



# AMERICANS

## AND THE HOLOCAUST

**TEACHER GUIDE**  
ISOLATION OR  
INTERVENTION?  
A CASE STUDY ON  
THE LEND-LEASE ACT

UNITED STATES  
HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
MUSEUM

WILLIAM LEVINE FAMILY INSTITUTE  
FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

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## ISOLATION OR INTERVENTION? A CASE STUDY ON THE LEND-LEASE ACT

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will identify multiple economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans' attitudes about the United States' role in the world from 1939–1941, when people in the United States were deeply divided about what actions, if any, America should take in defense of countries threatened by German military conquest. Through an examination of primary source documents, students will identify and evaluate arguments that different Americans made for the provision of military materiel to Britain in 1940. Ultimately, students will reflect on questions that this lesson raises about America's role in the world today.

**This lesson explores the following question:**

- How did Americans interpret their role in the world when facing the threat of war?

### HISTORY KEY QUESTIONS EXPLORED

1. From 1939–1941, what information was available to Americans about German military expansion and the German threat to European countries?
2. What events and conditions had an impact upon Americans' attitudes about German military expansion and whether the United States should supply military materiel to Great Britain?
3. How did Americans respond to the proposal that the United States provide military aid to Great Britain in defense against German attacks?

### HISTORY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will understand that there were many different issues that the American public perceived as having a critical impact on their livelihoods, security, and core values. Those issues vied for public attention during this time and affected the manner in which the American people responded to events at home and abroad.
2. They will be able to identify economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans' attitudes toward the potential for American involvement in World War II.
3. Students will be able to articulate and evaluate arguments for and against the Lend-Lease Act of 1940, providing facts to support these arguments about whether and how the United States should have supported countries abroad via lend-lease during this time.

### ELA/MEDIA LITERACY KEY QUESTIONS EXPLORED

1. When should a leader take the risk to lead the public, and when should leaders follow public opinion? What role should public opinion play in policy decisions?
2. How important is emotional context in the formation of public opinion?
3. How did individuals and groups play to people's emotions to shape their interpretation of policy options?
4. Which is more convincing—moral arguments, practical arguments, appeals to emotion, or expediency?
5. A common tool of propagandists is to engage the public in “us versus them” thinking. How can interest groups use this technique to influence public policy, especially in relation to national security and war?

Cover photo: A newly freed prisoner of the Buchenwald concentration camp made this flag and gave it to Sergeant Donald Hall in 1945. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum collection, gift of the family of Donald J. Hall*

## PROCEDURE

### Essential Questions

What role should Americans play when democracy and freedom are threatened abroad?

1. What information was available to Americans about German military expansion and the Nazi threat to countries abroad?
2. What pressures and motivations influenced Americans' attitudes about whether and how America should intervene in support of European countries threatened by Nazi Germany?
3. How did Americans respond to German expansionism and threats to European countries? What were the main arguments for and against intervention?

### Optional Background Materials

The materials below can supplement historical knowledge students may or may not already have about this time period. If necessary, teachers may cover this information on the first day and complete the primary source part of this lesson on the second day.

- Lend-Lease Background (included in the student packet)
- Historical Slide Deck with accompanying teacher script
- Timeline of events for 1918–1940.

### During Class

#### Activity and Discussion

1. Open with the essential question: What role should Americans play when democracy and freedom are threatened abroad? Open class discussion. Ask students to recall what was happening from 1939 through 1941.
2. Divide the class into small groups (three to five) students. Assign readings for each case study from the lend-lease primary sources, based on the time allotted for the lesson and the reading level of the students. Students should underline key information, passages in the reading that require further explanation, or content about which they have questions.
  - Lend-Lease Bill decision to be discussed: Should the US Congress and president provide military equipment in support of the British war effort against the Germans?
3. In small groups, students will:
  - Examine primary source documents. Using the document analysis worksheet each group will answer the following questions:
    - Who is the author?
    - Who might be the intended audience?
    - What does the author want the target audience to think, feel, or do? Is there a specific action the author proposes?
    - What hopes, fears, and grievances present in society at the time might influence how the target audience responded to this document? Consider political, social, and economic conditions.
4. After each group has analyzed and discussed their documents, lead the full class in a discussion of the arguments that different Americans made for and against the Lend-Lease Act. Help the students synthesize their findings and consider the various factors that influenced public opinion during this time. Draw broader conclusions (as well as lingering questions) about Americans and their responses to the Nazi threat in 1939–1941. What questions does this activity raise about America's role in the world?

## Assessments

### Questions for Class Discussion:

1. How would you characterize public opinion in America regarding the lead-up to and start of World War II in 1939–1941? As America engaged in this debate, what was happening in Europe?
2. What factors influenced Americans' attitudes and opinions about these events and conditions?
3. Were there particular arguments that you found convincing? Why? Was there additional information you would need to accurately assess the validity of these arguments?
4. In a democracy, what is the role of informed public debate about policy decisions?
5. What questions does this case study raise about America's role in the world?

