

The Road to Pearl Harbor

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German dictator Adolf Hitler accepts the ovation of the Reichstag in Berlin, Germany, after announcing the "peaceful acquisition of Austria" in 1938. It set the stage to annex the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland, largely inhabited by a German-speaking population. Photo from the National Archives

Storm clouds were darkening around the world. While Americans struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression, dictatorship swept Italy and Germany.

Nations fell victim to new hostile leaders. Japan struck first, invading China. Next Italy struck at Ethiopia. Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, was the greatest fear. The world braced itself for another great conflict. Remembering the scars caused by World War I, Americans hoped to remain separate from the danger.

Reactions to a troubled world

The day after Franklin Roosevelt became president the Nazi government gave Adolf Hitler control of Germany. Germany had become very poor after it lost World War I. Hitler promised to make Germany strong again.

Dictators were gaining power across Europe and East Asia. In 1936, Hitler broke the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed after World War I to keep the peace. In Spain, a dictator also came into power.

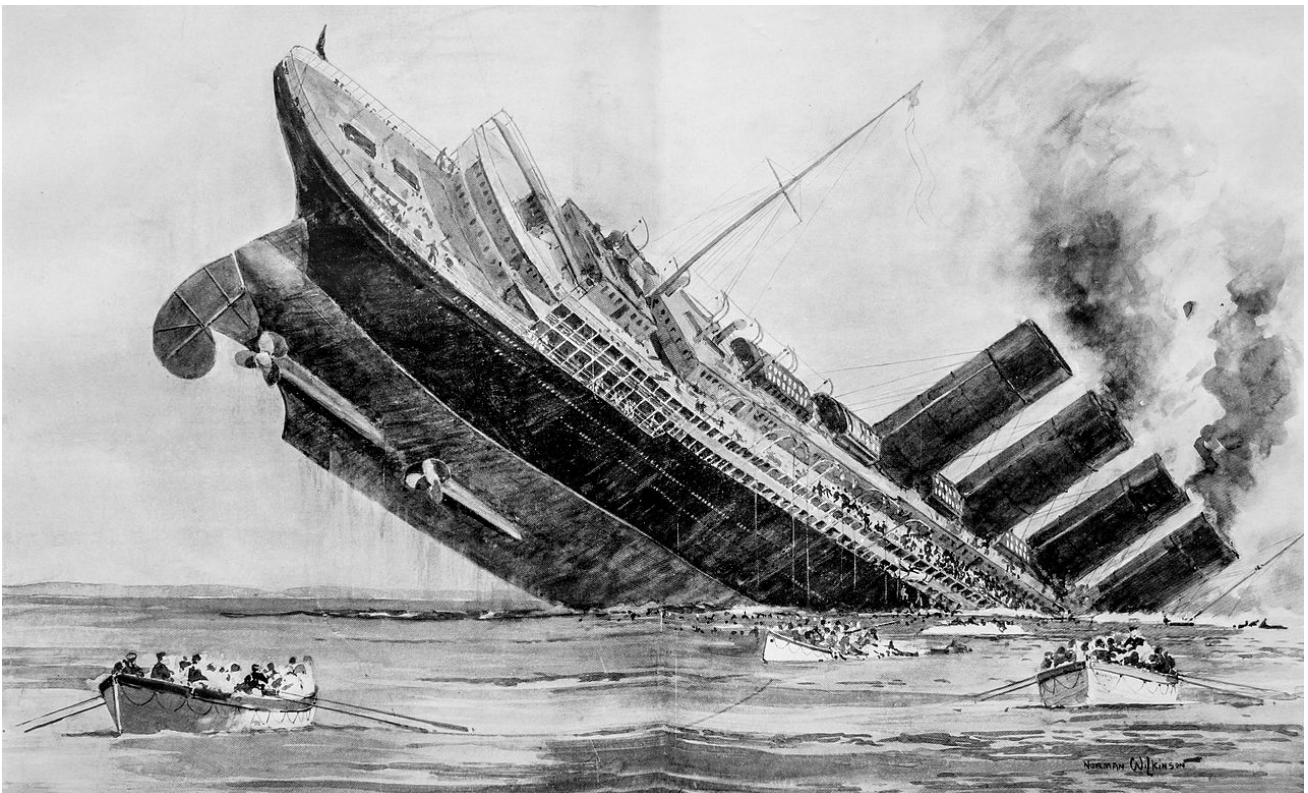
Meanwhile, Europe, America, Britain, and France sat on the sidelines. No government was willing to confront the new leaders, for fear of repeating World War I.

1930s isolationism

The Great Depression began in 1929 and was caused by business problems. People invest money in companies when they buy stocks on the stock market. But the stock market crashed and now Americans faced tough times. Many businesses closed and some people lost jobs and their homes. In the 1930s, Americans cared much more about their own problems than problems in Europe.

