



A NEUTRAL AMERICA

PRIMARY SOURCES

DOCUMENT A

The U.S. Consul General at Berlin
to the Under Secretary of State
November 23, 1933

“In spite of the way in which the feelings of the German people have been whipped up by this new Government I do not believe that the majority of the German people yet desire war, but there is certainly no great desire for peace. Everything that is being done in the country to-day has for its object to make the people believe that Germany is threatened vitally in every aspect of its life by outside influences and by other countries. Everything is being done to use this feeling to stimulate military training and exercises, and innumerable measures are being taken to develop the German people into a hardy, sturdy race which will be able to meet all comers.”

DOCUMENT B

Address Delivered by President
Roosevelt at New York (Excerpts)
August 14, 1936

“We shun political commitments which might entangle us in foreign wars; we avoid connection with the political activities of the League of Nations....”

“We are not isolationists except insofar as we seek to isolate ourselves completely from war. Yet we must remember that so long as war exists on earth there will be some danger that even the nation which most ardently desires peace may be drawn into war.”

DOCUMENT C

Address Delivered by the Secretary of State at Washington (Excerpts)
March 17, 1938

“It would be absurd and futile for us to proclaim that we stand for international law, for the sanctity of treaty obligations, for nonintervention in internal affairs of other countries, for equality of industrial and commercial rights and opportunities, for limitation and reduction of armaments—but only in one-half of the world, and among one-half of the world's population. The catastrophic developments of recent years, the startling events of the past weeks, offer a tragic demonstration of how quickly the contagious scourge of treaty breaking and armed violence spreads from one region to another.”

“Those who contend that we can and should abandon and surrender principles in one-half of the world clearly show that they have little or no conception of the extent to which situations and developments in any part of the world of today inevitably affect situations and conditions in other parts of the world.”

“It would mean a break with our past, both internationally and domestically. It would mean a voluntary abandonment of some of the most important things that have made us a great nation.”



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DOCUMENT D

Address Delivered by President Roosevelt to the Congress (Excerpts)
September 21, 1939

“Beginning with the foundation of our constitutional government in the year 1789, the American policy in respect to belligerent nations, with one notable exception, has been based on international law. Be it remembered that what we call international law has had as its primary objectives the avoidance of causes of war and the prevention of the extension of war.”

“Our ... deviation by statute from the sound principles of neutrality and peace through international law did not come for 130 years. It was the so-called Neutrality Act of 1935—only 4 years ago... I regret equally that I signed that act.”

“On July fourteenth of this year I asked the Congress in the cause of peace and in the interest of real American neutrality and to take action to change that act.”

“I now ask again that such action be taken in respect to of the act which is wholly inconsistent with ancient precepts of the law of nations—the embargo provisions. I ask it because they are, in my opinion, most vitally dangerous to American neutrality, American security, and American peace.”

“I seek a greater consistency through the repeal of the embargo provisions and a return to international law. I seek reenactment of the historic and traditional American policy which, except for the disastrous interlude of the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts, has served us well for nearly a century and a half.”

“It has been erroneously said that return to that policy might bring us nearer to war. I give to you my deep and unalterable conviction, based on years of experience as a worker in the field of international peace, that by the repeal of the embargo the United States will more probably remain at peace than if the law remains as it stands today I say this because with the repeal of the embargo this Government clearly and definitely will insist that American citizens and American ships keep away from the immediate perils of the actual zones of conflict....”

“To those who say that this program would involve a step toward war on our part, I reply that it offers far greater safeguards than we now possess or have ever possessed to protect American lives and property from danger. It is a positive program for giving safety. This means less likelihood of incidents and controversies which tend to draw us into conflict, as they did in the last World War. There lies the road to peace!”



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DOCUMENT E

Excerpts from a Fireside Chat Delivered by President Roosevelt
September 3, 1939

“My fellow Americans and my friends:

Until four-thirty this morning I had hoped against hope that some miracle would prevent a devastating war in Europe and bring to an end the invasion of Poland by Germany.”

“For four long years a succession of actual wars and constant crises have shaken the entire world and have threatened in each case to bring on the gigantic conflict which is today unhappily a fact.”

“You must master at the outset a simple but unalterable fact in modern foreign relations between nations. When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger.”

