

The answer came a few weeks after the “garden hose” press conference, as Roosevelt introduced the Lend-Lease bill. Under it, he was granted unprecedented powers to aid any country whose defense was deemed vital to the defense of the United States. America would “lend” tanks, warplanes, and ships that could be returned “in kind” after the war. Congress almost unanimously sided with Roosevelt, except for the hard-line isolationists like Senator Robert A. Taft, who compared the loan of war equipment not to a garden hose but to chewing gum—you wouldn’t want it back.

The path to Lend-Lease had been a long and torturous one for Roosevelt. Preoccupied with the Depression crisis, Roosevelt was little concerned with events in Europe. Too many Americans had fresh memories of the horrors of 1918, and isolationist sentiment in the country was overwhelming. When a congressional investigation showed that munitions makers had garnered enormous profits during World War I, the desire to avoid Europe’s problems gained greater strength.

Of even less concern than events in Europe was the changing scene in Asia. In 1931, while Herbert Hoover was still in office, the Japanese invaded China and established a puppet state called Manchukuo in Manchuria. Little was said or done by the United States or anyone else. A few months later, Japan bombarded Shanghai and extended its control over northern China. The League of Nations condemned Japan, which laughed and withdrew from the League. Adolf Hitler, who became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, a few days before Roosevelt was inaugurated, watched with interest as Japan’s aggressive empire building went unpunished.

Who were the Fascists?

The word “fascist” gets thrown about quite a bit these days. In the 1960s, the police were called “fascist pigs.” Anybody who doesn’t like another government simply calls it fascist. Generally, fascism has come to mean a military dictatorship built on racist and powerfully nationalistic foundations, generally with the broad support of the business class (distinguishing it from the collectivism of Communism). But when Benito Mussolini adopted the term, he used it quite proudly.

The first of the modern dictators, Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), called Il Duce (which simply means “the leader”), was the son of a blacksmith, who came to power as prime minister in 1922. A preening bully of a man, he organized Italian World War I veterans into the anti-Communist and rabidly nationalistic “blackshirts,” a paramilitary group that used gang tactics to suppress strikes and attack leftist trade unions. Riding the anti-Communist fervor in Italy, he was accepted by a people who wanted “order.” His rise to power was accompanied by the beatings of opponents and the murder of a key Socialist Party leader.

In 1925, Mussolini installed himself as head of a single-party state he called *fascismo*. The word came from *fasces*, a Latin word referring to a bundle of rods bound around an ax, which had been a Roman symbol of authority and strength. While most of Europe disarmed, Mussolini rearmed Italy during the twenties. A failure at actual governing, Mussolini saw military adventurism as the means to keep the Italian people loyal, and Italy embarked on wars in Africa and in support of General Francisco Franco’s Spanish rebels.

The rise to power of the three militaristic, totalitarian states that would form the wartime Axis—Germany, Japan, and Italy—as well as Fascist Spain under General Franco, can be laid to the aftershocks, both political and economic, of the First World War. It was rather easy, especially in the case of Germany and Italy, for demagogues to point to the smoldering ruins of their countries and the economic disaster of the worldwide depression and blame their woes on foreigners. Under the crushing weight of the war’s costs, the people might be said to have lacked the will *not to believe*.

Mussolini blamed Italy’s problems on foreigners, and promised to make the trains run on time. (Contrary to popular belief, he did not.) The next step was simply to crush opposition through the most ruthless form of police state. In Germany, Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) made scapegoats not only of the Communists and foreign powers who he claimed had stripped Germany of its land and military abilities at Versailles, but also of Jews, who he claimed were in control of the world’s finances. The long history of anti-Semitism in Europe, going back for centuries, simply fed the easy acceptance of Hitler’s argument.

Like Mussolini and his blackshirts, Hitler organized his followers

into a strongarm gang of Brownshirts, and later into an elite uniformed guard called the SS. In 1930, his National Socialist (Nazi) Party, with its platform of placing blame for Germany's economic misery on Jews, Marxists, and foreign powers, attracted the masses of unemployed and began to win increasing numbers of seats in Germany's parliament, the Reichstag, and Hitler was named chancellor by an aging President Hindenburg. When the Reichstag burned and Communists were blamed, Hitler had the incident he needed to grab dictatorial powers and concentrate them under a police state that simply crushed all opposition. Skilled in nationalistic theatrics, bankrolled by militant industrialists, supported by an increasingly powerful army and secret police, and able to captivate and enthrall his country with pomp and jingoism, Hitler was the essence of the fascist leader.

