

## The United States Responds Cautiously

Most Americans were alarmed by the international conflicts of the mid-1930s but believed that the United States should not get involved. In 1928, the United States had signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact. The treaty was signed by 62 countries and declared that war would not be used "as an instrument of national policy." Yet it did not include a plan to deal with countries that broke their pledge. The Pact was, therefore, only a small step toward peace.

**AMERICANS CLING TO ISOLATIONISM** In the early 1930s, a flood of books argued that the United States had been dragged into World War I by greedy bankers and arms dealers. Public outrage led to the creation of a congressional committee, chaired by North Dakota Senator Gerald Nye, that held hearings on these charges. The Nye committee fueled the controversy by documenting the large profits that banks and manufacturers made during the war. As the furor grew over these "merchants of death," Americans became more determined than ever to avoid war. Antiwar feeling was so strong that the Girl Scouts of America changed the color of its uniforms from khaki to green to appear less militaristic. ☺

Americans' growing isolationism eventually had an impact on President Roosevelt's foreign policy. When he had first taken office in 1933, Roosevelt felt comfortable reaching out to the world in several ways. He officially recognized the Soviet Union in 1933 and agreed to exchange ambassadors with Moscow. He continued the policy of nonintervention in Latin America—begun by Presidents Coolidge and Hoover—with his Good Neighbor Policy and withdrew armed forces stationed there. In 1934, Roosevelt pushed the Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act through Congress. This act lowered trade barriers by giving the president the power to make trade agreements with other nations and was aimed at reducing

tariffs by as much as 50 percent. In an effort to keep the United States out of future wars, beginning in 1935, Congress passed a series of **Neutrality Acts**. The first two acts outlawed arms sales or loans to nations at war. The third act was passed in response to the fighting in Spain. This act extended the ban on arms sales and loans to nations engaged in civil wars.

**NEUTRALITY BREAKS DOWN** Despite congressional efforts to legislate neutrality, Roosevelt found it impossible to remain neutral. When Japan launched a new attack on China in July 1937, Roosevelt found a way around the Neutrality Acts. Because Japan had not formally declared war against China, the president claimed there was no need to enforce the Neutrality Acts. The United States continued sending arms and supplies to China. A few months later, Roosevelt spoke out strongly against isolationism in a speech delivered in Chicago. He called on peace-loving nations to "quarantine," or isolate, aggressor nations in order to stop the spread of war.

### A PERSONAL VOICE FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

"The peace, the freedom, and the security of 90 percent of the population of the world is being jeopardized by the remaining 10 percent who are threatening a breakdown of all international order and law. Surely the 90 percent who want to live in peace under law and in accordance with moral standards that have received almost universal acceptance through the centuries, can and must find some way . . . to preserve peace."

—"Quarantine Speech," October 5, 1937

At last Roosevelt seemed ready to take a stand against aggression—that is, until isolationist newspapers exploded in protest, accusing the president of leading the nation into war. Roosevelt backed off in the face of criticism, but his speech did begin to shift the debate. For the moment the conflicts remained "over there."

## The United States Musters Its Forces

As German tanks thundered across Poland, Roosevelt revised the Neutrality Act of 1935. At the same time, he began to prepare the nation for the struggle he feared lay just ahead.

**MOVING CAUTIOUSLY AWAY FROM NEUTRALITY** In September of 1939, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to pass a "cash-and-carry" provision that allowed warring nations to buy U.S. arms as long as they paid cash and transported them in their own ships. Providing the arms, Roosevelt argued, would help France and Britain defeat Hitler and keep the United States out of the war. Isolationists attacked Roosevelt for his actions. However, after six weeks of heated debate, Congress passed the Neutrality Act of 1939, and a cash-and-carry policy went into effect.

**THE AXIS THREAT** The United States cash-and-carry policy began to look like too little too late. By summer 1940, France had fallen and Britain was under siege. Roosevelt scrambled to provide the British with "all aid short of war." By June he had sent Britain 500,000 rifles and 80,000 machine guns, and in early September the United States traded 50 old destroyers for leases on British military bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. British prime minister Winston Churchill would later recall this move with affection as "a decidedly unneutral act."

On September 27 Americans were jolted by the news that Germany, Italy, and Japan had signed a mutual defense treaty, the Tripartite Pact. The three nations became known as the **Axis Powers**.

