THE GREAT DEBATE

(Image: Associated Press.)

From our 21st-century point of view, it is hard to imagine World War II without the United States as a major participant. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, however, Americans were seriously divided over what the role of the United States in the war should be, or if it should even have a role at all. Even as the war consumed large portions of Europe and Asia in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was no clear consensus on how the United States should respond.

The US ambivalence about the war grew out of the **isolationist** sentiment that had long been a part of the American political landscape and had pervaded the nation since World War I. Hundreds of thousands of Americans were either killed or wounded during that conflict, and President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic plan to ensure permanent peace through international cooperation and American leadership failed to become a reality. Many Americans were disillusioned by how little their efforts had accomplished and felt that getting so deeply involved on the global stage in 1917 had been a mistake.

Neither the rise of Adolf Hitler to power nor the escalation of Japanese expansionism did much to change the nation's **isolationist** mood in the 1930s. Most Americans still believed the nation's interests were best served by staying out of foreign conflicts and focusing on problems at home, especially the devastating effects of the Great Depression. Congress passed a series of **Neutrality** Acts in the late 1930s, aiming to prevent future involvement in foreign wars by banning American citizens from trading with nations at war, loaning them money, or traveling on their ships.

But by 1940, the deteriorating global situation was impossible to ignore. Nazi Germany had annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia and had conquered Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. Great Britain was the only major European power left standing against Hitler's war machine. The urgency of the situation intensified the debate in the United States over whether American interests were better served by staying out or getting involved.

Isolationists believed that World War II was ultimately a dispute between foreign nations and that the United States had no good reason to get involved. The best policy, they claimed, was for the United States to build up its own defenses and avoid antagonizing either side. **Neutrality**, combined with the power of the US military and the protection of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, would keep Americans safe while the Europeans sorted out their own problems. **Isolationist** organizations like the America First Committee sought to influence public opinion through print, radio, and mass rallies. Aviator Charles Lindbergh and popular radio priest Father Charles Coughlin were the Committee's most powerful spokesmen. Speaking in 1941 of an "independent American destiny," Lindbergh asserted that the United States ought to fight any nation that attempted to meddle in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. However, he argued, American soldiers ought not to have to "fight everybody in the world who prefers some other system of life to ours."

Interventionists believed the United States did have good reasons to get involved in World War II, particularly in Europe. The democracies of Western Europe, they argued, were a critical line of defense against Hitler's fast-growing strength. If no European power remained as a check against Nazi Germany, the United States could become isolated in a world where the seas and a significant amount of territory and resources were controlled by a single powerful dictator. It would be, as President

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Female isolationists from the America First Committee, Keep America Out of War, and the Mothers' Crusade picket British Ambassador Lord Halifax in Chicago, May 8, 1941. *(Image: Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo, F2AWAM.)*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt put it, like "living at the point of a gun," and the buffer provided by the Pacific and Atlantic would be useless. Some **interventionists** believed US military action was inevitable, but many others believed the United States could still avoid sending troops to fight on foreign soil, if only the **Neutrality** Acts could be relaxed to allow the federal government to send military equipment and supplies to Great Britain. William Allen White, Chairman of an **interventionist** organization called the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, reassured his listeners that the point of helping Britain was to keep the United States out of the war. "If I were making a motto for [this] Committee," he said, "it would be 'The Yanks Are Not Coming.'"

> "WE WELL KNOW THAT WE CANNOT ESCAPE DANGER, OR THE FEAR OF DANGER, BY CRAWLING INTO BED AND PULLING THE COVERS OVER OUR HEADS.
>
> *PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT*

Public opinion polling was still in its infancy as World War II approached, but surveys suggested the force of events in Europe in 1940 had a powerful impact on American ideas about the war. In January of that year, one poll found that 88% of Americans opposed the idea of declaring war against the Axis powers in Europe. As late as June, only 35% of Americans believed their government should risk war to help the British. Soon after, however, France fell, and in August the German ***Luftwaffe*** began an all-out bombing campaign against Great Britain. The British Royal Air Force valiantly repelled the German onslaught, showing that Hitler was not invincible. A September 1940 poll found that 52% of Americans now believed the United States ought to risk war to help the British. That number only increased as Britain continued its standoff with the Germans; by April 1941 polls showed that 68% of Americans favored war against the Axis powers if that was the only way to defeat them.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, ended the debate over American intervention in both the Pacific and European theaters of World War II. The day after the attack, Congress declared war on Imperial Japan with only a single dissenting vote. Germany and Italy—Japan's allies—responded by declaring war against the United States. Faced with these realities and incensed by the attack on Pearl Harbor, everyday Americans enthusiastically supported the war effort. Isolation was no longer an option.