



PEARL HARBOR

Great Debates

in American History

Isolationism vs Interventionism

Debate Overview

Almost from the start of Hitler's campaign to take control of Europe, Americans were divided over the role the United States should play in the conflict. Isolationists argued that the United States should maintain its distance. Interventionists believed that the nation must get involved.

Isolationism had traditionally dominated American foreign policy. According to this view, the United States did not need to concern itself with foreign disputes, because their outcome would have little impact on America. Separated from most of the world by two oceans, the nation faced little threat from outside aggressors. The government's only military imperative was to establish adequate defenses along the country's borders; the bulk of its energies should go toward promoting domestic well-being. These sentiments grew stronger after World War I, which cost America thousands of lives and billions of dollars but failed to establish enduring peace in Europe. In 1937, 94 percent of Americans surveyed in a Gallup poll were against United States intervention in foreign wars.

Those who subscribed to intervention claimed that even two oceans did not protect America from foreign attack. Interventionists asserted that there was nothing to stop Hitler or any other aggressor from invading the country. The only way, therefore, to guarantee domestic freedom and prosperity was to join the fight whenever these principles were threatened overseas.

As the conflicts in Europe, Asia, and Africa heated up, the nation's attitude started to shift away from isolationism toward interventionism. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ultimately silenced the isolationists and established interventionism as the national policy. The readings that follow present one facet of the debate between interventionists and isolationists: the argument over America's role as a protector of freedom worldwide.

The Readings

In his state of the union address before Congress on January 6, 1941, **President Franklin Delano Roosevelt** outlined the reasons and the principles for which America should be prepared to fight.

Fighting for the Four Freedoms

I address you, the Members of the Seventy-Seventh Congress, at a moment unprecedented in the history of the Union. I use the word

"unprecedented," because at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today. . . .

Every realist knows that the democratic way of life is at this moment being directly assailed [attacked] in every part of the world—assailed either by arms, or by secret spreading of poisonous propaganda by those who seek to destroy unity and promote discord in nations still at peace. During sixteen months this assault has blotted out the whole pattern of

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democratic life in an appalling number of independent nations, great and small. The assailants are still on the march, threatening other nations, great and small. . . .

The need of the moment is that our actions and our policy should be devoted primarily—almost exclusively—to meeting this foreign peril. For all our domestic problems are now part of the great emergency. Just as our national policy in internal affairs has been based upon a decent respect for the rights and dignity of all our fellowmen within our gates, so our national policy in foreign affairs has been based on a decent respect for the rights and dignity of all nations, large and small. And the justice of morality must and will win in the end.

Our national policy is this.

First, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship [taking sides], we are committed to all-inclusive national defense.

Second, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship, we are committed to full support of all those resolute [determined] peoples, everywhere, who are resisting aggression and are thereby keeping war away from our Hemisphere. By this support, we express our determination that the democratic cause shall prevail; and we strengthen the defense and security of our own nation.

Third, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship we are committed to the proposition that principles of morality and considerations for our own security will never permit us to acquiesce [give in to] in a peace dictated by aggressors and sponsored by appeasers. We know that enduring peace cannot be bought at the cost of other people's freedom. . . .

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peace time life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments [military forces and equipment] to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis [opposite] of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb. . . .

This nation has placed its destiny in the hands and heads and hearts of its millions of free men and women; and its faith in freedom under the guidance of God. Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights or keep them. Our strength is in our unity of purpose.

To that high concept, there can be no end save victory.

From Congressional Record, 77 Congress, 1 Session, pp. 44-47.

Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, argued in a January 23, 1941, radio broadcast that war would neither protect nor extend democratic principles.*

A False Path to Freedom

I speak tonight because I believe that the American people are about to commit suicide. We are not planning to. We have no plan. We are drifting into suicide. Deafened by martial [warlike] music, fine language, and large appropriations, we are drifting into war. . . .

If we go to war, what are we going to war for? This is to be a crusade, a holy war. Its object is moral. We are seeking, the President tells us, "a world founded on freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and

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freedom from fear." We are to intervene to support the moral order. We are to fight for "the supremacy of human rights everywhere."

... let us agree now that we want the four freedoms; we want justice, the moral order, democracy, and the supremacy of human rights, not here alone but everywhere. The question is whether entrance into this war is likely to bring us closer to this goal.

How can the United States better serve suffering humanity everywhere: by going into this war, or by staying out? I hold that the United States can better serve suffering humanity everywhere by staying out. . . .

The chances of accomplishing the high moral purposes which the President has stated for America, even if we stay out of war, are not bright. The world is in chaos. . . . What we have of high moral purpose is likely to suffer dilution at home and a cold reception abroad. But we have a chance to help humanity if we do not go into this war. If we do go into it, we have no chance at all.

The reason why we have no chance to help humanity if we go into this war is that we are not prepared. I do not mean, primarily, that we are unprepared in a military sense. I mean that we are morally and intellectually unprepared to execute the moral mission to which the President calls us. . . .

If we stay out of war, we may perhaps some day understand and practise freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. We may even be able to comprehend and support justice, democracy, the moral order, and the supremacy of human rights. Today we have barely begun to grasp the meaning of the words. . . .

Words like these have no meaning unless we

believe in human dignity. Human dignity means that every man is an end in himself. No man can be exploited by another. Think of these things and then think of the sharecroppers, the Okies, the Negroes, the shumdwellers, downtrodden and oppressed for gain. They have neither freedom from want nor freedom from fear. They hardly know they are living in a moral order or in a democracy where justice and human rights are supreme. . . .

We Americans have hardly begun to under-

stand and practise the ideals that we are urged to force on others. What we have, in this country, is hope. We and we alone have the hope that we can actually achieve these ideals. The framework of our government was designed to help us achieve them. . . .

If we go to war, we cast away our opportunity and cancel our gains. For a generation, perhaps for a hundred years, we shall not be able to struggle back to where we were. In fact the changes that total war will bring may mean that we shall never be able to

struggle back. . . . The effort to establish a democratic community will stop. We shall think no more of justice, the moral order, and the supremacy of human rights. We shall have hope no longer.

What, then, should our policy be? Instead of doing everything we can to get into the war, we should do everything we can to stay at peace. . . .

But most important of all, we should take up with new vigor the long struggle for moral, intellectual, and spiritual preparedness. If we would change the face of the earth, we must first change our own hearts.

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— Franklin Delano Roosevelt

"... we have a chance to help humanity if we do not go into this war. If we do go into it, we have no chance at all."

— Robert M. Hutchins

Great Debates in American History *Continued***Questions to Think About**

Use information from the excerpts to answer the following questions. Answer the critical thinking questions on an additional sheet of paper.

Comprehension

1. Describe Roosevelt's three-point policy concerning the war in Europe.

2. What were the basic components of the new world order envisioned by Roosevelt?

3. Did Hutchins believe that the United States had "achieved a democratic community" in 1941? Why or why not?

4. According to Hutchins, why had the United States made the defeat of Hitler the main focus of its foreign policy?

Thinking Critically

1. **Identifying Central Issues** What threat did Roosevelt believe the Axis powers posed to America?
2. **Expressing Problems Clearly** In Hutchins's opinion, why was the United States unprepared for war?
3. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** Did Hutchins's predictions concerning the domestic impact of war prove correct?
4. **Testing Conclusions** How, in Hutchins's view, would remaining out of the war benefit United States and world freedom?