Several laws called the Neutrality Acts tried to keep the U.S. out of World War II. The first was the Neutrality Act of 1935. This prohibited shipping weapons to any nations at war.

The Neutrality Act of 1936 added more restrictions. It said that money couldn't be loaned to countries at war, and Americans couldn't travel on the ships of countries at war. Congress didn't want any more incidents like the sinking of the Lusitania – when a German submarine sunk the British ship Lusitania carrying British and Americans during World War I, killing 1,198 people on board.



A Neutrality Act of 1937 limited any trade to nations at war to a "cash and carry basis." This meant that a nation that bought from the U.S. would have to use its ships to transport what it bought.

Lend-Lease

Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3, 1939. Two days later, President Roosevelt declared that the U.S. would stay neutral. However, FDR knew that the only chance Britain and France would have to defeat Nazi Germany was to have enough weapons. He immediately asked Congress to end the ban on the U.S. selling weapons to Europe. FDR wanted to sell weapons to Britain and France, as long as they used their own ships and paid all at once.

The Neutrality Act of 1939 ended the ban and permitted the sales of weapons on a "cash and carry" basis.

On April 9, 1940, the German blitzkrieg – a sudden military strike – moved rapidly into Denmark and Norway. The German military steadily advanced through the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and into France. The French were forced to surrender to the Germans, leaving Britain as the only democracy in Europe opposing Germany.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill desperately pleaded with Roosevelt for assistance, and American public opinion shifted toward helping the British.

However, Britain did not have the money to pay for all the weapons they needed. So Roosevelt hatched a new plan called Lend-Lease. Roosevelt publicly mused that if a neighbor's house is on fire, nobody sells him a hose to put it out. Common sense dictated that the hose is lent to the neighbor and returned when the fire is extinguished. The United States could simply lend Britain the weapons it would need to fight the war. Congress argued over the proposal, and Senator Robert Taft shot back at Roosevelt: "Lending war equipment is a good deal like lending chewing gum. You don't want it back."

In March 1941, Congress approved the Lend-Lease Act. Hitler saw Lend-Lease as a declaration of war and ordered attacks on American ships.

Roosevelt began his third term – the first of any president – and urged Congress and Americans to take action. In his famous Four Freedoms Speech, he explains the rights that he believed any citizen in the world is entitled to. The first is freedom of speech and expression. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way. The third is freedom from want, which means having enough food, clothing and a place to live. The fourth is freedom from fear, which means a world-wide reduction of weapons so that no nation will be in a position to attack any neighbor. FDR believed America should lead the way in securing these freedoms.



In the end, it was Japan who provoked the United States into war. The United States was the only nation standing against Japanese domination of the Pacific. Japan launched a ruthless surprise attack against American naval bases at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Faced with an assault on its own forces, the United States finally entered World War II.

Quiz

- 1 WHY does the author include the section "Reactions to a troubled world"?
- (A) to show how several effects of World War I led to World War II
 - (B) to compare the leadership of different countries across Europe
 - (C) to describe the problems people had with the Treaty of Versailles
 - (D) to explain how Germans reacted to promises made by Hitler
- 2 Which piece of evidence from the article BEST explains the cause of Americans' desire to stay out of World War II?
- (A) Storm clouds were darkening around the world. While Americans struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression, dictatorship swept Italy and Germany.
 - (B) Nations fell victim to new hostile leaders. Japan struck first, invading China. Next Italy struck at Ethiopia. Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, was the greatest fear.
 - (C) Dictators were gaining power across Europe and East Asia. In 1936, Hitler broke the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed after World War I to keep the peace. In Spain, a dictator also came into power.
 - (D) Many businesses closed and some people lost jobs and their homes. In the 1930s, Americans cared much more about their own problems than problems in Europe.
- 3 WHY does the article include information about Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Speech?
- (A) to outline Roosevelt's principles for justifying American involvement in World War II
 - (B) to suggest that America contributed to World War II by waiting too long to defend its principles
 - (C) to show that Roosevelt had developed a method of preventing war during his first two terms
 - (D) to emphasize the fears Americans felt about sending weapons to European countries during World War II

- 4 Which selection from the article shows that American leaders were conflicted about whether to get more deeply involved in World War II?
- (A) Several laws called the Neutrality Acts tried to keep the U.S. out of World War II. The first was the Neutrality Act of 1935. This prohibited shipping weapons to any nations at war.
 - (B) Congress didn't want any more incidents like the sinking of the Lusitania – when a German submarine sunk the British ship Lusitania carrying British and Americans during World War I, killing 1,198 people on board.
 - (C) Congress argued over the proposal, and Senator Robert Taft shot back at Roosevelt: "Lending war equipment is a good deal like lending chewing gum. You don't want it back."
 - (D) Roosevelt began his third term – the first of any president – and urged Congress and Americans to take action. In his famous Four Freedoms Speech, he explains the rights that he believed any citizen in the world is entitled to.