

## **Clinging to Neutrality**

### **How did Americans respond to the rising tensions abroad?**

Like the British and the French, Americans were initially reluctant to intervene in European and Asian aggression. After World War I, American public opinion returned to isolationism. People were too worried about the Great Depression to want to deal with problems abroad. Many believed the rising tensions and hostilities in Europe only proved that President Woodrow Wilson's policies of intervention had failed. Liberals feared war could increase support for [fascism](#). Conservatives worried that war would encourage socialism.

Additionally, a Senate investigation sought to prove that U.S. weapons manufacturers had pushed for U.S. involvement in World War I to increase their profits. The Senate Munitions Committee found little evidence, but the mere existence of the investigation increased U.S. isolationist feeling.

### [Neutrality Acts](#)

With the support of the U.S. people, Congress passed a series of laws during the 1930s that aimed to keep the country out of the war. These [Neutrality Acts](#) set several limits on U.S. activities. The Neutrality Act of 1935 prevented Americans from selling weapons to any nation at war. The following year, an extension of the act banned Americans from lending money to countries at war.

The Neutrality Act of 1937 barred Americans from traveling on ships operated by nations at war, but this same act loosened some earlier restrictions. It permitted sales of consumer goods to warring nations, with two conditions. The goods must be paid for with cash, and they must be transported on non-U.S. ships. This policy became known as "cash-and-carry."

### [American Supporters of Germany and Italy](#)

Many U.S. supporters of isolationism were also supporters of the fascists. Famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, for instance, was a spokesperson for the America First Committee. This group had more than 800,000 members who supported U.S. neutrality. Members asserted that the only way to keep the country safe was to stay out of the war entirely. In his speeches supporting neutrality, Lindbergh spoke highly of Nazi Germany and its treatment of Jews.

Other Americans shared some of the convictions of Hitler or Mussolini as well. A number of political groups had emerged in the 1930s to oppose the New Deal. Some members of these groups had extreme beliefs that echoed some of the ideals of fascism. These included racist and anti-Semitic views as well as intense disapproval of communism. In fact, American anticommunism was strong and widespread.

Many Americans at this time were prejudiced against Jews. One 1939 poll stated that just over half of all respondents believed Jews were different than other Americans and should not have the same rights. Polls during the early 1940s showed that nearly one-quarter of Americans believed that Jews were dangerous to the country. These opinions affected U.S. policies. Anti-Semitic feeling and anticommunism in the federal government further discouraged action against the Nazis.

## **A Changing Mood**

### **How did the United States support the Allies before officially entering the war?**

During the late 1930s, many Americans disapproved of the actions of aggressive nations. Further, they began to fear that [fascism](#) in Europe and Asia was a growing threat to the United States. Most notable among these people was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Yet, these Americans remained a minority, and the [Neutrality Acts](#) prevented action.

At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, for example, the United States declared that it would not intervene. Yet, as the conflict dragged on, Roosevelt and other Americans began to worry. German and Italian support for the Spanish rebels seemed to reflect a bigger plan for fascist domination of Europe. Roosevelt also worried that the revolution's success

might inspire similar movements closer to home in Latin America. When Japan invaded China in 1937, the president criticized it publicly. He argued that peaceful nations must work together to oppose such acts of war.

Roosevelt's leadership may have influenced U.S. public opinion, or public opinion may have changed in response to events. Whatever the cause, public support for intervention continued to grow. When Germany seized Poland in 1939, U.S. citizens clearly favored the cause of the Allies.

Although the United States declared its neutrality, Roosevelt began working to loosen the restrictions of the Neutrality Acts. A new Neutrality Act of 1939 allowed the United States to sell arms and war goods to warring nations under the terms of the cash-and-carry clause. In theory, both Axis and Allied nations could take advantage of this provision. However, in practice, the powerful UK navy controlled the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, the change helped only the Allies.

*This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral has a right to take account of facts. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.*

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 3, 1939

Many Americans became alarmed when Japan joined the [Axis Powers](#). Army Chief of Staff George Marshall was in charge of building and directing the U.S. Army. He pushed for military readiness despite neutrality. Although Marshall recognized the desire for peace, he thought the threat of war was imminent, and the U.S. Army was not prepared. He brought his message to Roosevelt, and afterward to Congress. At the time, there were only 180,000 troops in the army. Following Marshall's plea to raise numbers, in 1940 Congress reestablished a draft to boost the size of the U.S. military, even though the nation was not at war. During the same year, Roosevelt used his executive power to sell warships to the United Kingdom in exchange for control of military bases in the Americas. This provided support for the British war effort without requiring payments in money, which the United Kingdom could not afford.

