

The Undeclared War: How the Lend Lease Act of 1941 Signaled America's Entry into World War II

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In December 1940, President Roosevelt took a much-needed cruise through the Caribbean. With a successful third-term victory behind him and the perils of Europe still ongoing, Roosevelt needed to gather himself and contemplate the future of the United States' aid to Britain's war effort. Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, sent a letter to Roosevelt while he was on vacation, expressing that Britain could no longer afford to pay for American military aid with cash. Wanting to help Britain, Roosevelt knew the request from Churchill was valid and thought of ways to help Britain while also appeasing isolationists and abiding by the Neutrality Acts. By the end of his Caribbean cruise, Roosevelt developed a possible plan where the United States could lend and lease military aid to Britain. Roosevelt would eventually use his fireside chats to convince the American public that this possible lend lease program was vital for the survival of Britain and to keep the United States out of the war.¹

¹ Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days* (New York: Random House, 2013), 271-273.

Though the view of the United States coming to the rescue of Britain seemed second nature to Roosevelt, groups such as the American First Committee remained against America entering World War II. The idea of the United States claiming neutrality but still arming Britain signaled to them an inevitable entry into the war for the United States. The American First Committee resisted aid to Europe's war effort, especially if a large amount of American military equipment and supplies were in Europe and not at home, where they believed such resources belonged.² President Roosevelt understood the struggle he faced to implement the Lend-Lease Act into American foreign policy, and this reality required him to portray aid to Britain as essential for peace to the American public. Roosevelt argued, "There is far less chance of the United States getting in the war if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis." He continued, "You can nail any talk about sending armies to Europe as a deliberate untruth."³ President Roosevelt's comments were paramount due to America's strong isolationist stance in 1940. During this particular year, Roosevelt gauged the American public about how they felt about containing Hitler's unchecked behavior. When Roosevelt realized his hints toward restraining Germany were not popular he exclaimed, "It's a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead—and find no one there."⁴ As time progressed, this aid program was hotly contested despite sympathy growing for the Allied powers, in particular Britain.⁵

² Clay Judson, "Document 4—Clay Judson to Robert E. Wood September 24, 1940," *In Danger Undaunted The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee*, ed. Justus D. Doenecke (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 92-93.

³ Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 274.

⁴ Steven Gillon, *Pearl Harbor FDR Leads the Nation into War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 8.

⁵Gillon, *Pearl Harbor*, 9.

The Lend-Lease Act evinced various reactions after its implementation in March 1941. Some asked—whether the United States shared a heavier burden than other countries, while others wondered what the United States gained from this act, and still others questioned if the United States’ allies were ungrateful. Scholars, moreover, have largely sidestepped the possibility that the Lend-Lease Act officially put the United States on the Allied side of World War II. Beth F. Scott, Lieutenant Colonel James C. Rainey, and Captain Andrew W. Hunt portray the Lend-Lease Act as an economic savior, arguing, “Further, the lend-lease program was vital for the preservation of life and the general economic survival of our Allies fighting to defeat Germany, Italy, and Japan.”⁶ Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton miss the significance of the Lend-Lease act in their contention that the, “Lend-Lease was in its conception largely a means of overcoming financial and legal barriers to the continuance of aid to the British.”⁷

Historians like Martin Folly and Niall Palmer have also largely ignored the Lend-Lease Act’s manifestation of a declaration of a pseudo war by the United States onto the Axis powers—Folly and Palmer exclaimed, “Lend-Lease did draw the United States closer to war and did identify it closely with Allied cause, though it did not itself bring direct involvement.”⁸ Thus, even historians who have considered the Lend-Lease’s importance have not investigated the true weight this program carried in the United States and abroad.

This paper argues that the Lend-Lease Act (March 1941), which gave military aid to Britain and other allied nations, was the catalyst for

⁶ Beth F. Scott, James C. Rainey, and Andrew W. Hunt, eds., *The Logistics of War* (Maxwell AFB, Gunter Annex, Ala: AF Logistics Management Agency, 2000), 249.

⁷ Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1995), 76.

⁸ Martin H. Folly and Niall A. Palmer, *The A to Z of U.S. Diplomacy from World War I through World War II* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 207.

much political strife during the years leading up to the Japanese attack on American forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (December 7, 1941). Though the United States still claimed neutrality, this aid bill was considered, by its opposition, to be a pseudo declaration of war on the Axis powers—because it was. This is evident through political debate over the Lend-Lease Act, Axis warnings towards the United States of passing the Lend-Lease Act, and strong British approval of the Lend-Lease Act. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that America's entrance into World War II was more complicated than conventional accounts of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and America's subsequent military aggression suggest.

