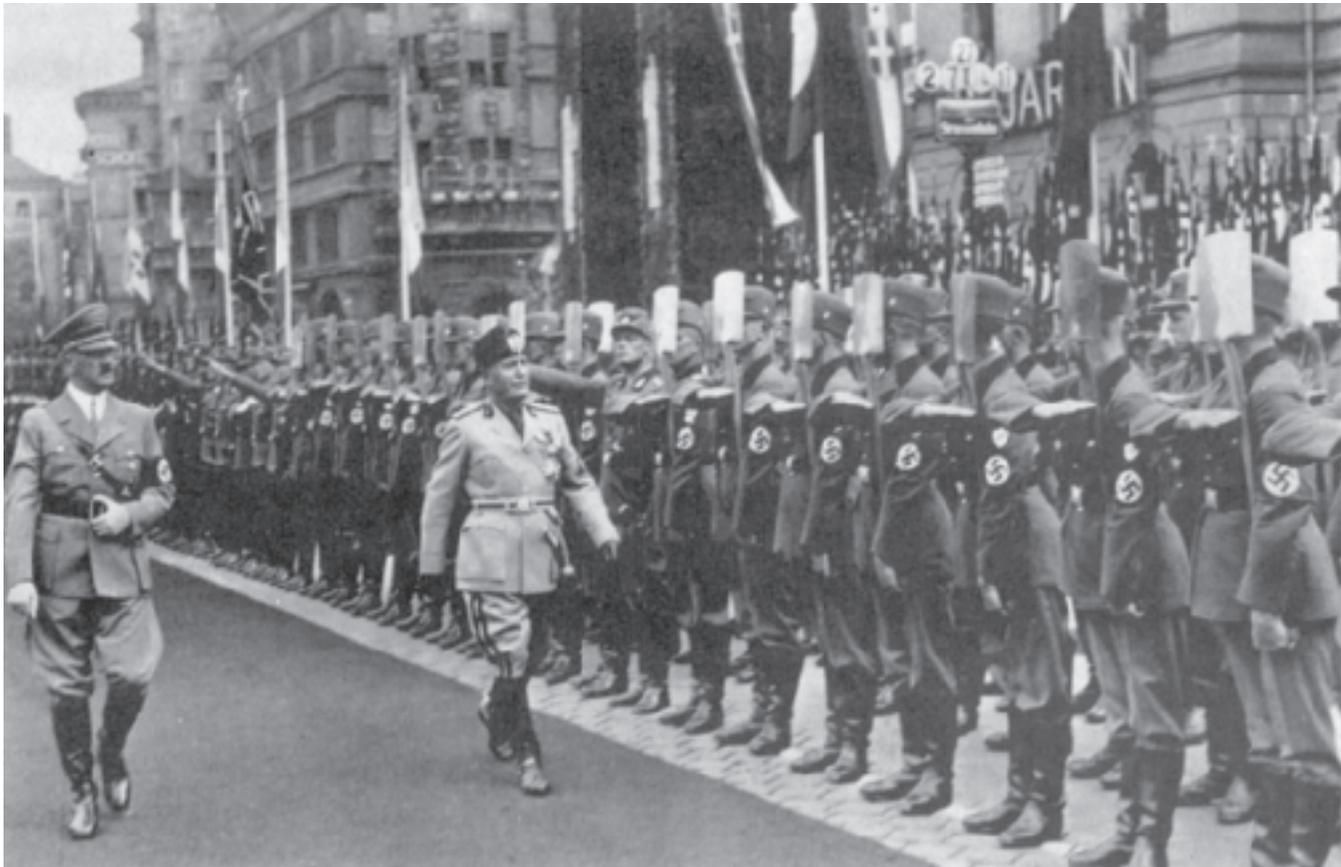
countries in the region. United States investments in Latin America more than doubled between 1924 and 1929; American corporations built roads and other facilities in many areas—partly, they argued, to weaken the appeal of revolutionary forces in the region, but at least equally to increase their own access to Latin America’s rich natural resources. American banks were offering large loans to Latin American governments, just as they were in Europe; and just as in Europe, the Latin Americans were having great difficulty earning the money to repay them in the face of the formidable United States tariff barrier. By the end of the 1920s, resentment of “Yankee imperialism” was growing rapidly. The economic troubles after 1929 would only accentuate such problems.

### Hoover and the World Crisis

After the relatively placid international climate of the 1920s, the diplomatic challenges facing the Hoover administration must have seemed ominous and bewildering. The world financial crisis that began in 1929 and greatly intensified after 1931 was not only creating economic distress; it was producing a dangerous nationalism that threatened the weak international agreements established during the previous decade. Above all, the Depression was toppling some existing political leaders and replacing them with powerful, belligerent governments bent on expansion as a solution to their economic problems. Hoover was confronted, therefore, with the beginning of a process that would ultimately lead to war. He lacked sufficient tools for dealing with it.

In Latin America, Hoover worked studiously to repair some of the damage created by earlier American policies. He made a ten-week goodwill tour through the region before his inauguration. Once in office, he tried to abstain from intervening in the internal affairs of neighboring nations and moved to withdraw American troops from Haiti. When economic distress led to the collapse of one Latin American regime after another, Hoover announced a new policy: America would grant diplomatic recognition to any sitting government in the region without questioning the means it had used to obtain power. He even repudiated the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine by refusing to permit American intervention when several Latin American countries defaulted on debt obligations to the United States in October 1931.

In Europe, the administration enjoyed few successes in its efforts to promote economic stability. When Hoover’s proposed moratorium on debts in 1931 failed to attract broad support or produce financial stability (see pp. 661–662), many economists and political leaders appealed to the president to cancel all war debts to the United States. Like his predecessors, Hoover refused;



**HITLER AND MUSSOLINI IN BERLIN** The German and Italian dictators (shown here reviewing Nazi troops in Berlin in the mid-1930s) acted publicly as if they were equals. Privately, Hitler treated Mussolini with contempt, and Mussolini complained constantly of being a junior partner in the relationship. (Bettmann/Corbis)

and several European nations promptly went into default, severely damaging an already tense international climate.

The ineffectiveness of diplomacy in Europe was particularly troubling in view of some of the new governments coming to power on the Continent. Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party had been in control of Italy since the early 1920s; by the 1930s, the regime was growing increasingly nationalistic and militaristic, and Fascist leaders were loudly threatening an active campaign of imperial expansion. Even more ominous was the growing power of the National Socialist (or Nazi) Party in Germany. By the late 1920s, the Weimar Republic, the nation's government since the end of World War I, had lost virtually all popular support, discredited by, among other things, a ruinous inflation. Adolf Hitler, the stridently nationalistic leader of the Nazis, was rapidly growing in popular favor. Although he lost a 1932 election for chancellor, Hitler would sweep into power less than a year later. His belief in the racial superiority of the Aryan (German) people, his commitment to providing *Lebensraum* (living space) for his "master race," his pathological anti-Semitism, and his passionate militarism—all posed a threat to European peace.

