

America's Transformation from Isolationism to Global Intervention: The Critical Years 1939–1941

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gradual but decisive shift in American foreign policy from neutrality to full engagement in World War II during the period from 1939 to 1941. Through a comprehensive analysis of the modifications to the Neutrality Acts, the passage of the Lend-Lease Act, the formation of Anglo-American strategic cooperation, the escalation of U.S.-Japan tensions, and the outbreak of war following the Pearl Harbor attack, this study explores both the domestic and international factors driving the evolution of American diplomacy. Drawing upon Herbert Feis's seminal work *The Road to Pearl Harbor* and international relations theoretical frameworks, this paper demonstrates how external threats progressively narrowed the U.S. policy options, ultimately transforming isolationist America into the architect of the global anti-fascist coalition. The analysis reveals how economic pressures, diplomatic negotiations, and strategic miscalculations on both sides led inexorably toward conflict, fundamentally reshaping both the course of World War II and the post-war international order.

KEYWORDS

American isolationism; World War II; Neutrality Acts; Lend-Lease Act; Pearl Harbor; U.S.-Japan relations; International relations theory

1 Introduction

Entanglement in the conflicts of Europe and Asia. This attitude found its legislative expression in the Neutrality Acts, first passed in 1935 and subsequently revised, which embodied a broad consensus favoring non-intervention ^[1]. The original legislation imposed an arms embargo on all belligerent nations, representing a determined effort to ensure American non-participation in foreign wars through statutory means. The underlying philosophy was straightforward: by maintaining strict neutrality in both word and deed, the United States could shield itself from the catastrophic consequences that had followed its involvement in World War I.

The isolationist consensus of the 1930s was deeply embedded in American political culture and drew strength from multiple sources. The revisionist historical scholarship of the interwar period had convinced many Americans that their entry into World War I had been a tragic mistake, engineered by bankers and arms manufacturers—the so-called "merchants of death". The Nye Committee hearings of 1934-1936 reinforced these suspicions by investigating the role of munitions manufacturers and financial interests in drawing America into the Great War. Public opinion polls consistently showed overwhelming majorities opposed to any involvement in foreign conflicts, with some surveys indicating that up to 95% of Americans favored staying out of war ^[2-3].

However, the effectiveness of this isolationist framework began to be tested as international crises deepened. Following Japan's full-scale invasion of China in 1937, the deteriorating situation in East Asia raised fundamental questions about whether American neutrality could remain sustainable in the face of naked aggression. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, a devoted Wilsonian idealist, attempted to constrain Japanese aggression through the reiteration of fundamental principles of international law and morality ^[4]. He firmly believed that "if the world followed these principles, the world could maintain peace forever. If the world ignores these principles, war will never cease." Hull's principled approach reflected a deep conviction that international order rested upon shared moral foundations rather than merely the balance of power.

Yet such moral appeals proved impotent against the expansionist ambitions of Japanese militarism, which was driven by concrete strategic objectives rather than abstract ethical considerations. The Japanese military establishment had concluded that control of China's resources was essential for Japan's survival as a great power and for the creation of a self-sufficient "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" ^[5]. The rhetoric of Asian liberation from Western imperialism provided ideological cover for what was essentially a program of Japanese imperial expansion. Tokyo's leaders viewed American moral objections as hypocritical given the United States' own history of continental expansion and its maintenance of colonial possessions in the Philippines.

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 marked the first critical juncture in American policy transformation. Germany's invasion of Poland and the subsequent declarations of war by Britain and France created an entirely new strategic environment. In November of that year, Congress amended the Neutrality Acts to repeal the arms embargo and institute a "cash and carry" system ^[6]. While this modification maintained the formal appearance of neutrality, it effectively favored Britain and France, which possessed superior naval power and could actually utilize the new provisions to purchase American war materials. The Roosevelt administration carefully crafted this policy to assist the Allies while

remaining within the bounds of what isolationist sentiment would tolerate.

