

Chapter 35- Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Shadow of War

1933-1941

The London Conference

- Americans in the 1930s tried to turn their backs on the world's problems
- But as war seemed imminent in Europe, Roosevelt eventually concluded that the United States could no longer remain aloof—events gradually brought the American people around to his thinking: no nation was safe in an era of international anarchy
- The 66-nation London Economic Conference, meeting summer of 1933, revealed how Roosevelt's foreign policy was subordinated to his strategy for domestic economic recovery
- The London Conference hoped to organize an international attack on the global depression
- Exchange-rate stabilization was essential to the revival of world trade (gone by 1933)
- Roosevelt sent an American delegation to the conference (SS Hull) but the president wanted to pursue gold and inflationary policies at home as a means of stimulating American recovery
- Roosevelt was unwilling to sacrifice the possibility of domestic recovery and he scolded the conference for attempting to stabilize currencies, declaring America's withdrawal
- The delegates adjourned empty-handed, amid cries of American bad faith
- The collapse of the London Conference strengthened the global trend toward extreme nationalism, making international cooperation more difficult in the 1930s
- The persistence of American isolationism played directly into the hands of dictators

Freedom for (from?) the Filipinos and Recognition for the Russians

- Roosevelt matched isolationism from Europe with withdrawal from Asia (Far East imperialism)
- In hard times, Americans were eager to drop their expensive tropical liability in the Philippine Islands (low-wage Filipino workers and Philippine competition in the sugar industry)
- Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934 that provided for the independence of the Philippines after a twelve-year period of economic and political guidance—by 1946
- The US agreed to relinquish its army bases but not its naval bases
- The American people were not so much giving freedom to the Philippines as they were freeing themselves from the Philippines—proposed to leave the Philippines to their fate
- American isolationists rejoiced while Japanese militarists calculated that they had little to fear from an inward-looking America that was abandoning its principal possession in Asia

- Roosevelt formally recognized the Soviet Union in 1933—over the protest of anticommunist conservatives, as well as Roman Catholics offended by Kremlin’s antireligious policies
- He was motivated in part by the hope of trade with Soviet Russia, as well as by the desire to bolster the Soviet Union as a counterweight to the threat of German power and Japanese power

Becoming a Good Neighbor

- Roosevelt said, “I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the Good Neighbor”
- Roosevelt’s withdrawal suggested that the US was giving up its ambition to be a world power
- The Great Depression had cooled off Yankee economic aggressiveness and now the hated marines were protecting fewer dollars—Roosevelt was eager to line up the Latin Americans to help defend the Western Hemisphere by renouncing armed intervention (Monroe Doctrine)
- At the Seventh Pan-American Conference, the US formally endorsed nonintervention
- The last marines departed from Haiti in 1934 and in the same year, Cuba was released from the Platt Amendment, Panama was given uplift in 1936, as Washington relaxed its grip
- The Good Neighbor policy was tested in Mexico when the Mexican gov’t seized Yankee oil properties in 1938 but Roosevelt worked out a settlement in 1941
- Roosevelt’s policy paid rich dividends in goodwill among the peoples to the south

Secretary Hull’s Reciprocal Trade Agreements

- Associated with Good Neighborism was the reciprocal trade policy of the New Dealers
- Created by the Secretary of State Hull, he believed that a nation could sell abroad only as it buys abroad, that tariff barriers choke off foreign trade, and that trade wars beget shooting wars
- Responding to Hull-Roosevelt leadership, Congress passed the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act in 1934—this enlightened measure was aimed at both relief and recovery
- It activated the low-tariff policies of the New Dealers—amended parts of the Hawley-Smoot law
- Roosevelt could lower rates by as much as 50 percent, provided that the other country involved was willing to respond with similar reductions—did not need formal approval of the Senate
- Secretary Hull negotiated pacts with 21 countries by the end of 1939 and U.S. foreign trade increased appreciably—Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act was a landmark piece of legislation and reversed the traditional high-protective-tariff policy that had persisted for so long
- Paved way for the American-led free-trade international economic system after WW II

Impulses Toward Storm-Cellar Isolationism

- Post-WW I and post-Great Depression, spawned the ominous spread of totalitarianism
- The state was everything—the Communist USSR led the way with dictator Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, a Fascist, seized the reins of power in Italy and Adolf Hitler held control in Germany
- Hitler was the most dangerous of the dictators because he combined tremendous power with impulsiveness—he secured control of the Nazi party by making political capital of the Treaty of Versailles and Germany’s depression-spawned unemployment (Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936)
- International gangsterism spread in the Far East, where Japan ruled—it resented the Treaty of Versailles and demanded additional space for its teeming millions, on its crowded island nation
- Tokyo gave notice in 1934 of the termination of the twelve-year-old Washington Naval Treaty and at London a year later, it ended all hope of effective naval disarmament (accelerated ships)
- Mussolini, seeking glory and empire in Africa, brutally attacked Ethiopia in 1935; the League could have crushed Mussolini but the League did not want to risk global hostilities
- Isolationism received a strong boost from these alarms abroad—they remembered their debts
- In 1934, Congress passed the Johnson Debt Default Act, which prevented debt-dodging nations from borrowing further in the U.S.—“have-not” powers were out to become “have” powers
- Strong nationwide sentiment welled up for a constitutional amendment to forbid a declaration of war by Congress—except in case of invasion—unless there was a favorable popular referendum

Congress Legislates Neutrality

- As 1930s lengthened, the press condemned the munitions manufacturers and a Senate committee, headed by Senator Nye of ND was appointed in 1934 to investigate the “blood business”
- Because the munitions makers had made money out of the war, many citizens leaped to the illogical conclusion that these soulless scavengers had caused the war in order to make money
- Responding to overwhelming popular pressure, Congress made haste to legislate the nation out of war—Neutrality Acts of 1935-1937 stipulated that when the president proclaimed the existence of a foreign war, certain restrictions would automatically go into effect—no American could legally sail on a belligerent ship, sell or transport munitions, or make loans to belligerent
- This legislation in effect marked an abandonment of the traditional policy of freedom of the seas
- The Neutrality Acts were tailored to keep the nation out of a conflict like World War I

- America falsely assumed that the decision for peace or war lay in its own hands, not in those of the forces already unleashed in the world—enormous power to shape international events
- Statutory neutrality was of dubious morality; it actually overbalanced the scales in favor of the dictators, who had armed themselves to the teeth—declining to use its vast industrial strength to aid its democratic friends and defeat its totalitarian foes, it helped goad the aggressors

America Dooms Loyalist Spain

- The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 was a lesson in the folly of neutrality-by-legislation
- Spanish rebels rose against the republican government in Madrid headed by General Francisco Franco—aided by Hitler and Mussolini, he overthrew Loyalist regime (assisted by Soviet Union)
- Washington continued official relations with the Loyalist gov't; this regime should have been free to purchase munitions but US amended neutrality to include an arms embargo
- Uncle Sam watched Franco supported by his fellow dictators, strangle the republican gov't of Spain; they further encouraged the dictators to take the dangerous road that led to WW II
- America declined to build up its armed forces to a point where it could deter the aggressors
- Not until 1938 did Congress come to grips with the problem when it passed a billion-dollar naval construction act—America had allowed its navy to decline in relative strength

Appeasing Japan and Germany

- In 1937, Japan touched off the explosion that led to an all-out invasion of China—start of WW II
- Roosevelt refused to call the China incident an officially declared war—if he had, he would have cut off the munitions on which the Chinese were desperately dependent—Japanese still bought
- In Chicago President Roosevelt delivered his “Quarantine Speech” in the autumn of 1937—he called for “positive endeavors” to “quarantine” the aggressors—with economic embargoes
- The speech triggered a cyclone of protest from isolationists and other foes of involvement—Roosevelt retreated but in December 1937, Japanese aviators sank an American gunboat, the *Panay*, in Chinese waters but Tokyo hastened to make the necessary apologies and pay
- In 1935 he flouted the Treaty of Versailles by introducing compulsory military service in Germany; the next year he brazenly marched into the demilitarized German Rhineland
- Hitler undertook to persecute and then exterminate the Jewish population in the areas under his control—in the end he wiped out about 6 million innocent victims (military machine)
- In March 1938, Hitler occupied Austria and he began to make demands for the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and the leaders of Britain and France sought to bring the dispute to the table
- A conference was finally held in Munich, Germany in September 1938 and the Western European democracies, unprepared for war, betrayed Czechoslovakia to Germany

- “Appeasement” of the dictators turned out to be merely surrender and in March 1939, Hitler suddenly erased the rest of Czechoslovakia from the map, contrary to his solemn vows

