

LESSON 6: UNDER THE CLOUD OF WAR

Student Handout 2

OUTCOMES

Goals in 1936: President Franklin Roosevelt had two goals before 1936:

1. Slow down the world's drift toward war
2. Keep the U.S. out of war if one did occur

FDR had deep concerns about Hitler long before Germany attacked other European countries; he privately referred to him as a “madman.” FDR also worried about the isolationist movement in the U.S. He believed the Nye Committee’s report was misleading, and he felt that laws preventing U.S. involvement in the growing crisis could end up posing a real danger to American interests. Nevertheless, he gave in to pressure from Congress and the American public and signed the Neutrality Acts into law.

DECISION 1—1936

FDR considered option 3, a trade embargo of Germany and Italy. This strategy appealed to him because it did not require involving ground troops in the conflict. However, the idea didn't have much support inside the U.S. or with the European powers. FDR recognized that the high level of isolationist sentiment in the U.S. would mean that few Americans would support the plan, and that European countries still hoped to appease Germany and avoid conflict. He also suggested a disarmament conference, and then an economic conference, but neither idea received much support from other countries. He didn't even give speeches to make Americans



Hitler and Mussolini in Munich in 1940

aware of the threat (option 4) because he felt the public steadfastly opposed American involvement. Instead, he chose option 7 and basically stayed out of the conflict. Some historians believe FDR should have done more, especially pushing harder for an embargo. An embargo might have forced Italy to abandon its conquest of Ethiopia; had it backed down, the fascist regimes might not have been so eager to undertake further campaigns of aggression. Also, support for Mussolini might have decreased within Italy. The League of Nations did vote to place an embargo on oil shipments to Italy, but it needed U.S. cooperation to make this work because the U.S. produced more than half the world's oil. FDR did not agree, since the Neutrality Acts did not cite oil as a good eligible for embargo. He didn't feel he had the authority or support within the U.S. to change the list and enforce an embargo.

The U.S. also did not supply weapons to the republican government in Spain, a decision FDR later deemed a mistake. In his opinion, Spain represented the first battleground in the coming world conflict: defeating the fascists there might have deterred them from taking aggressive action later.

Offering to mediate (option 1) was unrealistic, since the fascist regimes were more interested in conquering than negotiating. Threatening to send troops (option 2) or revising the Neutrality Acts (option 5) was unrealistic, given the isolationist mood within the U.S.

DECISION 2—1937 & 1938

FDR gave what became called the “Quarantine Speech” (option 4) in order to make Americans aware of the spread of lawlessness and aggression. He then proposed a naval quarantine of Japan (option 3) but avoided using words like “sanctions” that could have provoked the Japanese. He proposed a conference between small neutral countries and the U.S. to start the quarantine and discuss international arms reduction. (Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of Britain at the time, chose not to take part in the conference.)

FDR also criticized the Neutrality Acts (option 5) and argued that the U.S. should build up its military in order to counter the Axis threat (option 6). He did send a note (option 1) to protest the *Panay* incident, and the dispute was settled when the Japanese acknowledged that they had made a mistake, apologized, and paid compensation to the U.S.

He did not threaten to send troops (option 2), because he felt that there was still a chance to settle some of the issues in Europe and Asia peacefully, and because of the strength of isolationist sentiment within the U.S. He didn’t believe that war was inevitable, although he recognized that the Axis powers posed a threat.

DECISION 3—1938

FDR’s remaining optimism about resolving the conflict peacefully diminished after the Munich Conference. Part of this was an emotional response—the news he received from American diplomats at Munich increasingly disturbed him, especially when they described Hitler’s attitude and willingness to bully other countries. FDR was further shaken by Hitler’s reply to his letter (option 1) asking for peaceful resolution. Hitler’s militant, threatening response convinced FDR that negotiations with Germany would be impossible and that war would inevitably come. FDR and his advisors sometimes described Hitler as “mentally ill” after the Munich Conference. This marked a major change in the way FDR viewed the problem. No longer did the situation involve one country’s mildly aggressive behavior towards its immediate neighbors: instead, FDR viewed it as an unavoidable conflict caused by the actions of one extremely powerful (and possibly mentally ill) man. From this point on, FDR’s primary goal was to help the Allied countries, not to preserve peace.

Many American diplomats believed that Britain and France decided to negotiate with Germany at Munich because they weren't prepared to fight. The Germans possessed such superior air power that the Allies had no choice but to give in to German demands. FDR believed the Germans had about 13,000 planes, compared to fewer than 2000 for the British and French combined. He was so convinced that air power represented the key to German dominance that he focused almost all his efforts on getting airplanes to the British and French (option 5). However, few planes reached either country, and the plan didn't deter the Germans from attacking, because they didn't know about it. FDR also tried to increase defense spending, mainly for airplanes (option 6).