Concerning the political debate surrounding the Lend-Lease Act, a brief history of its evolution will be covered. Following will be three examples of this political debate that pointed to the notion that the passage of the Lend-Lease Act was a declaration of a pseudo war. Next the warnings that the Axis directed toward the United States due to the Lend-Lease Act will be examined through three separate examples and followed with proper analysis. Lastly, the strong support voiced by the British in favor of the Lend-Lease Act will also be covered. Two strong evidences will be analyzed to show that the British support of the Lend-Lease Act helped initiate the United States into the war unofficially. All the evidence will lead to the conclusion that the Lend-Lease Act was a soft declaration of war by the United States onto the Axis powers.

Before the Lend-Lease Act declared a pseudo war on the Axis powers, its evolution and eventual passage inflicted much political strife in the United States. During the last half of the 1930s and early part of 1940-41, the United States watched as the Axis powers, particularly Japan and Germany, seized territories from East Asia to central Europe. With each conquest, the American people sat quietly and observed the unforgiving aggression of the Axis war machine. Under the provisions

of the Neutrality Acts, the United States not only abstained from the war, but also placed trade embargos on all shipments of arms to the offending nations. This detail of the Neutrality Acts was the source of much frustration for many American leaders including Secretary of State Cordell Hull. On two separate occasions, Hull requested that Congress repeal the arm embargo requirement in the Neutrality Acts. He reasoned that the best way to prevent the Axis aggressors from continuing their onslaught of total war was to allow nations such as Britain be allowed to purchase arms from the United States. Despite support for the repeal of the Neutrality Acts, especially the arm embargo, growing and the fall of Poland to Nazi Germany in 1939, the arm embargo provision remained.⁹ The debate to amend the Neutrality Acts spread all over the nation. In Arkansas, congressmen all over the state supported the amendment to the Neutrality Acts be made, and they petitioned Congress to make it happen. Representative James R. Campbell of Hot Springs embodied the feeling of interventionists in 1939 when he made this statement regarding the arm loan amendment, "I think it is time for the United States to realize that it cannot pursue an isolation policy."¹⁰ In November of 1939, the idea Representative Campbell shared with other Americans prevailed as Congress passed "cash-and-carry" into law.¹¹

The amendment of "cash-and-carry" worked for the British and French governments until the disaster of Dunkirk and the fall of France in 1940. The British were left alone as the continent of Europe fell under

⁹ Edward R. Stettinius, *Lend-Lease: Weapon for Victory* (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1944), 17-20.

¹⁰ "Asks Congress to Amend U.S. Neutrality Act Legislators Also Want Foreign Loan Act Changed," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), February 2, 1939, Daily ed.

¹¹ Stettinius, *Lend-Lease*, 20.

Nazi rule.¹² This placed the British government under an extensive financial strain.

When Americans began to question how Britain could pay for American arms, President Roosevelt replied:

Suppose my neighbor's house catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out the fire. Now what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15; you have to pay me \$15 for it. What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want \$15—I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.¹³

Cleverly, Roosevelt placed the idea of lending weapons to Britain and other Allied nations not for the desire of money, but with the intention that Britain would defeat the Axis powers and then return the leased military equipment back to the United States. Though Roosevelt was an interventionist, it was paramount his analogy demonstrated that the lender (the United States) did not physically get involved in the fire-fighting (War) but only the person leasing the hose (Britain). In 1940, two political sides on the war existed in America—the interventionists and isolationists.

American isolationists believed it was a mistake to involve the United States into any war, especially in Europe, that did not directly benefit the United States. They argued that once the Nazi invasion of Britain failed, it would only be a matter of time until the British fully prepared for war and could strangle the Germans via their naval

¹² Stettinius, *Lend-Lease*, 26-32.

¹³ Stettinius, *Lend-Lease*, 1.

superiority.¹⁴ When “cash-and-carry” was enacted into law in 1939, one of the isolationists, a Republican leader in Congress named Senator Vandenberg lamented in his diary, “In the name of ‘democracy’ we have taken the first step, once more, into Europe’s ‘power politics’... What ‘suckers’ our emotions make of us.”¹⁵ This quote shows that isolationists sensed that the “cash-and-carry” law would eventually evolve into the Lend-Lease Act and drag America into another European war, something American isolationists did not want.

On the other side of the debate, interventionists claimed it was America’s duty to aid the remaining Allied nations before the Axis powers conquered the world, which would leave the United States extremely vulnerable to invasion. In his statistical analysis of the war, economist Fritz Sternberg stated, “If Britain obtains such support as quickly as possible, then, and only then, may we hope that the United States will remain at peace.”¹⁶ Though idealistic, many Americans disagreed with this statement because while claiming neutrality, the United States was claiming a side in this world-wide conflict.