Hitler’s Belligerency and U.S. Neutrality

- Joseph Stalin was a key to the peace puzzle and in the summer of 1939, the British and French were negotiating with Moscow, hopeful of securing a mutual-defense treaty to halt Hitler
- The Soviet Union astounded the world by signing, on August 23, 1939, a nonaggression treaty with the German dictator—the Hitler-Stalin pact meant that Hitler could now wage war on Poland and the Western democracies, without fear of the Soviet Union turning against him
- The Soviet dictator was plotting to turn his German accomplice against the West democracies, the two warring camps would then kill each other, and leave Stalin bestriding Europe
- With the Nazi-Soviet pact, Hitler demanded from Poland a return of the areas wrested from Germany after WW I and failing to secure satisfaction, he invaded Poland on September 1, 1939
- Britain and France, honoring the commitments to Poland, promptly declared war; but they were powerless to aid Poland, which succumbed in three weeks to Hitler’s smashing strategy of terror
- Stalin came in on the kill for his share of old Russian Poland—World War II had now started
- President Roosevelt issued the routine proclamations of neutrality—Americans were overwhelmingly anti-Nazi and anti-Hitler—they believed that the forces of righteousness would triumph—ill prepared Britain and France urgently needed American airplanes and other weapons
- Neutrality Act of 1937 raised a sternly forbidding hand; Roosevelt considered lifting embargo
- The Neutrality Act of 1939 provided that European democracies might buy American war materials, but only on “cash-and-carry basis”—transport money bought munitions on own ships
- Roosevelt was now authorized to proclaim danger zones in which American merchant ships would be forbidden to enter—this law clearly favored the democracies against the dictators
- Overseas demand for war goods brought a sharp upswing from the recession of 1937-1938 and ultimately solved the decade-long unemployment crisis

The Fall of France

- The months following the collapse of Poland were known as the “phony war” as Hitler shifted his victorious division from Poland for a knockout blow at France
- The Soviets attacked Finland in an effort to secure strategic buffer territory; the debt-paying Finns were granted \$30 million by Congress for nonmilitary supplies but Finland surrendered

- An end to the “phony war” came in April 1940 when Hitler overran Denmark and Norway and the next month he attacked Netherlands and Belgium, followed by a paralyzing blow at France
- By late June France was forced to surrender but a successful evacuation from the French port of Dunkirk saved the bulk of the British shattered and partially disarmed army
- The crisis brought forth an inspired leader in Prime Minister Winston Churchill
- France’s sudden collapse shocked Americans; the Britons were all that stood between Hitler and the death of constitutional gov’t in Europe—possibilities seemed to pose a dire threat to US
- Roosevelt moved with electrifying energy and called upon the nation to build huge airfleets and a two-ocean navy, which could also check Japan—appropriated a sum of \$37 billion in a year
- Congress passed a conscription law, approved 9/6/1940 and under this measure, provision was made for training each year 1.2 million troops and 800,000 reserves (first peacetime draft)
- At the Havana Conference of 1940, the US agreed to share with its twenty New World neighbors the responsibility of upholding the Monroe Doctrine (bracing Latin America bulwark)

Bolstering Britain with the Destroyer Deal (1940)

- As Britain alone stood between Hitler and his dream of world domination, the wisdom of the neutrality seemed increasingly questionable; Hitler launched air attacks Britain in August 1940 in preparation for invasion in September and for months the Battle of Britain raged in the air over the British Isles; Royal Air Force’s tenacious defense led Hitler to postpone invasion
- Debate intensified in the US over what foreign policy to embrace
- Sympathy for Britain grew, but it was not sufficient to push the United States into war
- Roosevelt faced a historic decision: whether to assumed a “Fortress America” defense posture or to bolster beleaguered Britain by all means short of war itself—both sides had their advocates
- Supporters of aid to Britain formed propaganda groups—Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (direct succor to the British and could appeal for assistance to the democracies)
- The isolationists organized the America First Committee—they contended that America should concentrate what strength it had to defend its own shores, lest Hitler cross Atlantic (Lindbergh)
- Britain was in critical need of destroyers, for German submarines were threatening to starve it out with attacks on shipping—Roosevelt moved in September to transfer to Great Britain fifty destroyers left over from World War I (British gave US eight defensive base sites in NA and SA)
- The exchange was achieved by a simple presidential agreement; condemnation arose from America Firsters and other isolationists, as well as from anti-administration Republicans

- Shirting warships from a neutral US to a belligerent Britain was a flagrant violation of neutral obligations; most Americans were determined to provide British with “all aid short of war”

FDR Shatters the Two-Term Tradition (1940)

- The two leading Republican aspirants were Senator Robert Taft of Ohio and Thomas Dewey of New York but the convention was swept off its feet by Wendell L. Willkie
- He had been a Democrat and had been a head of a huge public utilities corporation but his great appeal lay in his personality, for his trustful and honest homespun, Lincolnesque way
- Delegates finally accepted this political upstart as the only candidate who could beat Roosevelt
- The Republican platform condemned FDR’s alleged dictatorship, as well as the New Deal while Democratic critics branded him “the rich man’s Roosevelt”
- Roosevelt delayed to the last minute the announcement of his decision to challenge the sacred two-term tradition; he thought he owed his experience hand to the service of this country
- The Democrats realized that only the Champ could defeat Willkie and drafted him unanimously
- Willkie made over five hundred speeches, criticizing Roosevelt’s aid-to-Britain policies; he refrained from assailing the president’s interventionism because he saw eye-to-eye with FDR
- Both promised to stay out of the war; both promised to strengthen the nation’s defenses so Willkie hit hard at Rooseveltian “dictatorship” and the third term—Roosevelt triumphed
- Voters generally felt that should war come, the experienced hand of the tired leader was needed

