

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 332

### “God Help Us All”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“If a chief of police makes a deal with the leading gangsters and the deal results in no more hold-ups, that chief of police will be called a great man—but if the gangsters do not live up to their word the chief of police will go to jail.”

Franklin Roosevelt, commenting privately on Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 332. God Help Us All.

We haven’t looked in on the political situation in the United States for a while, not since episode 310, in fact. If you recall, that episode ended with the mid-term elections of 1938, in which the Republican Party began to bounce back from its earlier losses and Franklin Roosevelt found himself in the novel position of not being able to get everything he wanted. Republicans in Congress were still in the minority, but together with conservative Southern Democrats, they formed a majority coalition hostile to any more big government programs.

Even so, the Republican Party of 1938 was very different from the Republican Party that had elected Herbert Hoover President ten years earlier. A new generation of leaders like Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen were reconciled to the New Deal, but these Republicans and those Southern Democrats felt that enough was enough. It was time to consolidate what had already been accomplished, rather than pushing ahead further with more new and untried programs.

The United States of this time, the late 1930s, is often described with the word “isolationist.” Well, yes and no. The American public and their government were not isolationist in an ideological sense, as a matter of principle. There were individual Americans who believed in isolationism as a principle, but generally speaking, American isolationism of the time was the result of two important factors: first, the simple fact that domestic issues, particularly the Great

Depression, had taken up most of the political debate, and second, a sense of what one might call “buyer’s remorse” regarding America’s involvement in the last war.

Hitler came to power during the darkest days of the Great Depression in the United States. The German reoccupation of the Rhineland happened during a Presidential election year. Japan invaded China during the debate over the Supreme Court, and the Sudetenland Crisis erupted during those crucial 1938 midterms.

The 1930s saw a re-examination of America’s role in the First World War. There was a widespread sense in the United States that America had sacrificed blood and treasure for the sake of this vision of a world without war, and yet a mere twenty years after the end of that war, the British and French and Germans and Italians seemed poised to start another one. What then, had been the point? And the Europeans seemed distinctly ungrateful, complaining bitterly about having to repay the loans they had once begged for and denouncing America as “Uncle Shylock.”

What you might call a revisionist interpretation of US entry into the war emerged during the Thirties, which attributed American involvement not to the need to make the world safe for democracy, but to manipulation by American arms makers, like DuPont; corporations that made huge profits from the war and American financial institutions that had loaned large sums of money to the Allies and feared that an Allied defeat would mean the loans would never be paid. I already told you about Marine Corps general turned pacifist Smedley Butler and his 1935 book, *War Is a Racket*. In 1934, writer and academic H.C. Englebrecht published *The Merchants of Death*. In 1938, American University history professor Charles Callan Tansill published *America Goes to War*, a skeptical account of the process by which America entered the war in 1917.

In 1934, the US Senate created a Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry to look into this question. It was chaired by Republican Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota and is often referred to as the Nye Committee. The Committee’s report, published in 1936, documented the profits of American arms makers and the political pressure applied by the big financiers, and also called attention to the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay, in which both countries felt compelled to purchase foreign arms because the other was doing the same, in order to fight over which foreign corporation would get the oil drilling rights in the Chaco.

It was largely Progressive Republicans and New Deal Democrats who embraced this view, that business and finance interests drove America to war in 1917 and they tended to be suspicious of the Roosevelt Administration’s foreign policy.

In August 1935, Congress passed the Neutrality Act, which barred trade in arms and ammunition with any country involved in a war and declared that American passengers aboard ships of belligerent nations traveled at their own risk. Roosevelt and his Administration chafed at these restrictions, but Roosevelt needed votes in Congress for his domestic initiatives, so he swallowed his pride and signed the bill. The shortcomings of this kind of broad, inflexible prohibition

quickly became clear when Italy invaded Ethiopia just two months later and US law prohibited sending arms to the Ethiopians.