More immediately alarming to the Hoover administration was a major crisis in Asia—another early step toward World War II. The Japanese, reeling from an economic depression of their own, were concerned about the increasing strength of the Soviet Union and of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist China. In particular, they were alarmed at Chiang's insistence on expanding his government's power in Manchuria, which remained officially a part of China but over which the Japanese had maintained effective economic control since 1905. When the moderate government of Japan failed to take forceful steps to counter Chiang's ambitions, Japan's military leaders staged what was, in effect, a coup in the autumn of 1931—seizing control of foreign policy from the weakened liberals. Weeks later, they launched a major invasion of northern Manchuria. (See "America in the World," p. 716.)

The American government had few options. For a while, Secretary of State Henry Stimson (who had served as secretary of war under Taft) continued to hope that Japanese moderates would regain control of the Tokyo government and halt the invasion. The militarists, however, remained in command; and by the beginning of 1932, the conquest of Manchuria was complete. Stimson



**THE BOMBING OF CHUNGKING, 1940** Chungking (now Chongqing) was the capital of China under the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek during World War II. It was also the site of some of the most savage fighting of the Sino-Japanese War. This photograph shows buildings in Chungking burning after Japanese bombing in 1940. (*Getty Images*)

issued stern (but essentially toothless) warnings to Japan and tried to use moral suasion to end the crisis. But Hoover forbade him to cooperate with the League of Nations in imposing economic sanctions against the Japanese. Stimson's only real tool in dealing with the Manchurian invasion was a refusal to grant diplomatic recognition to the new Japanese territories. Japan was unconcerned and early in 1932 expanded its aggression farther into China, attacking the city of Shanghai and killing thousands of civilians.

By the time Hoover left office early in 1933, it was clear that the international system the United States had attempted to create in the 1920s—a system based on voluntary cooperation among nations and on an American refusal to commit itself to the interests of other countries—had collapsed. The United States faced a choice. It could adopt a more energetic form of internationalism and enter into firmer and more meaningful associations with other nations. Or it could resort to nationalism and rely on its own devices for dealing with its (and the world's) problems. For the next six years, it experimented with elements of both approaches.

Failure of America's  
Interwar Diplomacy

## ISOLATIONISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

The administration of Franklin Roosevelt faced a dual challenge as it entered office in 1933. It had to deal with the worst economic crisis in the nation's history, and it had to deal with the effects of a decaying international structure. The two problems were not unrelated. It was the worldwide Depression itself that was producing much of the political chaos throughout the globe.

Through most of the 1930s, however, the United States was unwilling to make more than faint gestures toward restoring stability to the world. Like many other peoples suffering economic hardship, most Americans were turning inward. Yet the realities of world affairs were not to allow the nation to remain isolated for very long—as Franklin Roosevelt realized earlier than many other Americans.

### Depression Diplomacy

Perhaps Roosevelt's sharpest break with the policies of his predecessor was on the question of American economic relations with Europe. Hoover had argued that only by

resolving the question of war debts and reinforcing the gold standard could the American economy hope to recover. He had therefore agreed to participate in the World Economic Conference, to be held in London in June 1933, to try to resolve these issues. By the time the conference assembled, however, Roosevelt had already decided to allow the gold value of the dollar to fall to enable American goods to compete in world markets. Shortly after the conference convened, Roosevelt released a famous “bombshell” message repudiating the orthodox views of most of the delegates and rejecting any agreement on currency stabilization. The conference quickly dissolved without reaching agreement, and not until 1936 did the administration finally agree to new negotiations to stabilize Western currencies.

FDR’s “Bombshell”

At the same time, Roosevelt abandoned the commitments of the Hoover administration to settle the issue of war debts through international agreement. In effect, he simply let the issue die. In April 1934, he signed a bill to forbid American banks to make loans to any nation in default on its debts. The result was to stop the old, circular system; within months, war-debt payments from every nation except Finland stopped for good.

Although the new administration had no interest in international currency stabilization or settlement of war debts, it did have an active interest in improving America’s position in world trade. Roosevelt approved the Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act of 1934, authorizing the administration to negotiate treaties lowering tariffs by as much as 50 percent in return for reciprocal reductions by other nations. By 1939, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, a devoted free trader, had negotiated new treaties with twenty-one countries. The result was an increase in American exports to them of nearly 40 percent. But most of the agreements admitted only products not competitive with American industry and agriculture, so imports into the United States continued to lag. Thus other nations were not obtaining the American currency needed to buy American products or pay off debts to American banks.

## America and the Soviet Union

America’s hopes of expanding its foreign trade helped produce efforts by the Roosevelt administration to improve relations with the Soviet Union. The United States and Russia had viewed each other with mistrust and even hostility since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the American government still had not officially recognized the Soviet regime by 1933. But powerful voices within the United States were urging a change in policy—less because the revulsion with which most Americans viewed communism had diminished than because the Soviet Union appeared to be a possible source of trade. The Russians, too, were eager for a new relationship. They were hoping in particular for American cooperation in

containing the power of Japan, which Soviet leaders feared as a threat to Russia from the southeast. In November 1933, therefore, Soviet foreign minister Maxim Litvinov reached an agreement with the president in Washington. The Soviets would cease their propaganda efforts in the United States and protect American citizens in Russia; in return, the United States would recognize the communist regime.

Despite this promising beginning, however, relations with the Soviet Union soon soured once again. American trade failed to establish much of a foothold in Russia; and the Soviets received no reassurance from the United States that it was interested in stopping Japanese expansion in Asia. By the end of 1934, as a result of these disappointed hopes on both sides, the Soviet Union and the United States were once again viewing each other with considerable mistrust.

## The Good Neighbor Policy

Somewhat more successful were American efforts to enhance both diplomatic and economic relations with Latin America through what became known as the “Good Neighbor Policy.” Latin America was one of the most important targets of the new policy of trade reciprocity. During the 1930s, the United States succeeded in increasing both exports to and imports from the other nations of the Western Hemisphere by over 100 percent. Closely tied to these new economic relationships was a new American attitude toward intervention in Latin America. The Hoover administration had unofficially abandoned the earlier American practice of using military force to compel Latin American governments to repay debts, respect foreign investments, or otherwise behave “responsibly.” The Roosevelt administration went further. At the Inter-American Conference in Montevideo in December 1933,

Secretary of State Hull signed a formal convention declaring: “No state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another.” Roosevelt respected that pledge throughout his years in office. The Good Neighbor Policy did not mean, however, that the United States had abandoned its influence in Latin America. Instead of military force, Americans now tried to use economic influence. The new reliance on economic pressures eased tensions between the United States and its neighbors considerably. It did nothing to stem the growing American domination of the Latin American economies.

