U.S. ISOLATIONISM

How did U.S. isolationism contribute to the cause of World War II?

Viewpoint: U.S. isolationism led Britain to continue policies of appeasement that made war inevitable.

Viewpoint: The principle significance of isolationism was its encouragement of the Axis belief that the United States would do nothing of substance to challenge aggression.

U.S. isolationism between the world wars was a bipartisan policy, drawing support from across the social and political spectrum. Its fundamental postulate was not absolute withdrawal behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, but a belief that the United States should retain the independence in foreign policy that had been its norm until 1917. America’s direct losses in World War I were less significant in reinforcing that position than a growing sense that the war had been fought over nothing; that America’s former allies were less concerned with peace and justice than with victory and plunder; and that the United States had obtained nothing from its participation except uncollected debts. In January 1937 almost three-fourths of the responses to an opinion poll believed that American participation in World War I had been a mistake.

Rejection of the League of Nations covenant in 1919 was the first of a series of bipartisan steps designed to move the United States as far as possible from the diplomatic and economic woes of both Europe and Asia. Increasingly high tariffs, themselves in part a response to the Great Depression, limited commercial connections. Neutrality legislation passed in the 1930s forbade selling on credit to belligerent nations and asserted that Americans traveling on the ships of states at war did so at their own risk. U.S. military spending was repeatedly reduced, to the point where as late as 1939 the army and air corps were about on par with those of Romania. Nor did American diplomacy assert consequent, systematic opposition to the increasing aggression of Italy, Germany, and Japan.

These policies were in tune with a public opinion that in May 1939 identified keeping out of war as the major issue facing the country. During the 1940 election campaign, President Franklin D. Roosevelt insisted that America’s sons were not going to be sent into any foreign wars. An arguable result was that the Axis powers took American isolationism seriously enough that they did not consider the prospect that the United States would oppose them with anything stronger than words, or more formidable than material “lend-lease” to other governments. It was one of the century’s greatest miscalculations.
Viewpoint:
U.S. isolationism led Britain to continue policies of appeasement that made war inevitable.

Isolationism in America was based on two beliefs. The first was the view that the United States should avoid any political commitment that tied American policy and action to the policies and actions of other nations. The second was a pervasive belief that the central aim of American foreign policy was to avoid foreign wars at all costs. These isolationist views in the 1930s were the result of several specific beliefs, the central one being that the United States had been duped into participating in World War I by a combination of British propaganda, greedy munitions makers, bankers holding European loans to pay for those munitions, and a naive administration in Washington. In the mid-1930s congressional hearings into the munitions industry provided evidence that American firms had made enormous profits from the war, strengthening the view of that industry's role in American involvement. Influential books and articles of the 1920s put forth the argument that our involvement in World War I had been a tragic mistake, and that the British and French bore a great responsibility for its outbreak. As a result American public opinion in the mid-1930s strongly supported the belief that the nation should do everything possible to keep out of any future European war, a view reflected in public-opinion polls.

Isolationist sentiment prompted the passage, in 1935, of the first of several neutrality acts that were aimed at preventing American involvement in any future conflict. The various neutrality acts prohibited the export of arms to belligerent states, prohibited the carrying of munitions in American ships to belligerents or through neutral countries to belligerents, and included provisions barring loans to warring nations. The 1937 revision included a "cash and carry" provision that allowed foreign nations to buy goods other than finished arms by paying cash for them and shipping them on non-American ships. This provision, however, expired in May 1939.

Public-opinion polls of the time also show considerable support for mandatory neutrality measures as a means of keeping the nation out of wars abroad. A large and vocal isolationist bloc in Congress, composed of both Republicans and Democrats, supported this legislation, and many were strongly in favor of provisions that limited presidential discretion. Newspapers, particularly those of the Hearst chain and the influential Chicago Tribune, along with many periodicals, such as New Republic and The Saturday Evening Post, gave support to neutrality legislation. Peace societies, many women's organizations, and some religious groups also supported mandatory neutrality provisions and the embargo of arms sales. As late as 1939, sentiment against participation in a European war was so strong that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to gain revision of the neutrality laws in the first session of the Seventy-sixth Congress was a failure. Only after war came to Europe in September 1939 were changes in the neutrality laws that allowed for the sale of arms on a "cash-and-carry" basis finally made. Until then the isolationists in the United States prevented the country from playing a concrete role that might have prevented the outbreak of war.

