

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Shadow of War, 1933–1941

The epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading....
There must be positive endeavors to preserve peace.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1937

Prologue: The same depression that generated the New Deal at home accelerated the rise of power-hungry dictators abroad: Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese warlords. Congress tried to insulate the nation from the imminent world war by arms embargoes and other presumed safeguards. But when Hitler attacked Poland in 1939, the American people found themselves torn between two desires: they wanted to avoid involvement, but they feared for their future security if they failed to support the democracies. Under Roosevelt's prodding, Congress repealed the arms embargo in 1939, and the administration gradually took a series of steps that removed any pretense of neutrality. Most Americans—except the diehard isolationists—were willing to risk hostilities in an effort to help the democracies and halt the aggressors. Roosevelt took the gamble but lost when a shooting war developed with Germany in the Atlantic and when Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941.

The Struggle Against Isolationism

I. Two Views of Isolationism (1936, 1938)

As Europe and Asia moved toward a new world war in the 1930s, Americans remembered with great bitterness and regret their country's involvement in World War I. Revisionist histories and congressional investigations of the World War I-era munitions industry reinforced the idea that America's involvement in the Great War of 1914–1918 had been a terrible mistake. Many Americans, especially in the arch-isolationist Midwest, resolved never again to allow their country to be drawn into a foreign war. Yet other Americans, particularly in the great cities of the eastern seaboard, argued that the United States could not safely ignore the threat posed by Nazi Germany and militaristic Japan. These internationally minded Americans

accused their isolationist countrymen of being hopelessly naïve about the dangers their country faced. The cartoon below, by C. D. Batchelor of the *New York Daily News*, makes the pro-isolationist case; the one on page 641, by Albert Hirschfeld of the *New Masses*, makes the pro-internationalist case. Which is more persuasive as propaganda? Were the two images aimed at the same sectors of the American public?

"Come on in, I'll treat you right. I used to know your daddy."



C.D. Batchelor 1936/*New York Daily News*, L.P. Used with permission.

War, 1933–1941

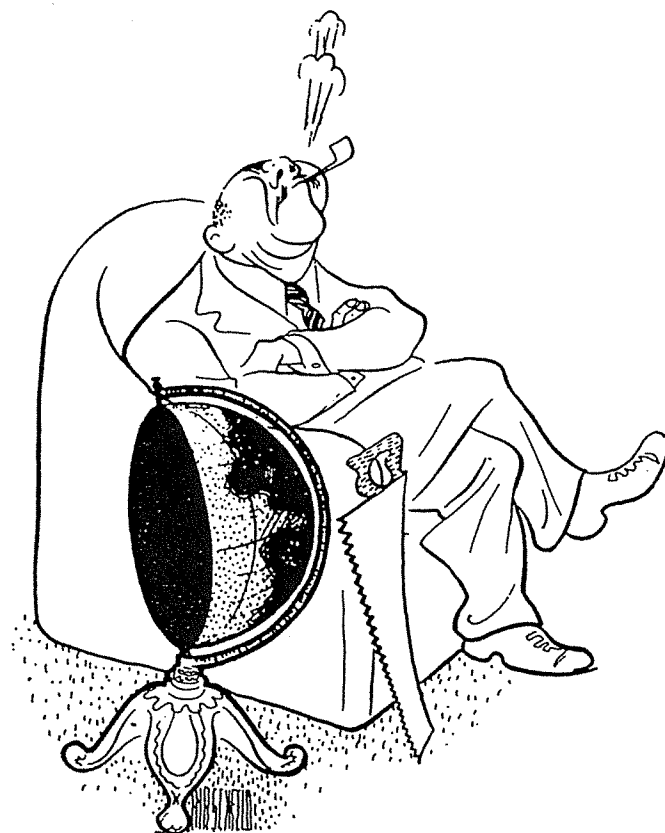
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C.D. Batchelor 1936/New York Daily News, L.P. Used with permission.