Inter-American Conference

## The Rise of Isolationism

The first years of the Roosevelt administration marked not only the death of Hoover’s hopes for international economic agreements, but the end of any hopes for world peace through treaties and disarmament as well.

The arms control conference in Geneva had been meeting, without result, since 1932; and in May 1933, Roosevelt

attempted to spur it to action by submitting a new American proposal for arms reductions. Negotiations stalled and then broke down; and only a few months later, first Hitler and then Mussolini withdrew from the talks altogether. Two years later, Japan withdrew from the London Naval Conference, which was attempting to draw up an agreement to continue the limitations on naval armaments negotiated at the Washington Conference of 1921.

Faced with a choice between more active efforts to stabilize the world or more energetic attempts to isolate the nation from it, most Americans unhesitatingly chose the latter. Support for isolationism emerged from many quarters. Old Wilsonian internationalists had grown disillusioned with the League of Nations and its inability to stop Japanese aggression in Asia. Other Americans were listening to the argument (popular among populist-minded politicians in the Midwest and West) that powerful business interests—Wall Street, munitions makers, and others—had tricked the United States into participating in World War I. An investigation by a Senate committee chaired by Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota revealed exorbitant profiteering and blatant tax evasion by many corporations during the war, and it suggested (on the basis of little evidence) that bankers had pressured Wilson to intervene in the war so as to protect their loans abroad. Roosevelt himself shared some of the suspicions voiced by the isolationists and claimed to be impressed by the findings of the Nye investigation. Nevertheless, he continued to hope for at least a modest American role in maintaining world peace. In 1935, he asked the Senate to ratify a treaty to make the United States a member of the World Court—a treaty that would have expanded America's symbolic commitment to internationalism with-

#### Sources of Isolationism

with the League of Nations and its inability to stop Japanese aggression in Asia.

out increasing its actual responsibilities in any important way. Nevertheless, isolationist opposition (spurred by unremitting hostility from the Hearst newspapers and a passionate broadcast by Father Charles Coughlin on the eve of the Senate vote) resulted in the defeat of the treaty. It was a devastating political blow to the president, and he did not soon again attempt to challenge the isolationist tide.

That tide seemed to grow stronger in the following months. Through the summer of 1935, it became clear that Mussolini's Italy was preparing to invade Ethiopia in an effort to expand its colonial holdings in Africa. Fearing that a general European war would result, American legislators began to design legal safeguards to prevent the United States from being dragged into the conflict. The result was the Neutrality Act of 1935.

The 1935 act, and the Neutrality Acts of 1936 and 1937 that followed, was designed to prevent a recurrence of the events that many Americans now believed had pressured the United States into World War I. The 1935 law established a mandatory arms embargo against both victim and aggressor in any military conflict and empowered the president to warn American citizens that they might travel on the ships of warring nations only at their own risk. Thus, isolationists believed, the "protection of neutral rights" could not again become an excuse for American intervention in war. The 1936 Neutrality Act renewed these provisions. And in 1937, with world conditions growing even more precarious, Congress passed a new Neutrality Act that established the so-called cash-and-carry policy, by which belligerents could purchase only nonmilitary goods from the United States and had to pay cash and carry the goods away on their own vessels.

#### Neutrality Acts



**THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR** Less than a year before the beginning of World War II, American volunteers were in Spain serving as Republican soldiers in the country's civil war. Most of the Americans were members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, members of which are shown here in October 1938 near Barcelona. Because many members of the brigade were communists, they were dismissed by the government in 1939 after the Nazi-Soviet pact ended Stalin's support of the Spanish Republicans. (*Magnum Photos*)

## THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR, 1931–1941

Long before Pearl Harbor, well before war broke out in Europe in 1939, the first shots of what would become World War II had been fired in the Pacific in a conflict between Japan and China.

Having lived in almost complete isolation from the world until the nineteenth century, Japan emerged from World War I as a great world power, with a proud and powerful military and growing global trade. But the Great Depression created severe economic problems for the Japanese (in part because of stiff new American tariffs on silk imports); and as in other parts of the world, the crisis strengthened the political influence of highly nationalistic and militaristic leaders. Out of the Japanese military emerged dreams of a new empire in the Pacific. Such an empire would, its proponents believed, give the nation access to fuel, raw materials, and markets for its industries, as well as land for its agricultural needs and its rapidly increasing population. Such an empire, they argued, would free Asia from exploitation by Europe and America and would create a “new world order based on moral principles.”

During World War I, Japan had seized territory and economic concessions in China and had created a particularly strong presence in the northern Chinese region of Manchuria. There, in September 1931, a group of militant young army officers seized on a railway explosion to justify a military campaign through which they conquered the entire province. Both the United States government and the League of Nations demanded that Japan evacuate Manchuria. The Japanese ignored them, and for the next six years consolidated their control over their new territory.

On July 7, 1937, Japan began a wider war when it attacked Chinese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Beijing. Over the next few weeks, Japanese forces overran a large part of southern China, including most of the port cities, killing many Chinese soldiers and civilians in the process. Particularly notorious was the Japanese annihilation of many thousands of civilians in the city of Nanjing (the number has long been in dispute, but estimates range from 80,000 to more than 300,000) in an event that became known in China and



**ENTERING MANCHURIA, 1931** Japanese troops pour into Mukden (now Shenyang), the capital of the Chinese province of Manchuria, in 1931—following a staged incident that allowed Japan to claim that its troops had been attacked. The so-called Mukden Incident marked the beginning of the long Sino-Japanese War. (*Getty Images*)

the West as the Nanjing Massacre. The Chinese government fled to the mountains. As in 1931, the United States and the League of Nations protested in vain.

The China that the Japanese had invaded was a nation in turmoil. It was engaged in a civil war of its own—between the so-called Kuomintang, a nationalist party led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong; and this internal struggle weakened China’s capacity to resist invasion. But beginning in 1937, the two Chinese rivals agreed to an uneasy truce and began fighting the Japanese together, with some success—boggling the Japanese military down in a seemingly endless war and imposing hardships on the Japanese people at home. The Japanese government and the military, however, remained determined to continue the war against China, whatever the sacrifices.

One result of the costs of the war in China was a growing Japanese dependence on the United States for

steel and oil to meet civilian and military needs. In July 1941, in an effort to pressure the Japanese to stop their expansion, the Roosevelt administration made it impossible for the Japanese to continue buying American oil. Japan now faced a choice between ending its war in China or finding other sources of fuel to keep its war effort (and its civilian economy) going. It chose to extend the war beyond China in a search for oil. The best available sources were in the Dutch East Indies; but the only way to secure that European colony, the Japanese believed, would be to neutralize the increasingly hostile United States in Asia. Visionary military planners in Japan began advocating a daring move to immobilize the Americans in the Pacific before expanding the war elsewhere—with an attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. The first blow of World War II in America, therefore, was the culmination of more than a decade of Japanese efforts to conquer China.

