

Between World Wars: FDR and the Age of Isolationism



THE CHOICES PROGRAM

Explore the Past... Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
BROWN UNIVERSITY WWW.CHOICES.EDU

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The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program develops curricula on current and historical international issues and offers workshops, institutes, and in-service programs for high school teachers. Course materials place special emphasis on the importance of educating students in their participatory role as citizens.

The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program is a program of the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

Thomas J. Biersteker
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Introduction: The Great Debate

In 1938, Nazi Germany's actions worried European leaders. Leaders met in Munich, Germany in October of that year to discuss the matter. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich thinking he had helped Europe and Britain avoid war. Chamberlain, French Premier Edouard Daladier, Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini, and Nazi Germany's leader Adolf Hitler had signed an agreement that allowed Germany to occupy part of Czechoslovakia.

“My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.”

—Neville Chamberlain,
September 30, 1938

Prime Minister Chamberlain was wrong. Hitler would violate the agreement within months, occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia, and launch a war to conquer Europe. Today history is a harsh judge of Chamberlain's miscalculation, though historians recognize that the devastation of World War I made European leaders anxious to do anything to prevent war from occurring again. The desire to avoid another war in Europe was widespread in the United States as well.

Americans watching from afar had sympathy for the Czechoslovakians, but most were quite sure that they wanted nothing to do with Europe's problems. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) sent a telegram to Hitler just before the Munich meeting asking him to negotiate to avoid war. He concluded his telegram by saying that the United States had “no political involvements in Europe....” Public opinion polls showed that after Munich, 95 percent of the American public opposed participation in another war. Two-thirds opposed

selling war materials to either side.

Events in Asia seemed to point towards conflict as well. Japan invaded China in 1937. In November 1938, Japan proclaimed that it had established a “new order” in Asia. American policy-makers worried about Japanese expansion into Asia.

Japanese and German aggression led Roosevelt and his advisors to believe that the United States needed to begin to prepare to meet the threats in Europe and Asia. But many Americans were not so sure. In 1940 and 1941 a great debate took place in the United States about America's role in the world and what to do about events in Europe and Asia.

“There have been a number of fierce national quarrels in my lifetime—over communism in the later Forties, over McCarthyism in the Fifties, over Vietnam in the Sixties—but none so tore apart families and friendships as the great debate of 1940-1941.”

—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Historian

The debate raged until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war against the United States on December 11, 1941.

In the following pages you will explore the debate that occurred in the United States about how to respond to the gathering storm in Europe and Asia. You will consider the following questions: Why did so many Americans want to avoid war? What was Roosevelt's view of the issue, why did he believe that war was coming, and how did he try to convince the country to prepare? Finally, you and your classmates will recreate a debate in the U.S. Congress about whether to supply aid to Great Britain when it remained the last hold-out to Hitler's war of conquest.

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The Great Depression

Objectives:

Students will: Examine the effects of the Great Depression using a variety of sources.

Explore the connection between domestic and international events.

Assess the value of multiple contemporary sources to analyze an historical issue.

Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the background reading (pages 1-12) and completed the “Study Guide—Part I” in the Teacher Resource Book (TRB 4-5) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part I” (TRB-6).

Handouts:

“Photographs of the Great Depression” (TRB-7)

“Robert Frost Poem” (TRB-10)

“FDR’s Fireside Chat, September 6, 1936” (TRB-11)

“Graph Analysis” (TRB-13)

Note:

A collection of 160,000 images from the Great Depression through World War II is available online at <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>>

In the Classroom:

1. Focus Question: Write the question “Was the Great Depression a threat to American democracy?” on the board or overhead.

2. Examining the Great Depression: Divide the class into groups of two or three students and give a handout to each group. Tell students that each group will examine the Great Depression from different perspectives. Ask students to read the directions on each handout and answer the questions provided.

3. Group Responses—After small groups have completed the questions, have everyone come together in a large group. Call on small groups to share their responses to the questions. Are there recurring themes and ideas that appear? Record them on the board.

4. Making Connections: Ask students to recall their background reading and American attitudes toward Europe. Some Americans put some of the blame for the depression on Europe. What other events in overseas concerned Americans? How might the Great Depression have affected American attitudes toward international issues?

Ask students to consider Roosevelt’s worry about the “... class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life.” What was Roosevelt worried about? Did the Great Depression threaten the foundations of American society?

