The American Experience

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*Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor*

The United States officially entered World War II in December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In reality, however, the United States had been fighting a war against the Axis powers for years. It was a war of words and a war of action, a war of secret meetings and public duplicity. And the prosecutor of this war was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd president of the United States.

Roosevelt understood early on that territorial concessions would not satisfy [Adolf Hitler](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/bulge/peopleevents/p_hitler.html) and his fascist counterparts, Benito Mussolini of Italy and [Emperor Hirohito](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/macarthur/peopleevents/pandeAMEX97.html) of Japan. In 1931, Japan took Manchuria. In 1935, Mussolini took Ethiopia. In 1936, Nazi troops swept into the Rhineland. In 1938, Hitler annexed Austria, and at the Munich conference, Britain and France surrendered Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland to the Germans.

Roosevelt condemned international aggression, but could do little else. The American public was decidedly isolationist and antiwar. Memories of the expense of [World War I](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/portrait/wp_war.html) -- in lives and money -- were still fresh. In 1934, Congress passed the Johnson Act, which prohibited loans to nations behind on World War I debt repayment. The Neutrality Act of 1935 forbade the export of arms, ammunition or implements of war to belligerent nations -- a 1937 amendment to the act forbade American citizens and ships from entering war zones or traveling on belligerents' ships.

In early 1939, Roosevelt asked Congress to repeal the Neutrality Act, so the U.S. could sell arms to the free European forces. Congress refused. In September, [World War II](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/bulge/) began as Germany invaded Poland. Roosevelt spoke before Congress again, and on November 4, it approved the Pittman Bill, which allowed America to sell arms to nations who could pay for their weapons in cash.

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*Adolf Hitler and Nazi followers*

FDR realized Hitler must be stopped yet knew the value of consensus rule. Publicly, Roosevelt promised that America would not fight unless attacked. He condemned the fascists and suggested that the way to keep the peace was to create a strong national defense. Privately, he prepared America for battle.

Roosevelt dramatically increased the defense budget from 1939 on and began to convert America to a military economy. Using powerful industrialists who could skillfully cut through governmental red tape, Roosevelt began to build the "Arsenal of Democracy."

In early 1940, Roosevelt stacked his cabinet with interventionists like Henry Stimson and Frank Knox, who took over the Navy and War departments. He named Harry Hopkins, an avid anti-Nazi, Secretary to the War Cabinet.

When France fell to the Nazis in May 1940, Britain stood alone. Roosevelt began a remarkable and voluminous secret correspondence with Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill. Although Churchill desperately needed American troops, he asked only for arms and ammunition. Roosevelt responded, using his presidential powers to circumvent the Neutrality Act. The U.S. swapped 50 aging U.S. destroyers in return for British bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. The British saw the trade as unfair. But Churchill needed all the help he could get.

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*Roosevelt and Winston Churchill*

On September 27, 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, in which they promised to defend each other against U.S. attacks. The pact formally established the Axis alliance. Designed to enforce American neutrality, the pact had quite an opposite effect, increasing interventionist sentiment in America. FDR skillfully capitalized on this change.

In a December "fireside chat" on national radio, Roosevelt condemned Axis aggression, insisting that its objective was no less than world domination. He asked for military aid for Britain, which was rapidly running out of money to buy arms. Behind the scenes, FDR moved even closer to war. He secretly sent Harry Hopkins to London to plan an Anglo-American war against Germany.

In March of 1941, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to pass the [Lend-Lease Act](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/fdr-dallek/). The act allowed the U.S. to lend the Allies war materials in return for repayment after the war. FDR, understanding Britain's desperation, began Atlantic transshipment of materials days before signing the bill.

Using all of his political ingenuity, Roosevelt struggled against the constraints of neutrality. In April, he gave the Navy permission to attack German submarines west of 25 degrees longitude. That same month, the U.S. and Denmark agreed to place Greenland under American protection. In July, the U.S. occupied Iceland. On August 14th, the Selective Service Act, which allowed a peacetime draft, passed Congress by a single vote.

That same August day, the [Atlantic Charter](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/fdr-dallek/) was made public. Signed during a secret five-day conference at sea between Roosevelt and Churchill, the charter called for national self-determination and stated that aggressor nations should be disarmed. If this was not a declaration of war, it was close. Roosevelt hoped it would provoke the Germans to war on America.

On September 4, 1941, the first clash came. The *Greer*, a U.S. destroyer, spotted a German submarine and called in a British plane to bomb it. The sub and the destroyer exchanged fire, with little result. But Roosevelt used the incident to further his intention to get America into the war. On October 17, German subs attacked the U.S. destroyer *Kearney* as it escorted a British convoy. Several crewmen were injured. On October 31, Nazi subs sank the U.S. destroyer *Reuben James*, killing 115 men.

A little over a month later, the Japanese [attack on Pearl Harbor](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/fdr-harbor/) would overshadow America's first Atlantic battles. The U.S. would declare war. But in no small way would the Allies' eventual victory in the declared war be attributable to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's prosecution of the unofficial one. With years of public speaking, private maneuvering, political lobbying and presidential action, FDR had helped save Britain and perhaps the world from Nazi domination, all while his country remained at peace.