The American stance of militant neutrality gained support in October 1935 when Mussolini finally launched his long-anticipated attack on Ethiopia. When the League of Nations protested, Italy simply resigned from the organization, completed its conquest of Ethiopia, and formed an alliance (the “Axis”) with Nazi Germany. Most Americans responded to the news with renewed determination to isolate themselves from European instability. Two-thirds of those responding to public opinion polls at the time opposed any American action to deter aggression. Isolationist sentiment showed its strength once again in 1936–1937 in response to the civil war in Spain. The Falangists, a group much like the Italian fascists, revolted in July 1936 against the existing republican government. Hitler and Mussolini supported General Francisco Franco, who became the leader of the Falangists in 1937, both vocally and with weapons and supplies. Some individual Americans traveled to Spain to assist the republican cause; but the United States government joined with Britain and France in an agreement to offer no assistance to either side—although all three governments were sympathetic to the republicans.

Particularly disturbing was the deteriorating situation in Asia. Japan’s aggressive designs against China had been clear since the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. In the summer of 1937, Tokyo launched an even broader assault, attacking China’s five northern provinces. (See “America in the World,” p. 716.) The United States, Roosevelt believed, could not allow the Japanese aggression to go unremarked or unpunished. In a speech in Chicago in October 1937, therefore, the president warned forcefully of the dangers that Japanese aggression posed to world peace. Aggressors, he proclaimed, should be “quarantined” by the international community to prevent the contagion of war from spreading. The president was deliberately vague about what such a “quarantine” would mean. Nevertheless, public response to the speech was disturbingly hostile. As a result, Roosevelt drew back.

Only months later, another episode provided renewed evidence of how formidable the obstacles to Roosevelt’s efforts remained. On December 12, 1937, Japanese aviators bombed and sank the U.S. gunboat *Panay* as it sailed the Yangtze River in China. The attack was almost undoubtedly deliberate. It occurred in broad daylight, with clear visibility. A large American flag had been painted conspicuously on the *Panay*’s deck. Even so, isolationists seized eagerly on Japanese protestations that the bombing had been an accident and pressured the administration to accept Japan’s apologies.

## The Failure of Munich

Hitler’s determination to expand German power became fully visible in 1936, when he moved the revived German

army into the Rhineland, violating the Versailles Treaty and rearming an area that France had, in effect, controlled since World War I. In March 1938, German forces marched into Austria, and Hitler proclaimed a union (or *Anschluss*) between Austria, his native land, and Germany, his adopted one—thus fulfilling his longtime dream of uniting the German-speaking peoples in one great nation. Neither in America nor in most of Europe was there much more than a murmur of opposition. The Austrian invasion, however, soon created another crisis, for Hitler had by now occupied territory surrounding three sides of western Czechoslovakia, a region he dreamed of annexing to provide Germany with the *Lebensraum* he believed it needed. In September 1938, he demanded that Czechoslovakia cede to him part of that region, the Sudetenland, an area on the Austro-German border in which many ethnic Germans lived. Czechoslovakia, which possessed substantial military power of its own, was prepared to fight rather than submit. But it realized it could not hope for success without help from other European nations. It received none. Most Western nations were appalled at the prospect of another war and were willing to pay almost any price to settle the crisis peacefully. Anxiety ran almost as high in the United States as it did in Europe during and after the crisis, and helped produce such strange expressions of fear as the hysterical response to the famous “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast in October. (See “Patterns of Popular Culture,” pp. 718–719.)

On September 29, Hitler met with the leaders of France and Great Britain at Munich in an effort to resolve the crisis. The French and British agreed to accept the German demands for Czechoslovakia in return for Hitler’s promise to expand no farther. “This is the last territorial claim I have to make in Europe,” the Führer solemnly declared. And Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned to England to a hero’s welcome, assuring his people that the agreement ensured “peace in our time.” Among those who had cabled him with encouragement at Munich was Franklin Roosevelt.

The Munich accords were the most prominent element of a policy that came to be known as “appeasement” and that came to be identified (not altogether fairly) almost exclusively with Chamberlain.

Whoever was to blame, however, it became clear almost immediately that the policy was a failure. In March 1939, Hitler occupied the remaining areas of Czechoslovakia, violating the Munich agreement unashamedly. And in April, he began issuing threats against Poland. At that point, both Britain and France gave assurances to the Polish government that they would come to its assistance in case of an invasion; they even flirted, too late, with the Stalinist regime in Russia, attempting to draw it into a mutual defense agreement. Stalin, however, had already decided that he could expect no protection from the

Ethiopia

“Quarantine” Speech

Munich Conference

Failure of  
“Appeasement”

## ORSON WELLES AND THE “WAR OF THE WORLDS”

On the evening of October 30, 1938, about 6 million Americans were listening to the weekly radio program *The Mercury Theater of the Air*, produced by the actor/filmmaker Orson Welles and broadcast over the CBS network. A few minutes into the show, an announcer broke in and interrupted some dance music with a terrifying report:

At least forty people, including six state troopers, lie dead in a field east of Grover’s Mill [New Jersey], their bodies burned and distorted beyond recognition. . . . Good heavens, something’s

wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake! Now it’s another one and another. . . . It’s large as a bear and it glistens like black leather. But that face . . . it’s indescribable! I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it.

The panicky announcer was describing the beginning of an alien invasion of earth and the appearance of Martians armed with “death rays,” determined to destroy the planet. Later in the evening, an announcer claiming to be broadcasting from Times Square reported the destruc-

tion of New York City before falling dead at the microphone. Other statements advised citizens of surrounding areas to flee.

The dramatic “news bulletins” were part of a radio play by Howard Koch, loosely adapted from H. G. Wells’s 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds*. Announcers reminded the audience repeatedly throughout the broadcast that they were listening to a play, not reality. But many people either did not hear or did not notice the disclaimers. By the end of the hour, according to some estimates, as many as a million



**THE MERCURY THEATER OF THE AIR**

Orson Welles, the founder and director of the *Mercury Theater of the Air*, directs a corps of actors during a rehearsal for one of the show’s radio plays. (Culver Pictures, Inc.)



**WELLES ON THE AIR** Welles is shown here during the broadcast of the “War of the Worlds” in 1938. Although he was careful to note that the broadcast was fiction, he came under intense criticism in following days for the panic it caused among many listeners. (Bettmann/Corbis)

West; after all, he had not even been invited to attend the Munich Conference. Accordingly, he signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler in August 1939, freeing the Germans for the moment from the danger of a two-front war. For a few months, Hitler had been trying to frighten the Poles into submitting to German demands. When that failed, he staged an incident on the Polish border to allow him to claim that Germany had been attacked; and on September 1, 1939, he launched a full-scale invasion of Poland. Britain and France, true to their pledges, declared war on Germany two days later. World War II had begun.

