

From Isolationism to Interventionism: America's Entry into WWII

Section I: Introduction

This lesson plan shall examine American isolationism and the shift from isolationism to intervention to help the British before Pearl Harbor.

Section II: Guiding Question

Given America's isolationist attitude in the pre-world war II years, why did America move from isolationism to intervention by 1940?

Section III: Learning Objectives

The objectives for this lesson shall be the following:

- A. Explain the origination of America's isolationism in Foreign policy
- B. Explain the relationship that America had with Britain that would lead to pro-British sympathy during the war
- C. List the major points of
 - a. "We shall Fight Them On The Beaches," Winston Churchill, 4 June 1940
 - b. Destroyers for Bases Agreement, 2 September 1940
 - c. "Give Us the Tools" Winston Churchill, 9 February 1941
 - d. Lend Lease Act, 11 March 1941
 - e. Atlantic Charter, 14 August 1941
- D. Describe America's anti-interventionist feeling in the pre-war years
 - a. Lindbergh speech, Madison Square Garden, 23 May 1941
 - b. Time Magazine, 3 March 1941, British War Relief benefit

Section IV: Background Information for the Teacher

The documents in this lesson deal in one way or another with the subject of American isolationism and its gradual change in the days leading to our entry into World War II.

Non-Interventionist: [George Washington's Farewell Address](#).

The Farewell Address is a written document that George Washington gave in 1796 to Congress, explaining his refusal to run for a Third Term, and, more importantly perhaps, giving some lasting advice to his countrymen on how to keep the Republic free and united in the dangerous days ahead. Like a father's advice to a son, this is the Father of the Country imparting advice for the last time to a rapidly growing and changing nation. The foreign dangers to the nation were many: both the English and French were harassing American shipping on the Atlantic; the English were still in outposts in the American west stirring up discontent amongst the Indians; the Spanish could (and would) at any time they chose, cut off America's free navigation of the Mississippi. Thus, it was amidst warnings of potential dangers but also almost unlimited opportunities that George Washington—the only indispensable man" to the Revolution—stepped down, forcing the young nation to grow up in an increasingly threatening world. When Washington wrote of his desire for his young nation to "avoid entangling alliances" he set a principle for United States foreign policy that was interpreted to mean keeping the nation out of European affairs for the next century.

Non-Interventionist: [The Kellogg-Briand Pact](#)

In 1928 America was about to enter its most isolationist decade, but the nation still contributed to the European scene in its foreign affairs. Wishing to stay out of European affairs, but still under the spell of a post-Great War dream of "ending all wars", the United States picked up the shattered pieces from Versailles and remade them in this Pact. War was to be renounced by all signatory nations, most of whom made up the Great Powers of Europe and Asia, as well as the United States. In its most simplistic description, here was a document that most perfectly encapsulated the United States, meshing the idea of non-intervention with that of the post-Versailles desire to end all wars. Considered by most to be at best a pipe-dream of the United States, and at worst a naïve view of the world situation, nonetheless this is another document that shows that America by this time was firmly traveling the isolationist road.

Non-Interventionist: [The Nye Committee](#).

Throughout the 1930's, Senator Gerald Nye was committed to reaffirming American isolationism in the face of escalating European dangers. Working from the suspicion that America had entered The Great War not to make it the war to end all wars or to make the world safe for democracy, President Wilson's stated war goals of, but rather to mollify the banking and business interests who would get rich if America joined. Nye set about trying to justify this theory. After holding a series of hearings in the 1930s investigating the reasons for America's entry into the Great War, Nye believed the evidence showed that powerful American business interests, for financial gain, had pushed the United States into intervention against its own best interests. Thus, the Nye Committee served not only to serve as a symbol of American isolationist sentiment during the 1930's, but also as a justification for that sentiment.