The isolationist



Al Hirschfeld. Reproduced by arrangement with Hirschfeld's exclusive representative, the Margo Feiden Galleries Ltd., New York, www.alhirschfeld.com.

2. Roosevelt Pleads for Repeal of the Arms Embargo (1939)*

The arms-embargoing Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1937 made no distinction between aggressor and victim. When Hitler wantonly launched World War II in September 1939, the United States could not legally sell munitions to the unprepared democracies, although U.S. sentiment and self-interest both cried aloud for aid to Britain and France. A worried Roosevelt summoned Congress into special session and made the following dramatic appeal. He was wrong on two counts. First, the arms embargo, as purely domestic legislation, was not a departure from long-established international law. Second, the Jeffersonian Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts did not cause the War of 1812; they came within a few days of averting it. What does this excerpt suggest about Roosevelt's technique as a politician? What did he see as the most dangerous loophole in the existing legislation?

*Congressional Record, 76th Cong., 2d sess. (September 21, 1939), pp. 10–11.

Beginning with the foundation of our constitutional Government in the year 1789, the American policy in respect to belligerent nations, with one notable exception, has been based on international law....

The single exception was the policy adopted by this nation during the Napoleonic Wars, when, seeking to avoid involvement, we acted for some years under the so-called Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts. That policy turned out to be a disastrous failure—first, because it brought our own nation close to ruin, and, second, because it was the major cause of bringing us into active participation in European wars in our own War of 1812. It is merely reciting history to recall to you that one of the results of the policy of embargo and non-intercourse was the burning in 1814 of part of this Capitol in which we are assembled.

Our next deviation by statute from the sound principles of neutrality, and peace through international law, did not come for 130 years. It was the so-called Neutrality Act of 1935—only 4 years ago—an Act continued in force by the Joint Resolution of May 1, 1937, despite grave doubts expressed as to its wisdom by many Senators and Representatives and by officials charged with the conduct of our foreign relations, including myself.

I regret that the Congress passed that Act. I regret equally that I signed that Act.

On July 14th of this year, I asked the Congress, in the cause of peace and in the interest of real American neutrality and security, to take action to change that Act.

I now ask again that such action be taken in respect to that part of the Act which is wholly inconsistent with ancient precepts of the law of nations—the [arms] embargo provisions. I ask it because they are, in my opinion, most vitally dangerous to American neutrality, American security, and American peace.

These embargo provisions, as they exist today, prevent the sale to a belligerent by an American factory of any completed implements of war, but they allow the sale of many types of uncompleted implements of war, as well as all kinds of general material and supplies. They, furthermore, allow such products of industry [e.g., copper] and agriculture [e.g., cotton] to be taken in American-flag ships to belligerent nations. There in itself—under the present law—lies definite danger to our neutrality and our peace.

3. Senator Arthur Vandenberg Fights Repeal (1939)*

Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan—voluble orator, longtime newspaper reporter, and author of books on Alexander Hamilton—was a leader of the Republican isolationists and a serious contender for the presidential nomination in 1940. Later, in 1945, he underwent a spectacular conversion to internationalism and rose to heights of statesmanship in supporting the Marshall Plan for the rehabilitation of postwar Europe. While fighting against the repeal of the arms embargo in 1939, he wrote in his diary that he deplored Roosevelt's "treacherous" and "cowardly" idea that the United States could be "half in and half out of this war." Hating Hitlerism, he felt that the honorable course would be to go in or to stay out—and he much preferred to stay out. In this speech in the Senate against the repeal of the arms embargo, what does he regard as both unneutral and unethical?

**Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 2d sess. (October 4, 1939), p. 95.

Mr. President, I believe this debate symbolically involves the most momentous decision, in the eyes of America and of the World, that the United States Senate has confronted in a generation.

In the midst of foreign war and the alarms of other wars, we are asked to depart basically from the neutrality which the American Congress has twice told the world, since 1935, would be our rule of conduct in such an event. We are particularly asked to depart from it through the repeal of existing neutrality law establishing an embargo on arms, ammunition, and implements of war. We are asked to depart from it in violation of our own officially asserted doctrine, during the [first] World War, that the rules of a neutral cannot be prejudicially altered in the midst of a war.

