

Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

Written by Jenny Wilson

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JENNY WILSON, MAY 20 2012

During the 1930's the world began bubbling over with the social and political consequences of World War I. During this time the United States became inherently isolationist and unwilling to get involved with world affairs. This essay will discuss whether President Roosevelt was viewed "as the pawn of public and Congressional isolationism, or as a sagacious politician who slowly guided the nation toward his own internationalist philosophy." [1] George F. Kennan wrote "World War II seemed really so extensively predetermined; it developed and rolled its course with the relentless logic of the last act of a classical tragedy." [2] With this in mind, how much say did the United States have in being drawn in to World War II? Did President Roosevelt's foreign policy decisions speed up or hamper the United States' entry into World War II and in a time of isolationism, was all what it seemed?

The origins of World War II can be traced back to the end of World War I, where The Treaty of Versailles was signed, complete with extremely harsh terms for Germany. Furthermore, the United States did not become a member of the League of Nations after President Wilson failed to gain Congresses approval. The American people were too preoccupied with the first Red Scare, industrial disputes and inflation, and the United States sunk back into Isolationism. During the 1920's the American economy exploded, with industries such as manufacturing booming. Everyone seemed to be enjoying an extremely high standard of living, and in fact, war had become so unpopular that in 1928 the Kellogg-Briand Pact was ratified, essentially outlawing war. [3]

Though the United States was politically isolationist, American companies and Banks were not. Money was loaned and offices were set up throughout the world, and the global economy, led by the United States was flourishing. That is, until the Great Depression hit in 1929. This turned the American people even further away from global affairs and when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected into the Presidential office in 1933 domestic issues were at the forefront of his mind. [4]

The Neutrality Act of 1935 was the first indication that Roosevelt would not have absolute control over Congress. After a series of New Deal measures were passed without delay, the passing of the Neutrality Act would shock Roosevelt. Weiss tells us that he "suffered the first sever rebuke to his prestige and discretionary authority, as Congress forced him to accept a Neutrality Act which narrowly restricted his conduct of foreign policy." [5] Roosevelt had been pressing for a Discretionary Embargo which was introduced to Congress by President Hoover. This would allow the United States to stay quasi-neutral whilst legally supplying arms to whomever they felt was the victim of any conflict. The President would have the right to decide who was the belligerent, and this piece of legislation was welcomed by Europe. Dulles argues that with Congress pressing for full neutrality they were not looking realistically at the emerging threat and that the act was "designed to keep the United States out of a war that had been fought twenty years earlier." [6]

During the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933, just eight days after President Roosevelt's inauguration, the European powers waited on a decision from the new President before they would go forward in any deal. Roosevelt sent Ambassador Norman Davis to Geneva to reassure the countries that if they agreed on disarmament the Discretionary Embargo, which was particularly favoured by the British, would be passed. [7]

Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

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Roosevelt had no reason to believe this act would not be ratified as his party, the Democrats held majorities in both the House and the Senate. However, the Senate Foreign Relations Council had other ideas as its Chairman Senator Key Pittman (D-Nevada) was more interested in mining rights and silver. He was unwilling to support a foreign policy agenda that he thought was "contrary to national interests".[8] Pittman also had support in two Senior Republican Senators, William Borah (R-Idaho) and Hiram Johnston (R-California), whom were both staunch isolationists, "if that term is understood to mean opposition to any policy that would curtail American rights and involve collective action." [9] Therefore, Senator Johnston proposed an amendment for the bill that would require President Roosevelt to apply the Neutrality Act to all participants in any dispute, making the United States a Neutral country. President Roosevelt was displeased with this amendment, but Weiss suggests that Roosevelt may have wanted to "conserve his strength"[10] and ensure that the focus was firmly on his domestic policies which were lifting the country out of recession. Bachevich tells us that Roosevelt had a "master politician's acute sensitivity to the public yearning for normalcy after long years of depression." [11] At this time, picking a fight with the Senate did not seem conducive, even though Ambassador Davis has promised the Discretionary Embargo to the European Powers.[12] Dulles agrees with Weiss and since many of the Republican Senators helped to pass his New Deal Legislation, Roosevelt was unwilling to alienate them by rejecting their neutrality amendment.[13]