The 1935 Act expired in six months, but Congress renewed it in 1936 for another 14 months with an added provision barring loans to belligerent nations. With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War came the realization that the Neutrality Act did not apply to civil wars, so Congress added a provision to that effect in 1937, when the law came up for renewal. The 1937 renewal also added prohibitions on US ships transporting passengers or cargo to belligerent nations and barring US citizens from traveling aboard ships of belligerent nations.

Additionally, and at the request of the Roosevelt Administration, the 1937 bill added a provision that permitted arms sales to a belligerent nation provided that nation paid in cash, no credit, and transported the arms aboard their own ships. The Administration argued that this concession would not risk America getting involved in the war, since no American loans or American vessels would be involved in the transaction. This provision became known as “cash and carry.” As a practical matter, the only nations that would be able to take advantage of this loophole would be those such as Britain or France, able to pay cash and with navies capable of protecting arms shipments at sea.

And by the way, for the benefit of those of you in other countries, “cash and carry” is an American expression that describes a purchase made in cash, no checks or credit, and in which afterward the buyer assumes responsibility to transport the purchased item at their own expense. Cash and carry, you see? Businesses sometimes offer discounts on purchases made on a “cash-and-carry” basis.

But just two months later, once again came an unforeseen situation: Japan invaded China. Japan would have been able to make use of “cash and carry” purchases, but China would not, so the Roosevelt Administration took advantage of the fact that the Japanese government refused to call its actions in China a “war”—remember I told you about that in episode 301—which allowed the Roosevelt Administration also to deny it was a war, which meant it refused to apply the Neutrality Act and *voilà*, selling arms to China was perfectly legal. As a concession to his critics in Congress, Roosevelt agreed not to allow US ships to transport those American arms to China, ships that might draw Japanese fire; British ships carried them instead. Even so, the critics said Roosevelt was subverting the intent of the Neutrality Act.

Congress may have had its isolationist faction, but the American public overall was sympathetic to the Chinese and undisturbed by the thought of American aid. In October 1937, Roosevelt gave a speech in Chicago, which I also mentioned in episode 301, in which, without mentioning Japan by name, he compared war to a plague and argued that, like a plague, quarantine was the best protection. He seemed to be calling implicitly for economic sanctions against Japan, but when reporters put the question to him directly, he dodged it.

He dodged it because of the reaction to his speech. In Congress, the isolationists condemned it, while his Congressional supporters remained silent. *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the Hearst newspapers all criticized the speech. On the other hand, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* applauded Roosevelt's remarks and mail to the White House ran 4 to 1 in favor of the speech. Foreign governments, apart from Japan and Germany, were also supportive.

And here you see the political dynamic that is usually presented as "America was isolationist." There was a minority loudly opposed to US involvement in global conflicts out of concern that America would be sucked into a foreign war it had no real stake in, which is how they saw the First World War. Then there was the softer-spoken majority, which did not share that concern and was prepared to accept the US playing a larger role in international affairs, although that certainly did not mean they were prepared to go to war again.

And in the middle, you had President Roosevelt, who was accused by the isolationists of wanting to get America into a war. He didn't, but he was in the "play a larger role" camp. Even so, he preferred to save his political capital for his domestic initiatives and wasn't willing to get into political battles over foreign policy issues.

This dynamic began to change in December 1937, when the Japanese attacking Nanjing and bombed the US river patrol gunboat *Panay*, despite *Panay* being clearly marked as a US vessel. *Panay* was sunk and three of its crew killed, including the captain. The US had a naval force in China that patrolled the Yangtze River and the Chinese coast, pursuant to treaties imposed on China following the Second Opium War.

The attack on *Panay* moved some members of Roosevelt's Cabinet, including Secretary of the Navy Claude Swanson and Vice President Garner, to call for a declaration of war. Roosevelt argued that neither the Navy nor the American public were prepared for a war. The isolationists in Congress suggested instead that US forces be withdrawn from China. In the end, as you know, the Japanese government apologized, sacked the commander responsible, and paid the US government \$2.2 million in compensation.