Homework:

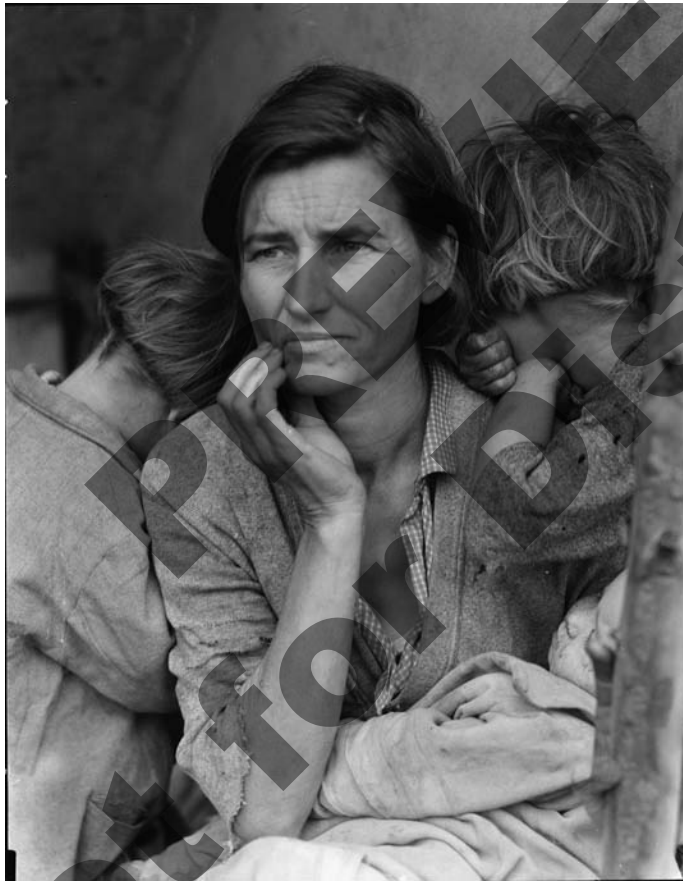
Students should read Part II of the background reading in the student text (pages 13-24) and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 19-20) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-21).

Name: _____

Photographs of the Great Depression

Instructions: Historians often use photographs to gain an impression about an event or era. Nevertheless, it is important to be careful about drawing conclusions from photographs. One cannot be certain that what is in the photograph is an accurate or complete reflection of reality. During the Great Depression, the federal government sponsored photographers to document the Depression. The complete collection of more than 100,000 photographs is available online at the Library of Congress. Examine the following photographs and answer the the questions that follow each. The photo's captions were written by the photgraphers.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OVI Collection LC-USF34-T01-009058-C Photographer: Dorothea Lange.



1. Who and what do you see?

2. When and where was it taken?

3. What does the caption tell you about the photo?

4. Does the photo have a political point of view? Explain.

Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection LC-USF34-009667-E Photographer: Dorothea Lange.



Drought refugees from Abilene, Texas, following the crops of California as migratory workers. "The finest people in this world live in Texas but I just can't seem to accomplish nothin' there. Two year drought, then a crop, then two years drought and so on. I got two brothers still trying to make it back there and there they're sitting," said the father. 1936.

1. Who and what do you see?
2. When and where was it taken?
3. What does the caption tell you about the photo?
4. Does the photo have a political point of view? Explain.

Name: _____



Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection LC-USF342-008147-A.
Photographer: Walker Evans.

Sharecropper Bud Fields and his family at home. Hale County, Alabama, 1935.

1. Who and what do you see?
2. When and where was the photo taken?
3. What does the caption tell you about the photo?
4. Does the photo have a political point of view? Explain.

Robert Frost Poem

Instructions: Read the poem to yourself and then out loud in your group. Answer the questions below.

In Dives' Dive* by Robert Frost, 1936

It is late at night and still I am losing,
But still I am steady and unaccusing.

As long as the Declaration guards
My right to be equal in number of cards,

It is nothing to me who runs the Dive.
Let's have a look at another five.

Questions:

1. What activity is the narrator of the poem describing?
2. How would you describe the mood of the narrator of the poem? Explain.
3. Why might the word "Declaration" be capitalized?
4. Robert Frost published this poem in 1936. List at least three events from your background reading that are taking place either then or the years immediately before 1936. Do any of them relate to the poem? Explain.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
5. *Extra Challenge:* Briefly explain the title of the poem.

*Note: "Dives" is a biblical allusion to a rich man.

FDR's Fireside Chat, September 6, 1936

Instructions: Read the conclusion of Roosevelt's Fireside Chat below. You may want to listen to a recording of the speech at <http://millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/diglibrary/prezspeeches/roosevelt/fdr_1936_0906.html>. In the first part of the speech Roosevelt focuses on the severe drought in the farm states. In the excerpt below he worries about the Labor Day holiday. Underline the five most important sentences below then answer the questions that follow.