At this stage, American policy toward Japan remained characterized primarily by restraint and watchful waiting. As Herbert Feis meticulously documented in *The Road to Pearl Harbor*, the U.S. government "was very restrained, neither alone nor together with other countries using threats and coercive means against Japan" ^[7]. This restraint reflected a "patient expectation," hoping either that moderate factions within Japan might regain control or that sustained Chinese resistance would exhaust Japanese resources and compel Tokyo to negotiate. American policymakers recognized that premature confrontation with Japan while the European situation remained fluid could prove disastrous, potentially driving Tokyo into closer alliance with the Axis powers.

The period from 1939 to early 1940 thus represented a transitional phase in which American policymakers sought to balance competing imperatives: maintaining formal neutrality while gradually tilting toward the democracies threatened by fascist aggression. This delicate equilibrium would prove increasingly difficult to sustain as the international situation deteriorated. The fundamental tension between isolationist public opinion and the Roosevelt administration's growing conviction that American security required active opposition to Axis expansion would come to dominate American politics and foreign policy debates throughout this critical period ^[8]. As shown in Figure 1, American policy evolved from isolation to full intervention as global conflicts intensified.

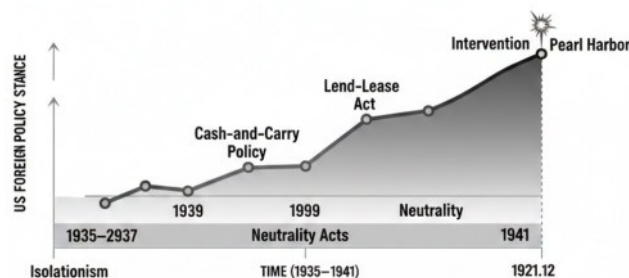


Figure 1 Evolution of U.S. Foreign Policy from Isolationism to Intervention (1935–1941)

2 The Intensification of the European War and the Initial Hardening of Japan Policy

Table 1 Evolution of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1935–1941

Phase	Time Period	Policy Characteristics	Major Events	Strategic Objective
Isolationist	1935–	Neutrality Acts restricted arms	Passage of Neutrality Acts; Nye Committee hearings	Avoid foreign entanglements and
Phase	1938	trade and foreign aid		prevent another world war
Transitional	1939–	Shift from strict neutrality toward	1939 revision introducing "cash and carry";	Support democracies while maintaining
Phase	1940	Allied support	German invasion of Poland and France	formal neutrality
Economic	1940–	Economic aid replaced neutrality	Passage of the Lend-Lease Act;	Use economic power to deter Axis
Support Phase	mid-1941		ABC-1 Anglo-American plan	expansion
Full Confronta- tion Phase	late-1941	Sanctions and embargoes esca- late to open conflict	Asset freeze, total oil embargo, and Hull Note	Economic pressure transforms into direct military confrontation

To clarify the stages of America's shift from isolation to intervention, Table 1 summarizes the main policy phases between 1935 and 1941.

The spring of 1940 brought a dramatic and terrifying shift in the global strategic landscape as Germany's blitzkrieg tactics achieved stunning success in Western Europe. In a matter of weeks, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg fell to German forces. Most shocking of all was the rapid collapse of France, long considered the possessor of Europe's most formidable army, which surrendered in June 1940 after only six weeks of fighting ^[9-10]. The speed and completeness of the German victory shattered assumptions about modern warfare and fundamentally altered American threat perceptions. Britain now stood alone against Nazi Germany, its survival dependent on control of the English Channel and the Atlantic sea lanes.

For the first time, U.S. policymakers confronted the realistic possibility of a two-ocean war, with threats emerging simultaneously from both the Atlantic and Pacific. The strategic implications were profound and deeply troubling. If Britain fell, the Royal Navy—the world's most powerful fleet—might come under German control, fundamentally altering the balance of naval power in the Atlantic ^[11]. Meanwhile, Japan viewed the weakening of European colonial powers as a golden opportunity for southward expansion, beginning to extend its influence into French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. The Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke articulated this strategic vision, arguing that Japan must seize the opportunity created by European weakness to establish its new order in East Asia.

