

WORLD WAR II – PART II

THE U.S. ROLE?

Since the Munich Agreement of 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suspected that the approaching conflict in Europe would likely draw in the United States. He could not say so publicly since public opinion was adamantly opposed to the nation involving itself in yet another “European war.”

Roosevelt, however, recognized long before most Americans the threat that Nazi Germany posed to U.S. national interests. If Hitler were to gain control of the entire European continent and then neutralize the British navy (or, even worse, put the British navy in the service of Germany), the U.S. would be cut off from its main trading partners and be vulnerable to a trans-Atlantic invasion.

Hitler had already made clear that his economic policy was one of “autarky.” This meant all of the economies of the conquered nations of Europe would be mobilized to benefit the Germans. Europe would become a closed economy, from which U.S. goods would be excluded.

Roosevelt worried that the U.S., already in the midst of the Great Depression, would remain in a permanent depression if it lost its ability to trade with the Europeans.

If the economy were to remain in a depressed state for too long, Roosevelt feared, the American political system could be in jeopardy. Americans could well lose faith in liberal democracy and turn to some sort of “strong man” or demagogue who might promise to “solve” their problems in exchange for being given absolute power to do so.

Finally, Hitler also made clear that he ultimately envisioned projecting German power across the Atlantic into South America, from which he might then launch an invasion of the United States. In hindsight, this seems improbable, but, at the time – especially if the Germans were to have control of the British navy – it seemed plausible.

In sum, Germany, if allowed to defeat Great Britain and to dominate all of Europe would pose a direct threat to the United States – an economic threat, a political threat, and even an existential threat (that is, a successful invasion of the U.S. could threaten the existence of the nation).

Though Roosevelt would have liked to have begun mobilizing the U.S. for war against Germany in 1938, he came to believe that this was politically impossible. In a 1938 address, later known as the “Quarantine Speech,” Roosevelt gently suggested that the nation should protect itself from the “disease” of Nazism by abandoning neutrality and taking steps to “quarantine” itself by helping the British contain Germany. The public and the press reacted negatively to Roosevelt’s attempt to sway opinion. Some critics labelled Roosevelt a “war monger.” Aware he had stepped on a political land mine, the President quickly pulled back and, at least for the immediate future, did not make any further attempts to “educate” the public about the need for preparedness.

Once Roosevelt decided to run for a third term in 1940, he realized he could not give any indication that he believed war with Germany was likely or share with the public his view that Germany directly threatened the United States. Instead, he repeatedly assured the American public that under no circumstances would “their boys” be fighting in any foreign wars. Though he knew that in promising this he was not being entirely honest, it was a line the public wanted to hear and therefore was a

message he needed to send if he was to be re-elected. (As mentioned in class, he was willing to undermine his opponent, Wendell Willkie, by deceiving him into believing that he (Roosevelt) would not discuss foreign policy during the campaign.)

Safely re-elected in November, 1940, Roosevelt could afford to be a bit more honest with the people. He tried to “educate” them on events in Europe and to make the case for why all-out U.S. support for Great Britain was necessary. Roosevelt insisted that only by helping Britain to defeat the Nazis could the U.S. itself avoid being drawn into the war. Those who supported the President’s views became known as “interventionists.”

Still, Roosevelt faced opposition from isolationists (or, more accurately, non-interventionists) who argued that if Germany posed such a significant threat to the U.S. (as Roosevelt claimed), then U.S. policy should be to throw all available resources into defending the nation’s coastline from German attack. Sending military supplies to Great Britain was unwise since the U.S. needed those supplies (weapons, ships, ammunition, etc.) for its own defenses.

Moreover, if Germany defeated Britain (which seemed likely in 1940 and early 1941), those supplies would fall into German hands and could conceivably be used against the United States.

Many Americans found the isolationists’ arguments persuasive, so Roosevelt had to develop a more compelling case for his views.

