

Washburn During The War Years 1939-1945—The Slide Toward War

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 world's 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 defeat of Finland by the Soviet Union in 1939-40. The causes of these aggressions by these four nations may be summarized as follows: problems remaining from the Great War, particularly the vengeful Treaty of Versailles imposed on Germany; the rise of authoritarian regimes of the right—Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany and militarism in Japan—and of the left—communism in the Soviet Union; the desire of these dictatorships for land, resources, and national glory; and the failure the international community to prevent aggression or to stop it when it was underway.

The slide toward war continued with the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, in April 1940, and of the Low Countries and France the following month. On June 10 1940, as Germany was consolidating its latest conquests in western Europe, President Roosevelt gave an address at the University of Virginia in which he indicated that the United States "had abandoned neutrality for 'non-belligerency,' " meaning that while the nation would support those opposing German aggression, it would not become an active participant in the war. "In our unity, in our American unity," the president declared, "we will pursue two obvious and simultaneous courses; we will extend to the opponents of force the material resources of this nation and, at the same time, we will harness and speed up the use of those resources in order that we ourselves in the Americas may have equipment and training equal to the task of any emergency and every defense."

To obtain the "equipment and training" for defense, the president, taking advantage of aggressive military and diplomatic actions by Germany but being careful not to offend public opinion, acted to increase defense budgets, expand the armed forces, and establish mobilization agencies. To aid Great Britain, the only surviving "opponent of force," after the fall of France in June 1940, 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 clever stratagem intended to defuse the opposition of the isolationists, to free aid to the British. In June 1941 German launched a massive invasion of the Soviet Union, relieving the immediate threat to Great Britain, and the lend-lease program was extended to that "opponent of force." 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 Great War, 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," bringing its naval ships patrolling this zone and German submarines into situations of potential conflict.

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 and from an unexpected direction. In 1937 Japan invaded China, then in 1940 and 1941 it made other aggressive moves against the colonial possessions of the Dutch, British, and French in Southeast Asia. In an attempt to stop the aggression and force Japan to withdraw from China and Indo-China, the United States imposed an embargo on the shipment of oil and other strategic materials to Japan. The embargo on oil, for which Japan was almost totally dependent on the United States, threatened to immobilize Japan's navy. In September 1941 the

Japanese government, which was controlled by the military, decided to move south to gain access to the oil and other rich natural resources of the Dutch East Indies. The major obstacle to the plan was the American Pacific fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Japanese decided to launch an attack to destroy the fleet, with the hope that the United States would be forced to acquiesce to its plans of conquest. On Sunday morning, December 7 1941, aircraft from Japanese navy carriers that had approached the Hawaiian Islands undetected from the northwest, attacked and sank or severely damaged the closely anchored ships of the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor.