

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

America First Isolationism and World War II

As a world war approached, Americans faced this choice: avoid it if possible, or join sides and lead.

A Good Time for Reflection



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Debating the
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America First

Isolationism and World War II

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this choice: avoid it if possible, or join sides and lead.*

Contents

Teacher Introduction	1
Suggestions to the Student	5
Introductory Essay	6
Isolationism and World War II Time Line	7
First Group of Documents	8
Study the Documents	10
Comparing the Documents	12
Comparison Essay	13
Second Group of Documents	14
Study the Documents	16
Comparing the Documents	18
Comparison Essay	19
Document-Based Question	20
Visual Primary Sources	21

Teacher Introduction

★ *Using Primary Sources*

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,
conflicting
perspectives are
among the truths
of history.
No single
objective or
universal account
could ever put an
end to this endless
creative dialogue
within and
between the past
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

INTRODUCTION

★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

2. Have students do the worksheets.

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):

Describe the two or three factors that you think best explain why isolationism appealed to some Americans in the years just before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

INTRODUCTION

★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

Excellent Essay

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

Good Essay

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Fair Essay

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Poor Essay

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in “laundry list” style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

Suggestions to the Student

★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

Isolationism and World War II

By the mid-1930s, Hitler's Germany and an aggressive, militarized Japan were rapidly growing threats to world peace. Nevertheless, a large portion of the American people were dead-set against any U.S. efforts to counter these threats.

This attitude is now usually known as "isolationism." The word suggests a desire to remain separate, or isolated, from the rest of the world and its problems. The term "isolationism" is a bit misleading, however. Isolationists in the 1930s did not want to avoid all contact with the world. Their goal was more limited and specific—to prevent any use of military force except to fight off immediate attacks on the nation's homeland.

Past memories of World War I gave strength to this isolationist spirit. And the terrifying new dictatorships in Asia and Europe only seemed to harden the desire of many to keep America out of any conflict overseas. A majority of Americans probably never agreed with this isolationist spirit completely. Yet it was strong enough to present a serious challenge to President Franklin Roosevelt. For by the late 1930s, Roosevelt was sure the U.S. would have to act to stop Nazi and Japanese aggression. The isolationist mood forced him to move very carefully to win support for military actions against the dictators.

Republican Senator Gerald Nye played a key role in fostering this isolationist spirit. Nye's Senate committee looked into huge profits made by arms manufacturers during World War I. Its hearings led many to blame the arms industry for the U.S. decision to enter that war in 1917. Few historians accept this view now, but at the time it convinced and angered many Americans.

Because of this, Nye and others were able to get the Senate to pass the 1935 Neutrality Act prohibiting the U.S. from selling arms to

any power at war. This act, and later versions of it, presented Roosevelt with a problem as the danger from abroad grew greater.

Nye was one of several Western and Midwestern progressive Republicans who made up one isolationist force in the 1930s. Another was a large group inspired by popular aviation hero Charles Lindbergh. In 1940, these people formed the America First Committee. The AFC included many conservatives and other businessmen who had long distrusted Roosevelt and his New Deal programs for ending the Great Depression. They feared a new war would be bad for the economy and would only add to the growth of a government they already opposed. Some AFC members openly sympathized with Nazi Germany and its anti-Semitism. The AFC's 450 chapters around the nation called for military strength, but only to build a "Fortress America" able to protect the nation's borders without becoming involved anywhere else.

Many liberals and left-wing socialists also adopted isolationist views. These people hated Hitler and the Nazis. But they opposed war itself even more. They may have been few in number. But the status of many of them as writers and artists gave them great influence and prestige.

In June 1940, France fell to the Nazis. At that point, Great Britain stood alone against them. The AFC tried to stop Roosevelt from getting the authority to send arms to Britain. Soon, however, more and more Americans began to turn against the isolationists. Conscription was introduced in 1940. U.S. industry began gearing up for war even before the Lend-Lease program was passed in March 1941. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. After that, the spirit of isolationism all but vanished as the nation united for total war.

Isolationism and World War II Time Line

1919–1920

• • • The Treaty of Versailles ending World War I is signed. However, the U.S. Senate fails to accept the treaty and refuses to join its League of Nations.

1921–1922

• • • The Washington Naval Conference sets limits on the naval armaments of the U.S., Japan, France, Great Britain, and Italy and works to keep peace in the Western Pacific. Similar conferences in 1927 and 1930 try to ease tensions through arms-control agreements.

1928

• • • The Kellogg-Briand Pact outlaws war as an “instrument of national policy,” but it lacks any means of enforcement. It is ultimately signed by 64 nations, including Germany and Japan.