A statement by Democrat Senator Clark of Missouri in 1941 exemplified how Americans considered the Lend-Lease Act to be a declaration of a pseudo war. *The Log Cabin Democrat* reported on February 18, 1941 that, “Senator Clark, Democrat Missouri, expressed belief in the senate today that enactment of the pending British aid bill would be ‘equivalent to a declaration of a state of war,’ which ultimately would have to be followed up by sending troops abroad.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Fritz Sternberg, *Five Fold Aid To Britain To Save Her and Keep Us Out of War* (New York: John Day Company, 1941), 9-10.

¹⁵ Alan P. Dobson, *U.S. Wartime Aid to Britain 1940-1946* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 15.

¹⁶ Sternberg,, *Five Fold Aid To Britain*, 12.

¹⁷ “Aid Bill is War Measure, Says Senator Equivalent to Declaring War, Asserts Clark, Opening for Opposition,” *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), February 18, 1941.

Clearly, Senator Clark demonstrated that the passage of the Lend-Lease Act would be placing the United States officially on the side of the Allies in the war, and it would not only require valuable military resources but American soldiers on foreign soil as well.

Another example to illustrate American concerns of encroachment into World War II because of the Lend-Lease Act took place when Senator Robert Taft of Ohio interrupted a speech by Senator Burton Wheeler. Senator Wheeler told the senate, "That the time was 'not far distant' when the President should use his high office in an attempt to bring about peace in Europe."¹⁸ Senator Taft objected, "It might not be actively engaged in shooting, but when the British lost a ship they could take one from the American fleet to replace it."¹⁹ This concerned Senator Taft because the interventionists supported the action of aiding Britain to a new degree and setting a dangerous precedent, which was a direct lease to Britain in real time. Isolationists like Senator Taft understood that a policy like this meant placing American warships in combat zones, which would not keep the United States at peace.

On another occasion in February of 1941, the former 1940 Republican nominee for President, Wendell Willkie, proposed that America provide five-to-ten destroyers (naval warships) to Great Britain every month. Willkie passionately testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that, "England desperately needed more destroyers".²⁰ Upon hearing this statement, Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, disagreed: "We haven't anymore destroyers to spare than

¹⁸ "Fear U.S. Navy May Be Joined With Britain," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 1, 1941.

¹⁹ "Fear U.S. Navy May Be Joined With Britain," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 1, 1941.

²⁰ "Knox Opposes Sparing More Destroyers," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), February 12, 1941.

we need for a balanced fleet.”²¹ This is significant because it indicates Secretary Knox believed it was important the United States maintain a balanced fleet. It can therefore be inferred that he was implying, as the head of the United States Navy, that the United States would need her Navy in the event of an entry into the war. One can surmise that the addition of American destroyers to the British fleet gave natural concerns that the Lend-Lease Act, if passed by Congress, would instigate a conflict with the Axis powers since we were aiding their enemies to attack them.²²

The political debate in America demonstrated the divisiveness that the Lend-Lease Act caused as it slowly evolved to its eventual passage in March of 1941.²³ The intense debate between the isolationists and interventionists, though they were in complete ideological opposition with each other, came from the same desire that both sides wanted the United States to have peace, but it is clear the passage Lend-Lease Act did spark the beginnings of a pseudo war with the Axis powers, as the isolationists theorized.

After the passage of the Lend-Lease Act, Axis powers warned the United States that the passing of this aid bill to Great Britain would signal to them that the United States had chosen a side in the war. Despite these warnings, the United States government determined to pass the Lend-Lease Act which triggered a pseudo war with the Axis powers.

²¹ “Knox Opposes Sparing More Destroyers,” *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), February 12, 1941.

²² “Knox Opposes Sparing More Destroyers,” *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), February 12, 1941.

²³ “Lend-Lease Bill Passed by Senate,” *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 10, 1941.

On the same day Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act, the Fascist editorial spokesman, Virginio Gayda, detested its passage by saying, "The British aid bill was 'open intervention in the war against the Axis'" and he also went on to say, "Roosevelt's gesture is a deliberate, unprovoked move toward war."²⁴ These two comments on the passage of the Lend-Lease Act demonstrate that the Axis powers considered it an unofficial entry into the war for the United States. Thus, reinforcing the notion that the Lend-Lease Act declared a pseudo war on the Axis powers by the United States.

A second example proving that when the United States passed the Lend-Lease Act it enacted a pseudo war against the Axis powers came from a warning by the Nazi government. With the Lend-Lease Act passed by Congress, Germany knew the war supplies and naval support from the United States would only increase. Thus, a Nazi spokesman responded, "We are determined to torpedo everything that approaches England."²⁵ This showed Germany's complete disregard for the United States' supposed position of neutrality, and thus, validates that the Axis considered the passage of this aid bill to be an unofficial declaration of war by the United States.

