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# The Situation

**The 1930s** The American reaction to such aggression was true to tradition. We made an all-out effort to isolate ourselves from the possibility of entrance into another war. Inspired by the conclusions of the Nye Committee in 1934-1935, the prevailing opinion of most Americans was that we had been naively lured into World War I by warmongering munitions manufacturers who considered profit above human lives.

**The neutrality laws** Between 1935-1937 rumors of American involvement in the European war were set aside when Congress passed a series of neutrality laws. These measures prohibited the export of arms and munitions to belligerent forces and forbade Americans from traveling on belligerent ships. Now there was an "official" barrier between the United States and the nations at war, a barrier seeming to separate American interests from those of the Europeans, not by an ocean, but by a universe.

**Events in Europe** Events in Europe during 1937-1938 did little to alter American feelings toward neutrality. England and France maintained a policy of appeasement toward Hitler. They allowed him to occupy Czechoslovakia based on his promise not to acquire any further territory. However, the outbreak of World War II shattered the complacency of western Europeans and Americans. Germany's surprise invasion of Poland in 1939 and the relative ease with which Hitler crushed France convinced many Americans that the Nazis could indeed win the war. Furthermore, if England, which by May of 1940 "stood alone" against German aggression, should fall, what was to stop the Axis from world domination?

**FDR reacts** These Nazi successes combined with the Japanese sweep southward through China spurred President Roosevelt to pledge "to opponents of force the material resources of this nation." Roosevelt traded 50 "over-age" destroyers to England in exchange for naval and air bases on British territory (the British West Indies, Newfoundland, and Bermuda). England desperately needed the destroyers to combat German submarines; the United States needed the bases as defensive outposts. The so-called Destroyer-Naval Base deal of 1940 was more than a moral decree. Our government was committing itself to a gradual movement from neutrality to non-belligerency (i.e., indirect involvement in the European war). For the second time in the 20th century, the base of United States isolationism had been cracked.

▶ **Drifting toward war** Thus, the United States was embarking on a course of action that would prove irreversible as war drifted closer to America's shores. Throughout 1940, while the Roosevelt administration moved swiftly from a policy of limited assistance to England to all-out aid short of war, the American public never ceased debating whether FDR was a great leader or a great betrayer. This period of time produced two opposing groups, *interventionists* and *isolationists*. Both claimed to speak for the sentiments of most Americans.

**The debate** The lines of debate were well drawn by October 1940, and the combatants on both sides were ready to deliver their arguments forcefully and eloquently. Key questions were on the lips of many Americans:

- Will the Axis powers defeat England and China and then look to the western hemisphere for their next conquest?
- Has the United States recovered sufficiently from the worst economic depression in its history, only to prepare for involvement in a major war?
- Is President Roosevelt "willfully" moving the United States toward war, or is he trying to keep the country neutral?
- If the United States continues to aid England, will the Germans consider our actions as a sign of open belligerency and attack us?



Many questions bothered many Americans.

These and other important issues raged hot and heavy across the United States in the period of time 1937-1940. It is necessary to point out, without prejudicing the entire debate that will take place, that the majority of Americans believed by late 1940 that their country would eventually be drawn into war. But few people conceived of Pearl Harbor being the provocation because, regardless of whether one was an isolationist or an interventionist, most had thought the issue of war or peace would be America's to decide.

To give you a first-hand impression of the depth and feeling that leading Americans possessed at this time, excerpts from two articles, one by an isolationist (Senator Bennett Champ Clark of Missouri) and one by an interventionist (writer Robert E. Sherwood), are presented. As you read each carefully, strive to understand and feel the emotions and attitudes these men present. If your efforts prove successful, you will be better prepared to debate and learn from the issue of American neutrality in 1940.