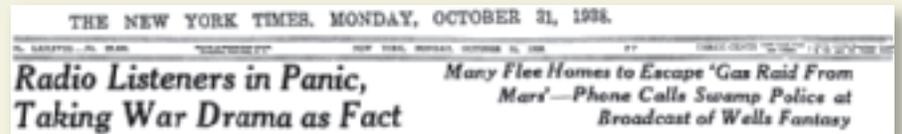
### FROM NEUTRALITY TO INTERVENTION

“This nation will remain a neutral nation,” the president declared shortly after the hostilities began in Europe, “but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well.” It was a statement that stood in stark and deliberate contrast to Woodrow Wilson’s 1914 plea that the nation remain neutral in both deed and thought; and it was clear from the start that among those whose opinions were decidedly unneutral in 1939 was the president himself.

Americans were flying into panics, convinced that the end of the world was imminent.

Thousands of listeners in New York and New Jersey actually fled their homes and tried to drive along clogged highways into the hills or the countryside. Others rushed into the streets, huddled in parks, or hid under bridges. In Newark, people ran from their buildings with wet towels wrapped around their faces or wearing gas masks—as if defending themselves against the chemical warfare that many remembered from the trenches in World War I. In cities across the country, people flocked into churches to pray; called police and hospitals for help; flooded the switchboards of newspapers, magazines, and radio stations desperate for information. “I never hugged my radio so closely as I did last night,” one woman later explained. “I held a crucifix in my hand and prayed while looking out of my open window for falling meteors.” The *New York Times* described it the next day as “a wave of mass hysteria.” Other papers wrote of a “tidal wave of terror that swept the nation.” For weeks thereafter, Orson Welles and other producers of the show were the focus of a barrage of criticism for what many believed had been a deliberate effort to create public fear. For years, sociologists and other scholars studied the episode for clues about mass behavior.

Welles and his colleagues claimed to be surprised by the reaction their show created. It had never occurred to them, they insisted, that anyone would consider it real. But the broadcast proved more effective than they



**MASS HYSTERIA** A *New York Times* headline the morning after the famous “War of the Worlds” broadcast of the *Mercury Theater of the Air* reports on the panic the radio show had caused the night before. “A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners throughout the nation between 8:15 and 9:30 o’ clock last night,” the paper reported, “when a broadcast of H. G. Wells’s fantasy ‘The War of the Worlds,’ led thousands to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction in New Jersey and New York.” (Copyright © 1938 by the *New York Times Co.* Reprinted by Permission)

had expected because it touched on a cluster of anxieties and assumptions that ran deep in American life at the time—anxieties similar to those that ran deep again in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. The show aired only a few weeks after the war fever that had preceded the Munich pact among Germany, Britain, and France; Americans already jittery about the possibility of war proved easy prey to fears of another kind of invasion. The show also tapped longer-standing anxieties about the fragility of life that afflicted many Americans during the long depression of the 1930s, and it seemed to frighten working-class people—those most vulnerable to unexpected catastrophes—in particular.

Most of all, however, “The War of the Worlds” unintentionally exploited the enormous power that radio had come to exercise in American life, and the great trust many people had developed in what they heard over the air. Over 85 percent of American families had radios in 1938. For many of them, the broadcasts they received had become their principal, even their

only, source of information about the outside world. When the actors from the *Mercury Theater* began to use the familiar phrases and cadences of radio news announcers, it was all too easy for members of their audience to assume that they were hearing the truth.

Welles concluded the broadcast by describing the play as “the Mercury Theater’s own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying Boo! . . . So good-bye everybody, and remember, please, for the next day or so, the terrible lesson you learned tonight. The grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and there’s no one there, that was no Martian . . . it’s Halloween.” But the real lesson of “The War of the Worlds” was not Welles’s jocular one. It was the lesson of the enormous, and at times frightening, power of the medium of broadcasting.

From *War of the Worlds* by Howard Koch. Copyright © 1938 Howard Koch. Reprinted by permission from International Creative Management, Inc.

## Neutrality Tested

There was never any question that both the president and the majority of the American people favored Britain, France, and the other Allied nations in the conflict. The question was how much the United States was prepared to do to assist them. At the very least, Roosevelt believed, the United States should make armaments available to the Allied armies to help them counter the highly productive German munitions industry. In September 1939, he asked Congress for a revision of the Neutrality Acts. The original measures had forbidden the sale of American weapons to

any nation engaged in war; Roosevelt wanted the arms embargo lifted. Powerful isolationist opposition forced him to accept a weaker revision than he would have liked; as passed by Congress, the 1939 measure maintained the prohibition on American ships entering war zones. It did, however, permit belligerents to purchase arms on the same cash-  
Cash-and-Carry  
and-carry basis that the earlier Neutrality Acts had established for the sale of nonmilitary materials.

After the German armies had quickly subdued Poland, the war in Europe settled into a long, quiet lull that

**THE OCCUPATION OF POLAND, 1939** A German motorized detachment enters a Polish town that has already been battered by heavy bombing from the German air force (the *Luftwaffe*). The German invasion of Poland, which began on September 1, 1939, sparked the formal beginning of World War II. (Bettmann/Corbis)



lasted through the winter and spring—a “phony war,” many people called it. The only real fighting during this period occurred not between the Allies and the Axis, but between Russia and its neighbors. Taking advantage of the situation in the West, the Soviet Union overran and annexed the small Baltic republics of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania and then, in late November, invaded Finland. Most Americans were outraged, but neither Congress nor the president was willing to do more than impose an ineffective “moral embargo” on the shipment of armaments to Russia. By March 1940, the Soviet advance was complete.

Whatever illusions anyone may have had about the reality of the war in western Europe were shattered in the spring of 1940 when Germany launched an invasion to the west—first attacking Denmark and Norway, sweeping next across the Netherlands and Belgium, and driving finally deep into the heart of France. Allied efforts proved futile against the Nazi blitzkrieg. One western European stronghold after another fell into German hands. On June 10, Mussolini brought Italy into the war, invading France from the south as Hitler was attacking from the north. On

June 22, finally, France fell to the German onslaught. Nazi troops marched into Paris; a new collaborationist regime assembled in Vichy; and in all Europe, only the shattered remnants of the British army, rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk

Fall of France

by a flotilla of military and civilian vessels assembled miraculously quickly, remained to oppose the Axis forces.

