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American Politics: The Road to
War

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The Second World War was one of the most important events in modern world history. The conflict itself was by far the deadliest in human history in terms of civilian and military casualties. Because of the monumental importance of this event, it came as a surprise and a disappointment to the Allied powers during the war that two years into it, the United States, one of the greatest powers of the era, hadn't joined the war effort. It wasn't until the United States naval base of Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Empire of Japan on December 7, 1941, that the United States finally joined its European allies. When looked at briefly, the series of events that occurred based around the attack on Pearl Harbor seem like logical events. America was remaining neutral, Japan attacked America, and naturally, America entered the war. However, when explored more deeply, the implications involved in the entrance of America to the war are much more complex. The entrance of the United States to the Second World War was not caused by one single defining event, but was rather the result of prolonged provocations by both sides.

As mentioned above, America did not join the war until two years after it started. Disillusionment from the First World War and the economic depression of the 1930's led to a very prevalent feeling of isolationism among the American people. Meanwhile, congress worked to reinforce the policy of isolationism by passing several acts of neutrality throughout the 1930's. These acts effectively banned the United States from providing arms, ammunition, oil, steel, and rubber to all parties of the war, as well as forbidding loans to all belligerents and prohibiting

American ships from entering war zones.¹ President Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself assured the American people that he would do everything in his power to keep the United States out of the war. In fact, Roosevelt's most quoted statement for his 1940 campaign which he asserted to a crowd in Boston was "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign war." His reassurance was successful enough for him to win an unprecedented third term in office.²

Even though it can be said that on the surface, the American public and the American government were doing everything possible to remain uninvolved with the war in Europe, the reality was more complicated. While it is true that Roosevelt's platform for re-election centered on remaining neutral in the matter of the war in Europe, his speeches were seen as having quarrelsome undertones. An example of this comes from a speech where he argued, "Some, indeed, still hold to the now somewhat obvious delusion that we can safely permit the United States to become a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force."³ This statement is a good example of Roosevelt's true feelings about the spread of the fascist ideology. He described it in his statement as the philosophy of force, which he claims cannot coexist peacefully alongside democracy, represented by the United States, making it clear that the United States would have to confront Germany eventually.

¹ Steven M. Gillon, *Pearl Harbor: FDR Leads the Nation into War* (New York: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2011), 7-8.

² Gillon, *FDR Leads Nation into War*, 13.

³ *The Annals of America*, vol. 16, (Chicago Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 1968), 6, N.B

In fact, the people who did support American intervention in Europe claimed a fear of a German invasion as their main argument for becoming involved in the war. When France fell to the Germans in the summer of 1940, Great Britain was left as the only great democratic power standing in the way between Germany and the United States.⁴ The urgency of this situation can be seen from newly-elected Prime Minister Winston Churchill's warning to President Roosevelt that "If necessary, we [Great Britain] shall continue the war alone and we are not afraid of that. But I trust you realize, Mr. President, that the voice and force of the United States may count for nothing if they are withheld too long. You may have a completely subjugated, Nazified Europe with astonishing swiftness, and the weight may be more than we can bear."⁵ American intervention in World War I proved to be highly important towards the defeat of the Central Powers. This fact was not lost in the mind of Allied leaders, nor with American leaders. Most importantly however, was the fact that though the majority of people in the United States favored isolationism, they also recognized the threat that would become a victorious Germany. A national survey performed in the summer of 1940 found that 67% of Americans viewed a German-Italian victory as dangerous to America, and that if such a victory should occur, 88% supported "arm[ing] to the teeth at any expense to be prepared for any trouble," while 71% embraced "the immediate adoption of compulsory military training for all young men."⁶ Such opinions demonstrated a realistic view of a peaceful nation

⁴ *The Annals of America*, vol. 16, (Chicago Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 1968),8, N.B

⁵ John Lukacs " Churchill Offers Toil And Tears To FDR" *American Heritage*, 2008, www.americanheritage.com/content/churchill-offers-toil-and-tears-fdr (29 April 2012).

⁶ *Life*, 29 July 1940, 20.

that would undoubtedly fight any time it felt threatened in a way that was close to becoming a reality in the summer of 1940.

