Main Idea Japanese and German aggression plunged the world into a war that eventually involved the United States.

Setting the Scene On October 5, 1937, President Roosevelt addressed a large crowd in Chicago. He was there to see whether Americans were ready to abandon isolationism. Claiming that the “epidemic of world lawlessness” was spreading, he said:

“There is no escape through mere isolation or neutrality. Those who cherish their freedom... must work together for the triumph of law and moral principles in order that peace, justice, and confidence may prevail in the world.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Quarantine Speech” October 5, 1937

Roosevelt’s speech produced no change in the isolationist mood of Americans. “It is a terrible thing,” he commented, “to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead—and find no one there.” During the 1930s, neither the United States nor European nations were prepared to halt aggression in Europe or Asia. As the armies of Germany, Italy, and Japan conquered more territory, the democracies still hoped to avoid another world war.

Japan Sparks War in Asia
In 1937, Japan began an all-out war against China. Japanese planes bombed China’s major cities. Thousands of people were killed. In the city of Nanjing alone, some 300,000 civilians and prisoners of war were murdered in a six-week massacre. Japanese troops defeated Chinese armies and occupied northern and central China.

The Japanese advance into China alarmed American leaders. They felt it undermined the Open Door Policy, which promised equal access to trade in China. It also threatened the Philippines, which the United States controlled. Nevertheless, isolationist feelings
remained strong among the American people and kept the United States from taking a firm stand against the Japanese.

**Germany Brings War to Europe**

In Europe, Hitler continued his plans for German expansion. In 1938, just two years after occupying the Rhineland, Hitler annexed Austria. This action again violated the Treaty of Versailles. Once again, Britain and France took no action against Germany.

Later that year, Hitler claimed the Sudetenland, the western part of Czechoslovakia. He justified his demand by claiming that the Sudetenland contained many people of German heritage.

**Appeasement** Britain and France had signed treaties to protect Czechoslovakia but were reluctant to go to war. The two nations sought a peaceful solution. In September 1938, the leaders of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany met in Munich, Germany.

At the Munich Conference, Hitler promised that Germany would seek no further territory once it had acquired the Sudetenland. To preserve the peace, Britain and France agreed that Germany should have the Sudetenland. This practice of giving in to aggression in order to avoid war is known as *appeasement*.

The policy of appeasement failed. Nazi Germany seized the rest of Czechoslovakia the very next year. At last, Britain and France realized that they had to take a firm stand against Nazi aggression.

**Invasion of Poland** Hitler next eyed Poland. In August 1939, he signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact with Stalin. The two rival dictators agreed not to attack each other. Secretly, they also agreed to divide Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe.

In September 1939, Hitler launched a blitzkrieg, or lightning war, against Poland. Unable to withstand up-to-date German planes and tanks, the Poles soon surrendered.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union seized eastern Poland. Stalin’s forces also invaded Finland and later annexed Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Stalin claimed that these steps were needed to build Soviet defenses.

**A Second World War**

Two days after Hitler’s invasion of Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany. A new world war had begun.

World War II was truly a global conflict. Military forces fought all over the world. Italy, Japan, and six other nations joined Germany to form the Axis powers. Opposing the Axis powers were the Allies. Before the war was over, the Allies would include Britain, France, the Soviet Union, the United States, China, and 45 other countries.
The situation at Dunkirk looked hopeless. French and British troops had their backs to the North Sea. Advancing German troops pinned down the army, cutting off a possible retreat through ports on the English Channel. British Navy ships were too few to carry so many troops to safety in time.

In a massive effort, the British put to use nearly everything that could float. Civilians piloted fishing boats, private yachts, tugboats, motorboats, and ferries across the rough waters. Luckily, an approaching storm in the Atlantic had turned north before hitting the English Channel. By June 4, 1940, some 338,000 troops had been miraculously rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk.

**Fall of France** In the spring of 1940, Hitler’s armies marched north and west. In April, they smashed through Denmark and Norway. In May, they overran Holland and Belgium and pushed into France. Hitler’s ally, Italy, also attacked France.

Britain sent troops to help France resist the assault. The British and French, however, were quickly overpowered. By May, the Germans had forced them to retreat to Dunkirk, a French port on the English Channel. In a bold action, the British sent every available ship across the channel to rescue the trapped soldiers.

Unhindered, German armies entered France and marched on to Paris, the French capital. On June 22, 1940, barely six weeks later, France surrendered. The fall of France shocked the world.

**Battle of Britain** Britain now stood alone. Even so, the new prime minister, Winston Churchill, was confident. He vowed:

”We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets... we shall never surrender.”

—Winston Churchill, Speech to House of Commons, June 4, 1940

German planes dropped bombs on London and other British cities during the **Battle of Britain**. British fighter pilots fought back, gunning down nearly 2,000 German planes. By late 1940, after months of bombing, Hitler gave up his planned invasion of Britain.

In the United States, people listened to radio reports from London. Hearing of Britain’s brave stand against Hitler, Americans wondered how much longer they could stay out of the war.

**The United States Moves Toward War**

After the invasion of Poland, President Roosevelt announced that the United States would remain neutral. He knew that most Americans favored the Allies but did not want to go to war.

**Aid to the Allies** Roosevelt sought ways to help the Allies. He asked Congress to repeal the neutrality law that banned the sale of arms to warring nations. Isolationists blocked the move, but FDR won a compromise. The United States could sell arms to the Allies under a “cash-and-carry” plan. The Allies had to pay cash for the goods and carry them away in their own ships.