Congress Passes the Landmark Lend-Lease Law

- By late 1940, Britain was near the end of its financial end; Roosevelt was determined to eliminate the need for debts and had the scheme of lending/leasing American arms
- The Lend-Lease Bill was praised by the administration as a device that would keep the nation out of the war rather than drag it in—it would send a limitless supply of arms to the victims of aggression, who in turn would finish the job and keep the war on their side of the Atlantic
- Most of the opposition came from isolationists and anti-Roosevelt Republicans (“blank-check bill”) but the bill was approved in March 1941 by sweeping majorities in Congress
- America had thus pledged itself to bolster those nations that were indirectly defending it by fighting aggression—at the end of the war, America had sent about \$50 billion worth of arms
- The Lend-Lease Bill marked the abandonment of any pretense of neutrality; the bill would involve a grave risk of war, but most Americans were prepared to take that change
- Lend-lease had result of gearing US industry for all-out war production (increased capacity)
- Hitler saw lend-lease as an unofficial declaration of war (no more avoiding attacking US ships)

Hitler's Assault on the Soviet Union Spawns the Atlantic Charter

- Two events marked the course of World War II before the assault on Pearl Harbor in December 1941; one was the fall of France in June 1940 and the other was Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 (Hitler and Stalin had been uneasy allies under the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939)
- They could not decide on how to divide potential territorial spoils between them, but Stalin balked at dominant German control of the Balkans so Hitler decided to crush his ally
- On June 22, 1941, Hitler launched a devastating attack on his Soviet neighbor; Roosevelt quickly promised assistance and backed up his words by making some military supplies available
- He extended \$1 billion in lend-lease (of a total \$11 billion) and meanwhile, the valor of the red army, combined with the paralysis of an early Russian winter, had halted Hitler's invaders
- The Atlantic Conference was held in August 1941; British Prime Minister Winston Churchill secretly met with Roosevelt on a warship off of Newfoundland and this was the first of a series of history-making conferences that discussed such things including Japan in the Far East
- This get-together formed the eight-point Atlantic Charter, covenant that outlined aspirations of the democracies for a better world at war's end (accepted by Roosevelt, Churchill, Soviet Union)
- Opposing imperialistic annexations, it promised self-determination concerning territorial changes, affirmed the right of a people to choose their own form of government, and declared for disarmament and a peace of security, pending a "permanent system of general security"
- It was gratifying to subject populations but the agreement was roundly condemned in the United States by isolationists and others hostile to Roosevelt—nation was no longer neutral

U.S. Destroyers and Hitler's U-boats Clash

- Roosevelt made the fateful decision to convoy in July 1941—the president issued orders to the navy to escort lend-lease shipments as far as Iceland where the British would take them
- Inevitable clashes with submarines ensued even though Hitler's orders were to strike at American warships only in self-defense (after the US destroyer *Greer* was attacked in September 1941, Roosevelt proclaimed a shoot-on-sight policy; *Kearny* and *Reuben James* attacked)
- Congress, responding to public pressures and confronted with a shooting war, voted in mid-November 1941 to pull the teeth from the now-useless Neutrality Act of 1939 (merchant ships could now be legally armed and they could enter the combat zones with munitions for Britain)

Surprise Assault on Pearl Harbor

- Japan had been Germany's ally since September 1840; Japan was bogged by the "China incident" and its war machine was dependent on immense shipments from the US

- Washington, late in 1940, finally imposed the first of its embargoes on Japan-bound supplies and the blow was followed in mid-1941 by a freezing of Japanese assets in the US
- Japanese leaders could knuckle under to the US or break out of the embargo with an attack
- Tense negotiations with Japan took place in Washington during November and early December 1941 and the US insisted that Japanese clear out of China to renew trade relations but they choose the sword—but the United States as a democracy, could not shoot first
- Japanese bombers attacked on the “Black Sunday” morning of December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor
- About three thousand Americans died, many aircraft were destroyed, the battleship fleet virtually wiped out but the three priceless aircraft carriers happened to be outside the harbor
- Germany and Italy, allies of Japan, spared Congress the indecision of debate by declaring war on December 11, 1941 and that challenge was accepted on the same day by unanimous vote

America’s Transformation from Bystander to Belligerent

- Japan’s gamble in Hawaii paid off only in the short run; the Pacific fleet had been largely destroyed, but the sneak attack aroused and united America (many had not wanted war)
- This treacherous attack was but the last explosion in a long chain reaction—they wished to halt Japan’s conquests in the Far East, which menaced not only American trade and security but international peace as well—Roosevelt administration felt compelled to extend unneutral aid
- Rather than let democracy die and dictatorship rule supreme, most citizens were evidently determined to support a policy that might lead to war and that it did