As the first of The Neutrality Acts were signed, European troubles began to heat up, with the League of Nations proving itself incompetent by failing to prevent Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in 1935 or the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Hitler was also breaking the Treaty of Versailles at his will, especially with his remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, and none of the European powers held any sway over him, whilst Spain had erupted into a Civil War that brought Global involvement.[14] The Neutrality Act was passed again in 1937, though there was many pleas to the contrary. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain wrote that he had, "no doubt whatsoever that the greatest single contribution which the United States could make at the present moment to the preservation of world peace would be the amendment of the existing neutrality legislations," as he felt that it compounded, "an indirect but potent encouragement to aggression." [15] Chamberlain got his wish, as the Cash-and-Carry provision was added to the policy. This would allow nations involved in conflict to travel to America, buy their goods in cash and take them home, eliminating the risk to American property and lives in the shipping of the goods.[16]

This led President Roosevelt to deliver his 'Quarantine Speech' on October 5th 1937, calling for a world quarantine on any aggressor nations. In his speech he spoke of international lawlessness, a reign of terror and that world affairs, particularly those in Japan and China had "reached a stage where the very foundations of civilization are seriously threatened." [17] Roosevelt, however, had been battling with an isolationist public who did not understand the threats in Europe. In his own words in a letter to a friend and confidant he wrote, "As you know, I am fighting against a public psychology of long standing – a psychology which comes very close to saying 'Peace at any price'" then follows up with, when talking of the aggressors, "The most practical and most peaceful thing to do in the long run is to quarantine them." [18]

With such an isolationist feeling in the United States at this time, Roosevelt was brave to buck the trend of "softly softly" and deliver a speech with some gusto.[19] Haight tells us that it was widely accepted that Roosevelt backed down from his strong stance on Foreign Policy almost immediately after the speech was delivered, but he argues that he did not, though he did tone down the rhetoric. Roosevelt felt that the public reaction was not "overwhelmingly negative" and carried on with his newly voiced foreign policy with The Welles Plan and The Nine Power Conference.[20] The Welles Plan, conceived by Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles, was presented to Roosevelt in October 1937. The plan was for all Ambassadors that were in Washington D.C to be called to the White House on Armistice Day and a call would be issued for an international gathering. Roosevelt wished to make "lawlessness of the aggressors easier to define and condemn"[21] and to engage the American public in the world of foreign affairs to try and dampen down isolationism.

The Nine Power Conference was a simultaneous opportunity to get involved with world affairs and it was held from November 3rd to the 24th 1937 in Brussels after the League of Nations struggled to deal with the Sino-Japanese Conflict. The conference originated with the Nine Power Naval Treaty that was signed in 1922, and the League hoped that a meeting of the powers would hold Japan accountable for their actions, especially if the United States was involved. Roosevelt felt that there had to be unanimous cooperation in order to fix the problems in the far east.

Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

Written by Jenny Wilson

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In such a climate of isolationism in the United States, Roosevelt's Foreign Policy decisions from the Quarantine Act onwards were very internationalist. These three decisions tested the water on how the American Public may act to any intervention that would possibly take place. Haight states "had Roosevelt believed that opposition to his Quarantine Speech to be overwhelming, he never would have devoted such attention to the Welles Plan or to the Nine Power Conference." [23] However, Dallek tells us that Roosevelt was not trying to push through sanctions on Japan with his Quarantine Speech, but "rather to give public expression to his long-standing desire to find some new concept for preserving peace." [24]

