

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 March 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 in the 1930s. Americans struggled to make money during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, brutal, undemocratic leaders came to power across Europe. Adolf Hitler became leader of Germany, spreading fear across Europe.

Americans remembered the horror of World War I, which took place from 1914 to 1918. They hoped to stay out of the problems in Europe this time.

Reactions to a troubled world

Franklin D. Roosevelt became president of the United States on March 4, 1933, at the height of the Great Depression. The next day, Adolf Hitler gained control of Germany. Germany had become very poor after it lost World War I. Hitler promised to make Germany strong again.

1930s isolationism

The Great Depression began in 1929 and was caused by business problems. Now Americans faced tough times. Many businesses closed and some people lost jobs and their homes. In the 1930s, Americans were worried more about their own problems than problems in Europe.

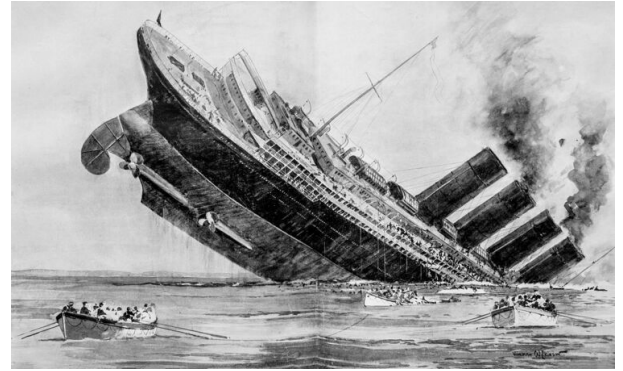
Several laws were made to keep America out of war. They were called the Neutrality Acts. The first was the Neutrality Act of 1935. This prohibited shipping weapons to any countries at war.

The Neutrality Act of 1936 added more restrictions. It said money couldn't be loaned to countries at war. Also, no Americans were permitted to travel on the ships of countries at war.

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

Lend-Lease

Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3, 1939. Two days later, President Roosevelt said that the U.S. would stay neutral. This meant that America would not get involved in the war.



However, FDR knew that Britain and France needed more weapons if they were going to defeat Germany. He immediately asked Congress to get rid of the ban on selling weapons.

The Neutrality Act of 1939 ended this ban. It allowed sales of weapons on a "cash and carry" basis.

On April 9, 1940, the Germans suddenly attacked Denmark and Norway. Then the Germans moved toward France, and the French were forced to surrender. Britain was the only country in Western Europe left to fight Germany.

The British leader Winston Churchill begged Roosevelt for help. Slowly but surely Americans decided to help the British. But Britain didn't have enough money to buy weapons.

Roosevelt hatched a new plan called Lend-Lease. He said that if a neighbor's house is on fire, you wouldn't sell him a water hose to put it out. It's common sense that someone would lend the hose to the neighbor and it would be returned when the fire is out. The United States could simply lend Britain weapons to fight the war.

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 urged Congress and Americans to take action. In his famous Four Freedoms Speech, he spoke about what he believed are the rights of any citizen of the world. 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 to have enough food, clothing and a place to live. The fourth is freedom from fear. FDR believed America should lead the way in securing these freedoms.

In the end, it was Japan who provoked the United States into war. Japan launched a surprise attack against American naval bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Faced with an assault on its own forces, the United States finally entered World War II.