"Tomorrow is Labor Day. Labor Day in this country has never been a class holiday. It has always been a national holiday. It has never had more significance as a national holiday than it has now. In other countries the relationship of employer and employee has more or less been accepted as a class relationship not readily to be broken through. In this country we insist, as an essential of the American way of life, that the employer-employee relationship should be one between free men and equals. We refuse to regard those who work with hand or brain as different from or inferior to those who live from their property. We insist that labor is entitled to as much respect as property. But our workers with hand and brain deserve more than respect for their labor. They deserve practical protection in the opportunity to use their labor at a return adequate to support them at a decent and constantly rising standard of living, and to accumulate a margin of security against the inevitable vicissitudes of life.

"The average man must have that twofold opportunity if we are to avoid the growth of a class conscious society in this country.

"There are those who fail to read both the signs of the times and American history. They would try to refuse the worker any effective power to bargain collectively, to earn a decent livelihood and to acquire security. It is those short-sighted ones, not labor, who threaten this country with that class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life.

"All American workers, brain workers and manual workers alike, and all the rest of us whose well-being depends on theirs, know that our needs are one in building an orderly economic democracy in which all can profit and in which all can be secure from the kind of faulty economic direction which brought us to the brink of common ruin seven years ago.

"There is no cleavage between white collar workers and manual workers, between artists and artisans, musicians and mechanics, lawyers and accountants and architects and miners.

"Tomorrow, Labor Day, belongs to all of us. Tomorrow, Labor Day, symbolizes the hope of all Americans. Anyone who calls it a class holiday challenges the whole concept of American democracy.

"The Fourth of July commemorates our political freedom—a freedom which without economic freedom is meaningless indeed. Labor Day symbolizes our determination to achieve an economic freedom for the average man which will give his political freedom reality."

Questions:

1. Roosevelt refers to “class” five times in the excerpt. What does he mean by “class”?

2. What values does Roosevelt emphasize in this Fireside Chat? List at least four.
 - a.

 - b.

 - c.

 - d.

3. Roosevelt refers to “...that class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life.” What other countries might he be referring to? What systems of government do these countries have?

4. What international and domestic events might have led Roosevelt to say that calling Labor Day a “...class holiday challenges the concept of American democracy”?

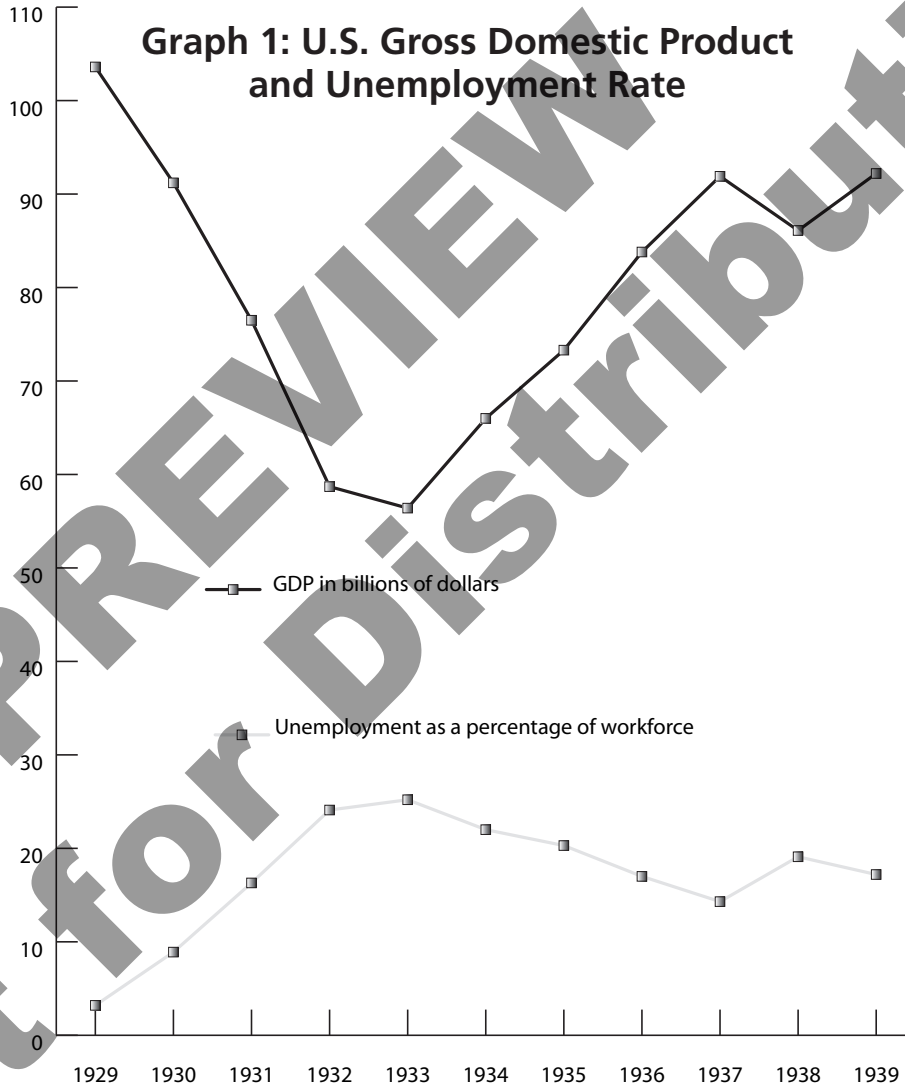
Domestic events:

