

AP United States History
Unit 7: A Colossus Emerges
Topic- World War II: Interwar Foreign Policy and the Homefront

World War II

Explain the similarities and differences in attitudes about the nation's proper role in the world.

In the years following World War I, the United States pursued a unilateral foreign policy that used international investment, peace treaties, and select military intervention to promote a vision of international order, even while maintaining U.S. isolationism.

After concluding the peace treaties with the Central Powers in 1921, the involvement of America in World War I officially came to an end. By this time, Americans had already shunned the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. Americans were not interested in being involved in foreign affairs after having been involved in a European conflict which had resulted in such high casualties in such a short amount of time. Most Americans, however, failed to realize that the tremendous casualties of World War I had so weakened both Great Britain and France that they had now become second-tier powers— it was a stunning shift in the balance of global power. Germany, however, had been on the cusp of victory, and though it had suffered immense casualties, too, its landscape had not been destroyed, unlike that of France, where most of the fighting in the West had taken place during the war. Despite the heavy casualties, America had suffered none of the ravages of the war across its landscape. Throughout three successive presidencies— all Republican, during the 1920s and during the first phase of the Great Depression experience— Americans became increasingly isolationist. The first of the conservative Republican presidents, Warren G. Harding, hosted the Washington Naval Conference in 1921-1922. The goal of the conference was to defuse the growing tensions between an increasingly imperialistic Japan and its neighbors in East Asia. The treaty that was produced by the conference did reduce the tensions for a time in East Asia and it also required Japan as well as the Allied powers of World War I to reduce the size of their naval forces, but it foreshadowed the tensions that would lead to the eruption of World War II in Asia long before the development of the conflict in Europe. The German economy was devastated by the experience of World War I, as were the German people. In 1924, American president Calvin Coolidge's administration enacted what became known as the Dawes Plan which was designed to assist Germany in reparations payments to the Allied powers— Great Britain and France. But it was a Ponzi Scheme in the making, as Germany took the American money, paid back Great Britain and France, who in turn, took the German payments and used the funds to pay back loans that they owed from the war experience to America— no recovery— financial, or economic ever occurred during the decade after the war as the German economy floundered and Great Britain and France were slow to recover from the war. It would be one of the triggering causes for the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, as the Allied nations and their struggling economies (Germany, as well) could not afford to purchase American industrial products. In 1928, also under Coolidge, America and the former Allied nations signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, pledging to outlaw war. But, during the next decade, as each of the former Allied powers remained mired in the Great Depression (especially in the United States), Americans watched as Japan invaded China and as Fascist regimes began to annex territories across the continent of Europe— precipitating another, even more deadly, global conflict that would erupt by 1939.

In the 1930s, while many Americans were concerned about the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, most opposed taking military action against the aggression of Nazi Germany and Japan until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into World War II.

