GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY: GREAT DEBATE (1939–1941)

Review each issue and the opposing viewpoints.
Highlight key phrases, and summarize the opposing views in your notes.

Isolationism versus internationalism.

Should the United States move away from isolationist neutrality and toward aiding the Allies in the fight against Hitler? Explain.

Yes: The internationalists, led by President Roosevelt and the administration; most big-business leaders and cosmopolitan city-dwellers; the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, led by William Allen White.

No: The isolationists, led by the America First Committee and Charles A. Lindbergh; some senators and representatives, led by William Borah, Robert Taft, and Hamilton Fish; some writers, like Charles Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes; some small-business and ethnic groups, especially in the Midwest; some leftists and socialists, led by Norman Thomas.

Isolationism and overseas interests

Should the United States have any interest in events overseas? Explain.

Yes: Internationalist Roosevelt: “It becomes clearer and clearer that the world will be a shabby and dangerous place to live in—yes, even for Americans to live in—if it is ruled by force in the hands of a few….I hope that we shall have fewer American ostriches in our midst. It is not good for the ultimate health of ostriches to bury their heads in the sand.”

No: Isolationist poet Oliver Allstrom:
“Over there,” there’s mud and shedding of blood
And tongues confusing and strange.
So why lend a hand to an alien band
Whose dreams we can never change?

“No, no,” comes the cry from the U.S. sky,
“We’ll never be Allied tools.
Nor again parade in a foreign brigade
Like saps in a squad of fools.”

“And Europe may strut through its bloody rut
And scheme with her Babel-snares.
But we’ll stay home, this side of the foam
And mind our own affairs!”

Democracy

Are the Allies fighting for the democratic principles America believes in? Explain.

Yes: Internationalist Congressman Jerry Voorhis: “I have an interest in the way of life wherein free men can freely struggle to better their conditions, freely worship and believe according to their own conscience….I know that this is not possible in a Nazi- or Communist-dominated nation. So…to aid Great Britain and the other nations attempting to resist the totalitarians has become part of American policy.”

No: Isolationist Congressman Hamilton Fish: “The cause for which Hitler has thrown the German masses into war is damnedly unholy. But the war of Chamberlain and Reynaud is not thereby rendered holy. The fact that Hitler is the opponent does not make the Allied war a fight for democracy….The Allied governments have no idealism in the conflict, no war aims worthy of the sacrifice…of their peoples….!”
**War.**

**Will aiding the Allies inevitably lead the United States into war? Explain.**

*No:* Internationalist Roosevelt: “There is a far less chance of the United States getting into war if we do all we can now to support the nations defending themselves against attack by the Axis than if we acquiesce in their defeat, submit tamely to an Axis victory, and wait our turn to be the object of attack in another war later on….There is no demand for sending an American Expeditionary Force outside our own borders. There is no intention by any member of your government to send such a force. You can, therefore, nail any talk about sending armies to Europe as deliberate untruth.”

*Yes:* Isolationist Senator Arthur Vandenberg: “When H.R. 1776 [lend-lease] passed the Senate…we did vastly more than ‘aid Britain.’ We have thrown ourselves squarely into the power politics and the power wars of Europe, Asia, and Africa….We have said to Britain, ‘We will see you through to victory.’ And it would be unbelievably dishonorable for us to stop short of full participation in the war if that be necessary to a victory….But I fear this means we must actively engage in the war ourselves.”

**War and democracy.**

**Would another war require dictatorial methods and destroy democracy within the United States? Explain.**

*No:* Internationalist Roosevelt: “I reject the idea that only by abandoning our freedom, our ideals, our way of life, can we build our defenses adequately, can we match the strength of the aggressors….I do not share these fears.”

*Yes:* Isolationist socialist Norman Thomas: “The method of modern totalitarian warfare is self-defeating in terms of ideal ends. War itself is the only victor. Each particular war begets its more deadly successors. Intolerance, dictatorship, brutality, are its inevitable accompaniments….“