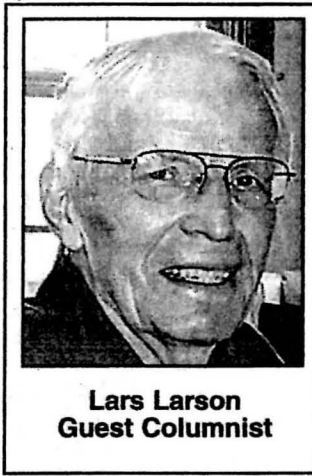


Washburn During The War Years —Prelude To War

CSB/16/11

The second great war in a quarter century, soon to become known as World War II (and the earlier one as World War I), began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. But the slide toward war had begun years earlier with the Japanese seizure of Manchuria from China in 1931, followed by the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-36, the German occupation of the Rhineland in 1935, then of Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, and the conquest of Finland by the Soviet Union in 1939-40. While these events in far away places may have occupied the attention of their national leaders, they were of little concern to the American people, committed as they were to deep isolationism after the disastrous venture into internationalism after World War I, and absorbed with surviving the depression. They were generally sympathetic to the victims of aggression but felt that if these countries were stupid enough to go to war with each other, then they would have to bear the consequences.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood that the United States would inevitably be drawn into the war and that it was to the nation's interest to support the Allied powers. A week after the German assault on Poland he declared a limited national emergency that



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

allowed expansion of the army, then in early November he persuaded Congress to repeal the arms embargo, allowing belligerent powers, clearly intended to mean Great Britain and France, to purchase war materials in the United States but transport them in their own ships. The British and French took immediate advantage of this "cash and carry" law, placing large orders with American companies for armaments and munitions. The slide toward war continued when the "phony war" of the winter of 1939-40 ended with the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, in April 1940, and of the Low Countries and France the following month.

To aid Great Britain, after the fall of France, the president persuaded Congress to pass the lend-lease program in March 1941. This program provided that the United

States would lend war materials to Great Britain that would be returned or paid for after the war, a stratagem intended to defuse the opposition of the isolationists, to free aid to the British. In June 1941 Germany launched an invasion of the Soviet Union, relieving the invasion threat to Great Britain, and the lend-lease program was extended to that nation. The lend-lease aid to Great Britain and the Soviet Union had to be transported in convoys of ships across the north Atlantic.

As it had done during the World War I, Germany launched a submarine campaign to destroy the convoys. The United States responded by declaring the north Atlantic as far west as Iceland an American "defense zone," placing its naval ships patrolling this zone and German submarines into situations of potential conflict. Inevitably, incidents occurred: on September 4th, southwest of Iceland, the destroyer, Greer, was attacked by a German submarine with no casualties or damages, the Greer responding with depth charges; on October 17 southwest of Iceland, the destroyer, Kearney, was torpedoed, with 11 killed; on October 30th east of Newfoundland, the Navy oiler, Silinas, was torpedoed, with damage but no casualties; and on October 31st

west of Iceland, the destroyer, Reuben James, was torpedoed and sunk, with 115 killed.

Although the United States and Germany were engaged in what amounted to an undeclared naval war in the north Atlantic, and rearmament had been underway for two years, the American people still did not expect that war would actually come. But come it did when on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Japanese naval air forces struck the great naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, inflicting heavy damage on the U. S. Pacific Fleet moored there. The next day Congress declared war on Japan and in the following days, in response to their declaration of war, on Germany and Italy, Japan's partners in the nefarious Tripartite Pact.

World War II was a titanic struggle between two large coalitions—the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers. The major Allied powers were the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, along with France, China, Canada, and some 40 smaller countries, many occupied by Germany or Japan. The major Axis powers, joined in the Tripartite Pact, were Germany, Japan, and Italy, with six smaller nations. The war ended with the surrender of Germany on May 7, 1945 and Japan on August 14, 1945, for a total of almost six years.