Roosevelt was, at heart, an internationalist. He had spent a good part of his youth on many trips to Europe. By the time he completed his secondary education he believed, as did other graduates of the prep school at Groton, that the United States must play a useful role in world affairs. His early political years were influenced by the presidency of his uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, and by his work as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Woodrow Wilson's administration. FDR was a proponent of the League of Nations and spoke often for international cooperation in his unsuccessful campaign for the vice presidency in 1920. At the beginning of his presidency in 1933 he maintained a strong belief in the interdependency of nations—the idea that nations depended upon each other for long-term prosperity and peace. While domestic economic problems demanded his primary attention during his first term in office, FDR gave considerable attention to foreign affairs, particularly U.S. relations with Latin America. During his second term he became concerned about the deteriorating global situation—Italy's aggression in Africa, the Spanish Civil War, Japanese expansion in China, and the growing menace of Nazi Germany. He considered several foreign-policy initiatives in the mid-1930s, including the calling of international conferences to discuss ways to ensure peace. Against all his efforts, however, was the reality of an isolationist congress that supported by an active press and vocal organizations, firmly opposed to any American response that had the potential for involvement in war.

What might Roosevelt have done if it had not been for the existence of the neutrality laws and a strong isolationist Congress? An American administration, free from the restraints of isolationists, would have been able to provide assistance to Great Britain in its search for peace. The British government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain found itself facing three potential
enemies: Germany, Italy, and Japan. Britain's armed forces could not meet the demands posed by dealing with all three at once. Chamberlain had several policy choices: work to eliminate one or more potential enemies, seek allies to support his country in a search for peace, or follow a policy that would make concessions to Germany and Italy that might dissuade them from aggression. This policy came to be known as appeasement. Because of the significant influence of congressional isolationists, the United States was seen as an unreliable potential ally. Early in 1938, Chamberlain wrote in his diary: "The U.S.A. has drawn closer to us but the isolationists are so strong & so vocal that she cannot be depended on for help if we should get into trouble." British foreign secretary Anthony Eden believed that the policy of appeasement, pursued so diligently by Chamberlain, had to be implemented from a position of strength. An American government firmly backing British policy would have added greatly to Britain's bargaining position as it dealt with the increasing menace of German and Italian aggression.

It has been argued that Chamberlain needed to try to appease Germany in order to buy time for Britain to rearm. An American government able to develop its munitions industry free from isolationist fears and the restrictions of neutrality laws would have been able to sell arms to Britain and France. Knowing they had access to additional armaments would have strengthened those nations in their relationships with a resurgent Germany.

Roosevelt was also deeply concerned with the situation in Asia, where Japan had been fighting sporadically with China. His "quarantine speech" of October 1937 was an attempt to express not only his concern with the growing international instability, but appeared also to call for some sort
NEUTRALITY ACT OF 1937

In an attempt to keep the United States from entering into another world war, American isolationists in Congress pushed through a series of neutrality acts. A portion of the act of 1937, prohibiting the export of arms, is presented below.

Section 1

(a) Whenever the President shall find that there exists a state of war between, or among, two or more foreign states, the President shall proclaim such fact, and it shall thereafter be unlawful to export, or attempt to export, or cause to be exported, arms, ammunition, or implements of war from any place in the United States to any belligerent state named in such proclamation, or to any neutral state for transshipment to, or for the use of, any such belligerent state.

(b) The President shall, from time to time, by proclamation, extend such embargo upon the export of arms, ammunition, or implements of war to other states as and when they may become involved in such war.

(c) Whenever the President shall find that such a state of civil strife exists in a foreign state and that such civil strife is of a magnitude or is being conducted under such conditions that the export of arms, ammunition, or implements of war from the United States to such foreign state would threaten or endanger the peace of the United States, the President shall proclaim such fact, and it shall thereafter be unlawful to export, or attempt to export, or cause to be exported, arms, ammunition, or implements of war from any place in the United States to such foreign state, or to any neutral state for transshipment to, or for the use of, such foreign state.

(d) The President shall, from time to time by proclamation, definitely enumerate the arms, ammunition, and implements of war, the export of which is prohibited by this section. The arms, ammunition, and implements of war so enumerated shall include those enumerated in the President's proclamation Numbered 2163, of April 10, 1936, but shall not include raw materials or any other articles or materials not of the same general character as those enumerated in the said proclamation, and in the Convention for the Supervision for the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War, signed at Geneva June, 17, 1925.