International events:

5. *Extra Challenge:* Was American democracy under threat during the Great Depression? Explain.

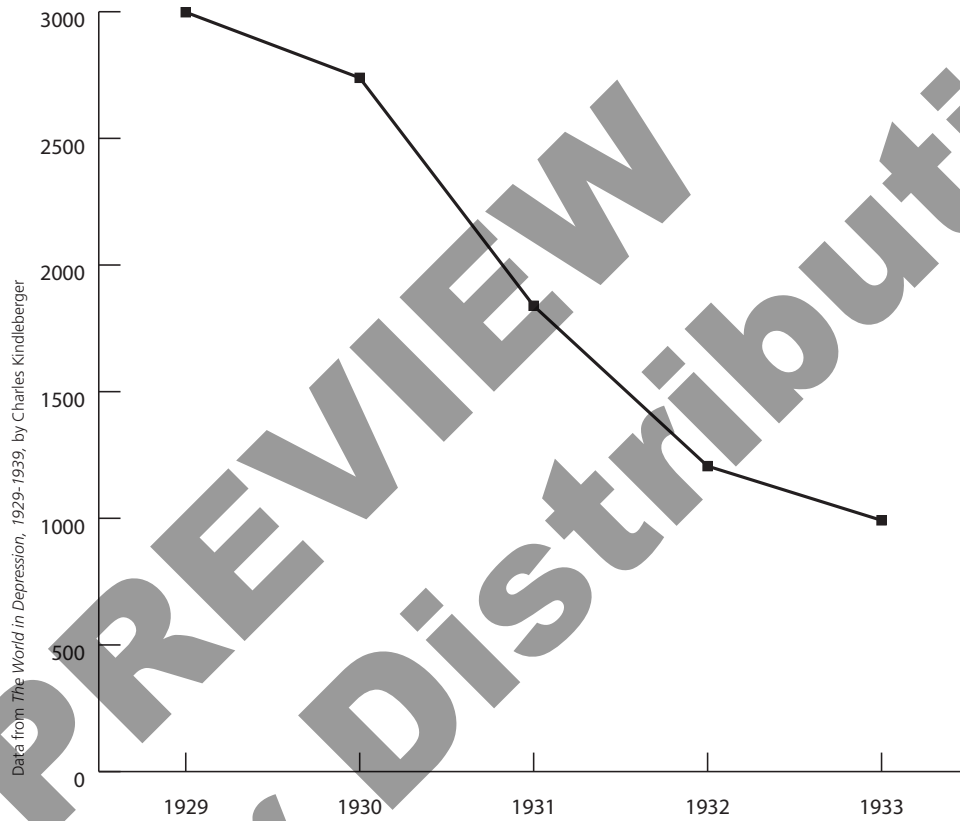
Graph Analysis

Instructions: Examine the graphs below and then answer the questions that follow. (Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the value of all goods and services produced in a country.)



1. What years does Graph 1 cover?
2. In what year is unemployment highest? What is the approximate rate of unemployment in that year?
3. What year had the largest change in GDP and unemployment?
4. Write in the following events in the year they occurred on Graph 1: Black Tuesday, Roosevelt elected to first term, New Deal policies first enacted, Roosevelt elected to second term, Japan invades China, Germany invades Poland. Refer to your reading if necessary.

**Graph 2: Total Imports of 75 Countries
in Millions of U.S. Dollars**



1. What years does Graph 2 cover?
2. Write in the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in the year it occurred on Graph 2.
3. What year had the greatest decline in world trade?
4. If the line in Graph 2 follows the same trend as the lines in Graph 1, what direction will the line in Graph 2 go after 1933?