The Welles Plan was not implemented at the time, even though it had the backing of Roosevelt, as Secretary of State Hull branded the scheme "illogical and impossible". [25] He believed a peace conference would lead to a false sense of security in such dangerous times. Roosevelt shelved the idea, which left only the Nine Power Conference as any continuation of the Quarantine Speech. Roosevelt sent his trusted diplomat Ambassador Norman Davis as his delegate, who was known to have an interventionist view on foreign policy. Cleverly, Roosevelt picked Jay Pierrepont Moffat, a noninterventionist to appease the isolationists in Congress and Stanley Hornbeck, an interventionist, to accompany Davis on the trip, which gained the confidence of the State Department, yet Roosevelt believed Hornbeck and Davis could override Moffat. Publicly Roosevelt made out that he sent the delegates to foster peace, privately, however, he was willing to talk about intervention as he believe it was a "fallacy that neutrality would keep us out of war" [26] There were two obstacles to Roosevelt's Plan however, The Neutrality Act and the threat of Japanese retaliation. Moffat along with the State Department felt the United States would not even be able to apply sanctions without Japanese Retaliation, but Roosevelt felt that if the United States held enough conviction in which ever action they took and had the backing of other countries, this would not transpire.

However, midway through the conference Davis received word from Secretary of State Cordell Hull to stop the agenda that was laid forth by the President and to back down. Reasons why the President suddenly stopped pushing this agenda range from congressional opposition to unfavourable public opinion, to the economic crisis in the United States, and also the hesitancy of Cordell Hull. [27] Another reason for the breakdown of the conference was the lack of equality between the powers, with many of the countries wanting the United States to take the lead militarily and economically, in which Franklin Roosevelt could scarcely afford. France called for an American guarantee of French Indo-China, but Roosevelt knew that he would be unable to see it's safe passage through Congress, as it was certainly not deemed as Collective Neutrality. "The Quarantine Speech has been heralded as a revolution in American Foreign Policy" [28], and it certainly showed Roosevelt's internationalist side, however, Roosevelt failed to carry on this doctrine in the public sphere.

The brief spell of internationalist thought carried on into December when the American Gunboat Panay was bombed by Japanese planes. Roosevelt immediately struck up plans with the British for a Japanese Quarantine, by acting under the 1933 Trading with the Enemy Act. Roosevelt had calculated these proposed actions, and felt Japan would fall within a year without any military intervention. [29] However, the isolationist mood was back in full throw throughout the country and all forms of intervention or retaliation were renounced. Roosevelt wrote in a letter to friend shortly after the incident stating that "largely as a result of Republican propaganda and the growing disregard for all treaties, our talk turned more and more to the "peace at any price" theory. That is what I have to combat at the present time." [30] Two days after Roosevelt wrote this letter the Japanese apologised and paid for damages, the case was closed. [31] From this set of actions it would seem that Roosevelt legitimately wanted to get involved with global affairs but was struggling to have his thoughts accredited within the public sphere and that of Congress.

By 1938 the crisis in Europe was almost at breaking point. In March Hitler incorporated Austria into Greater Germany, which extended his frontier to the Italian border, nevertheless, Hitler and Mussolini's relationship grew stronger. [32] Throughout 1937 the British and French had carried out a policy of Appeasement, one which Roosevelt had supported. He stayed silent when Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland, and after his Quarantine Speech he sent Ambassador William Bullitt to Germany to ensure the Germans it did not apply to them, but the public was unaware the United States was sending delegates to Europe. A sign that Roosevelt may shift his stance in foreign policy came in January of 1938 when the Welles Plan was reintroduced. Roosevelt wanted a convention of the major powers in

Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

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Washington to discuss disarmament and frame international law, however, upon asking the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to attend, he declined. His acceptance changed once his Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden managed to persuade him to the contrary. The signal was a fleeting one, Roosevelt headed straight back to an isolationist foreign policy when he cancelled the convention no less than five times. [33] Initiating the Welles Plan again was yet another sign that had Roosevelt held the backing of the public and Congress, he may have acted more forcefully in the global sphere.