By 1940, German submarines had sunk many British ships. Roosevelt agreed to give Britain 50 old American destroyers. In exchange, Britain gave the United States 99-year leases on military bases in Newfoundland and the Caribbean.

**Prepared for War** The United States also took several steps to prepare for war. Congress approved greater spending for the army and navy and set up a military draft. It was the first time young men were required to serve in the army during peace.

Isolationists opposed these moves, especially aid for Britain. “I have been forced to the conclusion that we cannot win this war for England, regardless of how much assistance we extend,” warned Charles Lindbergh, the hero pilot of the 1920s. Many other...
Americans, however, felt that the United States had no choice. If Britain fell, Hitler might control the Atlantic Ocean.

**A Third Term for FDR** The threat of war persuaded FDR to run for a third term in 1940. His decision broke the precedent set by George Washington of serving only two terms as President.

Republicans nominated Wendell Willkie, an Ohio businessman. Willkie was a strong critic of FDR’s New Deal. Still, he agreed with Roosevelt on many issues, such as sending aid to Britain. Both candidates also pledged not to send Americans into any foreign wars.

Republicans—and some Democrats—criticized Roosevelt for breaking the two-term tradition. Still, the voters gave FDR a clear victory. After his defeat, Willkie worked to win Republican support for Roosevelt’s war aims.

**Lend-Lease** By late 1940, Britain was running out of cash. Roosevelt boldly suggested lending supplies to Britain. He proclaimed that Britain was defending democracy against totalitarian forces.

Despite opposition from isolationists, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941. It allowed sales or loans of war materials to “any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States.” Under Lend-Lease, the United States sent airplanes, tanks, guns, and ammunition to Britain. British merchant ships transported the goods, with escorts of American warships providing protection as far as Iceland.
In June 1941, Hitler launched a surprise invasion of the Soviet Union. The Soviets were now fighting on the Allied side. Although Roosevelt condemned Stalin's totalitarian rule, he extended Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union.

**War Goals** In August 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill issued the **Atlantic Charter**, which set goals for the postwar world. The two leaders agreed to seek no territory from the war. They pledged to support "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live." The charter also called for a "permanent system of general security" similar to the League of Nations.

**War Comes to the United States**

To Roosevelt, Japanese aggressions in Asia were as alarming as Germany's advance through Europe. The Japanese had seized much of China. After Germany defeated France in 1940, Japan took control of French colonies in Southeast Asia. In September 1940, the Japanese signed an alliance with Germany and Italy.

**An Embargo** The United States tried to stop Japanese aggression by refusing to sell oil and scrap metal to Japan. This embargo angered the Japanese because they badly needed these resources. "Sparks will fly before long," predicted an American diplomat.

Japanese and American officials met in November 1941. Japan asked the United States to lift its trade embargo. The United States called on Japan to withdraw its armies from China and Southeast...
Asia. Neither side would compromise. As the talks limped along, Japan completed plans for a secret attack on the United States.

**Japan Attacks Pearl Harbor** On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, the American Pacific fleet was peacefully anchored at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Suddenly, Japanese planes swept through the sky. In less than two hours, they sank or seriously damaged 19 American ships, destroyed almost 200 planes, and killed about 2,400 people.

The attack was a desperate gamble by Japanese leaders. They knew they lacked the resources to win a long war with the United States. They believed, however, that Americans were weak and had no stomach for fighting. The Japanese thought the sneak attack would force the United States to beg for peace immediately. Instead, Pearl Harbor united Americans in their determination to fight.

The Japanese made two other mistakes. First, they failed to sink the aircraft carriers stationed at Pearl Harbor. The carriers were at sea at the time of the attack. Second, the Japanese did not bomb the fuel oil tanks in Hawaii. Oil and aircraft carriers would become two keys to American victory in the war that followed.

The next day, a grave President Roosevelt addressed Congress. "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—" he began. He told Congress and the nation:

"No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory."

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, War Message to Congress, December 8, 1941

Congress declared war on Japan. In response, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Americans were now united in the cause of freedom. Even isolationists backed the war effort.

### Section 2 Assessment

**Recall**

1. **Identify** Explain the significance of (a) Munich Conference, (b) Nazi-Soviet Pact, (c) Axis, (d) Allies, (e) Winston Churchill, (f) Battle of Britain, (g) Wendell Willkie, (h) Lend-Lease Act, (i) Atlantic Charter.

2. **Define** (a) appeasement, (b) blitzkrieg.

**Comprehension**

3. (a) How did Britain and France respond to German aggression at first? (b) Why did they finally declare war on Germany?

4. Describe two actions the United States took to support the Allies.

5. What were the results of the attack on Pearl Harbor?

**Critical Thinking and Writing**

6. **Exploring the Main Idea**

Review the Main Idea statement at the beginning of this section. Then, write a letter telling British and French leaders at the Munich Conference how you think they should respond to Nazi aggression.

**Drawing Conclusions**

"Until December 7, 1941, the United States followed a neutral course." Do you agree or disagree? Write a paragraph explaining your reasoning.

**Presenting a Scene**

With two or three classmates, present a scene in which an American family listens to FDR’s war message on the radio on December 8, 1941. Have the family discuss what they think the war will mean to them.