

## Awakening a Sleeping Giant

By Jenn Zellers

At 7 a.m. on December 7 1941, the radar site at Opana Point, Hawaii detected two large blips of approaching aircraft heading towards Pearl Harbor. By 8 a.m., 2,402 American servicemen lost their lives and the United States suffered a serious and devastating blow to her Pacific fleet. The United States officially entered the war on December 8 with a formal declaration of war toward Japan. The United States declared war on Germany three days later, but the involvement began nearly three years earlier when the country started to expand the military and self-dependence in case of a shortage of essential materials purchased from overseas. The defense program kick started the stagnant economy and tens of thousands of displaced workers found work within the defense industry. From the moment of the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938, Roosevelt felt that the United States needed to play a more active role in world politics, and the agreement only meant there was imminent threat of war. From 1938 to 1941, Roosevelt outlined a clear defense strategy to provide for an adequate defense of the United States and to provide aid to the Allies in Europe. Implementing strategies used in World War I, Roosevelt called for national unity and for industry to begin a conversion from a peacetime economy to a war economy in 1939. Despite early public opinion that stood against intervention in the late 1930's, Roosevelt worked to convince the American people of the threat posed by the Axis and called for the unity of the American people to work together to promote an united front against oppression. The mobilization of civilian and the military industry led to the United States ability to provide the necessary tools for the Allies to defeat the Axis powers in 1945.

The position of neutrality began when George Washington first declared that the newly formed United States must not meddle in foreign affairs. In a message to the citizens of the United States concerning the French Revolution, Washington asked that people refrain from divided loyalties: "[...] to exhort and warn citizens of the United States carefully to avoid all acts and proceedings whatsoever, which may in any manner tend to contravene such disposition."<sup>1</sup> Washington opted to be friendly to nations at war and warned citizens against conducting business or saying things that may provoke confrontation with fellow citizens. While his 1793 statement had little effect throughout the next century on staying out of foreign wars, President Woodrow Wilson invoked Washington's message when war broke out in Europe in 1914. The United States opted not to play favorites with the Entente and Central Powers in Europe.<sup>2</sup> After the start of the war, the country would remain neutral. Wilson told Congress on August 19, 1914, "We must be impartial in thought, as well as action, must put a curb upon our sentiments, as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another."<sup>3</sup> The United States continued to trade and conduct business with both sides, including the shipment of arms and other war materials to the warring nations. The United States withheld military support to Britain and France until mid-1917 when Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare became a direct threat to American shipping in the Atlantic. The United States became a powerful player on the world stage upon entering the war and her industrial might helped to pave the way for victory in 1918. The strong relationship between industry and government gave legitimacy to those Americans who wanted to stay out of the situation in Europe in the mid-1930s.

The threat of an invasion on homeland presented a problem for the Roosevelt administration. An increase in the production of military vehicles and armament lead many isolationists to believe that Roosevelt was edging the country closer to becoming involved in international politics. During his 1938 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt called for an increase in military spending to help deter the threat of a homeland invasion—a home defense would deter aggressor nations from trying to launch an attack on the United States. Increasing the size of the military and call for increases in production of war goods was part of his goal to increase United States security policy in 1938.<sup>4</sup>

Roosevelt recommended that Congress fund a nearly \$1 billion program to expand the national defense program. The program added additional battleships, anti-aircraft guns, and other military equipment and materials. Other increases would come in the additional training of officers and men.<sup>5</sup> Some politicians resisted the President's call for increased defense spending citing that the Neutrality Acts forbade any intervention by the United States into foreign affairs. The American public opinion at home, harbored by the memories of World War I kept most Americans from supporting any nation at war.

With the navy getting new ships and the army getting better weapons and the increasing ranks of the armed officers, the United States seemed prepared to defend against attack and neutrality remained the key policy of the government. The signing of the Munich Agreement revealed how unprepared the United States was in case of war in Europe. President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined a major defense policy shift in his 1939 State of the Union Address to improve American defense and industrial output and to prevent shortages of key raw materials. In his message, Roosevelt called upon Congress and the American citizens to do more to aid those who are in a struggle for democracy. Roosevelt declared, "Our neutrality laws may operate unevenly and unfairly—may actually give aid to an aggressor and deny it to the victim."<sup>6</sup> He charged that legislating neutrality encouraged or assisted in the build-up of military strength of aggressor nations. Nazi Germany's rapid buildup of military and industrial capacity meant that the United States had to meet the demands to ward off any threat from aggressor nations. Congress passed the first of several Neutrality Acts in 1935 that prohibited American businesses and shipping firms doing business with nations currently at war and did little to give aid to those in need of supplies and munitions.<sup>7</sup> American businesses would not profit off the blood of others and neutrality meant that military would remain a home defense force with outdated equipment. Without direct involvement from the United States, aggressor nations such as fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Japan could grow their militaries.<sup>8</sup>

The entry by the United States into World War I lingered in the memory of many Americans. Unwilling to send boys back into another European conflict, people on the home front wanted Congress to focus on domestic issues. In his book *The U.S. Economy in World War II*, Harold G. Vatter observed that isolationism and neutrality had oversold and misrepresented American involvement in World War I. This helped produce the suspicion toward any involvement by the United States in another European War.<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt focused on domestic issues in the years prior to 1941. The rising tension in Europe and a 19% unemployment rate, getting Americans back to work topped off the administration's agenda at the beginning of the 1938.<sup>10</sup> However, Roosevelt rejected using unemployed workers to boost American defenses. In his State of the Union Address in 1940, Roosevelt argued, "We refuse the European solution of using the unemployed to build up excessive armaments which eventually result in dictatorships and war."<sup>11</sup> Some saw Hitler's rise to power directly related to his early policies of coordination of industry and of business, and reducing unemployment in Germany. Roosevelt did not want that

<sup>1</sup> "Proclamation of Neutrality (April 22, 1793)" Miller Center of Public Affairs, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3455> (accessed November 19, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Belgium formed the Central Powers. The Entente Powers originally consisted of France, Russia and Great Britain with the United States, Japan and Spain going later.