Appeasement was back in full force in Europe, but Roosevelt was sending mixed messages. The Munich Agreement of 1938 allowed annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia and all the major powers were in agreement of this treaty, and had urged its passing so that they could feel “a universal sense of relief.”[34] The French, however, were not on board so the United States quietly urged them to stop acting as though they may help Czechoslovakia recover their land. Contrary to this a few months later he “began to praise France for backing Czechoslovakia against a country that understood only force.”[35] Furthermore, Ambassador Kennedy told the Germans that they had his sympathy in their racial and economic goals, and contrary to that Ambassador Bullitt was granted permission to give an interventionist speech by Roosevelt.[36] At this period in time it seems as though Roosevelt either had no real control over the State Department policy of appeasement to keep the United States neutral, or he was trying to keep all the European powers in his favour. There was also an overriding feeling in the country that if Britain and France could appease Hitler the United States would have no fear of military action. In spite of this, Cole tells us that neither Roosevelt or Hull “really believed that appeasement would produce enduring peace and security for Europe and the world”[37], yet both were willing to carry on with the policy. Ambrose suggests that this is because “American Foreign Policy in 1938... was to support the *status quo*”.[38]

In January of 1939 Roosevelt attempted to get the Neutrality Legislation repealed, but his plans failed partly because “Democrats personally hostile to Roosevelt voted with the isolationists”[39] and the isolationist public opinion. By 1939 Hitler had completely annexed Czechoslovakia, with this, Britain and France declared appeasement over and warned Hitler that any other forays into European countries would result in war. Roosevelt and the United States response was to do nothing, as isolationist sentiment still running high it would have been unwise for the Administration to do anything to the contrary.[40]

It became clear in the August of 1939 that Hitler would invade Poland. Desperate to stop the outbreak of war Roosevelt offered to send mediators to discuss the issue, however, the Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced on the 23rd. Poland would be split between the two countries, and with that Britain and France declared war on Germany.[41] On the 21st September Roosevelt made his first war speech to Congress. He stated no less than four times that he would keep the United States out of war, whilst also stating that Congress must repeal the Embargo on Arms and Munitions and reinstate the Cash-and-Carry system. This would undoubtedly help the Allied forces, and the United States aligned themselves with the Western Democracies, showed their sympathy and friendship, but also made it clear they would not get involved in any other way.[42]

Roosevelt had to fight “a battle of Washington” in 1940 against his own administration in a dispute about aid for the British and French. The Allies had ordered planes from the United States, but members of the government were refusing them the top-secret information on how to fly them. Cashman tells us that Roosevelt “became so exasperated that in March he told the War Department that its opposition must end, that leaks to the isolationist press must stop, and that he would transfer any truculent officers to Guam.”[43] During this time Roosevelt and Hull were trying everything to ensure the United States were playing “positive and active roles in efforts to preserve peace and guard security”[44], even over the heads of the isolationist. They tried trade reciprocity, diplomacy, messages from the President himself and disarmament ideas, however, Roosevelt’s most effective Foreign Policy directive was the aid and lifting of the embargo to the allies. [45] This, and the reprimand of subordinate members of his government suggests that Roosevelt was deeply involved in WWII and was steering his Foreign Policy towards possible intervention at a later date, whilst doing anything within his power to help the allies at this time. However, 1940 was also election year, which meant that Roosevelt had to compete on foreign policy with the Republicans, therefore, he spent most of the year promising peace for the United States, with no deployment into Europe “except in case of attack.”[46] It would be fair to say that 1940 was the “most opaque” year in foreign policy matters because of the election.[47]

Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

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However, The United States agreed a deal with Great Britain that American would furnish them with 50 out-of-date Destroyers whilst Britain gave them Naval Bases along the Atlantic Coast. This is seen as the first concrete and public show of support for the Allied Powers. Britain was in desperate need of aid, whether financial or arms, and Roosevelt broke the strict rules of the Neutrality Act to provide them with such.[48] Roosevelt then further stepped away from Neutrality in 1941 with the introduction of the Lend-Lease Act in January. The act would allow the President to “sell, transfer, exchange, lease, lend, under such terms as he thought suitable, supplies of munitions, food, weapons and other defense articles to any nation whose defense he deemed vital to the defense of the United States.”[49] In short it gave the President the ability to help the Allied Powers any way he wished and after two months of debate in Congress it was eventually passed on March 11th 1941. Dulles states that the Roosevelt administration was not seeking war when the policy of aid to the allies was adopted or when it cut off all supplies to Japan in Summer 1941, it was because he “remained convinced that there could be no safety for America in a world dominated by Hitler. And he knew that isolation was not security.”[50]