Soon after, in the spring of 1938, Germany annexed Austria and the British government recognized Italian control over Ethiopia. Privately, Roosevelt criticized British prime minister Neville Chamberlain with the words I read to you at the top of the episode, but publicly Roosevelt said little about the situation in Europe. In May, Congress passed the Naval Act of 1938, which called for a 20% increase in the size of the US Navy; this was in response to Japan and Italy withdrawing from the naval treaty framework that had begun with the Washington Naval Conference back in 1922, episode 224.

But that would take time to implement. As for the US Army, Congress had kept that small, around 185,000 soldiers on active duty, making it comparable in size to the armies of Portugal or Sweden. Any American who wants to criticize Neville Chamberlain for his tepid responses to

Hitler's expansionism would do well to consider that the British and French governments could have been more assertive had they had the full support of the United States, but America of 1938 had neither the military muscle nor the political will to influence events in Europe.

In August of 1938, Roosevelt visited Canada to dedicate the recently completed Thousand Islands Bridge that connected Ontario to New York across the St. Lawrence River, and to receive an honorary degree from Queen's University in Kingston. Speaking at the University, Roosevelt pledged that America would help defend Canada in the event of any foreign invasion or attack.

You can think of this as Roosevelt dipping his toe in the water, so to speak, testing the American mood. He must have been relieved when there was no outcry at home over this pledge. Indeed, over the next year, American public opinion shifted strongly against Nazi Germany and Roosevelt was arguably behind the curve on this change. For example, in a Gallup Poll conducted after the Munich Agreement, 77% of Americans polled believed that Germany's claim to the Sudetenland was unjustified, 92% said they didn't believe Hitler's claim that he had no further territorial ambitions in Europe, and 60% said the Munich Agreement had increased, rather than decreased, the risk of another war in Europe.

Two weeks later came Kristallnacht in Germany. In the US, the revulsion was bipartisan. President Roosevelt denounced the assaults on Jewish Germans and recalled the US Ambassador in Berlin. Numerous Republicans joined in the condemnation including the Party's past two Presidential nominees, Herbert Hoover and Alf Landon.

But when the press asked Roosevelt whether American immigration quotas should be raised to allow Jewish refugees to resettle in the United States, Roosevelt refused to consider it. This would have required amending the Immigration Act of 1924, and there was no sign Congress would have supported such an amendment, especially given the Roosevelt recession. Polling results indicated that fewer than 5% of Americans favored increasing the quotas to make room for Jewish refugees; 10% thought it would be a good idea for the US to deport the Jewish citizens it already had. Only 39% of Americans agreed with the statement that Jewish citizens in the US should have the same rights as other Americans. Bill of Rights? What Bill of Rights?

Under the 1924 Act, each European country had an immigration quota. Unused quotas from one country could not be applied to another, nor could immigration authorities "borrow" from future years to increase today's quota, say in response to an emergency. US immigration law at the time did not make any special provision for victims of persecution; in fact, it allowed authorities to deny entry to prospective immigrants "likely to become a public charge." Since Jewish refugees from Germany generally left their home country penniless, this provision alone insured they would not be free to enter the United States.

Roosevelt did issue executive orders to expedite processing of applications by Jewish refugees and to allow poor refugees to be admitted if their support would be guaranteed by relatives in the US or by Jewish charitable organizations. He also ordered that visas be extended indefinitely for

all German or Austrian citizens already in the US; that would have been about 15,000 people. No one would be forced to return to Germany against their will.

It was this moment when Roosevelt's policy priorities began to shift from domestic economic programs to national defense. He told his aides he wanted to ramp up military aircraft production in the US; since Congress was unlikely to approve such a buildup, he turned to the New Deal programs to fund aircraft and aircraft factory production as public works projects.