<sup>3</sup> "Message on Neutrality (August 20, 1914)," Miller Center of Public Affairs, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3791> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> "Army Will Share Billion Increase in Defense Plans." *New York Times*. January 26, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Franklin D. Roosevelt: Annual Message to Congress," The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15684> (accessed November 20, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> There were subsequent revisions in 1936 and 1937 which allowed for non-military goods to flow to countries fighting in wars against tyranny. A further revision in late 1939 allowed for the sale of munitions to France, England and Poland on a cash-and-carry basis. No U.S. ships were allowed to transport arms to these countries.

<sup>8</sup> Harold G. Vatter, *The U.S. Economy in World War II* (Columbia Studies in Business, Government, and Society), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Vatter, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Robert VanGiezen and Albert E. Schwenk, "Compensation from before World War I through the Great Depression." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/cwc/cm20030124ar03p1.htm> (accessed November 19, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> "Franklin D. Roosevelt: Annual Message to Congress," The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15856> (accessed November 20, 2010).

to give the appearance of mass coordination of millions of unemployed Americans in industry producing weapons. As the production orders increased because of the war in Europe, plants expanded to meet the demands.

Roosevelt could no longer ignore the difficulties that lay before him about the need to increase armaments production for home defense. Most Americans refused to accept any increase in the production of armaments out of fear that it might result in another involvement in the war. A few short months after the signing of the Munich Agreement left Roosevelt with little choice. In his 1939 State of the Union Address, he told Congress that while the Agreement averted war, world peace remained questionable. He warned, "There comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone [...] their governments, and their very civilizations are founded."<sup>12</sup> While American industry ramped up production for the Allies, it also helped bolster the American defenses at home. Roosevelt actively campaigned for more help for the Allies. Despite his active campaigning to do more, Congress and the public remained hesitant to Roosevelt's calls for more direct involvement.

Roosevelt challenged his critics by framing mobilization as a need to strengthen home defense. He was able to please those internationalists who saw a defense program as a way to end the Great Depression, and was able to quiet those who feared U.S. involvement. This was clear in Roosevelt's "Arsenal of Democracy" speech where he explained, "We are planning our own defense with the utmost urgency, and in its vast scale we must integrate the war needs of Britain and the other free nations which are resisting aggression."<sup>13</sup> Roosevelt appealed to the internationalists who felt the country should be in the war, and satisfied those who wanted to avoid American entanglement in another European conflict. There was no intent on Roosevelt's part to draw the United States into the war with his speech, but many of his critics remained alarmed that he continued to push the country towards war. Roosevelt's increased political role in the national life became a necessity in the time of war. The American public accepted this as a temporary solution. The majority of Americans were against any idea of getting involved in a European war; however, he proceeded carefully when trying to implement his policies for national defense.

Roosevelt's programs to plan for modernizing defense and coordinate with private industry started with the creation of the short-lived War Resources Board (WRB) in August 1939. The New York Times reported that duties of the board included the mobilization of the economic resources and perfecting plans already made or in the making to prepare the country for war.<sup>14</sup> The appointment of civilians to the board meant that the best men for leading the country into preparing for war came from the companies that would provide the industrial support. A New York Times editorial called the WRB "one of the most important steps" in preparing the country for a war emergency.<sup>15</sup> However, after submitting its first report in November 1939, the president disbanded the board. In a letter issued to the board, the president expressed gratitude and felt that they had accomplished their mission in developing a plan for mobilizing industry for war. Roosevelt told the board, "So as long as the United States is not engaged in war, such a board has no power and no executive responsibility."<sup>16</sup> The political pressure of the board from all political sides put Roosevelt in a precarious position. Roosevelt faced political and public pressure to keep America out of the war.

The fall of France in 1940 cleared up any confusion about the United States' role in the European war. Despite continued opposition to any military involvement, the president continued with his defense initiatives to bring American industry and military to compete with a strong Nazi Germany military. But the mobilization was slow. Opponents of the president's defense program tried to limit the funding to the military, add restrictions to the funding, or in some cases try to stop it all together. Even by the end of 1941 when the United States formally declared war on Japan and Germany, the defense program struggled to meet demands. The bombing of Pearl Harbor motivated

the public into action, but many still felt that the oceans that separated the country from the conflicts in the east and west isolated them from any invasion. By the end of 1942, the United States surpassed the Axis powers in terms of production. The dramatic change into a full-scale wartime economy all but assured an Allied victory. It was far from automatic. Troubles of production and supply problems hampered production, but the coordination allowing the larger manufacturers of armaments to subcontract work to smaller plants boosted the production. Roosevelt's call for unity mobilized millions of displaced women and minority workers to enter the workforce, many for the first time. The effects of the wartime economy reduced the unemployment to pre-1929 averages, and ended the Great Depression in 1940. Standards of living rose and the wartime controls on consumer goods allowed workers to establish savings, which helped to reduce the effects of a post-war economy slowdown as the war, ended in 1945.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Arsenal for Democracy," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations Since 1914: Documents and Essays, ed. Thomas G. Paterson, 2nd ed., (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1984): 164.

<sup>14</sup> "6 Civilians Name for Mobilization of War Resources," New York Times, August 10, 1939.

<sup>15</sup> "Industrial Mobilization," New York Times, August 11, 1939.

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