## STANDARDS MET

### AP US History

- Key Concept 7.3—Participation in a series of global conflicts propelled the United States into a position of international power while renewing domestic debates over the nation's proper role in the world.
  - II. World War I and its aftermath intensified ongoing debates about the nation's role in the world and how best to achieve national security and pursue American interests.
    - D) 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 US isolationism.
    - E) 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.
    - Related Thematic Learning Objective.

### US History State Standards (California)

#### CA.10.8. Content Standard: World History, Culture, and Geography

- 10.8.2. Understand the role of appeasement, non-intervention (isolationism), and the domestic distractions in Europe and the United States prior to the outbreak of World War II.
- 10.8.5. Analyze the Nazi policy of pursuing racial purity, especially against the European Jews; its transformation into the Final Solution; and the Holocaust that resulted in the murder of six million Jewish civilians.

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## CA.II.7. Content Standard: United States History and Geography

Continuity and Change in the 20th Century: Students analyze America's participation in World War II.

- 11.7.1. Examine the origins of American involvement in the war, with an emphasis on the events that precipitated the attack on Pearl Harbor.
- 11.7.4. Analyze Roosevelt's foreign policy during World War II (e.g., Four Freedoms speech).
- 11.7.5. Discuss the constitutional issues and impact of events on the U.S. home front, including the internment of Japanese Americans (e.g., Fred Korematsu v. United States of America) and the restrictions on German and Italian resident aliens; the response of the administration to Hitler's atrocities against Jews and other groups; the roles of women in military production; and the roles and growing political demands of African Americans.

## Common Core Standards

- RL/RI.X.1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- RL/RI.X.6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- RL/RI.X.7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- W.X.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- SL.X.2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- SL.X.5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

## C3 Framework

- Develop questions and planning inquiries about American knowledge, understanding, and responses to Nazi persecution of Jews and threats to democracy.
- Apply tools of historical inquiry to evaluate sources and develop claims using evidence.
- Communicate and critique conclusions.

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## ISOLATION OR INTERVENTION? A CASE STUDY ON THE LEND-LEASE ACT Primary Source Key Points

Congressional Testimony: American Federation of Labor

The American Federation of Labor supports the Lend-Lease Act as necessary and indispensable to the defense of the United States. It held that Britain was the “last democratic nation” and that if it were to be overrun by Germany, America and democracy around the world would be under threat. In supporting this legislation, the American Federation of Labor saw Lend-Lease as a basic instrument of national policy of the United States.

- The Nazis are a threat to democracy—not just to the countries they have declared war against but to all democratic countries around the world, and therefore, America is at grave risk if Britain is defeated.
- Support Britain—in order to keep war from our shores, we must ensure that Britain is not defeated.

Congressional Testimony: Robert E. Wood of the America First Committee

Wood asserts that the Lend-Lease Act is not just about defense or aid to our allies, but is in essence a “war bill” that affords too much power to the president. He also does not believe that America would be immediately threatened if Britain were to fall, and that Americans are falsely afraid of this potential threat. He goes on to speak about the lies that the American people have been told about the benefits of the Lend-Lease Act. Instead of promoting the defense of the United States while aiding our allies, Wood asserts that it gives equal importance to the defense of foreign nations and makes their cause our own. Wood rejects the Lend-Lease Act, and does not support it. He argues that:

- The bill gives too much power to the President to declare war and send aid.
- Even if Britain falls, the United States is not in immediate danger of invasion.
- The bill equates our national defense priorities with those of our allies, instead of doing what is in the best interest of the United States.

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### ISOLATION OR INTERVENTION? A CASE STUDY ON THE LEND-LEASE ACT

#### Primary Source Key Points (continued)

Fireside Chat: President Franklin D. Roosevelt

In this December 1940 fireside chat, President Roosevelt makes it clear that he supports the bill. He tells the American people that wars abroad should, in fact, be of concern to the American people, and that if Britain falls, those in the Western Hemisphere would be “living at the point of a gun.” Roosevelt admits the risks of aiding the British, but asserts that there would be less of a chance of America getting involved in the war if the country did all it could to support those defending themselves against the Axis countries. Finally, he stresses that America must be “the great arsenal of democracy,” and treat the fate of Britain with the same sense of patriotism, sacrifice, and urgency as if the United States were already at war.

- It is our role to help our Allies when they are threatened.
- There is a great possibility that the United States will be attacked if Britain falls.
- The United States should send support now to keep America out of the war later

Newspaper Article: “Lindbergh Hits Lease-Lend Bill in Testimony”

Charles Lindbergh comes out strongly against the Lend-Lease Act. Instead of avoiding war through Lend-Lease, he believes that the United States would be encouraging and prolonging it. From a tactical standpoint, Lindbergh also testified that he didn’t believe that American assistance could actually give Great Britain military superiority over Nazi Germany. He also argues that the British have a geographical disadvantage and by sending American supplies to them, we also are subjecting our ships to the bombs and torpedoes of the enemy.

- By sending aid to Britain, the United States would be giving up an ideal defensive position in America.
- The United States would only prolong the war by aiding the British.
- Even with American assistance, the British military would not be strong enough to defeat Germany

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