

Neutrality or Involvement?

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Looking back, we might think that joining the war against Hitler's aggressions was the obvious decision. But it wasn't necessarily so clear at the time. Here are some different opinions about the United States getting into World War II.

U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt

(Lend-Lease Proposal, 12/40) In the present world situation of course there is absolutely no doubt in the mind of a very overwhelming number of Americans that the best immediate defense of the United States is the success of Great Britain in defending itself.

(Annual Message to Congress, 1/6/41, asking Congress to enact Lend-Lease) I... ask this Congress for authority and for funds sufficient to manufacture additional munitions and war supplies of many kinds to be turned over to those nations which are now in actual war with aggressor nations. Our most useful and immediate role is to act as an arsenal for them as

well as for ourselves. They do not need manpower. They do need billions of dollars' worth of weapons for defense.... For what we send abroad we shall be repaid, within a reasonable time following the close of hostilities, in similar materials or, at our option, in other goods of many kinds which they can produce and which we need....Such aid is not an act of war, even if a dictator should unilaterally proclaim it so to be. When the dictators are ready to make war upon us, they will not wait for an act of war on our part.

(Address after a German Navy attack on a U.S. Destroyer, 10/27/41) We have wished to avoid shooting. But the shooting has started. And history has recorded who fired the first shot...America has been attacked. The USS *Kearny* is not just a Navy ship. She belongs to every man, woman, and child in this nation....Hitler's torpedo was directed at every American...The purpose of Hitler's attack was to frighten the American people off the high seas....Naturally, we reject that absurd and insulting suggestion...Freedom of the seas is now, as it has always been, a fundamental policy of your government and mine....

All of us Americans, of all opinions, are faced with the choice between the kind of world we want to live in and the kind of world which Hitler and his hordes would impose on us....The forward march of Hitler and of Hitlerism can be stopped—and it will be stopped. Very simply and very bluntly, we are pledged to pull our own oar in the destruction of Hitlerism.



Charles Lindbergh, U.S. pilot hero, 4/23/41

I say we should not enter a war unless we have a reasonable chance of winning....And I know that the United States is not prepared to wage war in Europe successfully at this time....I believe it will be a tragedy to the entire world if the British Empire collapses [but] we cannot win this war for England, regardless of how much assistance we extend....When history is written, the responsibility for the downfall of the democracies of Europe will rest squarely upon the shoulders of the interventionists who led their nations to war, uninvited and unprepared....

There is a policy open to this nation that will lead to success—a policy that leaves us free to follow our own way of life and to develop our own civilization...It recommends the maintenance of armed forces sufficient to defend this hemisphere from attack by a combination of foreign powers. It demands faith in an independent American destiny....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....



Over 100 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....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....That is why the America First Committee has been formed—to give voice to the people who have no newspaper or newsreel or radio station at their command; to the people who must do the paying and the fighting and the dying if their country enters the war.

Senator Robert Taft, on President Roosevelt's request for a policy of "total defense," 10/28/41

[President Roosevelt] is proposing that the United States carry on an undeclared naval war...[This] would mean the dispatch of American ships to British ports through the submarine blockade of the Germans. It cannot be doubted that many of those ships would be sunk and that many Americans would be drowned....It was just such sinking's and such deaths which took us into the World War [World War I]. It is probably more likely to be so now that it was in the World War, because now these ships would be invariably carrying contraband manufactured by the United States [because of Lend-Lease]....

I do not think we are at war. I think the people who say we are at war now will find that when war actually comes it will be something very different. There will be long casualty lists, a constant series of battles, constant incitement of the people to war, gradually building up a bigger and bigger army, until it is big enough to undertake a trip to Europe [i.e., a U.S. army sent to Europe to fight in the war, as in World War I].