The [Battle of Britain](#) further pushed Roosevelt to act. Prime Minister Churchill warned Roosevelt that the United Kingdom would not be able to pay for needed war goods much longer. In response, Roosevelt proposed the [Lend-Lease Act](#). This policy allowed the president to sell, trade, and lend goods and money to aid in the defense of any nation believed to be vital to U.S. national security. Congress approved the act in March 1941. Over the remainder of [World War II](#), the United States handed out \$50 million in lend-lease aid to more than 30 countries, including the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union.

By this time, U.S. support for the Allies was obvious. Americans listened to radio reports from Britain during the Blitz. These reports increased U.S. sympathy for the British civilians under attack there. President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill had a strengthening political alliance. In August 1941, the two met in a series of secret talks held on a warship off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. These meetings resulted in the Atlantic Charter. This pact set out a series of goals for the postwar world. Among these goals were popular sovereignty, equal access to trade, global cooperation, freedom of the seas, and world peace.

Both Roosevelt and Churchill hoped that issuing the Atlantic Charter would drum up enough popular support to allow U.S. intervention in the war. Although this did not happen, the Atlantic Charter served as a clear statement of mutual policy goals.

## **Tensions in the Pacific**

### **Why did the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor in 1941?**

By 1941, U.S.-British relations were strong. However, the United States was clearly at odds with some other nations, especially Japan. Historically, the United States had a solid friendship with China. U.S. public opinion supported the Chinese after the Japanese waged a brutal campaign there in 1937. One Japanese attack on a U.S. ship was particularly troubling. The USS Panay was helping American civilians flee the Chinese capital at Nanjing. Three people were killed. Despite the act of aggression, most U.S. leaders agreed that defending China was not worth going to war with Japan.

That year, Roosevelt led an effort to give more U.S. aid to China. At the same time, the nation restricted trade with Japan. Congress stopped sales of most goods that the Japanese needed to wage war, such as oil, steel, and iron. However, Japan was determined to continue its aggression. In response, Roosevelt set a formal trade embargo, or a ban on trade, and froze Japanese assets in U.S. banks. He also increased aid to China. U.S. and Japanese diplomats met to try to resolve their differences. The United States demanded that Japan withdraw from China. Japan refused.

Some U.S. leaders believed Japan lacked the resources to attack the United States. They thought the talks would eventually end in a diplomatic agreement. They were wrong. General and Prime Minister Tojo persuaded other Japanese leaders to agree to a surprise attack. The target was the U.S. military base in the territory of Hawaii. Early in the morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese airplanes and submarines bombed [Pearl Harbor](#). The attack caught the U.S. military off guard and devastated the base there. The raid killed more than 2,300 Americans and destroyed several battleships and some 180 aircraft. The Japanese, in contrast, suffered few losses.

President Roosevelt acted quickly to call for a declaration of war. Speaking to Congress, he declared the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor “a date which will live in infamy.” Roosevelt pointed to Japanese attacks on Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, and other Pacific islands as justification for war. Congress agreed. It passed an official declaration of war against Japan.

The declaration of war triggered responses by Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Romania. Because of the [Axis Powers](#) pact, these countries all declared war against the United States. The United States quickly responded with its own declarations.

The United States entered a conflict that seemed certain to test it to the fullest. Axis forces dominated much of Europe, and Germany had made significant progress in its invasion of Russia. The United States had promised its allies to focus on reclaiming Europe before addressing threats in the Pacific. That left the country facing the prospect of a long war on two fronts separated by half the globe. The nation needed more soldiers, more war goods, and immense support from a public that had long favored neutrality. How could the United States overcome the challenges ahead?

Pearl Harbor had changed public view on neutrality. In the months that followed the attack that had killed so many Americans, patriotism surged. In mid-1941, about 2,000 men enlisted in the Marine Corps each month. After December 7, these numbers grew even higher. More than 8,000 men became Marines by the end of 1941. About 13,000 enlisted in January 1942, and another 10,000 joined up in February. By war's end, nearly 40 percent of all servicemen and women were volunteers.

After Pearl Harbor, a patriotic fervor swept the nation. Posters urged citizens to “Remember December 7<sup>th</sup>” and “Remember Pearl Harbor.” By January 1942, many popular songs on the radio were patriotic anthems about supporting the troops and fighting back against the Japanese.