With these changes came a shift in Roosevelt's political support. He lost support among Progressives, especially Republicans like Hiram Johnson and Robert LaFollette Jr., who tended toward isolationism, but gained support from conservative Southern Democrats, who were lukewarm toward the New Deal, but were first in line to support strengthening America's military.

Roosevelt had in mind building up US aircraft production capacity both for the sake of domestic defense and to sell to the UK and France as a way of assisting those countries in their own rearmament programs. He had hoped to do this quietly, but in January 24, 1939, an experimental Douglas Aircraft bomber crashed in California. The pilot was killed, but one passenger survived, and a furor erupted after the press reported that the survivor was an officer in the French Air Force, who had been sent to evaluate the bomber for possible purchase.

I assume he didn't want to buy it anymore after it crashed and hospitalized him, but in response to the uproar in Congress, Roosevelt defended his policy. The Neutrality Act did not apply, since neither France nor Britain were at war, and, Roosevelt argued, if those countries fell to the Nazis, the New World would not be safe from the horror stalking the Old. Still, under political pressure, Roosevelt pledged not to sell American military technology to foreign governments, such as the Norden bomb sight, which was one of America's most sensitive military secrets.

In February 1939, the German American Bund held an explicitly pro-Nazi rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City, which drew a crowd of some 20,000. The rally was conducted in the style of Nazi Party rallies in Germany, with US and Nazi Party flags, Roman salutes, and a huge portrait of George Washington, embraced by the Bund as "the first fascist." The leader of the Bund, the *Bundesführer*, an immigrant from Germany named Fritz Kuhn, gave a speech in which he referred to President Roosevelt as "Frank Rosenfeld," the New Deal as "the Jew Deal" and claimed that the US Federal government was riddled with Jewish Bolsheviks.

This rally was the high-water mark of the German American Bund, founded in 1936. The American public was not very receptive to Nazism, and particularly not after the Munich Agreement. This rally was an attempt to increase public recognition. It was deliberately held in New York City, a place where the Bund was known to be unpopular, in the hope that it would spark controversy, which it did, and violence, which it also did, between Nazis and protesters who were mostly socialists or Jewish. The New York Police Department strove to keep the Nazis and the protesters separated, and were mostly successful.

The Bund declined rapidly after that, following an investigation by the New York District Attorney's office, which determined that *Bundführer* Kuhn had embezzled \$14,000 from Bund funds. Kuhn was prosecuted, convicted, and served a prison sentence. He had his US citizenship revoked and after the war he was deported to Germany.

In May 1939, British King George VI and Queen Elizabeth made a royal visit to Canada, the first by a reigning British monarch. The King stayed nearly a month and visited every Canadian province, in a gesture explicitly meant to emphasize Canada's status as a fully sovereign nation and implicitly meant to shore up Canadian support for Britain in the event of war.

While in North America, the King also accepted an invitation from President Roosevelt to visit the United States, again the first such visit by a reigning British monarch. The King and Queen stayed at the White House and at Roosevelt's private home in Hyde Park and visited the New York World's Fair. The American public greeted the King and Queen warmly; as with Canada, part of the purpose of the visit was to encourage American support and sympathy for Britain.

On May 13, 1939, the Hamburg Amerika passenger liner *St. Louis* departed Hamburg with 937 passengers bound for Havana. All but a few of these passengers were Jewish refugees from Germany. They had applied for US visas; so far only 22 had received them, but the others were still hopeful. In the meantime, they had paid bribes to receive Cuban tourist visas and hoped to spend a pleasant interval relaxing in Cuba while they waited for permission to enter the US.

The captain of the ship, a German sailor named Gustav Schröder, opposed the Nazis and their anti-Semitic policies; he ordered his crew to treat the passengers with respect. A bust of Adolf Hitler was covered with a cloth and portraits of Hitler were taken down so they would not disturb the passengers. One of them later recalled the holiday atmosphere aboard the ship, describing it as "a vacation cruise to freedom."