(e) Whoever, in violation of any of the provisions of this Act, shall export, or attempt to export, or cause to be exported, arms, ammunition, or implements of war from the United States shall be fined not more than $10,000, or imprisoned not more than five years, or both.

(f) In the case of the forfeiture of any arms, ammunition, or implements of war by reason of a violation of this Act, such arms, ammunition, or implements of war shall be delivered to the Secretary of War for such use or disposal thereof as shall be approved by the President of the United States.

(g) Whenever, in the judgment of the President, the conditions which have caused him to issue any proclamation under the authority of this section have ceased to exist, he shall revoke the same, and the provisions of this section shall thereby cease to apply with respect to the state or states named in such proclamation, except with respect to offenses committed, or forfeiture incurred, prior to such revocation.
vocal, determined, and effective isolationists both in Congress and the nation as a whole. It is clear that isolationism in the 1930s played a significant role in the coming of World War II.

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**Viewpoint:**

The principle significance of isolationism was its encouragement of the Axis belief that the United States would do nothing of substance to challenge aggression.

Isolationism is a somewhat pejorative term for the traditional American policy of not engaging in permanent or long-term alliances with other countries, preserving U.S. freedom of action, and relying on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, rather than allies, to protect the United States. During the period between World Wars I and II, advances in technology overtook this time-tested philosophy by making it possible for a foreign power of sufficient strength to directly threaten the United States. At the same time, many Americans, disillusioned by the outcome of World War I, embraced an extreme form of isolationism. Combined, these two changes encouraged aggression by Germany and Japan, and thus contributed significantly to the outbreak of World War II.

Following the conclusion of World War I, the United States experienced a sharp and rude awakening. Dragged reluctantly into the war, the United States, once committed, embarked on a moral crusade to “Make the World Safe for Democracy,” with every intention of bringing democracy, freedom, and the American way of life to the entire planet. Even though the national leadership had some idea that neither our enemies nor our allies would gladly accept every tenet of this philosophy, these aims garnered acclaim abroad and popular support at home.

In November 1918 the war came to an end and with it the universal acclaim for American war aims. Territorial ambitions, desires for revenge, and the opportunities for material gain soon distanced the Allies from American president Woodrow Wilson’s ideals. The Versailles Treaty (1919) the victors ultimately forced on the defeated powers contained virtually nothing for which the United States had fought. Instead, the peace settlement placed the sole blame for the outbreak of war on Germany. The treaty required Germany, as the only identified aggressor, to repay the Allies for the cost of the war in the form of large indemnities. It also severely limited the size and composition of Germany’s armed forces, giving them only enough strength to perform internal police functions. French marshal Ferdinand Foch, supreme commander of the Allied forces during the war, acknowledged that the Versailles Treaty was not a peace, but merely an armistice he expected to last twenty years.

The theoretical saving grace of Versailles was the League of Nations. This organization of states was intended to prevent war by utilizing the principle of collective defense. All League members would unite to punish aggressors. No nation could be so strong or so foolish as to defy the collective might of the world. Many who opposed the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles hoped that the League would be able to rewrite the unfair and unduly harsh terms once national tempers had cooled.

The United States, however, did not join the League. Disillusioned by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the Senate rejected the treaty in its entirety, including membership in the League, and eventually concluded separate peace treaties with the defeated nations. The principle of collective security was fatally weakened by the absence of the one power whose strength might well make it a reality.

The failure of the United States to join the League not only weakened collective security, but ensured no efforts would be made to revise the terms of the Treaty of Versailles to make them less harsh to the defeated powers. The voice of the United States was absent, weakening the call for revision, and France, deprived of American guarantees of security, was unwilling to budge in a direction that might allow Germany to regain strength. Without revision, Foch’s vision of a renewed war was almost certain to come true as a result of German resentment.

The United States had abandoned its isolationist garb for the crusader’s armor; then, disappointed that the world did not work out as it had dreamed, it retreated back to isolationism. Yet, the world the United States faced at the end of World War I was not the same world that George Washington, James Monroe, or even William Howard Taft had faced. Modern industrial methods had been applied to war. If a nation hostile to the United States gained control of much of the economic might of either Europe or East Asia, it would become a continental power, similar to the United States itself. Continental powers could develop enough logistical strength to deploy and support military
forces across an ocean barrier, as the United States had done in World War I. The safety of the United States was no longer predicated on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Instead, for the United States to remain safe, it must prevent a hostile power from gaining continental status in either Europe or Asia.

