

**Pearl Harbor and America's Entry into World War II:
A Documentary History**

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Isolationist Sentiment

Prior to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, many Americans did not want their nation to enter conflicts in Europe or Asia. Polls in 1940 showed that 80% of them opposed any involvement in military conflicts. This isolationist spirit was fueled by memories of the devastation caused by World War I. The vindictive and acquisitive attitude America's European allies displayed at the Versailles Peace Conference also contributed to this spirit. Prominent members of Congress were isolationists. Senator Gerald Nye's committee looked into the large profits arms manufacturers made during World War I. His committee concluded that the arms industry played a prominent role in convincing America to enter the war. As a result, Nye and like-minded senators got Congress to pass the Neutrality Act of 1935. This law prohibited the United States from selling arms to any nation at war.

In 1940, isolationists formed the America First Committee (AFC). AFC boasted a membership of 800,000, which included prominent politicians, such as Senator Nye and Congressman Hamilton Fish, as well as celebrities such as industrialist Henry Ford and aviator Charles Lindbergh. The famous aviator made an impassioned speech at an AFC rally in New York City on April 23, 1941:

Over a hundred million people in this nation are opposed to entering this war (the war in Europe which began in 1939)... If we are forced into a war against the wishes of an overwhelming majority of our people, we will have proved democracy such a failure at home that there will be little use to fight for it abroad.

Lindbergh reiterated his views in a *New York Times* article the following day (4/24/41), p.12.

We are divided [as a nation] because we are asked to fight over issues that are Europe's and not our own - issues that Europe created by her own short-sightedness. We are divided because many of us do not wish to fight again for England's balance of power or for her domination of India, Mesopotamia and Egypt... or for another treaty like Versailles. We are divided because we do not want to cross an ocean to fight on a foreign continent for foreign causes against an entire world combined against us.

Most "America Firsters" were conservatives and businessmen who mistrusted President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs. Some liberals and socialists, however, were also isolationists. They opposed the fascist aggression of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. But their opposition to America's military involvement in the European conflict was stronger. One group of leftist isolationists, the League for

Cultural Freedom and Socialism, published a petition against America's military involvement:

We loathe and abominate fascism as the chief enemy of all culture, all real democracy, all social progress. But the last war showed only too clearly that we can have no faith in imperialist crusades to bring freedom to any people. Our entry into the war, under the slogan of "Stop Hitler!" would actually result in the immediate introduction of totalitarianism over here. Only the German people can free themselves of the fascist yoke. The American masses can best help them by fighting *at home* to keep their own liberties....

The masses, who have nothing to gain and everything to lose from another war, are far from endorsing the President's foreign policy. But this sentiment can again be cheated, deceived, propagandized out of existence as it was in the last war, unless it is made conscious and given organized expression.

Interventionist Sentiments

Not all Americans favored isolationism. An editorial in the *New York Times* (4/30/41) expressed a fear in the spread of Nazism, perhaps into the western hemisphere:

Grant Hitler the gigantic prestige of a victory over Britain, and who can doubt that the first result on our side of the ocean would be the prompt appearance of imitation Nazi governments in a half-dozen Latin American nations, forced to be on the winning side, begging for favors, clamoring for the admission to the Axis.... [S]hall we sit tight while the area of Nazi influence draws ever closer to the Panama Canal and a spreading checkerboard of Nazi airfields provide ports of call for German planes that may choose to bomb our cities?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the danger of a Nazi victory in Europe. He assisted the British in every way possible, short of entering the war. In a radio address, FDR told the American people they cannot detach themselves from the world:

It is easy for you and me to shrug our shoulders and say that conflicts taking place thousands of miles from the continental United States... do not seriously affect the Americas – and that all the United States has to do is to ignore them and go about our own business. Passionately though we may desire detachment, we are forced to realize that every word that comes through the air, every ship that sails the sea, every battle that is fought does affect the American future.... Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.

On December 29, 1940, FDR said in his fireside chat that United States could be an "arsenal of democracy":

The people of Europe who are defending themselves do not ask us to do their fighting. They ask us for the implements of war, the planes, the tanks, the guns, the freighters, which will enable them to fight for their liberty and for our security. We must be the great arsenal of democracy.

After Pearl Harbor

The Pearl Harbor attack changed everything. Senator Nye, a prominent member of America First, reflected this change in the mood of the nation:

It is not time to quibble over what might have been done or how we got where we are. We know only that the enemy chose to make war against us. To give our Commander in Chief unqualified and unprejudiced backing in his prosecution of the war is an obligation which I shall gladly fulfill. Differences over matters of foreign policy up to this hour are abandoned and unity shall be accorded in every particular.

Less than twenty-four hours after the attack, President Roosevelt went to Congress to ask for a declaration of war. Republican and Democratic congressmen walked into the chamber arm in arm as a show of unity. They were joined by members of the United States Supreme Court and the nation's military leaders. Here, FDR delivered his now famous "a date which will live in infamy" speech:

Yesterday, December 7, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American Island of Oahu the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And, while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya. Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippines Islands. Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island. Japan has therefore undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves.