In August 1941 The Atlantic Charter was announced by Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, laying out a plan for world peace once the Nazis had been defeated. The charter spoke of sovereignty, self-determination, the freedom of trade and the seas to try and promote some form of world security.[51] The Charter itself “is an outstanding example of executive agreement”,[52] considering the United States was not yet at war, and the country was still fighting against it. Furthermore the Charter was used as “an explicit warning to Japan of war against further encroachment.”[53] As 1941 wore on Japan further spread their troops throughout the Pacific ocean and even further into China. Though Roosevelt had tried appeasement and diplomacy it was no longer working subsequently Hull issued a proposal to the Japanese that they completely withdraw from China. However, the United States did not hear back until December 7th 1941, when Japanese aircraft and naval ships attacked Pearl Harbour.[54] The United States could not ignore this blatant attack on American military personnel, Roosevelt had no option but to declare war on Japan, and did so the following day after an address to Congress. At the same time, the German forces in Russia were faltering due to the sub-zero winter, but nevertheless, Hitler declared war on the United States on December 11th 1941. The United States, once staunchly isolationist, was now fighting a war on both fronts. Cashman, on Pearl Harbour, tells us that ‘This tragic event was the bitter climax to years of infamy in world affairs.’[55]

Roosevelt's foreign policy throughout his presidency was varied, from conceding the first Neutrality Act to the isolationists to the Atlantic Charter. The fact that Roosevelt had argued for a discretionary embargo, over the Neutrality Act shows that he was not a staunch isolationist. However, he was stuck with an isolationist Congress and public, so rather than opposing the act he tried to appease the public and appease Hitler at the same time. “FDR, in particular was intimately involved in the patronage of Nazi Germany, more so that anyone has perhaps supposed.”[56] With the many underhand meetings that Roosevelt authorised, and the mixed messages sent to the powers in Europe, it is apparent that this statement is correct. However, this asserts that Roosevelt was trying to prevent the outbreak of war. The President did believe that intervention by the United States would be necessary for Hitler to be defeated, but could not say this outright due to “fear of further isolationist attacks... Under these circumstances the leadership that he might have exerted in preparing the nation for the role that it was destined to play often appeared weak and vacillating”[57], hence the reason he may have been accused of secretly leading the country to war. The inevitability of the United States joining World War II seems absolute, and even though his foreign policy did not always directly reflect this, he was always on the side of the Allies. Roosevelt's foreign policy was ramping up to be more interventionist, with the Lend-Lease Act, his tough stance on Japan and the Atlantic Charter, and had Pearl Harbour not pushed the United States into World War II, ultimately she would have found her own way there. Therefore, Roosevelt's foreign policy did eventually push the United States into war, but only after all other options had been exhausted.

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Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

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Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

Written by Jenny Wilson

[6] Dulles 1955, p 174

[7] Weiss 1968, pp 673 – 675

[8] Ibid, pp 676-677

[9] Ibid, p 677

[10] Weiss 1968, p 678

[11] Andrew J. Bachevich (2005). *The New American Militarism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p9

[12] Weiss 1968, p 677-678

[13] Dulles, 1955, p176

[14] Caridi, 1974 p144

[15] Dallek, 1979, p139

[16] Ibid, p139-142

[17] Dallek, 1979

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[21] Ibid, p237

[22] Haight, 1962 pp 237-242

[23] Ibid p 239

[24] Dallek, 1979, p148

[25] Ibid, p149

[26] Haight 1962, p242

[27] Ibid, p255

[28] Haight, 1962 p 258

[29] Dallek 1979, pp 154-155

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Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

Written by Jenny Wilson

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Roosevelt's Path to the Second World War: Interventionist or Isolationist?

Written by Jenny Wilson

[57] Dulles, p197

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