

Americans Debate Entering the War (1939, 1941)

U.S. isolationism before the country entered World War I had several causes. Certainly, the United States' need to survive the Great Depression was one of the most important of these. Isolationism, however, had existed even before the Depression as was shown by the U.S. Senate's rejection of the League of Nations in 1919. By the 1930s, Americans were still disillusioned with World War I. It was supposed to have made the world safe for democracy. Yet in the 1930s, fascist regimes were taking over parts of Europe. Deepening this disillusion was the belief by some that World War I had been all about international bankers and munitions companies making profits.

In keeping with isolationist sentiment, Congress passed the Neutrality Acts of 1935–1937. These acts (1) banned the sale or shipments of arms to *belligerent nations* (ones involved in a war); (2) prohibited loans or credits to belligerent nations; (3) banned travel by U.S. citizens on the ships of belligerent nations; and (4) specified that the purchase of nonmilitary goods by belligerent nations had to be paid for in cash and transported in their own ships. Document A, a cartoon, expresses a point of view on whether the United States should get involved in the war.

In August 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met on warships off the Atlantic Coast of Canada for a series of talks. The situation in Europe was desperate. France had fallen to Germany that spring. Great Britain was now the sole power defending democracy in Western Europe. Although the United States had not yet entered the war, it had sent arms and supplies to Britain. The talks between Roosevelt and Churchill ended with the release of what is known as the Atlantic Charter (Document B). In it, the two leaders spelled out the aims that the United States and Great Britain had for the war at that time. This charter demonstrated Roosevelt's early commitment to the defeat of German. Remember that the U.S. Congress had not yet declared war.

The Only Way We Can Save Her



Carey Ott. The Tribune (Chicago), 1939. By permission Tribune Media Services.

B. The Atlantic Charter, August 14, 1941

First, their [Roosevelt's and Churchill's] countries seek no aggrandizement [enlargement], territorial or other;

Second, they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord [agree] with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned;

Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sov-

own [independent] rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them;

Fourth, they will endeavor, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further the enjoyment by all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms, to the trade and to the raw materials of the world which are needed for their economic prosperity;

Fifth, they desire to bring about the fullest collaboration [cooperation] between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security;

Sixth, after the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny, they hope to see established a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men [people] in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want;

Seventh, such a peace should enable all men [people] to traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance;

Eighth, they believe that all of the nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons must come to the abandonment of the use of force. Since no future peace can be maintained if land, sea or air armaments continue to be employed by nations which threaten, or may threaten, aggression outside of their frontiers, they believe, pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security, that the disarmament of such nations is essential. They will likewise aid and encourage all other practicable measures which will lighten for peace-loving peoples the crushing burden of armaments.

Franklin D. Roosevelt
Winston S. Churchill

Review Questions

1. After World War I, what was one of the first examples of U.S. isolationism?
2. How were the Neutrality Acts of 1935-1937 supposed to prevent the United States from becoming involved in European wars?
3. What point did the cartoonist in **A** make by labeling Europe as "war mad"?
4. *Does this cartoon direct its message to the viewers' emotions or to their reason? Explain your answer.*
5. Why was the Atlantic Charter (**B**) created?
6. What were the attitudes of Great Britain and the United States toward imperialism as expressed in the Atlantic Charter?
7. How did the Atlantic Charter attempt to eliminate the use of force?
8. To what extent was the goal of preserving democracy to be achieved through the Atlantic Charter?
9. *What opinion do you think the cartoonist in **A** would have of the Atlantic Charter? Why do you think he would feel this way?*