Even though he believed war was inevitable, FDR did not actively try to declare war (option 2), cut trade (option 3), form an alliance (option 7), or even reform the Neutrality Acts (option 5). He was well aware that most Americans still resisted the idea of the U.S. entering another world war. At first, he didn't even give speeches (option 4) about the problem—he told his advisors that people would not believe how dire the threat was. The Nye Report, which claimed that the U.S. had been wrongly dragged into World War I, was still fresh in people's minds. Eventually, FDR felt he had to speak about the situation to Congress and the American people, and he managed to sway public opinion. After the talks, polls showed that 69% of Americans now believed the U.S. should aid Britain and France in a war against Germany.

DECISION 4—1939–1940

The outbreak of war in September 1939 moved the U.S. to increase aid to Britain and France (option 5). In November 1939, Congress revised the Neutrality Acts in order to allow the U.S. to trade weapons to other parts of the British and French empires, which then sent them on to Britain and France. The fall of France shocked the U.S. and the world. The U.S. now truly felt threatened by Germany, since only Britain remained in Europe to oppose the fascist regimes. American aid to Britain subsequently increased. When the Germans attempted to sink ships carrying aid, the U.S. equipped the ships with anti-submarine weapons. Thus, an undeclared naval war between the U.S. and Germany began in the Atlantic. FDR gave the British 50 destroyers in exchange for naval bases in North America; he argued that this deal actually strengthened American defenses and would keep the U.S. out of the war.

This clever argument worked, and a majority of Americans approved of the destroyer deal. Throughout this time, Joseph Kennedy, the U.S. Ambassador to Britain, was sending FDR reports that Britain could not hold out against the Germans. FDR concluded that Kennedy's reports were much too pessimistic. Britain could very likely hold out, he thought: Germany couldn't achieve the air superiority necessary to invade because they had lost more planes during the Battle of Britain than the English had.



Ambassador Joseph
Kennedy

FDR also gave speeches (option 4) to apprise the American public of the threat. He stated that the U.S. had to serve as the “Arsenal of Democracy,” providing weapons so that other democracies could defend themselves. In one speech, he argued that it was delusional for the U.S. to think it could remain isolated in a world in which power was based on military force. Many Americans opposed the increased aid to Britain and France, remembering how U.S. aid to the Allies had represented the first step leading American into World War I. FDR countered by establishing a policy called “Lend-Lease.” Instead of giving the aid to Britain and France, the U.S. would lend weapons to them, which they would eventually give back. FDR sold this to the American public by making a clever (if flawed) analogy: he argued that anyone would lend a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire.

FDR sent a note to Hitler (option 1) asking him to pledge not to attack a list of 34 countries. Hitler instead used the note for propaganda purposes. He asked countries on the list if they felt threatened by Germany and if they had asked FDR to send the note. The countries, fearful of angering Hitler, had to say no to both questions. Hitler then gave a speech in which he mocked FDR and pointed out that the U.S. had expanded in the 19th century without negotiating with the Native Americans whose land it took.

The only other possible action was to embargo exports to Germany and Japan (option 3), and FDR did give the Japanese six months’ notice that the U.S. would declare such an embargo if they didn’t stop their attacks. The other options were still not realistic, because while the American people had grown increasingly concerned about the situation in Europe, they still did not feel the threat warranted U.S. intervention.

DECISION 5—1941

The Neutrality Acts prevented American warships from escorting supply ships into a war zone. To avoid violating the acts, FDR sent warships not to escort, but to “patrol” (option 6). Eventually, one of the ships got involved in a battle with a German submarine. FDR claimed that the submarine attacked the U.S. ship, which was innocently “patrolling.” Having successfully misled the American public, he ordered ships to escort convoys of supply ships. This pitted the U.S. against Germany in an undeclared naval war. The escort strategy proved successful, and the resulting supplies helped Britain survive.

FDR also decided to expand Lend-Lease to include Russia (option 7). He felt that one of the best ways to defeat Hitler was to deplete Germany’s resources by prolonging its war with Russia.



The U.S.S. *Shaw* exploding during the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor

The U.S. did cut off war supplies to Japan. The embargo hurt Japan militarily, but it also strengthened militant factions within Japan. The militarists argued that the embargo proved American hostility to legitimate Japanese interests. Therefore, they said, Japan should attack the U.S. and take the oil it needed from places in Asia. This thinking led Japan to make a surprise attack on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) in December 1941.

The U.S. also increased defense spending (option 5) by more than 500%. The extra weapons helped the U.S. recover from the losses at Pearl Harbor and eventually win the war.