Roosevelt had already begun to increase American aid to the Allies. He also began preparations to resist a possible Nazi invasion of the United States. On May 16, he asked Congress for an additional \$1 billion for defense (much of it for the construction of an enormous new fleet of warplanes) and received it quickly. With France tottering a few weeks later, he proclaimed that the United States would “extend to the opponents of force the material resources of this nation.” And on May 15, Winston Churchill, the new British prime minister, sent Roosevelt the first of many long lists of requests for ships, armaments, and other assistance without which, he insisted, England could not long survive. Many Americans (including the United States ambassador to London, Joseph P. Kennedy) argued that the British



**THE BLITZ, LONDON** The German *Luftwaffe* terrorized London and other British cities in 1940-1941 and again late in the war by bombing civilian areas indiscriminately in an effort to break the spirit of the English people. The effort failed, and the fortitude of the British in the face of the attack did much to arouse support for their cause in the United States. St. Paul's Cathedral, largely undamaged throughout the raids, looms in the background of this photograph, as other buildings crumble under the force of German bombs. (*Brown Brothers*)

plight was already hopeless, that any aid to the English was a wasted effort. The president, however, made the politically dangerous decision to make war materials available to Churchill. He even circumvented the cash-and-carry provisions of the Neutrality Act by trading fifty American destroyers (most of them left over from World War I) to England in return for the right to build American bases on British territory in the Western Hemisphere; and he returned to the factories a number of new airplanes purchased by the American government so that the British could buy them instead.

Roosevelt was able to take such steps in part because of a major shift in American public opinion. Before the invasion of France, most Americans had believed that a German victory in the war would not be a threat to the United States. By July, with France defeated and Britain threatened, more than 66 percent of the public (according to opinion polls) believed that Germany posed a direct threat to the United States. Congress was aware of the change

Shifting Public Opinion

and was becoming more willing to permit expanded American assistance to the Allies. It was also becoming more concerned about the need for internal preparations for war, and in September it approved the Burke-Wadsworth Act, inaugurating the first peacetime military draft in American history.

But while the forces of isolation may have weakened, they were far from dead. A spirited and at times vicious debate began in the spring of 1940 between those activists who advocated expanded American involvement in the war (who were termed, often inaccurately, "interventionists") and those who continued to insist on neutrality. The celebrated journalist William Allen White served as chairman of a new Committee to Defend America, whose members lobbied actively for increased American assistance to the Allies but opposed actual intervention. Others went so far as to urge an immediate declaration of war (a position that as yet had little public support) and in April 1941 created an organization of their own, the Fight for Freedom Committee.

Opposing them was a powerful new lobby called the America First Committee, which attracted some of America's most prominent leaders. Its chairman was General Robert E. Wood, until recently the president of Sears Roebuck; and its membership included Charles Lindbergh, General Hugh Johnson, Senator Gerald Nye, and Senator Burton Wheeler. It won the editorial support of the Hearst chain and other influential newspapers, and it had at least the indirect support of a large proportion of the Republican Party. (It also, inevitably, attracted a fringe of Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semites.) The debate between the two sides was loud and bitter. Through the summer and fall of 1940, moreover, it was complicated by a presidential campaign.

America First  
Committee

### The Third-Term Campaign

For many months, the politics of 1940 revolved around the question of Franklin Roosevelt's intentions. Would he break with tradition and run for an unprecedented third term? The president himself never publicly revealed his own wishes. But by refusing to withdraw from the contest, he made it impossible for any rival Democrat to establish a foothold within the party. Just before the Democratic Convention in July, he let it be known that he would accept a "draft" from his party. The Democrats quickly renominated him and even reluctantly swallowed his choice for vice president: Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace, a man too liberal for the taste of many party leaders.

With Roosevelt effectively straddling the center of the defense debate, favoring neither the extreme isolationists nor the extreme interventionists, the Republicans had few obvious alternatives. Succumbing to a remarkable popular movement (carefully orchestrated by, among others, *Time* and *Life* magazines), they nominated a dynamic and attractive but politically inexperienced businessman, Wendell Willkie.

Willkie took positions little different from Roosevelt's: he would keep the country out of war but would extend generous assistance to the Allies. An appealing figure and a vigorous campaigner, he managed to evoke more public enthusiasm than any Republican candidate in decades. In the end, however, he was no match for Franklin Roosevelt. The election was closer than it had been in either 1932 or 1936, but Roosevelt nevertheless won decisively. He received 55 percent of the popular vote to Willkie's 45 percent, and won 449 electoral votes to Willkie's 82.

### Neutrality Abandoned

In the last weeks of 1940, with the election behind him, Roosevelt began to make subtle but profound changes in the American role in the war. More than aiding Britain, he was moving the United States closer to war.

In December 1940, Great Britain was virtually bankrupt. No longer could the British meet the cash-and-carry requirements imposed by the Neutrality Acts; yet England's needs, Churchill insisted, were greater than ever. The president, therefore, suggested a method that would "eliminate the dollar sign" from all arms transactions. The new system was labeled "lend-lease." It would allow the government not only to sell but also to lend or lease armaments

Lend-Lease

to any nation deemed "vital to the defense of the United States." In other words, America could funnel weapons to England on the basis of no more than Britain's promise to return or pay for them when the war was over. Isolationists attacked the measure bitterly, arguing (correctly) that it was simply a device to tie the United States more closely to the Allies; but Congress enacted the bill by wide margins.

With lend-lease established, Roosevelt soon faced another serious problem: ensuring that the American supplies would actually reach Great Britain. Shipping lanes in the Atlantic had become extremely dangerous; German submarines destroyed as much as a half-million tons of shipping each month. The British navy was losing ships more rapidly than it could replace them and was finding it difficult to transport materials across the Atlantic from America. Secretary of War Henry Stimson (who had been Hoover's secretary of state and who returned to the cabinet at Roosevelt's request in 1940) argued that the United States should itself convoy vessels to England; but Roosevelt decided to rely instead on the concept of "hemispheric defense," by which the United States navy would defend transport ships only in the western Atlantic—which he argued was a neutral zone and the responsibility of the American nations. By July 1941, American ships were patrolling the ocean as far east as Iceland, escorting convoys of merchant ships, and radioing information to British vessels about the location of Nazi submarines.

At first, Germany did little to challenge these obviously hostile American actions. By the fall of 1941, however, events in Europe changed its position. German forces had invaded the Soviet Union in June

Germany Invades  
the USSR

of that year, shattering the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact. The Germans drove quickly and forcefully deep into Russian territory. When the Soviets did not surrender, as many military observers had predicted they would, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to extend lend-lease privileges to them—the first step toward creating a new relationship with Stalin that would ultimately lead to a formal Soviet-American alliance. Now American industry was providing crucial assistance to Hitler's foes on two fronts, and the navy was playing a more active role than ever in protecting the flow of goods to Europe.

In September, Nazi submarines began a concerted campaign against American vessels. Early that month, a

German U-boat fired on the American destroyer *Greer* (which was radioing the U-boat's position to the British at the time). Roosevelt responded by ordering American ships to fire on German submarines "on sight." In October, Nazi submarines hit two American destroyers and sank one of them, the *Reuben James*, killing many American sailors. Enraged members of Congress now voted approval of a measure allowing the United States to arm its merchant vessels and to sail all the way into belligerent ports. The United States had, in effect, launched a naval war against Germany.