This dual threat generated intense and often acrimonious debate within the American policy establishment regarding whether to impose economic sanctions on Japan. Hawks, led by Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Treasury Secretary

Henry Morgenthau, argued that cutting off exports of oil, scrap iron, and other strategic materials to Japan was the most effective means of compelling Tokyo to alter its China policy and halt its southward expansion. They pointed to Japan's extreme dependence on American supplies—particularly petroleum, of which Japan imported approximately 80% from the United States—as creating a powerful lever for American influence.

However, this view faced strong opposition from elements within the State Department's Far Eastern Division, particularly from Ambassador Joseph Grew in Tokyo, who warned that comprehensive embargoes might "stimulate Japan to unite with the Axis powers and go to war with Britain" at a time when the United States was unprepared for a two-front conflict ^[12]. Grew and his colleagues argued that economic pressure should be applied gradually and carefully, always leaving Japan a face-saving avenue for retreat. They believed that pushing Japan too hard risked triggering the very aggressive expansion that American policy sought to prevent.

The resulting policy exhibited inherent contradictions that would plague American strategy throughout the coming months: gradually tightening the economic noose around Japan while simultaneously striving to avoid direct confrontation. In July 1940, the United States formally abrogated the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Commerce and Navigation of 1911, which had governed bilateral trade relations for nearly three decades. This abrogation, which took effect in January 1941, paved the way for future trade restrictions by removing the legal framework that had guaranteed Japanese access to American markets. That same month, and again in September, Washington imposed export licensing requirements on aviation gasoline, lubricating oils, and high-grade scrap iron, culminating in a total ban on scrap iron exports to Japan.

The Japanese government perceived these measures as clear "unfriendly acts" and protests from Tokyo grew increasingly strident. Japanese officials argued that the United States was interfering in Japan's legitimate sphere of influence in East Asia and attempting to strangle Japan's economy through discriminatory trade practices. American officials, as Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles explained to the Japanese ambassador, claimed they were primarily motivated by "our own national needs," attempting to downplay their targeted nature. This diplomatic fiction fooled no one in Tokyo, where the measures were correctly understood as deliberate attempts to constrain Japanese expansion.

Despite American attempts at diplomatic obfuscation, these economic measures severely impacted Japan's war economy and accelerated Tokyo's drive to establish a self-sufficient "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". The tightening of American economic pressure, while stopping short of a complete embargo on oil—the most critical resource—created growing Japanese anxiety about resource security and reinforced the arguments of those advocating for military expansion to secure access to Southeast Asian raw materials. The partial nature of American sanctions created a dangerous dynamic: sufficient to anger and alarm Japan, but insufficient to compel policy changes, while the implicit threat of more comprehensive measures created pressure for Japan to act before its strategic position deteriorated further.

3 The Tripartite Pact and the Deepening of Anglo-American Cooperation

The signing of the Tripartite Pact among Germany, Italy, and Japan on September 27, 1940, represented a watershed moment that catalyzed a decisive transformation in American strategic thinking. The treaty stipulated that if any signatory were attacked by a power "not presently involved in the European war or the Sino-Japanese conflict"—an obvious reference to the United States—the other signatories would provide all necessary assistance, including military aid. This explicit identification of America as a potential enemy, combined with the linking of Atlantic and Pacific threats into a unified Axis challenge, fundamentally altered Washington's strategic calculus and intensified the sense of encirclement felt by American policymakers.