We are asked to depart from international law itself, as we ourselves have officially declared it to exist. Consciously or otherwise, but mostly consciously, we are asked to depart from it in behalf of one belligerent whom our personal sympathies largely favor, and against another belligerent whom our personal feelings largely condemn. In my opinion, this is the road that may lead us to war, and I will not voluntarily take it...

The proponents of the change vehemently insist that their steadfast purpose, like ours, is to keep America out of the war, and their sincere assurances are presented to our people. But the motive is obvious, and the inevitable interpretation of the change, inevitably invited by the circumstances, will be that we have officially taken sides.

Somebody will be fooled—either the America which is assured that the change is wholly pacific, or the foreigners who believe it is the casting of our die. Either of these disillusionments would be intolerable. Each is ominous. Yet someone will be fooled—either those at home who expect too much, or those abroad who will get too little.

There is no such hazard, at least to our own America, in preserving neutrality in the existing law precisely as we almost unanimously notified the world was our intention as recently as 1935 and 1937. There is no such jeopardy, at least to our own America, in maintaining the arms embargo as it is. No menace, no jeopardy, to us can thus be persuasively conjured.

Therefore millions of Americans and many members of the Congress can see no reason for the change, but infinite reason to the contrary, if neutral detachment is our sole objective. I am one who deeply holds this view. If I err, I want to err on America's side.

[Despite such pleas, the arms embargo was repealed early in November 1939. The vote was 55 to 24 in the Senate, 243 to 172 in the House.]

4. Charles Lindbergh Argues for Isolation (1941)*

After France fell to Hitler in 1940, the embattled British stood alone. U.S. interventionists called for a helping hand to Britain; the isolationists called for hands off. The isolationist America First group proclaimed, "We have nothing to fear from a Nazi-European victory." Boyish-faced, curly-haired Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, who had narrowed the Atlantic with his historic solo flight in 1927, stressed the width of the ocean in his new role as a leading isolationist orator. After inspecting

*Source: <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/americanfirst/speech2.asp>.

Germany's aircraft facilities in 1938, he stoutly maintained that Hitler (who decorated him) could never be conquered in the air. If Lindbergh proved so wrong in an area in which he was a specialist, form some judgment about the assessment of the U.S. strategic position that he made in this speech before a New York mass meeting in April 1941. To what extent is interventionism undemocratic, assuming that Lindbergh's figures were correct? Is his analysis of public opinion trustworthy?

We have weakened ourselves for many months, and still worse, we have divided our own people, by this dabbling in Europe's wars. While we should have been concentrating on American defense, we have been forced to argue over foreign quarrels. We must turn our eyes and our faith back to our own country before it is too late. And when we do this, a different vista opens before us.

Practically every difficulty we would face in invading Europe becomes an asset to us in defending America. Our enemy, and not we, would then have the problem of transporting millions of troops across the ocean and landing them on a hostile shore. They, and not we, would have to furnish the convoys to transport guns and trucks and munitions and fuel across three thousand miles of water. Our battleships and our submarines would then be fighting close to their home bases. We would then do the bombing from the air and the torpedoing at sea. And if any part of an enemy convoy should ever pass our navy and our air force, they would still be faced with the guns of our coast artillery, and behind them the divisions of our Army.

The United States is better situated from a military standpoint than any other nation in the world. Even in our present condition of unpreparedness no foreign power is in a position to invade us today. If we concentrate on our own defenses and build the strength that this nation should maintain, no foreign army will ever attempt to land on American shores.

War is not inevitable for this country. Such a claim is defeatism in the true sense. No one can make us fight abroad unless we ourselves are willing to do so. No one will attempt to fight us here if we arm ourselves as a great nation should be armed. Over a hundred million people in this nation are opposed to entering the war. If the principles of democracy mean anything at all, that is reason enough for us to stay out. If we are forced into a war against the wishes of an overwhelming majority of our people, we will have proved democracy such a failure at home that there will be little use fighting for it abroad.