During the 1930s, America was mired in the Great Depression and most Americans continued to want to have no involvement in European affairs. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria (northern China— a major railroad hub which connected China and the Soviet Union to Korea) which were the first true shots fired in what eventually became World War II. As FDR ascended to the presidency in 1933, Adolf Hitler rose to power in what was to become Nazi Germany. Hitler immediately set about rebuilding the German war machine. His massive investments led the German nation to recover quickly from World War I. The Soviet Union also rapidly recovered from the Great Depression. Despite the efforts of the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal suite of programs, the Great Depression lingered throughout the decade. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia and without America in the League of Nations, the organization was powerless to stop it. After 1936, most Americans could only watch with trepidation as Hitler first annexed the territories that Germany had lost thanks to the Treaty of Versailles at the conclusion of World War I, such as the Rhineland (part of France that had belonged to Germany), Austria (his homeland), and the Sudetenland (a region of Czechoslovakia which had a German-speaking majority), and then unleashed a reign of terror throughout them which culminated in Kristallnacht— the night of the “Broken Glass,” in which the Jewish people living in those regions began to feel the weight of what would become the horrors of the Holocaust. In fact most Americans only began to see the inklings of the horrors of the Nazi regime when the 1936 Olympics were held in Munich, in which the American sprinter, Jesse Owens would win four gold medals in a single day. On the outside, the Olympics looked like any other spectacle, but on the inside, it was a chilling experience. In 1937, Japan invaded China and quickly overran Korea and Vietnam. Meanwhile, in America, the Nye Committee in Congress railed against the weapons manufacturers who they charged had brought us into World War I. An America First Movement, led by such popular figures as Charles Lindbergh, advocated for America to allow Germany to recover the lands it had lost during World War I and for Americans to stay out of the affairs of Europe. Even the Nazi Party had a small presence in America during the Great Depression. But with the Japanese closing in on the American possession of the Philippines and Germany and the Soviet Union eyeing Poland— a nation that had been created out of the ashes of the Treaty of Versailles from lands that had been given up both countries, and Great Britain and France seemingly powerless to stop the inevitable from occurring, it was only a matter of time before a second, more destructive global conflict would occur. America would be slow to react, as the memories of the First World War and the Great Depression still lingered. However, within less than a year after Germany had invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, which started World War in Europe, America would slowly become more and more involved in the conflict.

By the spring of 1940, no one in America could ignore the growing crisis, though very few Americans were willing to be engaged in it. In June, 1940, France surrendered to Nazi Germany (after having been betrayed by their leader, who was a Nazi sympathizer). Prior to the surrender of France, the German war machine had rolled through Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. While there was not popular support for it, slowly the Roosevelt administration began to become involved. In September, 1940, the Roosevelt administration created the Lend-Lease Program. (Meanwhile, the Japanese signed a pact with Germany and Italy, formally announcing themselves as a member of the Axis Powers.) Reluctantly supported by Congress, the Lend-Lease program allowed the British to purchase American weapons to continue to fight against Nazi Germany. Until that time, Great Britain had heroically virtually stood alone in Europe in the fight against Nazi Germany. The Lend-Lease program went into effect with Great Britain in March, 1941, and a few months later, with China (to aid in their fight against the Japanese). In the summer of 1941, Japan invaded French Indochina— present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. When the Japanese invaded the colonies that belonged to France, America began to assume more responsibility for them. (Japan also signed a neutrality agreement with the Soviet Union.) In order to slow down the Japanese war machine, Roosevelt’s administration introduced an embargo (stopped trading) against Japan. America had been the chief supplier of both iron and oil— the major components for fighting a war of that scale for the Japanese. The embargo slowly took effect throughout the summer of 1941. Also, during the summer of 1941, unable to conquer Great Britain despite bombing it around the clock, the forces of Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June and by November, had pushed to within 60 miles of Moscow (the capital). As the situation escalated, the Roosevelt administration

signed the Atlantic Charter with Great Britain, an agreement which stated joint American and British war aims and a plan for the postwar world. It was thought that the Atlantic Charter would convince the American people to once again become involved in the war on the side of Great Britain, but even in the early fall of 1941, most Americans were still reluctant to become involved in the growing crisis. But, for Japan, the embargo on oil had taken full effect by the fall of 1941. Desperate to control trade in the shipping lanes that traveled through the Philippine Islands— an American territory— the Japanese made a fateful decision. The Japanese would execute a surprise attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to try to cripple the American Pacific fleet and delay the mobilization of the United States into the war to try to protect the Philippines. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, effectively bringing America into the war and twenty-four hours later, launched an invasion of the Philippines. On December 11, 1941, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. The two conflicts— one in Europe and one in Southeast Asia, now merged, to become the Second World War, with the United States stepping into the conflict on the side of the Allies.

While it was American military might that proved to be decisive on the battlefields of Italy, France, North Africa, and Belgium in Europe, and in the island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific Rim, it was also the efforts of Americans at home that would tilt the balance of the war in the favor of the Allies in World War II.