Secretary Hull's internal assessments clearly recognized the treaty's ominous implications for American security. He warned that Germany and Japan might rapidly undertake coordinated actions designed to force American entry into the war on unfavorable terms, and that the United States could not afford to stand by while Japan seized critical strategic points such as the Dutch East Indies or Singapore. The pact's formation accelerated Anglo-American strategic coordination, which had been developing quietly since the outbreak of war in Europe. Although the Roosevelt administration continued to operate within the constraints imposed by isolationist sentiment and the upcoming presidential election ^[13], the pace and scope of cooperation with Britain expanded dramatically in the wake of the Tripartite Pact.

In early 1941, secret staff talks between American and British military planners produced the ABC-1 Plan, which established the fundamental principle that would guide Allied strategy throughout the war: in the event of U.S. entry into a two-front conflict, priority would be given to defeating Germany while maintaining a defensive posture in the Pacific. This "Germany First" strategy reflected a sophisticated appreciation of the relative dangers posed by the two threats. Germany, with its advanced industrial base, scientific capabilities, and control of much of Europe's resources, represented a potentially existential threat to Western civilization if allowed to consolidate its conquests. Japan, while dangerous, was more constrained by resource limitations and geographic factors.

Parallel to these military planning efforts, the Lend-Lease Act, signed into law in March 1941, represented a

revolutionary departure from traditional neutrality^[14-15]. The act authorized the President to "sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of" defense materials to any country whose defense was deemed vital to U.S. security. In practice, this meant massive shipments of war materials to Britain, and later to the Soviet Union and China, without immediate payment. Roosevelt famously justified the program by comparing it to lending a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire—a homely metaphor that obscured the program's radical implications for traditional concepts of neutrality.

The Lend-Lease program effectively made the United States the "arsenal of democracy,"^[16] in Roosevelt's memorable phrase, transforming America into a non-belligerent ally of Britain even while formally maintaining neutrality. The scale of the program was enormous: by the war's end, the United States would provide over \$50 billion in aid (equivalent to over \$700 billion in 2024 dollars) to Allied nations. The implementation of Lend-Lease required a massive expansion of American industrial production and marked the beginning of the mobilization that would later support full-scale war efforts. It also meant that American merchant ships, carrying war materials to Britain, became targets for German U-boats, drawing the United States closer to active combat even before the formal declaration of war.

The summer of 1941 brought further escalation in the undeclared naval war in the Atlantic. American destroyers began escorting convoys partway across the Atlantic, and incidents between U.S. warships and German submarines multiplied. In September, after the destroyer USS Greer exchanged fire with a German U-boat, Roosevelt announced a "shoot-on-sight" policy against Axis vessels in what he defined as American defensive waters. By autumn 1941, the United States and Germany were engaged in an undeclared naval war, with American ships protecting convoys carrying war materials to Britain and Soviet ports. Only Hitler's decision to avoid provoking American entry while focused on his invasion of the Soviet Union prevented this conflict from escalating to full-scale war. Figure 2 illustrates the strategic coordination between the United States and Britain through the Lend-Lease program and the ABC-1 Plan, demonstrating how economic support was integrated with military planning.