Even before joining the war, America was preparing for war, as evidenced by the increase of the Army to 1,000,000 by the end of 1940, with the eventual goal of increasing it to 4,000,000, the addition of 50,000 planes for the Army Air Corps, 170,000 enlisted men for the Navy, 34,000 for the Marines, 15,000 planes and 10,000 pilots for the Naval Air Force, as well as the introduction of plans for building an eventual two-ocean navy made up of 17 battleships, 14 heavy cruisers, 40 light cruisers, 197 destroyers and 74 submarines.⁷ On top of that, the seemingly uncompromising neutrality acts were in fact not as rigid against intervention as congress had hoped. President Roosevelt managed to gain a concession known as cash and carry in which any nation could buy materials from the United States, provided that the buying nation provided transportation of the goods and paid up front in cash. Though technically any belligerent nation in the European war could take advantage of this, Roosevelt acquired this concession knowing that Germany had no funds to buy materials and only France and Britain would be able to arrange transport reliably as their naval power controlled the ocean.⁸ Even though this concession was gained as a means to help further improve the rebounding American economy during the Great Depression, it showed Roosevelt's desire to aid Britain in the war and to have America play a larger role in it, while at the same time avoiding accusations of intervening in the European conflict.

⁷ Robert A. Theobald, *The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor; The Washington Contribution to the Japanese Attack* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1954), 10.

⁸ Robert Divine, *Roosevelt and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 48.

Roosevelt's attempts to mask his increasing aid to the Allies became harder to maintain when Great Britain became drained of funds with which to buy materials. In response to this, Roosevelt pushed for the passing of Lend-Lease, which was a program designed to directly aid Great Britain by lending it war equipment and materials and claiming repayment after the war. Even though Roosevelt claimed that this act would keep America away from the war by helping Britain win, it was seen as the biggest challenge to American isolationism as it directly involved America in the war. Despite strong opposition, polls showed that more than 60% of Americans supported the Lend-Lease, especially after increased German aggression towards Britain. Lend-Lease was successfully passed by the House and the Senate despite the fact that this would provoke deadly confrontations between the American navy and German U-boats that patrolled the Atlantic. This fear came to reality as evidenced by the sinking of the USS *Reuben James* off the coast of Iceland, along with the loss of 96 crew members. This incident led to the effective end of neutrality by the United States, as public anger over the sinking allowed Roosevelt to successfully repeal the neutrality acts on November 13, 1941 and to allow the shooting on sight of any German submarines found west of Iceland.⁹ At this point, it was clear that an undeclared naval war in the Atlantic had begun and that the entrance of America into the Second World War was not far away. Hostilities in the Atlantic theater of the war were now to be expected.

In addition to the Axis powers of Europe, the United States was faced with another foe in the Pacific. The Empire of Japan, which was also aligned with the Axis

⁹ Gillon, *FDR Leads Nation into War*, 14-15.

powers, continued with its conquest of Asia in the Pacific despite international condemnation. The biggest threat from the Pacific to America came after Japan joined the Axis powers in the Tripartite Treaty, which guaranteed the co-operation between Germany, Italy and Japan during the war. With the treaty in place, and Great Britain's seemingly imminent defeat, Japan was seen as a potentially dangerous tool of the Germans in the case of an invasion.¹⁰ Because of this, America passed many included aimed at putting economic pressure on Japan so as to slow its military growth. Throughout the latter half of 1940, successive restrictions stopped shipments of airplane fuel, scrap metal, and much-needed machinery and machine tools to Japan. Subsidies on what shipped to the Far East were also discontinued. Through Anglo-American support, the Dutch East Indies refused to be forced into the Japanese economic empire. A more direct provocation upon Japan included the financial and economic aiding of China, which occurred at around the same time that Japan's seizure of Indo-China caused the United States, Great Britain and The Netherlands, acting together, to freeze Japanese assets and stop trading with Japan.¹¹

Japan's economy had been involved with the United States so intimately that the economic pressure it received from America was significant enough to make war a logical response. It can even be said that war was always going to be inevitable since, given Japan's size, it was very dependent of imports and the conquests it was pursuing to meet its raw material needs. Harvard professor emeritus Akira Iriye

¹⁰ Iguchi Takeo, *Demystifying Pearl Harbor: a New Perspective from Japan* (Japan: International House of Japan, Inc. 2010), 78.

¹¹ Theobald, *Pearl Harbor*, 12.

asserts that Prime Minister Tojo decided to risk going to war with America because it was completely blockaded and had no other route. Furthermore, if Japan didn't risk war with America, it would have to completely discard that possibility after two years when its energy needs would not be able to meet its military. Finally, Japan felt pressured to act as it would be the only way to secure the oil necessary to continue its war with China in which, after 4 long years of battles and spilled blood, it was too invested to leave.¹²

By December of 1941, it seemed like America was on the brink of war. The only thing missing was a spark that would rally Americans and the American government into action. The attack on Pearl Harbor was that spark. On December 7, 1941 at 7:58 am, Japanese fighter planes were spotted flying over Pearl Harbor. Isoroku Yamamoto commanded the attack. 353 Japanese fighter planes were used over the course of 5 hours and in two waves. After the hostilities had ceased, the dead were counted. According to a Joint Congressional Committee investigating the events in 1946, Pearl Harbor was "the greatest military and naval disaster in our Nation's history." America suffered 3,566 casualties, of which 2,388 were killed, with 1,177 of those perishing on the USS *Arizona*, where they remain entombed to this day. In contrast, Japan lost 28 fighter planes and less than 100 men.¹³ The surprise attack was a success. The provocations between both sides finally led to significant hostile action.

¹² Takeo, *Demystifying*, 62.

¹³ Gillon, *FDR Leads Nation into War*, 50.

The attack itself was a very shocking and despicable event in the eyes of the Americans. The day after the attack, a newspaper from Atlanta described the attack as “treacherous and utterly unprovoked.”¹⁴ The effects of the attack were extreme and immediate. The same newspaper talked about 1,000 arrest warrants were issued for Japanese nationals in America who were considered dangerous, while at the same time, all Japanese nationals or people with Japanese ancestry were ordered to stay in their homes in Georgia. There was another article stating that the members of congress were furious over the attack and would declare war without hesitation if asked.

Whatever the provocations were, or the justifications Japan may have had, the first thing that the American people wanted was revenge. A very iconic event in American history occurred soon after the attack in the form of President Roosevelt’s infamy speech, which condemned Japan’s attack and called for war against them. As the leader of a nation that felt hurt, betrayed and angry, it was only fitting that he would denounce the actions of a treacherous nation taking innocent American lives. Even today, it can still be said that December 7, 1941 is “a date which will live in infamy.” The next day, America and Britain declared war on Japan, with Germany and Italy declaring war on America as a response three days later, and America responding in kind the very same day. On December 11, 1941, America had joined the Second World War.

¹⁴ The Associated Press, "JAPANESE INVADE MALAYA: F.D.R. WAR MESSAGE TODAY: Guam Is Attacked; Nippon's Seizure Of Wake Reported Enemy Aircraft Carrier Said To Be Sunk After Surprise Raid on Pearl Harbor Base" *The Atlanta Constitution*, 8 December, 1941

The fact remains that the Japanese took the American Naval Pacific fleet by surprise. However, some people claim that the higher authorities of the United States government were aware of the impending danger of in the Pacific Ocean. One of the men who took part in the attack on Pearl Harbor was Rear admiral Robert Alfred Theobald. In his book *The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor; The Washington Contribution to the Japanese Attack*, he claims that the responsibility of the attack lies with the president. According to Theobald, "by holding a weak Pacific Fleet in Hawaii as an invitation to a surprise attack, and by denying the Commander of that Fleet the information which might render that attack impossible, President Roosevelt brought war to the United States on December 7, 1941."¹⁵ While this theory is by no means groundbreaking or even close to being proved, it does fit in with the escalation towards war the United States underwent prior to the attack. Whether the claims are true or not, it shows that Roosevelt was believed to be maneuvering America into war and as tragic as the attack on Pearl Harbor was, it helped defeat of the Axis powers.

America's involvement in World War II was definitely a huge contributing factor to the Allied victory. Because of its importance before the war, it was inevitable that America would play a big role. Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to see how important it was for America to be involved with foreign politics and, whatever his agenda was, pushed for a more active role in the European war. Despite the initial resistance to join another big foreign war, as time passed, Americans and the American government began to see the dangers that would come with an Axis

¹⁵ Theobald, *Pearl Harbor*, 201.

victory. Roosevelt's disdain for the Nazi ideology was a main contributing factor for his persistence in making sure Germany would not win. Because of his strategic and political skill, Roosevelt was able to gradually maneuver America into war. Though Pearl Harbor is commonly known as the direct reason for joining the war, it was by no means the only reason. Had Pearl Harbor been predicted, it is likely that another event would have pushed us over the edge. Though this is hard, if not impossible to prove, it is consistent with the atmosphere of the era. It is probable that sooner or later a hostile power would have threatened America and by then, it could have been too late to stop it. Because of this, it is important to consider that an event like Pearl Harbor, as tragic as it was, could potentially have saved many more American lives. The fact remains that whatever political ideology is held, it is hard to imagine our world as a great place to live in had the Axis powers conquered the West.

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The Road to War. Presidential Commitments Honored and Betrayed. By Marvin Kalb May 10, 2013. Not since Pearl Harbor has an American president gone to Congress to request a declaration of war. Nevertheless, since then, one president after another, from Truman to Obama, has ordered American troops into wars all over the world. From Korea to Vietnam, Panama to Grenada, Lebanon to Bosnia, Afghanistan to Iraq—why have presidents sidestepped declarations of war? He focuses on the impact of media on public policy and politics, and is also an expert in national security, with a focus on U.S. relations with Russia, Europe and the Middle East. His new book, "Assignment Russia: Becoming a Foreign Correspondent in the Crucible of the Cold War," will be published in March 2021.

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