



THE AMERICAN NEUTRALITY DEBATE: 1940

A re-creation of the conflict preceding World War II,
debating whether or not the United States should end its neutrality

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PURPOSE

Why were Americans so isolationistic in the late 1930s?

When high school students assess American involvement in World War II, two of their more often repeated remarks are “It was a popular war” and “Americans were more patriotic then than they are today.” Comparing World War II to more recent conflicts in Korea and Vietnam—military operations whose wisdom a number of Americans questioned and even condemned—makes it easy to understand why such notions concerning World War II evolved. However, a thorough study of America from 1937–1940 reveals a real struggle taking place between those Americans who desired to avoid Europe’s wars at all costs and others who wanted to intervene. The issue of neutrality, heavily debated during the late 1930s, illustrates the intense differences of opinion surrounding the entire era. During these tumultuous years, the return to America’s traditional isolationism would be shattered, but only after vigorous debate and the stunning awakening brought on by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

This re-creation will result in a spirited debate of key conflicts that typified the various moods of Americans in the late 1930s. Specifically, your students will experience the following:

Knowledge

1. 1930s concerns about the direction and implementation of American foreign policy and subsequent attitudes and opinions
2. The main issues debated: neutrality legislation, traditional isolationism, the extent of American vital interests abroad, defensive perimeters, and the military draft

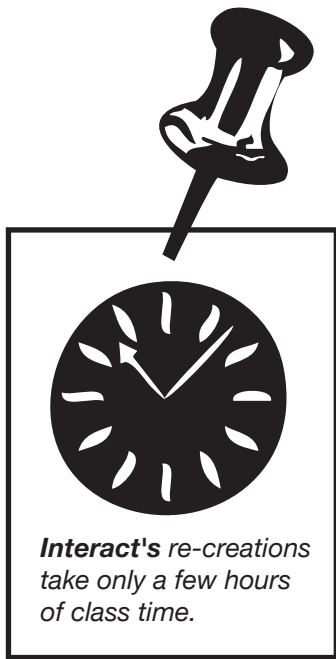
Attitudes

1. Appreciating the sincerity and conviction contained in both the isolationist and interventionist positions
2. Appreciating the anxiety and fear associated with all the debaters as they argued issues of war, peace, and national security
3. Appreciating how the development of diplomacy/foreign policy in the United States brings out the best in a democracy and that such policy decisions are not made by governments alone

Skills

1. Assuming an historic identity, standing up, and speaking convincingly as that identity before a whole class
2. Listening carefully enough to be able to take specific detailed notes under generalization headings

OVERVIEW



Four class periods—or days—are needed for this re-creation.

Day 1

After an interest catcher that makes students aware that they do have assumptions about America's role in world affairs, students read the Student Guide's Background Essay on the issue of whether to aid the Allies in 1940. Then they are grouped into three factions: 1) eight interventionist speakers; 2) eight anti-interventionist speakers; and 3) uncommitted individuals who will ask questions of the debaters. The three groups get separate handouts, which individuals study in order to contribute to the next day's debate.

Days 2–3

The room is changed into a special debate arrangement. Eight pairs of speakers debate the neutrality-intervention issue at an imaginary meeting in Chicago in October 1940: eight debaters speak for aiding the Allies; eight speak against. The remaining uncommitted persons ask specific questions of specific speakers. Regular votes are taken as the paired debaters present formal arguments and answer specific questions. Eventually one side is declared the winner.

Day 4

Either in study pairs or activity groups students debrief what happened during the previous days' debate. They pinpoint late 1930s concepts and attitudes about American foreign policy: the role of the presidency in implementing foreign policy objectives, isolationism, internationalism, and possible results of American intervention in the world war. They then discuss how American involvement in world affairs today relates to the events of the 1937–1940 period. As a result, students draw conclusions about present American foreign policy and how historic events, many of which are outside the realm of our nation's control, have shaped America's status within the world community of nations.

SETUP DIRECTIONS



Certain roles are so important that only you should determine who plays them.

1. **Assigning roles** Decide in advance how you wish to divide your students into the three groups. Since no student has a larger responsibility than making a two-minute speech and a one-minute answer to a question, you may wish to have students pull numbered slips to determine who is to be in which group if your group is roughly homogeneous in ability. However, if not, you may wish to assign students to roles to assure that all three groups have a fair number of “vocal” persons; that is, individuals either capable of or desirous of speaking on their feet. **Note well:** *After duplicating a ROLE ASSIGNMENTS: AMERICAN NEUTRALITY DEBATE 1940, fill in its spaces with students’ names so that you will always know the debate’s sequence.* (You may also want to give each student a copy.)
2. **Handouts** Duplicate the number in parentheses, using the masters in this Teacher Guide.
 - INTERVENTIONIST PRO ARGUMENTS (eight: one page per speaker)
 - ANTI-INTERVENTIONIST CON ARGUMENTS (eight: one page per speaker)
 - UNCOMMITTED QUESTIONS (eight: cut pages in half vertically, one per questioner)

Optional:

 - * ROLE ASSIGNMENTS: AMERICAN NEUTRALITY DEBATE 1940 (one copy for your use)
3. **Poster materials** If you wish to encourage your students to make posters with slogans on them to hang on your classroom walls during the debate, obtain some plain cardboard, butcher paper, appropriate paint, and felt pens.



An example of a poster your interventionist speakers might create for the debate

4. **Follow-up reading** Since some of your students will be stimulated by the heated quality of the debate, encourage them to check books out of the library on the 1940 Neutrality Debate. See Bibliography on page 4.

DAILY TEACHING DIRECTIONS - 1



Also assign your students to read the chapter(s) in their textbook covering America's drift into World War II. Make certain that your students pay particular attention to the maps and illustrations.

Before Day 1

(Could be one or more days in advance of Day 1)

1. Consider showing any film or filmstrip that will introduce the foreign policy issues of the late 1930s.
2. Point out how the audio-visual you have shown relates to the upcoming re-creation of the 1940 debate on aiding the Allies.
3. Encourage your students to read in the books you and your librarian have gathered on a reserve shelf labeled 1940 Neutrality Debate.

Day 1

(Some of the following teaching directions are rather brief since the instructional sequence is written out in considerable detail under Procedure in the Student Guide.)

1. If you have shown no filmstrip or film and want to awaken students to what is going to happen, consider using the following motivator. Either duplicate or write the following six statements on your chalkboard. Then have your students respond to each statement by writing one of the following: **SD**, **D**, **NO**, **A**, or **SA**. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, No Opinion, Agree, Strongly Agree.)

Statements for students' response:

- a. If it were left up to me, I would like to see the United States return to an earlier, simpler era when our nation was isolated from the problems faced by the rest of the world.
- b. The area of gravest concern to our nation today involves domestic issues (economic, political, social), not foreign affairs.
- c. Given the unstable world we live in today, the United States should prepare itself militarily to meet any aggressive possibility created by a hostile nation.
- d. American presidents have a solemn responsibility to inform American citizens concerning *any and all* matters relating to their security.
- e. The United States has a moral obligation as the leader of the free world to protect and defend other free societies—and this can mean sending military supplies and even our troops overseas.
- f. The United States should be more selective than in previous years when deciding which countries are to receive our military and/or economic aid.

ROLE ASSIGNMENTS: AMERICAN NEUTRALITY DEBATE: 1940

		Speakers	Questioners
Pro	1		
Con			
Pro	2		
Con			
Pro	3		
Con			
Pro	4		
Con			
Pro	5		
Con			
Pro	6		
Con			
Pro	7		
Con			
Pro	8		
Con			