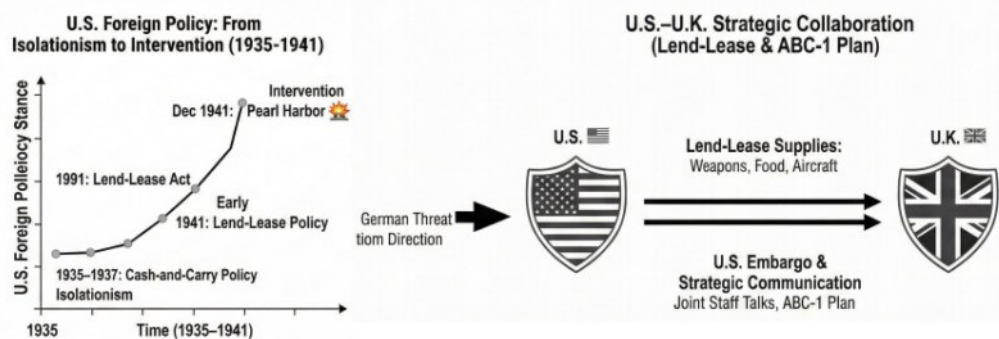


Figure 2 U.S.-U.K. Strategic Collaboration: Lend-Lease and ABC-1 Plan

4 Economic Warfare, Failed Negotiations, and the Road to Pearl Harbor

As illustrated in Figure 3, America's foreign policy evolved progressively from strict isolationism through various stages of neutrality to full intervention, with the oil embargo representing the culmination of economic pressure that ultimately led to direct confrontation with Japan. The tightening of U.S. economic sanctions—particularly in oil and financial sectors—signaled the transformation of economic policy into a decisive instrument of warfare, setting the stage for the final diplomatic breakdown that would lead to Pearl Harbor.

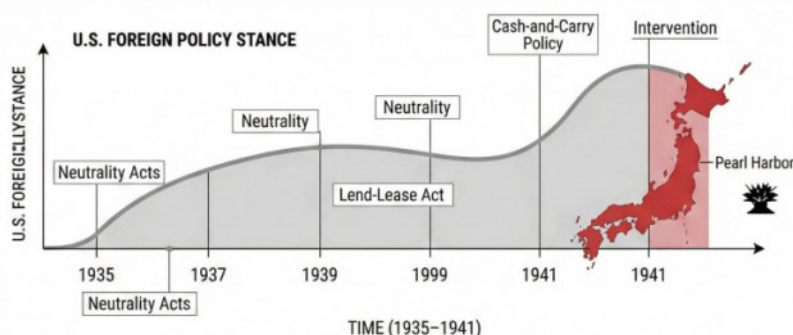


Figure 3 Evolution of U.S. Foreign Policy Stance (1935-1941)

The year 1941 witnessed the final deterioration of U.S.-Japan relations, as diplomatic efforts proved unable to bridge the fundamental incompatibility of American and Japanese objectives. In April 1941, Secretary Hull initiated discussions with Japanese Ambassador Nomura Kichisaburo in an attempt to find a peaceful resolution to outstanding issues. These conversations, which would continue through November, revealed the vast gulf separating the two nations. Hull insisted on four fundamental principles: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all nations, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, equality of commercial opportunity, and maintenance of the status quo in the Pacific except as altered by peaceful means. Japan, committed to its vision of a new order in East Asia under its leadership, found these principles fundamentally incompatible with its strategic objectives^[17].

The situation took a decisive turn in July 1941 when Japan occupied southern Indochina, gaining access to air and naval bases that threatened British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines. This move, which the Japanese government presented as a defensive measure against alleged Western encirclement, was correctly perceived in Washington as preparation for further southward expansion. The Roosevelt administration's response was swift and severe: on July 26, 1941, the United States froze all Japanese assets in the United States, effectively imposing a total embargo on trade with Japan, including—critically—petroleum exports^[18]. The strategic consequences of the oil embargo and the resulting diplomatic breakdown are summarized in Table 2, illustrating the U.S. sanctions and Japan's escalating responses leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Table 2 U.S. Economic Sanctions against Japan and Japanese Responses, 1939–1941

Date	Sanction Measure	Targeted Materials	Japanese Reaction	Strategic Impact
1939	Termination of U.S.-Japan Commercial Treaty	Trade privileges	Diplomatic protest; continued talks	Opened the path for future trade restrictions
July 1940	Export licensing system introduced	Aviation fuel, lubricants, high-grade scrap iron	Accused the U.S. of interference	Strengthened Japan's southward expansion planning
July 1941	Freezing of Japanese assets in the U.S.	Financial and trade transactions	Regarded as "economic warfare"	Triggered acceleration of military contingency planning
August 1941	Comprehensive oil embargo	Crude oil and refined petroleum products	Adoption of the "Southern Operation" plan	Hastened the move toward war and the Pearl Harbor attack

This oil embargo, which Britain and the Dutch government-in-exile immediately joined, represented the culmination of American economic warfare against Japan and created an existential crisis for Japanese policymakers. Japan's oil reserves were sufficient for only 18-24 months of normal consumption, and far less under wartime conditions. The Japanese military leadership calculated that unless the embargo was lifted or alternative sources of oil secured through conquest of the Dutch East Indies, Japan would be forced to accept American terms or face economic strangulation. This calculation created intense pressure for decisive action before Japan's strategic position became untenable.