The Tripartite Pact was aimed at keeping the United States out of the war. Under the treaty, each Axis nation agreed to come to the defense of the others in case of attack. This meant that if the United States were to declare war on any one of the Axis powers, it would face its worst military nightmare—a two-ocean war, with fighting in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

**BUILDING U.S. DEFENSES** Meanwhile, Roosevelt asked Congress to increase spending for national defense. In spite of years of isolationism, Nazi victories in 1940 changed U.S. thinking, and Congress boosted defense spending. Congress also passed the nation's first peacetime military draft—the Selective Training and Service Act. Under this law 16 million men between the ages of 21 and 35 were registered. Of these, 1 million were to be drafted for one year but were only allowed to serve in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt himself drew the first draft numbers as he told a national radio audience, "This is a most solemn ceremony." ☺

**ROOSEVELT RUNS FOR A THIRD TERM** That same year, Roosevelt decided to break the tradition of a two-term presidency, begun by George Washington, and run for reelection. To the great disappointment of isolationists, Roosevelt's Republican opponent, a public utilities executive named Wendell Willkie, supported Roosevelt's policy of aiding Britain. At the same time, both Willkie and Roosevelt promised to keep the nation out of war. Because there was so little difference between the candidates, the majority of voters chose the one they knew best. Roosevelt was reelected with nearly 55 percent of the votes cast.

## "The Great Arsenal of Democracy"

Not long after the election, President Roosevelt told his radio audience during a fireside chat that it would be impossible to negotiate a peace with Hitler. "No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it." He warned that if Britain fell, the Axis powers would be left unchallenged to conquer the world, at which point, he said, "all of us in all the Americas would be living at the point of a gun." To prevent such a situation, the United States had to help defeat the Axis threat by turning itself into what Roosevelt called "the great arsenal of democracy."

**THE LEND-LEASE PLAN** By late 1940, however, Britain had no more cash to spend in the arsenal of democracy. Roosevelt tried to help by suggesting a new plan that he called a lend-lease policy. Under this plan, the president would lend or lease arms and other supplies to "any country whose defense was vital to the United States."

Roosevelt compared his plan to lending a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire. He asserted that this was the only sensible thing to do to prevent the fire from spreading to your own property. Isolationists argued bitterly against the plan, but most Americans favored it, and Congress passed the **Lend-Lease Act** in March 1941.

**SUPPORTING STALIN** Britain was not the only nation to receive lend-lease aid. In June 1941, Hitler broke the agreement he had made in 1939 with Stalin not to go to war and invaded the Soviet Union. Acting on the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Roosevelt began sending lend-lease supplies to the Soviet Union. Some Americans opposed providing aid to Stalin; Roosevelt, however, agreed with Winston Churchill, who had said "if Hitler invaded Hell," the British would be prepared to work with the devil himself. ☺

**GERMAN WOLF PACKS** Providing lend-lease aid was one thing, but to ensure the safe delivery of goods to Britain and to the Soviet Union, supply lines had to be kept open across the Atlantic Ocean. To prevent delivery of lend-lease shipments, Hitler deployed hundreds of German submarines—U-boats—to attack supply ships.

From the spring through the fall of 1941, individual surface attacks by individual U-boats gave way to what became known as the wolf pack attack. At night groups of up to 40 submarines patrolled areas in the North Atlantic where convoys could be expected. Wolf packs were successful in sinking as much as 350,000 tons of shipments in a single month. In September 1941, President Roosevelt granted the navy permission for U.S. warships to attack German U-boats in self-defense. By late 1943, the submarine menace was contained by electronic detection techniques (especially radar), and by airborne antisubmarine patrols operating from small escort aircraft carriers.

## FDR Plans for War

Although Roosevelt was popular, his foreign policy was under constant attack. American forces were seriously underarmed. Roosevelt's August 1941 proposal to extend the term of draftees passed in the House of Representatives by only one vote. With the army provided for, Roosevelt began planning for the war he was certain would come.

**THE ATLANTIC CHARTER** While Congress voted on the extension of the draft, Roosevelt and Churchill met secretly at a summit aboard the battleship USS *Augusta*. Although Churchill hoped for a military commitment, he settled for a joint declaration of war aims, called the **Atlantic Charter**. Both countries pledged the following: collective security, disarmament, self-determination, economic cooperation, and freedom of the seas. Roosevelt disclosed to Churchill that he couldn't ask Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, but "he would wage war" and do "everything" to "force an incident."

The Atlantic Charter became the basis of a new document called "A Declaration of the United Nations." The term *United Nations* was suggested by Roosevelt to express the common purpose of the **Allies**, those nations that had fought the Axis powers. The declaration was signed by 26 nations, "four-fifths of the human race" observed Churchill. ☺

**SHOOT ON SIGHT** After a German submarine fired on the U.S. destroyer *Greer* in the Atlantic on September 4, 1941, Roosevelt ordered navy commanders to respond. "When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike," the president explained, "you crush him." Roosevelt ordered the navy to shoot the German submarines on sight.

Two weeks later, the *Pink Star*, an American merchant ship, was sunk off Greenland. In mid-October, a U-boat torpedoed the U.S. destroyer *Kearny*, and 11 lives were lost.

Days later, German U-boats sank the U.S. destroyer *Reuben James*, killing more than 100 sailors. "America has been attacked," Roosevelt announced grimly. "The shooting has started. And history has recorded who fired the first shot." As the death toll mounted, the Senate finally repealed the ban against arming merchant ships. A formal declaration of a full-scale war seemed inevitable. ☺