▶ **Your debate's scenario** The 1940 debate over American neutrality will take place in mid-October in a large conference room at the elegant Edgewater Beach Hotel on the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago, Illinois. Since Chicago is considered the "American Capital of Isolationism," this city is an appropriate locale. The debate is being sponsored by Robert E. Wood, who heads the America First Committee—which some people consider to be the "official voice" of isolationism and strict American neutrality. Here is the resolution you will debate: *Resolved—America should actively aid the Allies in their fights with Germany and Japan.*

## Interventionists (1939- 1940)

## EXCERPT 1

#1

neighbors to the south, against Britain or the captive states of Europe. We are arming solely for one reason. We are arming against Hitler's Germany—a great predatory Power in alliance with Japan.

It has been said, times without number, that if Hitler cannot cross the English Channel he cannot cross three thousand miles of sea. But there is only one reason why He has not crossed the English Channel. . . . As Secretary Hull has said: "It is not the water that bars the way. It is the resolute determination of British arms. Were the control of the seas by Britain lost, the Atlantic would no longer be an obstacle—rather, it would become a broad highway for a conqueror moving westward."

That conqueror does not need to attempt at once an invasion of continental United States in order to place this country in deadly danger. We shall be in deadly danger the moment British sea power fails; the moment the eastern gates of the Atlantic are open to the aggressor; the moment we are compelled to divide our one-ocean Navy between two oceans simultaneously. . . .

Grant Hitler the gigantic prestige of a victory over Britain, and who can doubt that the first result, on our side of the ocean, would be the prompt appearance of imitation Nazi regimes in a half-dozen Latin-American nations, forced to be on the winning side, begging favors, clamoring for admission to the Axis? What shall we do then? Make war upon these neighbors; send armies to fight in the jungles of Central or South America; run the risk of outraging native sentiment and turning the whole continent against us? Or shall we sit tight while the area of Nazi influence draws ever closer to the Panama Canal and a spreading checkerboard of Nazi airfields provides ports of call for German planes that may choose to bomb our cities? . . .

American courage and American idealism, together with the sound common sense of the American people, summon us to the defense both of our physical security and of those moral and spiritual values which alone make life worth living.

*New York Times* editorial:

Those who tell us now that the sea is still our certain bulwark, and that the tremendous forces sweeping the Old World threaten no danger to the New, give the lie to their own words in the precautions they would have us take.

To a man they favor an enormous strengthening of our defenses. Why? Against what danger would they have us arm if none exists? . . .

No man in his senses will say that we are arming against Canada or our Latin American

#2

**EXCERPT 2**

## Interventionist Foreign Policy

These accomplishments..."once seemed a dream. Today they are concrete realities brought about by a common cause; the patient and judicious application of American leadership, American power and perhaps most of all American moral force. And yet from some quarters we have voices sounding the retreat. We've carried the burden too long they say and the disappearance of..." [the problems of the time] "mean America can withdraw from international responsibilities and others assert that domestic needs preclude an active American policy... that we've done our part and now it's someone else's turn. We are warned against entangling ourselves in the troubles that abound in today's world... such as the alarming growth of virulent nationalism. And it's true that many problems seem to have united all at once taxing the world's ability to respond. But, let's be clear. The alternative to American leadership is not more security for our citizens but less! History is summoning us once again to lead. Proud of its past, America must once again look forward and we must live up to the greatness of our forefathers ideals and in doing so secure our grandchildren's futures. And that is the cause that much of my public life has been dedicated to serving. God bless you!

#3

Robert Sherwood was one of our nation's most articulate spokespersons during this troubled time.



**PRO-INTERVENTION ... Robert E. Sherwood, writer ... New York Times, June 10, 1940.**

We Americans have naturally wished to keep out of this war—to take no steps which might lead us in. But—

We now know that every step the French and British fall back brings war and world revolutions closer to us—our country, our institutions, our homes, our hopes for peace.

Hitler is striking with all the terrible force at his command. His is a desperate gamble, and the stakes are nothing less than domination of the whole human race.

If Hitler wins in Europe—if the strength of the British and French armies and navies is forever broken—the United States will find itself alone in a barbaric world—a world ruled by Nazis, with “spheres of influence” assigned to their totalitarian allies. However different the dictatorships may be, racially, they all agree on one primary objective: *“Democracy must be wiped from the face of the earth.”*

The world will be placed on a permanent war footing. Our country will have to pile armaments upon armaments to maintain even the illusion of security. We shall have no other business, no other aim in life, but primitive self-defense. We shall exist only under martial law—or the law of the jungle. Our economic structure will have to be adjusted to that of our gangster competitors. We shall have to change ourselves from easy-going individuals into a “dynamic race.”