Japanese Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro made a last attempt at diplomacy by proposing a face-to-face summit meeting with President Roosevelt in September 1941. Konoe believed that a direct meeting between leaders might break the diplomatic deadlock and find a compromise that would allow both nations to claim success. However, Secretary Hull, skeptical of Japanese sincerity and fearful that Roosevelt might be pressured into unwise concessions, advised against the meeting. Hull insisted that Japan must first demonstrate its commitment to peace by accepting American principles in writing before any summit could be contemplated. This decision effectively doomed Konoe's peace initiative and contributed to the fall of his government in October 1941.

Konoe was replaced by General Tojo Hideki, whose cabinet included strong military representation and was more willing to contemplate war if diplomacy failed. At an Imperial Conference on November 5, 1941, Japanese leaders set a deadline: if negotiations with the United States did not produce a settlement by late November, Japan would proceed with military operations against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands. Ambassador Nomura and special envoy Kurusu Saburo presented two proposals to Hull in November—Plan A and Plan B—representing Japan's final diplomatic efforts. Plan B, presented on November 20, proposed a modus vivendi: Japan would withdraw from southern Indochina and promise no further expansion in exchange for restoration of normal trade relations, including oil shipments.

The American response, delivered on November 26, 1941, came to be known as the "Hull Note". Rather than accepting the Japanese proposal for a temporary arrangement, Hull presented a comprehensive proposal requiring Japan to withdraw all military forces from China. The note made no mention of restoring oil shipments or normalizing trade relations until these conditions were met. From the Japanese perspective, these demands represented an ultimatum requiring Japan to abandon its entire China policy and the fruits of four years of warfare—conditions no Japanese government could accept without committing political suicide.

Final diplomatic efforts continued through November, but with neither side willing to compromise on essential interests, war became inevitable. The Hull Note of November 26 was interpreted by the Japanese government as proof

that further negotiations were pointless. The Imperial Conference had already approved war preparations, and the Pearl Harbor strike force had departed on November 26—the same day Hull delivered his note. Even had Washington offered substantial concessions at this late date, it is doubtful that they could have recalled the attack force or altered the momentum toward war.

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, initiating the Pacific War. The attack, while achieving tactical surprise and inflicting severe damage on the U. S. Pacific Fleet, represented a profound strategic miscalculation. Japanese planners hoped that a devastating initial blow would force the United States to accept Japanese dominance of East Asia rather than undertake a costly war of reconquest. Instead, as Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku had privately feared, the attack unified American opinion as nothing else could have and ensured that the United States would prosecute the war with implacable determination until Japan's unconditional surrender. Through meticulous examination of archival materials from both nations, Feis revealed how economic pressure, diplomatic deadlock, and strategic miscalculation combined to propel two major powers toward armed conflict that neither initially desired. The explosions at Pearl Harbor shattered American isolationist illusions overnight, leading Congress to declare war on Japan the following day with only one dissenting vote. When Germany and Italy declared war on the United States on December 11, America found itself fully committed to World War II on both fronts, precisely the scenario that isolationists had struggled for years to avoid.

5 Theoretical Perspectives on American Policy Evolution

Viewed through the lens of international relations theory, America's policy transformation from 1939 to 1941 represents a textbook case of realist logic prevailing over ideological preferences and domestic political constraints^[19]. The initial neutrality policy reflected rational calculations based on geographic advantages and the desire to avoid the costs of foreign entanglements. The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans provided natural barriers that had historically insulated the United States from European and Asian conflicts, allowing Americans to believe that they could remain aloof from great power competition while reaping the benefits of commerce with all sides.

