

# LESSON: Isolation or Intervention: A Case Study on the Lend Lease Act

**GRADE LEVEL:** Adaptable for grades 9–12

**SUBJECT:** Multidisciplinary

**TIME REQUIRED:** Approximately 60–90 minutes (extensions available)

**This is a *thematic* lesson that builds on fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic.**

## RATIONALE

In this lesson, students will identify multiple economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans’ attitudes about the United States’ role in the world from 1939–1941, when people in the United States were deeply divided about what actions, if any, America should take in defense of countries threatened by German military conquest. Through an examination of primary source documents, students will identify and evaluate arguments that different Americans made for the provision of military materiel to Britain in 1940. Ultimately, students will reflect on questions that this lesson raises about America’s role in the world today.

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What role should Americans play when democracy and freedom are threatened abroad?

### EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand that there were many different issues that the American public perceived as having a critical impact on their livelihoods, security, and core values. Those issues vied for public attention during this time and affected the manner in which the American people responded to events at home and abroad.
- Identify economic, social, and geopolitical factors that influenced Americans’ attitudes toward the potential for American involvement in World War II.
- Articulate and evaluate arguments for and against the Lend-Lease Act of 1940, providing facts to support these arguments about whether and how the United States should have supported countries abroad via lend-lease during this time.

### TEACHER PREPARATION

The materials below can supplement historical knowledge students may or may not already have about this time period. If necessary, teachers may cover this information on the first day and complete the primary source part of this lesson on the second day

- Lend-Lease Background (Pages 2-7 in the [student packet](#))
- [Worksheet](#)
- [Historical Slide Deck](#) with [accompanying teacher script](#)
- [Timeline of events](#) for 1918–1940 and [notes](#)

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## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes. Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.
- Reference the [Glossary](#) in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* for definitional support.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.

## INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

### ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

1. Begin with a class discussion.

#### ASK THE STUDENTS

- What role should Americans play when democracy and freedom are threatened abroad?

Discuss with students what was happening from 1939 through 1941.

2. Divide the class into small groups of students. Assign readings for each case study from the [lend-lease primary sources](#), based on the time allotted for the lesson and the reading level of the students.

Set a purpose for reading:

Lend-Lease Bill decision to be discussed: Should the US Congress and president provide military equipment in support of the British war effort against the Germans?

Below are examples of arguments that were made in the media and Congressional committee in late 1940 and early 1941, both for and against passage of the Lend-Lease Bill. Students should underline key information, passages in the reading that require further explanation, or content about which they have questions.

- Sources:

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- Page 8: Statement of the American Federation of Labor in Support of the “Lend Lease” Bill (S. 275), to the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, February 11, 1941 (full text)
  - Page 12: December 29, 1940: President Franklin D. Roosevelt “Fireside Chat” (excerpts)
  - Page 21: “Lindbergh Hits Lease-Lend Bill in Testimony,” Northwest Arkansas Times, February 6, 1941 (transcription)
  - Page 23: Statement of General Robert E. Wood, Acting National Chairman, America First Committee, February 4–10, 1941 (excerpts)
3. While in small groups, students will examine primary source documents. Using the [document analysis worksheet](#), each student will answer the following questions:
- Who is the author?
  - Who might be the intended audience?
  - What does the author want the target audience to think, feel, or do? Is there a specific action the author proposes?
  - What hopes, fears, and grievances present in society at the time might influence how the target audience responded to this document? Consider political, social, and economic conditions.
4. After each group has analyzed and discussed their documents, lead a discussion of the arguments that different Americans made for and against the Lend-Lease Act. Key points for each primary source are listed at the end of this lesson plan.
- Help the students synthesize their findings and consider the various factors that influenced public opinion during this time. Draw broader conclusions (as well as lingering questions) about Americans and their responses to the Nazi threat in 1939–1941.
  - What questions does this activity raise about America’s role in the world?

## ASSESSMENTS

### Essay or discussion questions

1. How would you characterize public opinion in America regarding the lead-up to and start of World War II in 1939–1941? As America engaged in this debate, what was happening in Europe?
2. What factors influenced Americans’ attitudes and opinions about these events and conditions?
3. Were there particular arguments that you found convincing? Why? Was there additional information you would need to accurately assess the validity of these arguments?
4. In a democracy, what is the role of informed public debate about policy decisions?
5. What questions does this case study raise about America’s role in the world?

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## PRIMARY SOURCE KEY POINTS

### Congressional Testimony: American Federation of Labor

The American Federation of Labor supports the Lend-Lease Act as necessary and indispensable to the defense of the United States. It held that Britain was the “last democratic nation” and that if it were to be overrun by Germany, America and democracy around the world would be under threat. In supporting this legislation, the American Federation of Labor saw Lend-Lease as a basic instrument of national policy of the United States.

- The Nazis are a threat to democracy—not just to the countries they have declared war against but to all democratic countries around the world, and therefore, America is at grave risk if Britain is defeated.
- Support Britain—in order to keep war from our shores, we must ensure that Britain is not defeated.

### Congressional Testimony: Robert E. Wood of the America First Committee

Wood asserts that the Lend-Lease Act is not just about defense or aid to our allies, but is in essence a “war bill” that affords too much power to the president. He also does not believe that America would be immediately threatened if Britain were to fall, and that Americans are falsely afraid of this potential threat. He goes on to speak about the lies that the American people have been told about the benefits of the Lend-Lease Act. Instead of promoting the defense of the United States while aiding our allies, Wood asserts that it gives equal importance to the defense of foreign nations and makes their cause our own. Wood rejects the Lend-Lease Act, and does not support it. He argues that:

- The bill gives too much power to the President to declare war and send aid.
- Even if Britain falls, the United States is not in immediate danger of invasion.
- The bill equates our national defense priorities with those of our allies, instead of doing what is in the best interest of the United States.

### Fireside Chat: President Franklin D. Roosevelt

In this December 1940 fireside chat, President Roosevelt makes it clear that he supports the bill. He tells the American people that wars abroad should, in fact, be of concern to the American people, and that if Britain falls, those in the Western Hemisphere would be “living at the point of a gun.” Roosevelt admits the risks of aiding the British, but asserts that there would be less of a chance of America getting involved in the war if the country did all it could to support those defending themselves against the Axis countries. Finally, he stresses that America must be “the great arsenal of democracy,” and treat the fate of Britain with the same sense of patriotism, sacrifice, and urgency as if the United States were already at war.

- It is our role to help our Allies when they are threatened.
- There is a great possibility that the United States will be attacked if Britain falls.
- The United States should send support now to keep America out of the war later

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## Newspaper Article: “Lindbergh Hits Lease-Lend Bill in Testimony”

Charles Lindbergh comes out strongly against the Lend-Lease Act. Instead of avoiding war through Lend-Lease, he believes that the United States would be encouraging and prolonging it. From a tactical standpoint, Lindbergh also testified that he didn't believe that American assistance could actually give Great Britain military superiority over Nazi Germany. He also argues that the British have a geographical disadvantage and by sending American supplies to them, we also are subjecting our ships to the bombs and torpedoes of the enemy.

- By sending aid to Britain, the United States would be giving up an ideal defensive position in America.
- The United States would only prolong the war by aiding the British.
- Even with American assistance, the British military would not be strong enough to defeat Germany