"We shall Fight Them On The Beaches," Winston Churchill, 4 June 1940

Audio Archive Select: [1940 Jun 04 - We Shall Never Surrender](#)

In June 1940, England was just emerging from the phony war, and the Battle of Britain was just beginning. With the fall of France in May, England was now alone. Before American aid was made available through Lend-Lease, the collapse of France, and the fall of the Chamberlain government, England's survival was anything but certain in the face of the Nazi threat. In this atmosphere, Churchill delivers what many consider to be his most stirring remarks in this speech. Would England fight or surrender? The British people—and the people of the United States, becoming increasingly worried about British chances of survival—had their answer.

Destroyers for Bases Agreement 2 September 1940

Roosevelt's Explanation of Lend-Lease to the American People:

"Arsenal of Democracy" Fireside Chat 16, 29 December 1940

Transcript and audio

In December of 1940, FDR gave a fireside chat effectively arguing the merits of the proposed Lend-Lease Act (see above). In doing so, he was treading a fine line—he had to explain away the apparent dichotomy between getting the United States seemingly more involved in European affairs (by aiding Britain) in order to keep us out of the next European war (by letting the British fight the Nazis with American

equipment, so America wouldn't have to). This was an effective "chat", particularly in utilizing the analogy of a farmer's house burning down. Upon asking his neighbor for a hose to put out the flames, the neighbor doesn't quibble about time or price, he gives him the hose. Why? By doing so, he is ensuring that his own home is not engulfed in flames. Thus, this is a good analogy easily understood not only by the American people at large, but also by those in the classroom.

"Give Us the Tools," Winston Churchill

Radio broadcast, 9 February 1941

Audio Archive Select: [1941 Feb 09 - Give Us The Tools](#)

Churchill takes stock of Britain's current position: "We stood our ground and faced the two Dictators in the hour of what seemed their overwhelming triumph, and we have shown ourselves capable, so far, of standing up against them alone." But, noting that it is still possible that Hitler may attempt an invasion, for "in order to win Hitler must destroy Great Britain," Churchill asks Roosevelt to have confidence in the British for "We shall not falter or fail Give us the tools and we will finish the job."

The Lend Lease Act, 11 March 1941

To [download a document transcript or a PDF](#)

Document image:

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=71>

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/decade/decade04.htm>

By March of 1941, with the United States still in the midst of its isolationist sentiment and not having yet entered the war, Great Britain was fighting the war alone. The Empire was quickly coming to the end of its financial rope; assets from the Commonwealth overseas had dried up, and no aid from elsewhere was coming. Though Cash and Carry had been in effect by the United States for some months, allowing Britain to buy war supplies from the "arsenal of democracy," and American destroyers were now helping protect these vital shipments thanks to the recent destroyers for bases deal, it was apparent that Britain was rapidly approaching bankruptcy. Thus, the

Lend-Lease Act of March 1941 allowed for American allies—meaning at this time Britain—to obtain American goods needed for the war effort without paying up front for them. It did allow Roosevelt to give the British over \$1 billion in aid by the end of the year—aid that would be vital in keeping Britain in the war, and perhaps America out of the war—until Pearl Harbor shattered that fiction as well.

According to the [UK's Guardian Unlimited](#), “between March 1941 and September 1945, the United States' lend-lease program transferred some \$48 billion worth of war material to other nations, the largest part of it (worth some \$21 billion) to Britain. This was an enormous sum, nearly equal to an entire year's UK gross national product. But it came at a price and the Americans drove a hard bargain. At one point Washington pressed for the transfer of the British West Indies in return. Though that proposal fell through, Britain did agree to give up the rights to and royalties on innovations such as radar, antibiotics, jet aircraft and nuclear research to the US as part of "reverse lend-lease". And when the war was over, the Americans handed in their bill.

Britain has been paying off her lend-lease bill in annual installments ever since 1950. This week the Treasury confirmed that the last payment of £45m will be made by the end of this year. Lend-lease was an extraordinarily far-sighted American move – hardly "the most unsordid act in the history of any nation", as Churchill described it. But, according to the Guardian, “it was also the price of our survival. Repayment of debt may be unfashionable these days. But if ever a debt deserved paying it was lend-lease.”

The final UK repayment of £45m debt to the US Federal Reserve was made at midnight 31st December 2006.

