

# War and Uneasy Neutrality



**In an address to a joint session of Congress on September 21, 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt assailed the Neutrality Acts that barred the sale of arms to belligerent nations then engaged in the opening hostilities of World War II.**

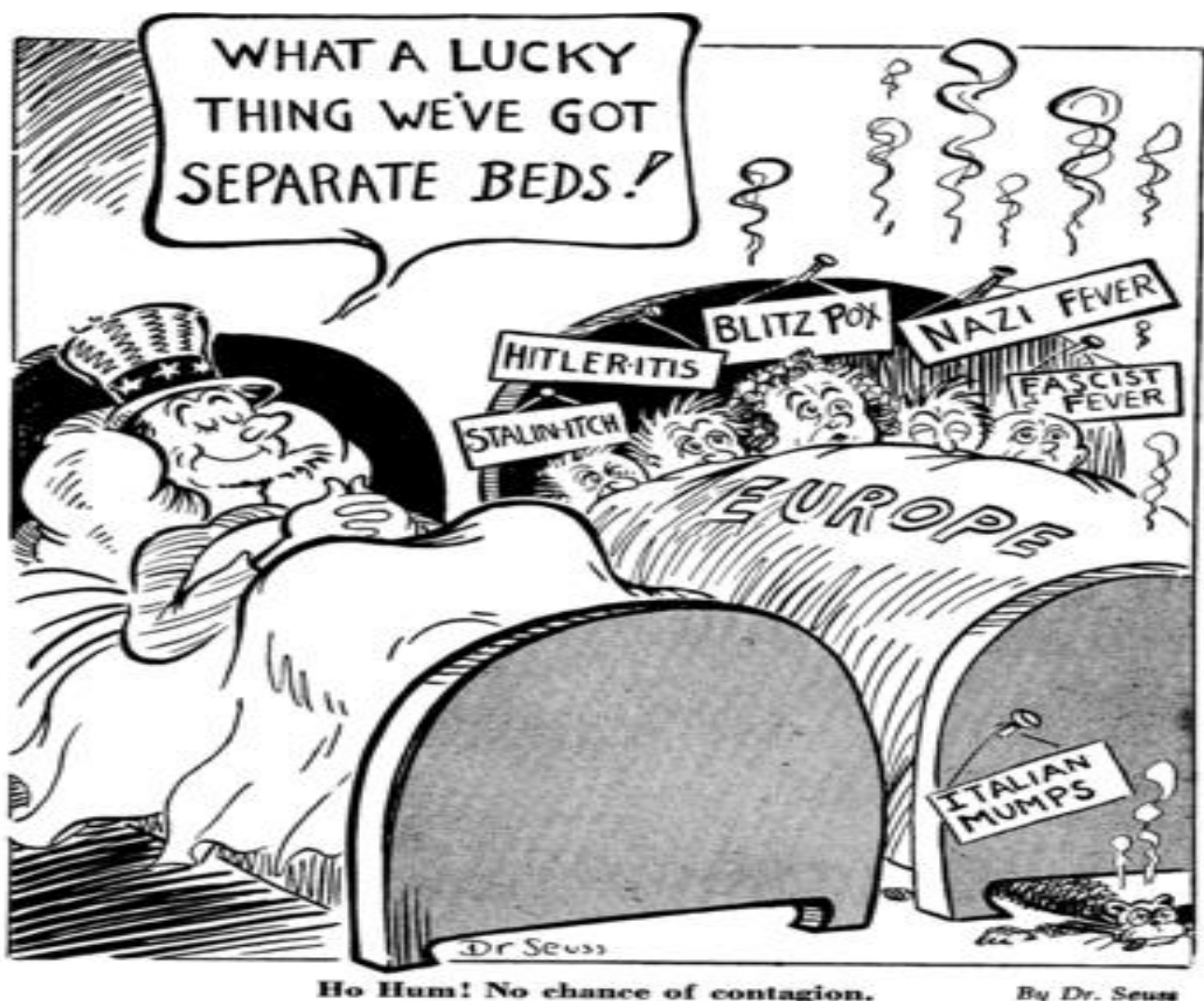
Before Franklin Roosevelt's second term was well under way, his domestic program was overshadowed by the expansionist designs of totalitarian regimes in Japan, Italy, and Germany. In 1931, Japan had invaded Manchuria, crushed Chinese resistance, and set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Italy, under Benito Mussolini, enlarged its boundaries in Libya and in 1935, conquered Ethiopia. Germany, under Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, militarized its economy and reoccupied the Rhineland (demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles) in 1936. In 1938, Hitler incorporated Austria into the German Reich and demanded cession of the German-speaking Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. By then, war seemed imminent.

The United States, disillusioned by the failure of the crusade for democracy in World War I, announced that in no circumstances could any country involved in the conflict look to it for aid. Neutrality legislation, enacted piecemeal from 1935 to 1937, prohibited trade in arms with any warring nations, required cash for all other commodities, and forbade American flag merchant ships from carrying those goods. The objective was to prevent, at almost any cost, the involvement of the United States in a foreign war.

With the Nazi conquest of Poland in 1939 and the outbreak of World War II, isolationist sentiment increased, even though Americans clearly favored the victims of Hitler's aggression and supported the Allied democracies, Britain and France. Roosevelt

could only wait until public opinion regarding U.S. involvement was altered by events. After the fall of France and the beginning of the German air war against Britain in mid-1940, the debate intensified between those in the United States who favored aiding the democracies and the antiwar faction known as the isolationists. Roosevelt did what he could to nudge public opinion toward intervention. The United States joined Canada in a Mutual Board of Defense and aligned with the Latin American republics in extending collective protection to the nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Congress, confronted with the mounting crisis, voted immense sums for rearmament, and, in September 1940, passed the first peacetime conscription bill ever enacted in the United States. In that month also, Roosevelt concluded a daring executive agreement with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The United States gave the British Navy 50 "overage" destroyers in return for British air and naval bases in Newfoundland and the North Atlantic.



Ho Hum! No chance of contagion.

By Dr. Seuss

The 1940 presidential election campaign demonstrated that the isolationists, while vocal, were a minority. Roosevelt's Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie, leaned toward intervention. Thus, the November election yielded another majority for the president, making Roosevelt the first, and last, U. S. chief executive to be elected to a third term.

In early 1941, Roosevelt got Congress to approve the Lend-Lease Program, which enabled him to transfer arms and equipment to any nation (notably Great Britain and later the Soviet Union and China) deemed vital to the defense of the United States. Total Lend-Lease aid by war's end would amount to more than \$11.8 billion.



UNCLE: 'IT WOULD BE DYNAMITE IF I DIDN'T'

Most remarkably, in August, Roosevelt met with Prime Minister Churchill off the coast of Newfoundland. The two leaders issued a "joint statement of war aims," which they called the Atlantic Charter. Bearing a remarkable resemblance to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, it called for these objectives: no territorial aggrandizement; no territorial changes without the consent of the people concerned; the right of all people to choose their own form of government; the restoration of self-government to those deprived of it; economic collaboration between all nations; freedom from war, from fear, and from want for all peoples; freedom of the seas; and the abandonment of the use of force as an instrument of international policy. America was now neutral in name only.



**President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill onboard HMS Prince of Wales in August 1941.**