However, as Germany came to dominate Europe and Japan threatened to control the Western Pacific, the fundamental balance of power upon which American security rested faced existential threat. Realist theory, as articulated by scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and later Kenneth Waltz, posits that states prioritize survival above all other goals and respond to threats by balancing against rising powers. Once it became clear that neither Britain alone could contain Germany nor China could resist Japan indefinitely, American strategic interests dictated active engagement to prevent Axis domination of Eurasia. A world in which totalitarian powers controlled the resources and populations of Europe and Asia would present insurmountable challenges to American security and prosperity.

The policy evolution from strict neutrality through "cash and carry" and Lend-Lease to eventual belligerency exemplifies the realist concept of "offshore balancing"—initially seeking to contain threats through proxies (Britain and China), then through economic pressure and military aid, and finally through direct military intervention when these measures proved insufficient. This graduated escalation reflected both the administration's recognition of growing threats and its need to bring American public opinion along. Each step created new commitments and expectations that made the next step more likely, creating a path-dependent process that culminated in full-scale war.

The ABC-1 Plan and Lend-Lease also embodied nascent liberal institutionalism, representing efforts to create structured frameworks for security cooperation that would later characterize the post-war order. The decision to prioritize Germany over Japan, despite the fact that Japan struck first, reflected sophisticated strategic thinking about which threat posed the greater long-term danger—a calculation that proved correct. Germany's advanced industrial capabilities, scientific achievements, and potential to dominate European resources made it the more dangerous adversary in the long term, even though Japan's attack had been the immediate catalyst for American entry into the war.

Joseph Nye's "funnel of choices" model provides valuable analytical insight into how external pressures progressively constrained American policy options. In 1939, when revising the Neutrality Acts, Washington had multiple choices about how to respond to the European war: maintain strict neutrality, tilt toward the Allies through the cash-and-carry system, or move toward more active support. By mid-1940, following France's catastrophic defeat, the urgent question became whether to massively aid Britain or accept German domination of Europe—a considerably narrower range of options. By summer 1941, after imposing the oil embargo on Japan, the United States faced an essentially binary decision: either maintain economic pressure and risk war, or back down and accept Japanese expansion in Southeast Asia.

Each escalation of crisis reduced the range of viable options, ultimately channeling policy toward war despite neither side's initial desire for direct confrontation. This phenomenon—what scholars call "conflict spiral" or "security dilemma" dynamics—illustrates how well-intentioned defensive measures by one side can appear threatening to another, prompting counter-measures that further escalate tensions. American economic sanctions, designed to deter Japanese expansion without resorting to war, instead created pressure for Japan to strike before its strategic position deteriorated further. Japanese military preparations, undertaken to preserve options in case diplomacy failed, appeared to American

observers as evidence of imminent aggression requiring yet stronger deterrent measures. The result was a tragic spiral of action and reaction that made war increasingly likely even as both sides continued to negotiate.

6 Conclusion: The Significance of America's Transformation

The years 1939-1941 mark America's decisive shift from isolationism^[20] to global leadership, driven by Nazi Germany's threat in Europe and Japanese expansion in Asia. In Europe, Roosevelt forged a de facto alliance with Britain through Lend-Lease to counter German dominance. In Asia, the oil embargo of July 1941 failed to account for Japanese psychology, leaving Tokyo choosing war over capitulation. These interconnected crises required opposing both totalitarian powers simultaneously. The fundamental incompatibility of American and Japanese aims made conflict unavoidable. The Hull Note left no middle ground between war and abandoning core principles. American entry altered the war's outcome and established post-war American leadership. This transformation remains relevant today. The period illustrates enduring lessons: the limitations of economic coercion against nationalist adversaries, the risks of strategic miscalculation, and how major powers stumble into unwanted wars through incremental escalation.

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