Finally, on March 17, 1941, the three major Axis powers gave warning statements towards the United States for passing the Lend-Lease Act. The general consensus of each warning was summarized by one Axis press, "Plainly it is now a world war."²⁶ The statement that came from the Berlin press aggressively attacked President Roosevelt: "He conceals aggressive and offensive intentions by the pretext of

²⁴ "Rome Warns U.S. of 'Surprises' in the Pacific, Lend-Lease Bill Called Move Toward War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 10, 1941.

²⁵ "Says Germany Will Block British Aid," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 12, 1941.

²⁶ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

protecting democracies against dictators. He is not so much concerned about 'the security of the democratic system' as for satisfying his own lust for power."²⁷ This media attack was obviously a clear message that the Axis considered the United States not only in the war but a present danger, and President Roosevelt was portrayed as the main perpetrator due to his support for the British aid bill. From Rome, the Italian press simply said, "An announcement of American participation in the war."²⁸ Here, the Italian government plainly stated that they considered the United States officially participating in the war due to America's aid of Britain. Lastly, Tokyo media stated this about the President and his support of the Lend-Lease Act, "Plainly it is now a world war of the totalitarian nations with the Axis on one side and the democratic totalitarians on the other."²⁹ Interestingly, Japan considered what the United States was doing to be a totalitarian type of action, and in the message, they also made it clear they considered America apart of the war saying, "It is now a world war."³⁰ These warnings from Axis powers cemented the concept that the passage of the Lend-Lease Act was considered a declaration of the United States unofficial entry into this world conflict—thus, it was a declaration of pseudo war.

The final piece of evidence that displays the passage of the Lend-Lease Act triggered a pseudo war between the United States and the Axis powers derives from the strong British approval of this aid bill. The British strongly approved of this aid bill because without it they believed defeat was imminent for themselves and the struggling Allied

²⁷ ²⁷ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

²⁸ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

²⁹ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

³⁰ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

powers. Churchill tried to convince Roosevelt that if Britain fell to the Nazis, then all of Europe's industrial power would be dedicated to defeating the United States.³¹ Thus, Roosevelt and the interventionists aided Britain. It can be inferred through the following examples that Britain desired only one thing besides American weaponry and supplies—American official entry into the war. This is why their approval of the Lend-Lease Act helped trigger the United States' pseudo war against the Axis powers.

As the Lend-Lease was officially passed by Congress and immediately signed into law by President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill addressed the United States government with this thank you, "The most powerful democracy has in effect declared in solemn statute that they will devote their overwhelming industrial and financial strength to insuring the defeat of Nazism..."³² Churchill's thankful address to the United States sounds as if America had denounced her neutrality in that exact moment. This was no doubt on purpose. Britain most likely intended this statement to show the Axis powers that the United States was now on their side of the war. This furthers the notion that Britain's approval of the Lend-Lease Act aided in the creation of the pseudo war between the United States and the Axis powers.

In London, the British people were ecstatic as the United States passed the Lend-Lease Act. After President Roosevelt presented this information to the country in his speech, Britons celebrated because Roosevelt emboldened Americans in a pro-Allied manner, "The British cheered his exhortation to Americans to give unstintingly to 'all-out aid' to nations fighting aggressors."³³ This was the type of news Britain had

³¹ Dobson, *U.S. Wartime Aid to Britain*, 20-21.

³² "U.S. Thanked for Passing Aid Measure Appreciation Expressed for His Government by Prime Minister Churchill," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 12, 1941.

³³ "British, Axis Editors Say U.S. is in War," *The Log Cabin Democrat* (Conway, AR), March 17, 1941.

longed to hear, and with this news the British press exclaimed, "Here is the final pledge America is in this war with us."³⁴ Britain's strong approval of the passage of the Lend-Lease Act by the United States demonstrated that this was the news they had been longing to hear, and it was the one thing they desired most because the United States had unofficially entered into a war they eventually had to make official.

The Lend-Lease Act (March 1941) gave military aid to Britain and other allied nations. It was the reason for intense political debate until its passage, and it experienced bipartisan support once the attack on Pearl Harbor transpired (December 7, 1941). The United States professed to have a neutral stance in the war, but this aid bill was a pseudo declaration of war on the Axis Powers. This is evident through the political debate over the Lend-Lease Act, Axis warnings towards the United States of passing the Lend-Lease Act, and strong British approval of the Lend-Lease Act. These evidences reinforce the complex nature of America's entrance into World War II. Moreover, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was not the primary basis for which the United States declared war on the Axis powers.

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