But when *St. Louis* reached Havana on May 27, the passengers were greeted with unwelcome news. The Cuban government had rescinded their visas following anti-Semitic protests. Some claim these protests were incited by German government agents. The only passengers permitted to come ashore in Havana were the 22 who already held US visas, plus four Spanish nationals, two Cuban nationals, and one in need of medical attention. The remaining 908 passengers were denied permission to land, including those who had relatives or friends in Cuba.

After being ordered to leave Cuban waters, *St. Louis* spent four days cruising the coast of Florida. The US State Department declared that passengers would not be permitted on US soil until their visa applications were approved. In Canada, a movement to allow the passengers to debark there was rebuffed by the government of Prime Minister Mackenzie King.

With no options in the New World, Captain Schröder reluctantly set course for return to Europe, although he would not consider returning his passengers to Germany. Schröder reportedly

considered deliberately running his ship aground off the coast of Britain or France to force one of those countries to admit his passengers.

In the US, an American Jewish committee raised \$500,000 in private contributions to assist the refugees, which persuaded European governments to take them in. *St. Louis* docked at Antwerp, and the passengers were resettled, 288 in the United Kingdom, 224 in France, 214 in Belgium, and 181 in the Netherlands.

The refusal of Cuba, the United States, and Canada to admit the refugees became more fodder for Nazi propaganda.

On July 1, 1939, Army Chief of Staff Malin Craig retired. To replace him, Roosevelt chose the 58-year old General George Marshall, skipping over more senior commanders, including Douglas MacArthur. Roosevelt had once privately called MacArthur a “Mussolini in waiting.” Marshall got the job on a recommendation from Great War commander John Pershing and from Harry Hopkins, whom Marshall had impressed with his work in setting up CCC camps.

Marshall had been the only Army general to speak against Roosevelt’s plan to increase aircraft production during a White House meeting earlier in the year. Marshall had argued that large numbers of military aircraft would do no good so long as the Army lacked trained pilots to fly them and Army ground forces were limited to such small numbers. Some thought Marshall had ended his military career when he criticized the President’s pet policy to his face, but Roosevelt had been favorably impressed by Marshall’s willingness to speak his mind.

At 3:00 AM Washington time on the morning of September 1, Roosevelt was awakened to take an urgent phone call from US Ambassador William Bullitt in Paris, who was calling to forward the news that German troops had crossed the border into Poland. Roosevelt replied to Bullitt, “God help us all.”

[music: J.S. Bach, “Komm, Süßer Tod”]

On Sunday evening, September 3, the day the invasion of Poland became the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt delivered one of his fireside chats to a worried nation. He assured the public that the United States would remain neutral in the conflict, but added, “I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral has a right to take account of facts. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.”

Privately, Roosevelt could not help but notice the parallels to the last war. On September 13, he called Congress into special session to consider repealing the Neutrality Act, which would allow America to supply arms to the Allies. The debate that followed was vigorous, and leading figures on both sides appealed to the public for support. Roosevelt recruited his former opponents, Alf Landon and Frank Knox, to speak in favor of repeal. The leading figure who emerged in opposition was famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, who gave his own version of a fireside chat to



the nation on September 15, saying, “This is not a question of banding together to defend the white race against foreign invasion. This is simply one of those age-old struggles within our own family of nations—a quarrel arising from the errors of the last war—from the failure of the victors to follow a consistent policy of either fairness or force.”

It became clear that repeal was politically impossible. The Senate minority leader, Republican Charles McNary of Oregon, lamented that the public would see repeal of the Neutrality Act as repeal of neutrality. Roosevelt accepted a bi-partisan compromise: cash and carry. Britain and France could buy US arms, but no loans, no credits, and no US ships.

Charles Lindbergh made a second radio address on October 13, saying, “Our bond with Europe is a bond of race and not political ideology...Racial strength is vital—politics a luxury. If the white race is ever seriously threatened, it may then be time for us to take our part for its protection, to fight side by side with the English, French, and Germans. But not with one against the other for our mutual destruction.”

