

The United States and the World, 1898–1945

Submitted

Class

Date

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American History has played a critical role in shaping the modern-day policies in the country. The country has always had a policy of non-interference with other jurisdiction's matters that did not affect the country directly. This explains why the country never engaged in WWII until Japan provoked it by attacking Pearl Harbor. Between WWII began and December 1941, when the attack happened, The United States citizens engaged in numerous debates over how their country should respond to global conflicts. Despite the debates, all the Americans were in consensus that the United States governments protect them from economic harm, physical danger, and damage to the political institutions. However, most were not sure about the policy to achieve these aims. This paper looks at the main ways the Americans were divided over the war from 1939 to 1941, the arguments used to support each argument, and how the functions identified their favored approach with basic American values and traditions.

Americans Divisions Over the War from 1939 to 1941

The main ways the Americans were divided over the war from 1939 to 1941 were isolationism and interventionism¹. Those who supported interventionism wanted the United States to take an active role in the war. In contrast, those who supported isolationism argued that the United States was not an aggravated party in the conflicts playing around and therefore no need to participate in the war. Many groups were against American involvement in WWII. Some of these groups included the Keep America Out of War Congress and the National Council for the Prevention of War. The earlier was founded in 1938 to oppose Roosevelt's foreign policy, while the latter was founded in 1921 to promote neutrality². Other groups comprised mothers

¹ "The United States: Isolation-Intervention". 2022. Encyclopedia.Ushmm.Org.
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-united-states-isolation-intervention>

² Ibid

who never wanted to send their children to war, average citizens, intellectuals, a host of prominent businessmen, pacifists, students, and socialists. There were also Americans of Irish descent and others of Italian or German descent opposed to the war. More republicans than democrats advocated for isolationism. However, the two groups were not split along partisan lines. Although the groups did not support American engagement in the war, they did not like "Isolationism" as was used to refer to them. They often argued for broad economic spheres and a strong national defense even as they tried persuading the nation to stay out of the war.

The most influential and largest non-interventionist group was the American First Committee. It was founded by a group of Yale University law students in the summer of 1940³. By 1940, R. Douglas Stuart Jr led the group to prominence. They gathered prominent United States citizens to serve on the organization's board. The individuals included General Hugh Johnson, the director of the National Recovery, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of late President Theodore Roosevelt, Ford Motor Company founder Henry Ford, Hormel Foods chief executive Jay Hormel, and Avery Brundage, the president of the American Olympic Committee. Republican senators Robert Taft (Ohio) and Gerald Nye (North Dakota) also served as the organization's spokespersons⁴.

The group argued that The United States should maintain its policy on non-involvement in European affairs⁵. They also applied basic American values and traditions to persuade the United States to stay away from the war. They felt that the American dream would be achieved by keeping its political, economic, and social constructs strong. Engaging in a war would

³ "America First And WWII". 2022. Minnesota Historical Society.
<https://www.mnhs.org/lindbergh/learn/controversies>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "Milestones: 1937–1945 - Office Of The Historian". 2022. History.State.Gov.
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/american-isolationism#:~:text=Isolationists%20advocated%20non%20involvement%20in,its%20interests%20in%20Latin%20America>.

threaten the country's economic, political system and subject citizens to unnecessary misery. The American dream comprises material wealth, equal opportunity, and individual freedom. In war, people would pay a higher price for these benefits, and therefore it was uncalled for

In contrast to the isolationist groups or the non-intervention groups, the interventionists wanted the United States to take an active role in the war. They often advocated for the nation to adopt various policies to allow the country to support the Allied forces militarily and financially. In 1940, William Allen White Founded The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies⁶. He was a prominent Republican publisher in Kansas and was directed by the League of Nations Association head Clark Eichelberger. This body boasted seven hundred and forty local chapters, and its membership was approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand. It staged performances and rallies handed out flyers and newspaper ads to rally Great Britain's support. Most of the members opposed communism, and when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the group dropped the "by Aiding Allies" title from its name ⁷.

Fight for freedom, headed by journalist Ullrich Bell and founded in April 1941, aggressively advocated for the United States to join the war⁸. Their push came from the need to defend democratic values and Great Britain. The group had many prominent supporters, including politicians, movie stars, writers, and journalists. Walt Disney Studios produced a program cover for the group's rally. It featured Goofy, Donald Duck, and Mickey Mouse. The Committee to Defend America and Fight for Freedom coordinated with British propagandists and Roosevelt's aides to rally support. It also informed the Americans that the Axis powers were

⁶ "The Great Debate | The National WWII Museum | New Orleans". 2022. The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/great-debate#:~:text=Interventionists%20believed%20the%20United%20States,against%20Hitler's%20fast%2Dgrowing%20strength.>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

killing people in the nations they occupied. For example, in November 1941, they sponsored rallies in the entire United States to protest Nazi's Germany mass killings.

The interventionists argued that the United States needed to get involved in the war as a way to keep Hitler's fast-growing strength in check. According to them, if Hitler remained unchecked, the United States could become isolated in a globe where a significant amount of territories and seas and resources would be in the hands of a powerful dictator⁹. They also used aligned their argument with the basic American values and traditions. The advancement of the strong dictator would be a threat to equality and democracy. The Americans would be a great threat of lost progress and material comfort. Americans believe strongly in morality and humanitarianism, individualism, and personal achievement. The interventionists felt that all these values and the American dream were at a great risk if Hitler continued being strong. The United States as the custodian of global democracy, would not sit back and watch a powerful dictator ravage Europe. It was therefore justified to join the war.

Despite the debate on isolationism and interventionism taking three years, it was ended by one event; the attack on pearl harbor by Japan, a member of Axis powers, and a close Hitler Ally. During the attack, Japan staged a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, killing two thousand four hundred Americans and destroying numerous planes, boats, and eight battleships. The next day, The United States declared war on Japan, and three days after, Germany declared war on the United States.

⁹ "The Great Debate | The National WWII Museum | New Orleans". 2022. The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/great-debate#:~:text=Interventionists%20believed%20the%20United%20States,against%20Hitler's%20fast%2Dgrowing%20strength.>

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