He landed on the policy of “Lend Lease.” Britain needed supplies (particularly ships, oil, food, and ammunition) if it was to continue fighting against the Germans, but after two years of war, the Brits were nearly broke. Roosevelt proposed “lending” the British desperately needed supplies in exchange for “leases” on military bases that belonged to the British where the U.S. would be permitted to station its ships and troops. That way, the U.S. itself would not join the war, but it would do everything it could to insure the Germans did not defeat the British. And, if war came, the U.S. could project its power by making use of the military bases it leased from the British.

Roosevelt, as he often did, explained his policy to the people in the form of a story taken from everyday life: “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t keep your hose from him; you lend him the hose so that he can put out the fire before it spreads to your house.” This argument began to make inroads by 1941 and Congress passed the Lend Lease legislation in March 1941. Even so, it was clear to Roosevelt that the nation was still opposed to any U.S. declaration of war on Germany.

As his critics retorted, “The correct metaphor is not a hose, but rather chewing gum. Once you lend it to someone, you don’t expect to get it back.”

As it happened, the debate between isolationists and interventionists was settled by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Once the U.S. was attacked in December 1941, all citizens agreed that the nation must go to war...against Japan. But what about Germany?

Before answering that question, some background on WHY the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor...

THE WAR IN ASIA

The attack on Pearl Harbor was the culmination of worsening relations between the United States and Japan – relations that had been deteriorating since the mid-1930s as Japan waged war against

China, a U.S. ally, and threatened its East Asian neighbors, some of whom were British and French colonies.

In fact, the Japanese empire had been aggressively expanding for ten years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, invading China, French Indochina (Vietnam), Korea, and chains of islands colonized by the western powers (Britain, the Netherlands, etc.). The Japanese believed it was their right to establish an “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” without the interference of Western powers. They suggested that the nations of Asia wanted to be rid of Western imperialism and sought to pursue a different course in which the Japanese would be the regional power. This was more “spin” than reality. Most of the Asian populations subjected to Japanese rule did not welcome it. They saw the Japanese as imperialists, no different than the Western imperialists.

Beyond the abstract concept of an “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” the Japanese sought access to natural resources and raw materials needed to fuel their industrial and military machine. In particular, they needed steady access to oil.

(Ironically, much of Japan’s military and industrial expansion had been funded by U.S. bankers who during the 1920s and 1930s saw Japan as a lucrative investment – in particular the Japanese seemed like a better investment than the Chinese since they paid interest on their loans and paid on time. American oil companies also kept the oil flowing steadily to Japan – because the Japanese paid for the oil, and paid on time.)

As Japanese militarism began to worry the U.S. government, Washington rethought the wisdom of allowing private companies to invest in and supply the Japanese military. By 1940, the Roosevelt administration had decided to use access to American oil as diplomatic leverage against the Japanese. The U.S. would only permit continued oil exports to Japan if the Japanese government promised to end its expansionist and aggressive policies. The Japanese tried to reassure Washington that it would curb its expansion, but it soon became clear such assurances were insincere.

In 1941, the U.S. severely limited Japan’s access to U.S. oil. This shift in policy did not stop Japanese expansion, however; rather it made the Japanese even more aggressive. Unable to rely on U.S. oil, the Japanese had to find alternative sources closer to home. They set out to conquer the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and other strategic areas that had been colonized by the British.

This worried Roosevelt. He feared that the Brits would divert military resources from Europe to defend their colonies in Asia. If this happened, it increased Hitler’s chances of dominating the European continent and cutting off trade with the US. The economic depression in the US could become permanent and a “garrison state” could develop in which Americans’ liberties were curtailed in order to prevent revolutionary turmoil sparked by economic deprivation.

Also, the Japanese military considered the U.S. a weak and inferior society. They were furious at the United States for halting the flow of oil, but they remained convinced that a sudden and devastating attack on the U.S. military base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii would so frighten the American public that the people would demand U.S. withdrawal from Hawaii and the Japanese would then have a free hand to expand at will in Asia without fear of the U.S. launching a military attack on them from Hawaii.

Some Japanese politicians (and even the officer put in charge of planning the Pearl Harbor invasion) questioned the wisdom of such a move. They pointed out that if the Americans, rather than retreating out of the Pacific, instead declared war on Japan in response to an attack on Pearl Harbor, the

Japanese would have no chance against the Americans, whose economy was exponentially larger than that of Japan.