“It is easy for you and for me to shrug our shoulders and to say that conflicts taking place thousands of miles from the continental United States, and, indeed, thousands of miles from the whole American Hemisphere, do not seriously affect the Americas -- and that all the United States has to do is to ignore them and go about (our) its own business. Passionately though we may desire detachment, we are forced to realize that every word that comes through the air, every ship that sails the sea, every battle that is fought does affect the American future.”

“Let no man or woman thoughtlessly or falsely talk of America sending its armies to European fields. At this moment there is being prepared a proclamation of American neutrality. This would have been done even if there had been no neutrality statute on the books, for this proclamation is in accordance with international law and in accordance with American policy.”

“We have certain ideas and certain ideals of national safety and we must act to preserve that safety today and to preserve the safety of our children in future years.”

“That safety is and will be bound up with the safety of the Western Hemisphere and of the seas adjacent thereto. We seek to keep war from our own firesides by keeping war from coming to the Americas. For that we have historic precedent that goes back to the days of the Administration of President George Washington. It is serious enough and tragic enough to every American family in every state in the Union to live in a world that is torn by wars on other Continents. And those wars today (they) affect every American home. It is our national duty to use every effort to keep (them) those wars out of the Americas.”



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DOCUMENT F

Excerpts from a Fireside Chat Delivered by President Roosevelt
December 29, 1940

“My friends:

This is not a fireside chat on war. It is a talk on national security, because the nub of the whole purpose of your President is to keep you now, and your children later, and your grandchildren much later, out of a last-ditch war for the preservation of American independence...”

“At this moment, the forces of the states that are leagued against all peoples who live in freedom are being held away from our shores. The Germans and the Italians are being blocked on the other side of the Atlantic by the British, and by the Greeks...in Asia the Japanese are being engaged by the Chinese nation in another great defense. In the Pacific Ocean is our fleet.”

“Does anyone seriously believe that we need to fear attack anywhere in the Americas while a free Britain remains our most powerful naval neighbor in the Atlantic? And does anyone seriously believe, on the other hand, that we could rest easy if the Axis powers were our neighbors there? If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the high seas -- and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun -- a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military.”

“We should enter upon a new and terrible era in which the whole world, our hemisphere included, would be run by threats of brute force.”

“The British people and their allies today are conducting an active war against this unholy alliance. Our own future security is greatly dependent on the outcome of that fight. Our ability to “keep out of war” is going to be affected by that outcome.”

“The people of Europe who are defending themselves do not ask us to do their fighting. They ask us for the implements of war, the planes, the tanks, the guns, the freighters which will enable them to fight for their liberty and for our security. Emphatically we must get these weapons to them, get them to them in sufficient volume and quickly enough, so that we and our children will be saved the agony and suffering of war which others have had to endure.”

“We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself.”



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DOCUMENT G

Excerpts from a Fireside Chat Delivered by President Roosevelt
September 11, 1941

“My fellow Americans:

The Navy Department of the United States has reported to me that on the morning of September fourth the United States destroyer GREER, proceeding in full daylight towards Iceland, had reached a point southeast of Greenland. She was carrying American mail to Iceland. She was flying the American flag. Her identity as an American ship was unmistakable.”

“She was then and there attacked by a submarine. Germany admits that it was a German submarine. The submarine deliberately fired a torpedo at the GREER, followed later by another torpedo attack....I tell you the blunt fact that the German submarine fired first upon this American destroyer without warning, and with deliberate design to sink her.”

“It is now clear that Hitler has begun his campaign to control the seas by ruthless force and by wiping out every vestige of international law, (and) every vestige of humanity. His intention has been made clear. The American people can have no further illusions about it.”

“No matter what it takes, no matter what it costs, we will keep open the line of legitimate commerce in these defensive water of ours. We have sought no shooting war with Hitler. We do not seek it now. But neither do we want peace so much, that we are willing to pay for it by permitting him to attack our naval and merchant ships while they are on legitimate business.”

“...When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him. These Nazi submarines and raiders are the rattlesnakes of the Atlantic. They are a menace to the free pathways of the high seas. They are a challenge to our own sovereignty. They hammer at our most precious rights when they attack ships of the American flag -- symbols of our independence, our freedom, our very life.”

“In the waters which we deem necessary for our defense, American naval vessels and American planes will no longer wait until Axis submarines lurking under the water, or Axis raiders on the surface of the sea, strike their deadly blow -- first.”

“But let this warning be clear. From now on, if German or Italian vessels of war enter the waters, the protection of which is necessary for American defense, they do so at their own peril.”