The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation. As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people we will gain the inevitable triumph. So help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

Internment Order

Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused widespread fear among residents in western states and triggered racist attitudes. Citing extraordinary security circumstances, governors and attorneys general from California, Oregon and Washington urged the federal government to remove persons of Japanese descent from the West Coast. Representatives from the U.S. Justice Department raised ethical and constitutional objections to the removal. The White House therefore assigned the task to the military. President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, authorizing the military to conduct the removal. Congress passed enabling legislation for the executive order on March 21, 1942.

Executive Order

Authorizing the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas

Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material... premises... and... utilities....

Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military

Commanders whom he may from time to time designate... to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion. The Secretary of War is hereby authorized to provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary, in the judgment of the Secretary of War or the said Military Commander, and until other arrangements are made, to accomplish the purpose of this order....

Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House
February 19, 1942

This lesson plan is produced through a partnership between Chaminade University of Honolulu and the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities with additional support from the National Endowment for the Humanities "We the People" Special Initiative.

Primary Source Analyses
“Pearl Harbor and America’s Entry into World War II”

Developed by Mitch Yamasaki, Ph.D., Chaminade University of Honolulu, 2008

1. What statistic shows that most Americans were opposed to the United States getting involved in the war in Europe or Asia?
2. In his speech at the “America First” rally on April 23, 1941, what does Charles Lindbergh say will be proved if Americans are “forced into a war against the wishes of an overwhelming majority of our people”?
3. In the *New York Times* article on April 24, 1941, why does Lindbergh say Americans are “divided” over the issue of going to war?
4. What, according to the *New York Times* editorial on April 30, 1941, would happen if Hitler is victorious over Great Britain?
5. In what ways did President Franklin D. Roosevelt try to prevent Germany’s victory over England?
6. In his fireside chat on December 29, 1940, what does Roosevelt say is a vital role that the United States can play in the war in Europe?
7. What was Senator Gerald Nye’s position towards war before the Pearl Harbor attack? How does his speech after the attack show a change of view?
8. President Roosevelt’s request for a declaration of war on December 8, 1941:
 - a. In his speech, how does Roosevelt make the case for a sneak attack?
 - b. What does FDR see the will of Congress and the American people to be?
9. Describe the mood of the citizens on the West Coast after the Pearl Harbor attack.
10. What did governors and state attorney generals on the West Coast call for?
11. Executive Order 9066 issued on February 19, 1942:
 - a. What does Roosevelt say is required to successfully prosecute the war?
 - b. What does FDR authorize the military to do?
 - c. What is the Secretary of War authorized to provide?

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Primary Source Comprehension Assessment: Multiple Choice Quiz

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1. Which of the following primary sources shows that in 1940 many prominent Americans opposed entering the war in Europe or Asia?
 - a. *New York Times* editorial on April 30, 1941
 - b. Charles Lindbergh's speech at the "America First" rally on April 23, 1941
 - c. President Roosevelt's "fireside chat" on December 29, 1940
 - d. President Roosevelt's "a date that will live in infamy" speech on December 8, 1941

2. Shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack, Senator Gerald Nye stated, "To give our Commander in Chief unqualified and unprejudiced backing in his prosecution of the war is an obligation which I shall gladly fulfill." What is the significance of his statement?
 - a. it shows that Republicans, such as Senator Nye, fully supported President Roosevelt's war policy before and after the Japanese attack
 - b. it shows that Democrats, such as Senator Nye, fully supported President Roosevelt's war policy before and after the Japanese attack
 - c. it shows the significance of the Pearl Harbor because the attack proved correct Senator Nye's insistence of military preparedness
 - d. it shows the significance of Pearl Harbor because before the attack Senator Nye was a member of "America First" and strongly opposed going to war

3. In his December 29, 1940 "fireside chat," what does President Roosevelt say America must become?
 - a. "the great arsenal of democracy"
 - b. "first in war... to defend threats to democracy... around the world"
 - c. "the beacon of freedom... against the threat of international communism"
 - d. "sword that thwarts... the evil... talons of totalitarianism"

4. What does President Roosevelt authorize in his Executive Order 9066 (issued on February 19, 1942)?
 - a. "Military Commanders... to declare martial law for the West Coast... and all other such areas... in imminent danger of invasion by Japanese forces"
 - b. "CIA to monitor... movements and communications of... known spies and other suspicious persons of Japanese descent"
 - c. "Secretary of War and... Military Commanders ... to prescribe military areas... from which any or all persons may be excluded"
 - d. "Military Commanders... to seize the passports of Japanese nationals living in... militarily sensitive areas"

5. In his “a day that will live in infamy” speech on December 8, 1941, which of the following is not evidence that President Roosevelt provides to show that Pearl Harbor was a deliberate and surprise attack?
- a. “[At the time of the attack] the United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government... looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.”
 - b. “Yesterday, the Japanese Government launched an attack against Malaya... Hong Kong... Guam... Philippines... Wake Island..... Japan has therefore undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area.
 - c. “Military intelligence revealed that Japan plans to strike key American and British installations across the Pacific. I therefore ask the Congress on this solemn day to declare war on Japan so that we can launch a pre-emptive strike before American lives are lost.”
 - d. “[T]he distance between of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States with false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.”

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