On the other hand, American officials, succumbing to racist notions that the Japanese, an “inferior race,” could never summon the courage or the know how to project their military power all the way to Pearl Harbor, left the U.S. military base wide open to attack. Planes were lined up wing to wing in the air fields; ships sat side by side like sitting ducks in the harbor. The Americans, fearing sabotage (perhaps by “disloyal” Hawaiians of Japanese ancestry) and not a full scale Japanese attack, believed it wise to cluster its forces so as to keep an eye on them.

As a result, when the Japanese attack came on December 7, 1941, the U.S. military was taken by surprise and the U.S. navy suffered considerable losses.

That said, however, the Japanese hardly achieved their goal. The U.S. did not retreat; it declared war. The fears of the Japanese politicians would prove correct. By 1945 the Japanese empire, and Japan itself, lay in smoldering ruins (as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had predicted only days after the attack on Pearl Harbor). But there would be hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides before then.

The attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into World War II, but not in the way Roosevelt would have liked. He knew the real danger was losing the war in Europe and that the U.S. must pursue a “Europe first” strategy. After Pearl Harbor, however, most Americans were fixated on achieving revenge against the Japanese. The “Europe first” strategy would have been a tough sell. Luckily for Roosevelt – and he was indeed the luckiest of politicians – Hitler handed him a gift.

On December 11, 1941, Germany declared war on the United States. Though allied with Japan, Germany had no treaty obligation to do so. This decision was Hitler’s second monumentally stupid mistake (the first being his invasion of the Soviet Union the previous June). Hitler’s declaration of war enabled Roosevelt to make a convincing case to the public that winning in Europe was equally (if not more) important than winning the war in the Pacific. This meant that the Germans would soon face the military might of the United States.

It would take time, however, to mobilize the U.S. armed forces. Though Roosevelt had done all he could to pursue a campaign of preparedness between 1938 and 1941, public opinion had limited his efforts. The army was ill-equipped; the soldiers were poorly trained; the navy lacked ships; available weapons and ammunition fell well short of what was needed. Eventually, the U.S. mobilization would be one of the great success stories of the war, but in early 1942, this was a long way off.

U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY AND THE DELAY OF THE “SECOND FRONT”

More than anything else, Roosevelt sought to limit U.S. casualties in the war. In 1942, he well knew the U.S. army was in no condition to confront the Nazis head on in France – if such a strategy was pursued, it would be a bloodbath, and an unnecessary one. He hoped to delay that direct conflict until such point as the U.S. could realistically expect victory.

He also knew that public opinion would not tolerate heavy casualties in the European theater because most Americans still believed that revenge against the Japanese was the priority. If the US war effort in Europe did not go well, Roosevelt feared he would face significant opposition to his “Europe first”

strategy. Still convinced that defeating Germany (and thereby keeping the Nazis from gaining control of the entire European continent) was the top priority, Roosevelt did not want to risk opening a Second Front in France prematurely.

Stalin, however, insisted that the U.S. open a “Second Front” in France as soon as possible. From his perspective, this demand made perfect sense. If the German forces faced attacks on two fronts, they would have to reposition some of their soldiers – drawing them from the eastern front where they were fighting Soviet forces, to the western front where they would face American and British forces.

Implying that his new ally was engaging in treachery, Stalin suggested to U.S. diplomats that the Americans seemed to be deliberately pursuing a strategy that would bleed out the Soviets and save their own forces. But Stalin also understood that the U.S. wasn’t prepared for war in France and so he privately acknowledged to his top aides that the Americans were simply exercising caution. Nonetheless, he instructed Soviet officials to keep insisting that the U.S. open the second front since, once the war was over, the Americans, feeling guilty that they had delayed action and cost the Soviets lives, might be willing to make concessions that would be useful to Stalin.

As it happened, the first U.S. offensive occurred in North Africa where American troops, in league with the British, fought to keep the Germans from securing the Suez Canal in Egypt. Had the Germans seized the canal, the most efficient sea route to India, the chief British colony, would have been blocked. In short, by fighting in Africa, the U.S. was doing more to save the British Empire than it was doing to defeat the Germans – thus explaining why Churchill had insisted on the strategy in the first place.