At the same time, a series of meetings, some private and one public, were tying the United States and Great Britain more closely together. In April 1941, senior military officers of the two nations met in secret and agreed on the joint strategy they would follow were the United States to enter the war. In August, Roosevelt met with Churchill aboard a British vessel anchored off the coast of Newfoundland. The president made no military commitments, but he did join the prime minister in releasing a document that became known as the Atlantic Charter, in which the two nations set out "certain common principles" on which to base "a better future for the world." It was, in only vaguely disguised form, a statement of war aims that called openly for, among other things, "the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny."

By the fall of 1941, it seemed only a matter of time before the United States became an official belligerent. Roosevelt remained convinced that public opinion would support a declaration of war only in the event of an actual enemy attack. But an attack seemed certain to come, if not in the Atlantic, then in the Pacific.

## The Road to Pearl Harbor

Japan took advantage of the crisis that had preoccupied the Soviet Union and the two most powerful colonial powers in Asia, Britain and France, to extend its empire in the Pacific. In September 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, a loose defensive alliance with Germany and Italy that seemed to extend the Axis into Asia. (In reality, the European Axis powers never developed a strong relationship with Japan, and the wars in Europe and the Pacific were largely separate conflicts.)

Roosevelt had already displayed his animosity toward Japanese policies by harshly denouncing their continuing assault on China and by terminating a longstanding American commercial treaty with the Tokyo government. Still the Japanese drive continued. In July 1941, imperial troops moved into Indochina and seized the capital of Vietnam, a colony of France. The United States, having broken the Japanese codes, knew that Japan's next target would be the Dutch East Indies; and when Tokyo failed to respond to Roosevelt's stern warnings,

the president froze all Japanese assets in the United States and established a complete trade embargo, severely limiting Japan's ability to purchase essential supplies (including oil). American public opinion, shaped by strong anti-Japanese prejudices developed over several decades, generally supported these hostile actions.

Tokyo now faced a choice. Either it would have to repair relations with the United States to restore the flow of supplies, or it would have to find those supplies elsewhere, most notably by seizing British and Dutch possessions in the Pacific. At first the Japanese prime minister, Prince Konoye, seemed willing to compromise. In October, however, militants in Tokyo forced Konoye out of office and replaced him with the leader of the war party, General Hideki Tojo. With Japan's need for new sources of fuel becoming desperate, there now seemed little alternative to war.

For several weeks, the Tojo government kept up a pretense of wanting to continue negotiations. On November 20, 1941, Tokyo proposed a modus vivendi highly favorable to itself and sent its diplomats in Washington to the State Department to discuss it. But Tokyo had already decided that it would not yield on the question of China, and Washington had made clear that it would accept nothing less than a reversal of that policy. Secretary of State Cordell Hull rejected the Japanese overtures out of hand; on November 27, he told Secretary of War Henry Stimson, "I have washed my hands of the Japanese situation, and it is now in the hands of you and [Secretary of the Navy Frank] Knox, the Army and Navy." He was not merely speculating. American intelligence had already decoded Japanese messages, which made clear that war was imminent, that after November 29 an attack would be only a matter of days.

But Washington did not know where the attack would take place. Most officials were convinced that the Japanese would move first not against American territory but against British or Dutch possessions to the south. American intelligence took note of a Japanese naval task force that began sailing east from the Kuril Islands in the general direction of Hawaii on November 25, and radioed a routine warning to the United States naval facility at Pearl Harbor, near Honolulu. But officials were paying more attention to a large Japanese convoy moving southward through the China Sea. A combination of confusion and miscalculation led the government to overlook indications that Japan intended a direct attack on American forces—partly because Hawaii was so far from Japan that few officials believed such an attack possible.

At 7:55 A.M. on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a wave of Japanese bombers—taking off from aircraft carriers hundreds of miles away—attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor. A second wave came an hour later.

Atlantic Charter

ments, but he did join the prime minister in releasing a document

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Tripartite Pact

ial powers in Asia, Britain and France, to extend its empire in the Pacific. In September 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, a loose defensive alliance with Germany and Italy that seemed to extend the Axis into Asia. (In reality, the European Axis powers never developed a strong relationship with Japan, and the wars in Europe and the Pacific were largely separate conflicts.)

Tokyo's Decision for War

## THE QUESTION OF PEARL HARBOR

The phrase “Remember Pearl Harbor!” became a rallying cry during World War II—reminding Americans of the surprise Japanese attack on the American naval base in Hawaii and arousing the nation to exact revenge. But within a few years of the end of hostilities, some Americans remembered Pearl Harbor for very

different reasons. They began to challenge the official version of the attack on December 7, 1941, and their charges sparked a debate that has never fully subsided. Was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor unprovoked, and did it come without warning, as the Roosevelt administration claimed at the time? Or was

it part of a deliberate plan by the president to make the Japanese force a reluctant United States into the war? Most controversial of all, did the administration know of the attack in advance? Did Roosevelt deliberately refrain from warning the commanders in Hawaii so that the air raid’s effect on the American public would be more profound?

Among the first to challenge the official version of Pearl Harbor was the historian Charles A. Beard, who maintained in *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War* (1948) that the United States had deliberately forced the Japanese into a position whereby they had no choice but to attack. By cutting off Japan’s access to the raw materials it needed for its military adventure in China, by stubbornly refusing to compromise, the United States ensured that the Japanese would strike out into the southwest Pacific to take the needed supplies by force—even at the risk of war with the United States. Not only was American policy provocative in effect, Beard suggested; it was deliberately provocative. More than that, the administration, which had some time before cracked the Japanese code, must have known weeks in advance of Japan’s plan to attack—although Beard did not claim that



**PEARL HARBOR, DECEMBER 7, 1941** The destroyer U.S.S. *Shaw*, immobilized in a floating drydock in Pearl Harbor in December 1941, survived the first wave of Japanese bombers unscathed. But in the second attack, the Japanese scored a direct hit and produced this spectacular explosion, which blew off the ship’s bow. Damage to the rest of the ship, however, was slight. Just a few months later the *Shaw* was fitted with a new bow and rejoined the fleet. (U.S. Navy Photo)

### Pearl Harbor

Military commanders in Hawaii had taken no precautions against such an attack and had allowed ships to remain bunched up defenselessly in the harbor and airplanes to remain parked in rows on airstrips. The consequences of the raid were disastrous for America. Within two hours, the United States lost 8 battleships, 3 cruisers, 4 other vessels, 188 airplanes, and several vital shore installations. More than 2,000 soldiers and sailors died, and another 1,000 were injured. The Japanese suffered only light losses.