The majority of Americans after World War I did not understand the change that had taken place. Only the most thoughtful Americans realized the world had changed so dramatically. There were hints in the 1920s and 1930s, many of them ironically coming from the United States itself, such as the pursuit of heavier bombers—culminating in the “hemisphere defense weapon,” the B-29 Superfortress. A bomber with intercontinental range presented clear advantages for the United States, which did not wish to engage in alliances or treaties to acquire overseas bases; but in the hands of an enemy, such a weapon spelled the end of security for the United States.

In rebuffing the League of Nations, the United States rejected the organization most likely to prevent the emergence of another continental power to threaten U.S. security. The decade of the 1920s, however, seemed to belie the error. The “Spirit of Locarno” (Treaty of Locarno, 1 December 1925) prevailed as Europeans rejected territorial ambitions against their neighbors in a treaty signed in that Italian city. The “Spirit of Washington,” named after the American capital where the great powers agreed to limit naval forces in the winter of 1921–1922, resulted in the Five Power Naval Limitation Treaty (6 February 1922), and pointed toward an era of cooperation and disarmament. Beneath the calm surface, however, dangerous trends continued. In Europe, Italians felt cheated out of the fruits of victory. Germany fumbled with the unfamiliar concepts of democracy, achieving only a fragile stability. Across the Pacific, Japan gloomily assessed its meager resources and concluded the only way to ensure its security was to gain control of vital raw material currently under the control of its neighbors.

The Great Depression destroyed the calm surface of the 1920s. In both Europe and Asia, governments emerged that embraced both continental ambitions and totalitarian or militarist philosophies. These were precisely the sorts of governments that could shatter the United States’s cherished two-ocean security, but the United States was not a member of the single organization that might have stopped these ambitions. Without the power of the United States behind it, the League of Nations allowed Japan, Italy, and Germany in turn to disregard international law and absorb territory by force or the threat of force.

At the precise moment when the transoceanic threat to American security emerged, the United States embraced an extreme form of isolationism that made the rise of hostile continental powers possible. Isolationism had originally intended to preserve American freedom of action. Now, in a desperate attempt to avoid another war and another disappointing peace, the United States abandoned freedom of action for inaction. Many isolationists believed the United States had been drawn into World War I because the United States sold war materials and extended loans to the Allies, and later had to intervene to protect those investments. This simplistic analysis led to the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936, and 1937, which progressively restricted the United States or its citizens from providing any sort of armament, war matériel, or financial support to belligerents. The laws made no distinction between aggressor and victim, and no provision for supporting countries with philosophies similar to those of the United States against those who harbored the very ambitions that would make them a threat to the security of the United States.

The Neutrality Acts were interpreted by potential adversaries as indications that the United States would not go to war to prevent the growth of a hostile continental power. These acts ensured that the United States would not provide aid to those countries that might resist aggression by Germany, Italy, or Japan, even when such resistance served the interests of the United States. These acts encouraged states with continental ambitions to strike quickly and absorb their neighbors so that they might gain the continental power that would allow them to face the United States as equals in power. It is not coincidental that the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936, and 1937 were followed by the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the Anschluss (Union of Austria with Germany) in 1938, and the German invasion of Poland in 1939.

If the actions of the isolationists in Congress did not convince Germany and Japan that the time was ripe for them to achieve their continental ambitions, the rhetoric of the isolationist America First Committee made it seem likely that the United States would not enter the war no matter how close those nations came to their ambitions. Founded following the fall of France in 1940, the America First Committee violently opposed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s efforts to support the beleaguered United Kingdom with “all measures short of war.” This group, which remained in operation until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (7
December 1941), failed to see the threats that a continent-spanning Nazi Germany or an empire of Japan controlling all of East Asia would present to the United States. The threat was doubled by the entry of Japan into the Tripartite Pact (1940), better known as the Axis. The goal of the pact was to keep the Soviet Union and the United States out of the two existing wars—that in Europe and that between Japan and China—until each Axis power had achieved its continental ambitions. At that point, there would be four continental powers—Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, the Empire of Japan, and the United States—each of roughly equal potential strength. Such an alignment of power would not bode well for the United States, the only democratic state among them.

Traditional American isolationism was corrupted by the horrors of World War I and the disillusionment of Versailles into a philosophy that blinded many Americans to their vital national interests and encouraged aggressors to move quickly before the United States returned to the international scene. By removing even the possibility of American intervention until well after the Axis powers had begun their drives for continental power, isolationism contributed to the coming of World War II.

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