Meanwhile Stalin grew more impatient as Soviet casualties continued to mount. By early 1944, however, the tide seemed to be turning on the Eastern Front. Soviet troops had begun to score victories against the Germans who had overstretched their supply lines and could no longer provide enough reinforcements to keep pace with the sheer number of Soviet soldiers fighting the battles. Stalin speculated that if his own forces could defeat the Nazis without significant help from the Brits and the Americans, the Soviet army could continue moving west and, perhaps, dominate the continent.

Fearing just such an outcome, Roosevelt was determined to open a Second Front – indeed, at this point he may have been more determined than Stalin to see a Second Front.

By 1944, the plans for opening a second front in France were complete. The invasion would be launched from the south coast of England. American and British forces would travel across the channel and land in Normandy – the largest and most complicated amphibious (i.e. from sea to land) invasion in the history of the world. The invasion, under the command of General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, commenced on June 6, 1944 (D-Day). In the face of fierce German resistance, it succeeded. From this point, Germany’s defeat was only a matter of time, though months of hard fighting remained.

Within a year, Soviet and American/British forces met in Berlin and the Third Reich, proclaimed to last for a thousand years, fell abruptly in its 12th year.

THE PACIFIC WAR...IN BRIEF

After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. suffered a series of defeats and, most notably, had to abandon its bases on the Philippine Islands. After the Battle of Midway, however, the tide began to turn. The U.S.

economy, far more powerful than the Japanese economy, was now fully mobilized. In a war of attrition, then, the Japanese were doomed (just as their own civilian leadership had tried to tell the army officers years before.)

In a strategy of “island hopping” U.S. forces slowly advanced toward the Japanese home islands, suffering horrific casualties all the while (as did the retreating Japanese). The long term plan was to land on the main islands in a massive invasion which promised hundreds of thousands more U.S. deaths (not to mention even more Japanese deaths.)

The dropping of the two atomic bombs, however, brought the war to a close without the need for such a full-scale invasion. At the time, most Americans did not pause to consider the ramifications of the atomic bomb. They were simply glad the war was over. Many saw the atomic bombings as “revenge” or “pay back” for Pearl Harbor – not taking into account that the Japanese suffered disproportionately more deaths.

The U.S. government declared the bombings had saved American lives (one might add that despite the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bombs likely saved just as many Japanese lives since most Japanese were ready to fight to the death to repel an American invasion). Moreover, more Japanese had died in the fire-bombing of Tokyo than died (at least immediately) in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One commentator explained the lack of horror or revulsion in Americans’ reactions to the dropping of the atomic bombs as the result of a “moral numbing” that the Second World War had produced. There was simply so much death and destruction and so many atrocities on all sides that any “moral accounting” seemed absurd.

The bombings, then, seemed only part of a larger orgy of violence and not qualitatively different than more convention bombings. This view would change in the coming years as people became more familiar with the destructive potential that had been unleashed and the effects of radiation and fallout.

It seems, however, that the Japanese surrendered in August 1945 not only because of the atomic bombs, but because they so feared a postwar occupation by the Soviet Union. Much preferring to surrender to the Americans, the Japanese government asked only that the nation be able to retain its emperor, the symbol of the Japanese people and culture. When the Americans agreed, the Japanese surrendered and avoided prolonging the war.

Had they not surrendered when they did, the Soviets might have been able to make a more compelling case that they deserved to be included in the postwar occupation of Japan. As it was, the new U.S. President, Harry Truman (Roosevelt had died in April 1945), excluded the Soviets from any role in the postwar reconstruction of Japan. In the years to come, Japan would become the U.S.’s most reliable Cold War ally in Asia.

In fact, shortly after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, early signs were emerging that in the years to come the Soviets, and not a reconstructed Japan or Germany, would be the primary threat to U.S. interests. Truman’s refusal to allow the Soviets any of the “spoils” coming from the defeat of Japan did not play well in Moscow and likely contributed to the deterioration of US-Soviet relations, soon to be known as the “Cold War.”