American forces were now greatly diminished in the Pacific (although by a fortunate accident, none of the American aircraft carriers—the heart of the Pacific fleet—had been at Pearl Harbor on December 7). Nevertheless, the raid on Pearl Harbor did virtually overnight what more than two years of effort by Roosevelt and

others had been unable to do: it unified the American people in a fervent commitment to war. On December 8, the president traveled to Capitol Hill, where he grimly addressed a joint session of Congress: “Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” Within four hours, the Senate unanimously and the House 388 to 1 (the lone dissenter being Jeanette Rankin of Montana, who had voted against war in 1917 as well) approved a declaration of war against Japan. Three days later, Germany and Italy, Japan’s European allies, declared war on the United States; and on the same day, December 11, Congress reciprocated without a dissenting vote. For the second time in twenty-five years, the United States was engaged in a world war.

officials knew the attack would come at Pearl Harbor. Beard supported his argument by citing Secretary of War Henry Stimson's comment in his diary: "The question was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot." This view has reappeared more recently in Thomas Fleming, *The New Dealers' War* (2001), which also argues that Roosevelt deliberately (and duplicitously) maneuvered the United States into war with Japan.

A partial refutation of the Beard argument appeared in 1950 in Basil Rauch's *Roosevelt from Munich to Pearl Harbor*: The administration did not know in advance of the planned attack on Pearl Harbor, he argued. It did, however, expect an attack somewhere; and it made subtle efforts to "maneuver" Japan into firing the first shot in the conflict. But Richard N. Current, in *Secretary Stimson: A Study in Statecraft* (1954), offered an even stronger challenge to Beard. Stimson did indeed anticipate an attack, Current argued, but not an attack on American territory; rather, he anticipated an assault on British or Dutch possessions in the Pacific. The problem confronting the administration was not how to maneuver the Japanese into attacking the United States, but how to find a way to make a Japanese attack on British or Dutch territory appear to be an attack on America. Only thus, Stimson believed, could Congress

be persuaded to approve a declaration of war.

Roberta Wohlstetter took a different approach to the question in *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (1962), the most thorough scholarly study to appear to that point. De-emphasizing the question of whether the American government wanted a Japanese attack, she undertook to answer the question of whether the administration knew of the attack in advance. Wohlstetter concluded that the United States had ample warning of Japanese intentions and should have realized that the Pearl Harbor raid was imminent. But government officials failed to interpret the evidence correctly, largely because their preconceptions about Japanese intentions were at odds with the evidence they confronted. Admiral Edwin T. Layton, who had been a staff officer at Pearl Harbor in 1941, also blamed political and bureaucratic failures for the absence of advance warning of the attack. In a 1985 memoir, *And I Was There*, he argued that the Japanese attack was a result not only of "audacious planning and skillful execution" by the Japanese, but of "a dramatic breakdown in our intelligence process . . . related directly to feuding among high-level naval officers in Washington."

The most thorough study of Pearl Harbor to date appeared in 1981: Gordon W. Prange's *At Dawn*

*We Slept*. Like Wohlstetter, Prange concluded that the Roosevelt administration was guilty of a series of disastrous blunders in interpreting Japanese strategy; the American government had possession of enough information to predict the attack, but failed to do so. But Prange dismissed the arguments of the "revisionists" (Beard and his successors) that the president had deliberately maneuvered the nation into the war by permitting the Japanese to attack. Instead, he emphasized the enormous daring and great skill with which the Japanese orchestrated an ambitious operation that few Americans believed possible.

But the revisionist claims have not been laid to rest. John Toland revived the charges of a Roosevelt betrayal in 1982, in *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, claiming to have discovered new evidence (the testimony of an unidentified seaman) that proves the navy knew at least five days in advance that Japanese aircraft carriers were heading toward Hawaii. From that, Toland concluded that Roosevelt must have known that an attack was forthcoming and that he allowed it to occur in the belief that a surprise attack would arouse the nation. But like the many other writers who have made the same argument, Toland was unable to produce any direct evidence of Roosevelt's knowledge of the planned attack.

## CONCLUSION

American foreign policy in the years after World War I attempted something that ultimately proved impossible. The United States was determined to be a major power in the world, to extend its trade broadly around the globe, and to influence other nations in ways Americans believed would be beneficial to their own, and the world's, interests. But the United States was also determined to do nothing that would limit its own freedom of action. It would not join the League of Nations. It would not join the World Court. It would not form alliances with other nations. It would operate powerfully—and alone.

But ominous forces were at work in the world that would gradually push the United States into greater en-

gagement with other nations. The economic disarray that the Great Depression created all around the world; the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe and Asia; the expansionist ambitions of powerful new leaders—all worked to destroy the uneasy stability of the post-World War I international system. America's own interests, economic and otherwise, were now imperiled. And America's go-it-alone foreign policy seemed powerless to change the course of events.

Franklin Roosevelt tried throughout the later years of the 1930s to push the American people slowly into a greater involvement in international affairs. In particular, he tried to nudge the United States toward

taking a more forceful stand against dictatorship and aggression. A powerful isolationist movement helped stymie him for a time, even after war broke out in Europe. Gradually, however, public opinion shifted toward support of the Allies (Britain, France, and eventually Russia) and against the Axis (Germany, Italy, and Japan). The nation began to mobilize for war, to supply

ships and munitions to Britain, even to engage in naval combat with German forces in the Atlantic. Finally, on December 7, 1941, a surprise Japanese attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii ended the last elements of uncertainty and drove the United States—now united behind the war effort—into the greatest conflict in human history.

## INTERACTIVE LEARNING

The *Primary Source Investigator CD-ROM* offers the following materials related to this chapter:

- Documents, images, and maps related to the rising world tensions in the 1920s and 1930s, and the outbreak of World War II. Highlights include an excerpt from the Lend-Lease Act of 1941 providing U.S. aid to Britain, a 1941 “fireside chat” in which President Roosevelt makes the case for expanded powers dur-

ing wartime, and a video clip showing the destruction from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

### Online Learning Center ([www.mhhe.com/brinkley13e](http://www.mhhe.com/brinkley13e))

For quizzes, Internet resources, references to additional books and films, and more, consult this book’s Online Learning Center.

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (1979) is a comprehensive study of Roosevelt’s foreign policy. Akira Iriye, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, vol. 3: The Globalizing of America, 1913–1945* (1993) is another important study. In *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983), Walter LaFeber recounts America’s attempts to halt revolutionary movements throughout the world. James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: the Soldier of Freedom* (1970) and Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (1991) are two important studies of the president. Wayne S. Cole, *Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle Against American Intervention in World War II* (1974) and *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932–1945* (1983) examine prewar isolationism. A. Scott Berg,

*Lindbergh* (1998) is an excellent biography of the aviation hero who became such a controversial figure in the 1930s. Charles DeBenedetti, *Origins of the Modern American Peace Movement, 1915–1929* (1978) and *The Peace Reform in American History* (1980) examine antiwar movements in American history, including prior to World War II. Joseph Lash’s *Roosevelt and Churchill* (1976) explores the dynamic relationship between the two leaders of the United States and England. Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (1988) examines the conflict between China and Japan that preceded American intervention in the Pacific war. Gordon Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (1981) examines the controversial attack on Pearl Harbor from both the Japanese and American sides.