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people”—if Hitler wins, this will be the discarded ideal of a decayed civilization.

*Is this “Alarmism”?* Then so is the challenging scream of an air-raid siren, warning civilians that death is coming from the skies. We have ample cause for deepest alarm. It should impel us, not to hysteria, but to resolute action ....

We can and should and will devote ourselves to a vast program of defense. But we must not try to fool ourselves into thinking that security can be bought.

We can help by sending planes, guns, munitions, food. We can help to end the fear that American boys will fight and die in another Flanders, closer to home.

The members of our government are your servants. In an emergency as serious as this, they require the expression of your will. They must know that the American people are not afraid to cast off the hypocritical mask of neutrality, which deceives no one, including ourselves.

*Send a postcard, a letter, or a telegram, at once*—to the President of the United States, to your Senators and your Congressmen—urging that the *real* defense of our country must begin now—with aid to the Allies!

The United States of America is still the most powerful nation on earth—and the United States of America is you!

## **The President Explains the Lend-Lease Plan** **Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940**

At a press conference on October 30, 1940, President Roosevelt presented a program to aid the European Allies that would become the Lend-Lease Act of 1941.

It is possible--I will put it that way--for the United States not to take over British [war] orders, and, because they are essentially the same kinds of munitions that we use ourselves, turn them into American orders. We have got enough money to do it. And thereupon, as to such portion of them as the military events of the future determine to be right and proper for us to allow to go to the other side, either lease or sell the materials, subject to mortgage, to the people on the other side. That would be on the general theory that it may still prove true that the best defense of Great Britain is the best defense of the United States, and therefore that these materials would be more useful to the defense of the United States if they were used in Great Britain than if they were kept in storage here.

Now, what I am trying to do is to eliminate the dollar sign. That is something brand new in the thoughts of practically everybody in this room, I think--get rid of the silly, foolish old dollar sign.

Well, let me give you an illustration. Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire. Now, what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, "Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15; you have got to pay me \$15 for it." What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want \$15--I want my garden hose back after the fire is over. All right. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it. But suppose it gets smashed up--holes in it--during the fire; we don't have to have too much formality about it, but I say to him, "I was glad to lend you that hose; I see I can't use it any more, it's all smashed up." He says, "How many feet of it were there?" I tell him, "There were 150 feet of it." He says, "All right, I will replace it." Now, if I get a nice garden hose back, I am in pretty good shape.

It other words, if you lend certain munitions and get the munitions back at the end of the war, if they are intact--haven't been hurt--you are all right. If they have been damaged or have deteriorated or have been lost completely, it seems to me you come out pretty well if you have them replaced by the fellow to whom you have lent them. <sup>1</sup>

# Interventionist Worksheet

## **EXCERPT 1**

- A.) What does the New York Times editorial find hypocritical about Isolationist beliefs?
- B.) Does the editorial find the Atlantic Ocean a strong enough barrier to Hitler's possible aggressions against the Americas? Explain:
- C.) Who did the editorial author believe was protecting the USA?
- D.) What would this writer most likely recommend regarding US foreign policy in 1939?

## **EXCERPT 2**

- A.) What accomplishments is this president most likely referring to?
- B.) What is he warning about?
- C.) Does this president believe that being active in the world environment will be dangerous, or serve to limit dangers? Explain:
- D.) Paragraph: If this president were in the White House now, how would he most likely handle the situation in Iraq?

## **EXCERPT 3**

- A.) What was Robert Sherwood's primary purpose for American involvement in helping Britain and preparing our defense?
- B.) What does Sherwood believe are Hitler's intentions?

## **EXCERPT 4**

- A.) What is the purpose of the Lend-Lease Plan?
- B.) Did this plan risk war or was it a bastion (good thing) for the American interests in the world?