Hitler made no secret of his plans. From the start, he announced that he wanted to reunite the German-speaking people separated when the map of Europe was redrawn following the Treaty of Versailles. He also pledged to rearm Germany so that it would never be forced to accept terms as it had at Versailles in 1918. By 1935, Germany was committed to a massive program of militarization, modernizing its armaments and requiring universal military service. That same year, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, which bordered Italian Somaliland in Africa. American attempts to avoid entanglement in these "European" problems led to passage of the Neutrality Act in 1935, which barred the sale of munitions to all belligerents. Facing strong isolationist sentiment, led by Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and the vitriolic, anti-Semitic Catholic "radio priest," Father Charles Coughlin (1891–1979), Roosevelt had to swallow the unpleasant bill. Curiously unrestricted by the embargo were petroleum products. Oil and gasoline sales to Italy tripled as the modernized Italian army crushed the nearly primitive Ethiopian resistance.

In 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out. The Fascist (Falangist) rebels under General Francisco Franco (1892–1975), with the military support of Germany and 50,000 Italian troops, sought to overthrow the left-leaning Spanish Republic, which in turn was receiving support from the Soviet Union. The Spanish Civil War was a proxy war in which German arms, weapons, and tactics were being battle-tested.

Again, America's official position remained neutral and isolationist, even as many Americans went to Spain to fight in the losing Loyalist or Republican cause.

The pace of events became more rapid. In July 1937, Japan attacked China once more, this time conquering Peking. The following October, Roosevelt made a subtle shift from isolationism. Like Wilson before the First World War, Roosevelt always sympathized with England, and like Wilson, Roosevelt professed a desire to avoid American involvement in the war. Saying that "America actively engages in the search for peace," he recommended "quarantining" the aggressors, acknowledging without identifying them.

In March 1938, Germany absorbed Austria in the Anschluss (annexation), and in September, Hitler demanded the return of the German Sudetenland, which had been incorporated into Czechoslovakia after 1918. At a conference in Munich, the prime ministers of Great Britain and France accepted this demand and pressed the Czechs to turn over the land. That was simply Hitler's prelude to a more ambitious land grab.

Recognizing the paucity of resistance, Hitler simply took the rest of Czechoslovakia in early 1939. He next set his sights on Poland, demanding the city of Danzig (modern-day Gdansk). Hitler now had Roosevelt's full attention, but Roosevelt lacked the votes at the time even to overturn the Neutrality Act that prevented him from arming France and Great Britain for the war that everyone now knew was surely coming.

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact, a prelude to a joint attack on Poland by Germany from the west and Russia from the East. France and England could stand by and appease Hitler no longer. Both countries declared war on Germany on September 3.

As the German military had planned in 1914, Germany went for a quick, decisive victory that would crush France and give it control of Europe. But unlike 1914, when the British and French held off the German assault, the Nazi plan was far more successful. The Nazi onslaught, the Blitzkrieg ("lightning war"), leveled resistance in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. By the summer of 1940, Hitler controlled most of western Europe, and the British and

French armies had been sent reeling from Dunkerque, on the Strait of Dover.

Roosevelt was able to force through a stopgap “cash and carry” bill that allowed the Allies to buy arms. After Italy joined Germany in the attack on France, Roosevelt froze the assets of the conquered nations still held in the United States, to prevent the Germans from using them. Without legal authority, FDR began to sell the English “surplus” American arms. After the fall of France, FDR came up with the idea of “trading” aging American destroyers to the British in exchange for bases, the deal that was the prelude to Lend-Lease.

What did FDR know about a Japanese attack, and when did he know it?

At 7 A.M., Hawaiian time, on Sunday, December 7, 1941, two U.S. Army privates saw something unusual on their mobile radar screens. More than 50 planes seemed to be appearing out of the northeast. When they called in the information, they were told it was probably just part of an expected delivery of new B-17s coming from the mainland United States. The men were told not to worry about it. What they saw was actually the first wave of 183 Japanese planes that had arrived at Hawaii on Japanese carriers and struck the American naval base with complete surprise.

At 0758 the Pearl Harbor command radioed its first message to the world. AIR RAID PEARL HARBOR. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. An hour later, a second wave of 167 more Japanese aircraft arrived. The two raids, which had lasted only minutes, accounted for nineteen ships, of them eight battleships sunk, capsized, or damaged, and 292 aircraft, including 117 bombers, damaged or wrecked. And 2,403 Americans, military and civilian, had been killed, with another 1,178 wounded. The following afternoon, President Roosevelt requested and won a declaration of war against Japan. With that done, Germany declared war on America under its treaty terms with Japan. Soon America was at war with Germany and Italy as well.

No question has tantalized historians of the wartime period more than this one: Did President Roosevelt know the Japanese were going