1931

• • • Japan occupies Manchuria. It promises the League of Nations it will withdraw, but then sets up its own state there, called Manchuko. The League does nothing about this.

1933

• • • Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party come to power in Germany.

1934

• • • Senator Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota leads a Senate Committee that concludes American arms-makers played the key role in involving America in World War I. Many writers and pacifist organizations support the Nye Committee’s findings. Few historians today do.

1935

• • • Italy under Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini invades Ethiopia. Hitler ignores the Versailles Treaty and rearms. The first U.S. Neutrality Act forbids shipment of American arms to any belligerent nation in the world.

1936

• • • Hitler invades the Rhineland, which he says was unfairly taken from Germany in World War I. Francisco Franco in Spain launches a rebellion against Spain’s republican government. Nazi Germany and Italy aid Franco while Stalin’s Soviet Union aids the Republic. The second U.S. Neutrality Act forbids any American loans to belligerents.

1937

• • • The third U.S. Neutrality Act forbids Americans to travel anywhere on the vessels of nations at war. The president may list non-military goods that belligerent nations can purchase on a “cash-and-carry” basis only. Japan starts an undeclared war against China.

1938

• • • At the Munich Conference, Great Britain, France, and other nations agree to let Hitler take a part of Czechoslovakia.

1939

• • • President Franklin Roosevelt asks Congress for “methods short of war” to defend the nation. Germany annexes all of Czechoslovakia and invades Poland, triggering general war in Europe. The neutrality laws are revised to allow sales of arms, but only on a cash-and-carry basis.

1940

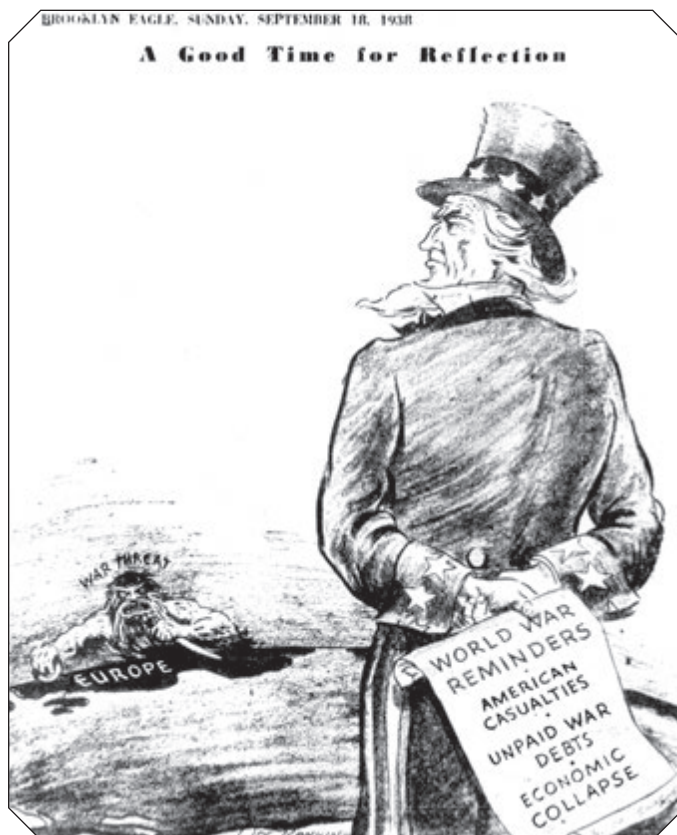
• • • Hitler conquers much of Western Europe. The Battle of Britain takes place. Roosevelt issues an executive order sending destroyers to Britain in exchange for leases on British bases. A draft law is passed. The America First Committee organizes to oppose U.S. entry into the war. At its peak, it has 800,000 members. It is led by Robert Wood of Sears, Roebuck and Co. Charles Lindbergh is its most famous speaker. It includes Senator Nye, writers Sinclair Lewis and Gore Vidal, and many others.

1941

• • • The Lend-Lease Act lets the U.S. provide aid to the Allies. On December 7, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. The United States enters World War II.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 1

A political cartoon by Doc Rankin in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 18, 1938. The cartoon appeared at the end of a summer of turmoil in Czechoslovakia. Pro-Nazi Germans there had been supporting Hitler's desire to take over the Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia where many Germans lived. Just 11 days after this cartoon appeared, the British and French agreed to Hitler's demands regarding the Sudetenland.

This action is still seen as the most dramatic example of the unwillingness or inability of Europe's democracies to stand up to Hitler. Their approach, known as "appeasement," only seemed to make Hitler bolder as he pushed the entire continent toward war. In the midst of this growing tension, this cartoon warns Americans to "reflect" on the horrible costs of U.S. involvement in Europe's last world war.