In early November, Congress approved the cash-and-carry bill.

As 1939 drew to a close, thoughts turned to the 1940 Presidential election. Back at Hyde Park, Roosevelt, now 58, was preparing for his post-Presidential life. A library building was being built there to house his Presidential papers and a new cottage with extra-wide doors and no stairs or thresholds to impede his wheelchair was under construction for Roosevelt to spend his retirement. When asked about the prospect of a third term, Roosevelt replied, “The country is sick and tired of Roosevelts.” He signed a deal with *Collier's* magazine to serve as a contributing editor after leaving office. And there were concerns about his health. Twelve stressful years as Governor of New York and as President during a time of crisis had taken their toll. His blood pressure was high, and when friends and supporters urged him to run again, he protested that he was just too tired.

Still, he had made no public statement disavowing interest in a third term. Vice President John Nance Garner noticed. He announced his candidacy for the 1940 Democratic nomination in December, perhaps as a way of nudging Roosevelt toward the exit. The press noticed, too. The 1939 Gridiron Dinner was decorated with a backdrop depicting a sphinx with pince-nez glasses and a cigarette holder in its mouth, just like you-know-who.

Roosevelt's political advisor, 51-year-old James Farley was also interested in running. Farley was well known to the Democratic Party leadership, but not so much to the public.

May 1940 saw the German offensive in the West. Roosevelt went to Congress and asked for a supplemental defense appropriation of \$1.2 billion. Two weeks later, with France collapsing, he went back to Congress and asked for an additional \$1.9 billion. Britain's new prime minister, Winston Churchill, cabled Roosevelt and asked for arms and fifty destroyers. Roosevelt agreed

to the arms, but told Churchill that the destroyers would require Congressional approval, which was unlikely.

Then came Dunkirk. The British Army escaped, but at the cost of most of its equipment. The need for American aid was now greater than ever. But in Washington, the Secretary of War and most of the military command were opposed to giving arms needed by the American military to Britain, until Army Chief of Staff George Marshall ordered an inventory of US military supplies, made a few bookkeeping adjustments, and declared that the Army held a surplus of weapons that happened to add up to exactly the what Churchill was requesting. The Army sold the “surplus” arms to two American corporations, United States Steel and Curtiss-Wright; the two corporations quickly resold the arms to the British government for the same price.

Meanwhile, the Democratic primary season was unfolding, though events in Europe were crowding political news off the front pages. Roosevelt did not announce or campaign, but Roosevelt supporters ran delegate slates anyway, and these were winning the primaries by wide margins.

June 10, 1940 saw Franklin Roosevelt aboard a train bound for Charlottesville, Virginia, where his son, Franklin Jr., was graduating from the University of Virginia Law School. His father had been invited to give the commencement address. Along the way, he received the news that Italy had declared war on France and Britain. Disregarding the State Department’s advice to proceed with caution, Roosevelt told the graduates—

But that is a story for next week’s episode. We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Robert for his kind donation, and thank you to Daniel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Robert and Daniel help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I’m pleased to be able to tell that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It’s a collection of stories about magical artifacts. The ebook is available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo, and I understand there will be a paperback edition as well.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up where we left off today, with Franklin Roosevelt speaking at that commencement exercises at the University of Virginia Law School. The Hand that Held the Dagger, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. With regard to the passengers of the *St. Louis*, it is estimated that about 250 of the 908 who returned to Europe were murdered in the Holocaust.

In 1957, Captain Schröder was awarded the Order of Merit by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany for the assistance he gave the refugees aboard his ship. He died in 1959, at the age of 73.

The story of the *St. Louis* was recounted in a book published in the UK in 1974 and titled *Voyage of the Damned*. It was made into a film with the same title in 1976.

In 1993, Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, named Captain Schröder one of the "Righteous Among the Nations," a title which is granted to non-Jewish people who rendered substantial assistance at personal risk to help save Jewish people from the Holocaust.

[music: Closing War Theme]