[Atlantic Charter](#), 14 August 1941

Churchill and Roosevelt meet secretly off the coast of Newfoundland

(Optional) American Media:

[Time Magazine, 3 March 1941 "Give Us the Tools---](#)" Benefit in New York City for the British War Relief Society

Non-Interventionist: [Speech by Charles A. Lindbergh](#) under the auspices of the America First Committee, to 20,000 people in Madison Square Garden, 23 May 1941

[More related documents](#) from the pre-World War II era:

V. Preparation for Teaching this Lesson

These documents trace the evolution of American foreign policy from one of traditional isolationism to one of intervention in this second European War of the Twentieth Century.

Section VI.

Activity #1

Give students the background information concerning each of the documents. Explain that all of these documents played an important role in defining why the United States was slow to move towards intervention in World War II. Have each group answer the following questions on the included worksheet for the document assigned to their group. In answering these questions, they should do so with the goal in mind of answering the large question, why did America move from isolationism to intervention during its history?

Activity #2

Have the students in each group each write an essay in which they role-play Winston Churchill and his attempt to get America involved in the war. Analyzing your group's document, what would you say to President Roosevelt concerning the document in order to convince him that America should enter the war against Germany and become England's ally? Students should come up with three points to prove their stance and get America involved in the war.

Activity #3

This is a group activity. Students, having now thought about in a group what Churchill's perspective was, should now be able to write an essay concerning Roosevelt's perspective. Using the worksheet

provided, how would Roosevelt argue that each of these documents could be used to justify keeping America out of the war?

Section VII. Assessment

Students can be assessed in a variety of ways. A typical test, half objective concerning the facts (names, dates, etc.) and half subjective (based on answering the Topic Question, for instance) can be given; a debate between two halves of the class, with half taking the role of Roosevelt and half taking the role of Churchill; or simply assess the students based on the essays they wrote role-playing Churchill or FDR.

Section IX. Additional Information

- A. Meant for grade levels 9-12
- B. American or world history
- C. One classroom period to teach background, perhaps one or two to do and assess activities, depending on group size and number
- D.** Mark Baker, Bishop Rosecrans High School, Zanesville, OH

Group Worksheet #1

Document Title_____

Instructions: Your teacher will give a brief account of the background of these documents. Explain the importance of your document to American intervention and isolationism by answering the following questions.

- A. Who wrote the document or was responsible for the document?**

- B. What was the intended audience for the document? What was the actual audience of the document?**

- C. What is the theme of the document? (The theme is the major point that the author, through the document, is trying to make to his/her audience)**

- D. What are the major points that the authors of the document make in trying to establish their theme? (Try to list at least FIVE)**

- E. What kind of special language do the authors use to make their points? (Is the language the kind that you would use today? What kind of vocabulary that is used? What is the style?)**

F. What do you think the intent of the author is in the writing of this document? (What do you think the author is trying to have his audience think or do as a result of this document?).

G. What do you think will be the ACTUAL result of this document concerning American isolationism and our willingness to get involved in European wars? Does it push us towards intervention in Europe? Does it push us away from intervention in Europe? Why?

H. How do you think the document's language could be improved to have its intended effect?

Group Worksheet #2

It is October 1941. You are in the Cabinet working with Winston Churchill. In this speech, you are trying to convince FDR that the United States should enter the war on England's side against Germany. In answering the following questions, you should be able to explain what you would say to FDR to persuade him to enter the war on your side.

"Mr. President, our situation is dire, and Britain needs your help. I know that on the face of it, this document that you have before you _____ argues strongly against American intervention in our European problems. Here is why, however, you MUST support the British Empire, and support us now!!!!

Group Worksheet #3

You are in the Brain Trust of the President of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt. You have been asked by the President to help craft a letter to Churchill, justifying your non-intervention in a European war. Use your document to justify American non-intervention to the great British leader.

“My dear Churchill, I understand that you are in a grave crisis, under threat from the Nazis. I will do everything in my power to help the great British people, short of going to war. I realize that this document you have before you _____ supports American intervention in this war. We simply cannot declare war, because.....