The time has come when those of us who believe in an independent American destiny must band together and organize for strength. We have been led toward war by a minority of our people. This minority has power. It has influence. It has a loud voice. But it does not represent the American people. During the last several years I have traveled over this country from one end to the other. I have talked to many hundreds of men and women, and I have letters from tens of thousands more, who feel the same way as you and I.

[Public opinion polls during these months showed contradictory desires. A strong majority of the American people wanted to stay out of war, but a strong majority favored helping Britain even at the risk of war. The Lend-Lease Act of 1941 received about two-to-one support in the public opinion polls and more than that in congressional voting.]

5. The New York Times Rejects Isolationism (1941)*

The New York Times challenged Lindbergh's views in a lengthy and well-reasoned editorial that brilliantly set forth the case for intervention. What are its principal points?

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? To what purpose would they have us spend these almost incredible billions upon billions for ships and planes, for tanks and guns, if there is no immediate threat to the security of the United States? Why are we training the youth of the country to bear arms? Under pressure of what fear are we racing against time to double and quadruple our industrial production?

No man in his senses will say that we are arming against Canada or our Latin-American 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. That is because forty-five million determined Britons, in a heroic resistance, have converted their island into an armed base, from which proceeds a steady stream of sea and air power. As Secretary [of State Cordell] 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.

The combined Axis fleets [German, Italian, Japanese] outmatch our own: they are superior in numbers to our fleet in every category of vessel, from warships and aircraft-carriers to destroyers and submarines.[†] The combined Axis air strength will be much greater than our own if Hitler strikes in time—and when has he failed to strike in time? The master of Europe will have at his command shipways that can outbuild us, the resources of twenty conquered nations to furnish his materials, the oil of the Middle East to stoke his engines, the slave labor of a continent—bound by no union rules, and not working on a forty-hour week—to turn out his production.

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[†]Three foreign fleets are not necessarily equal to the sum of all their parts. There are different languages and signals, different caliber guns and ammunition, different types of maneuvers, and so forth.

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?

But even if Hitler gave us time, what kind of "time" would we have at our disposal?

There are moral and spiritual dangers for this country as well as physical dangers in a Hitler victory. There are dangers to the mind and heart as well as to the body and the land.

Victorious in Europe, dominating Africa and Asia through his Axis partners, Hitler could not afford to permit the United States to live an untroubled and successful life, even if he wished to. We are the arch-enemy of all he stands for: the very citadel of that "pluto-democracy" which he hates and scorns. As long as liberty and freedom prevailed in the United States there would be constant risk for Hitler that our ideas and our example might infect the conquered countries which he was bending to his will. In his own interest he would be forced to harry us at every turn.

Who can doubt that our lives would be poisoned every day by challenges and insults from Nazi politicians; that Nazi agents would stir up anti-American feeling in every country they controlled; that Nazi spies would overrun us here; that Hitler would produce a continual series of lightning diplomatic strokes—alliances and "non-aggression pacts" to break our will; in short, that a continuous war of nerves, if nothing worse, would be waged against us?

And who can doubt that, in response, we should have to turn our own nation into an armed camp, with all our traditional values of culture, education, social reform, democracy and liberty subordinated to the single, all-embracing aim of self-preservation? In this case we should indeed experience "regimentation." Every item of foreign trade, every transaction in domestic commerce, every present prerogative of labor, every civil liberty we cherish, would necessarily be regulated in the interest of defense.

B. The Lend-Lease Controversy

1. FDR Drops the Dollar Sign (1940)*

A serious student of history, Roosevelt was determined to avoid the blunders of World War I. The postwar quarrel with the Allies over debts lingered in his memory as he groped for some means of bolstering the hard-pressed British without getting involved in a repayment wrangle. Keeping his new brainstorm under his hat until his triumphant reelection over Wendell Willkie—he might have lost if he had revealed

**The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940 Volume* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), pp. 606–608.