

Applications of FDR's "Quarantine Speech"

Part A.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his sensational "Quarantine Speech" on October 5, 1937, in Chicago, stated that the troublesome nations (Japan, Germany, and Italy) should be quarantined to preserve peace. Denouncing the dictators, he declared, "The peace, the freedom, and the security of 90 percent of the population of the world is being jeopardized by the remaining 10 percent, who are threatening a breakdown of all international order and law. Surely the 90 percent who want to live in peace under the law and in accordance with moral standards that have received almost universal acceptance through the centuries, can and must find some way to make their will prevail. . . . There must be positive endeavors to preserve peace."

Following are several factual scenarios. For each, consider these questions: (a) In the light of the speech, what would you have expected FDR to do? (b) What would have resulted?

Scenario 1: The Panay Incident

The Japanese invasion of China was meanwhile degenerating into an orgy of lust and loot. At various times American citizens, male and female, were subjected to slapping and stripping by arrogant Nipponese soldiers. Some American schools and hospitals were damaged by aerial bombers, despite the huge American flags painted on their roofs.

The most sensational incident of all came on December 12, 1937, when Japanese aviators bombed and sank a United States gunboat, the *Panay*, on the Yangtze River in broad daylight. Two men were killed and some thirty wounded; escaping survivors were repeatedly machine-gunned. The vessel was so plainly marked and the visibility was so clear that the incident could hardly have resulted from mistaken identity. One plausible explanation was that hot-headed Japanese officers, defying the Tokyo government, had thus vented their contempt for Yankees.

The American people were shocked by this wanton attack, which also involved the destruction of three Standard Oil tankers. Cartoonists represented the Japanese ambassador as saying, "So sorry—excuse please," while the bodies of mangled American sailors lay about. Washington promptly demanded apologies, reparation, and adequate precautions against the repetition of such an outrage.

The Tokyo Foreign Office, put in a bad light by irresponsible military men, made haste to tender the most profound apologies and pay full monetary reparation—\$2,214,007.36. Thousands of Japanese subjects attempted to make amends through private gifts. In these circumstances, the crisis quickly blew over.¹

a.

b.

Scenario 2: The Finnish Interlude

When war erupted in 1939, many Americans assumed that the conflict would follow the familiar pattern of 1914-1918. The supposedly impregnable concrete Maginot Line on France's eastern border would hold Hitler at bay. The strangling noose of Britain's blockade would slowly choke Germany into starvation, and Berlin would be forced to sue for peace, as in 1918.

But surprises were speedily forthcoming. German mechanized divisions speedily overran Poland, while Stalin came in for his prearranged share of the loot. Yet the lesson of the Polish preview meant little to the Allied countries. They went ahead with their business-as-usual plans for waging the conflict, while the bored journalists wrote disgustedly of the "phony war."

Unexpected excitement developed late in 1939 over the Finnish crisis. Joseph Stalin, not trusting his dictator-accomplice Adolph Hitler, sought to secure from Finland certain strategic areas that would enable him to bolster his defenses against Germany. "Brave little Finland" resolutely refused the proffered exchange of territory. Late in November, 1939, the Soviet Union spurned Washington's offer of good offices and assaulted its tiny neighbor. Russian aircraft, in defiance of an appeal from Roosevelt, heavily bombed civilian centers.²

a.

b.

Scenario 3: The Robin Moor Sinking

Then, on May 21, 1941, the American merchantman *Robin Moor* was torpedoed and shelled in the South Atlantic by a German submarine. This was the first United States vessel of any kind to be deliberately sunk by German hands, either in or out of the war zones. American public opinion was shocked and angered, even though no lives were lost. Senator Carter Glass of Virginia expressed the views of countless interventionists when he cried, "I think we ought to go over there and shoot hell out of every U-boat."

Hitler's spokesmen defended the sinking by alleging that the *Robin Moor* was carrying contraband of war to Britain's South Africa. Yet the Germans, in forcing the passengers and crew into small boats hundreds of miles from land, had not made provision for their safety in accordance with international law and the London protocol of 1936, which Berlin had freely signed. Roosevelt angrily denounced this act of "piracy," but Germany rejected his claims for damages. Washington in retaliation "froze" all German and Italian assets in the United States, and ordered all German and Italian consulates, as hotbeds of subversive activity, to be closed. Berlin and Rome retaliated in kind.

The *Robin Moor* opened a new chapter in German-American relations. Until then, Washington had little justification for complaint against the Germans, as far as America's specific rights were concerned. But it had much reason to complain of Hitler's ruthless attacks on the community of nations, of which the United States was a leading member. On purely legalistic grounds, Berlin had much better grounds for protest against America's unneutral aid to the Allies than America had for complaint against Germany's infractions of America's rights. The lend-lease act widened the breach irreparably. The United States was now a virtual cobelligerent of the Allies. Hitler, with bitter memories of America's role in terminating World War I, did not wish to provoke a showdown yet. But henceforth the German submarine commanders, pursuant to orders, could hardly be expected to refrain from defending themselves against American destroyers escorting lend-lease supplies to Britain.³

a.

b.

Scenario 4: Aid to Russia

Hitler's fateful attack on the "Mongol halfwits" of Russia wrought a revolution in American opinion. Stalin—the cynical, self-seeking, iron-fisted aggressor—suddenly became a most welcome ally of those nations who were seeking to halt Hitlerism. President Roosevelt promptly issued promises of aid to Moscow, and soon made some military supplies available. In about four months, after investigating Stalin's capacity to resist, he provided the first installments of lend-lease assistance to Russia that ultimately totalled a staggering \$11 billion.

No less astonishing was the reversal of American opinion regarding Finland. Alleging prior attacks, Russia reopened war with her, and the Finns, forced into bad company, fought back with Hitler's help. Many of the same Americans who had applauded Finnish victories the year before were now hoping for Russian victories, while Washington vainly tried to persuade Finland to drop out of the war. The Berlin press screamed "criminal intervention" and "Jewish impudence."

The American people, especially diehard conservatives, were not altogether happy over "Bloody Joe" Stalin, their new ally. If Russia won, they asked, would not communism, which was as bad as Naziism, engulf all Europe? Would Stalin prove to be a co-operative associate at the peace table? Roman Catholic and other religious denominations were deeply disturbed by the long-continuing persecutions directed against the Greek Orthodox Church in Russia. "I have no more confidence in Stalin," presciently

declared Archbishop Curley of Baltimore, "that I have in Hitler." American isolationists saw in the unexpected boon of a Russo-German war additional evidence that the two dictators should be allowed to slit each other's throats on the frozen wastes of Russia. The democratic world would then emerge strong and triumphant.⁴

Scenario 5: The Economic Crackdown on Japan

The restraining hand of Uncle Sam may have held Japan back from the riches of the Dutch East Indies in the summer of 1940, but not from those of French Indo-China. In September, 1940, Tokyo put the screws on the Hitler-dominated French government and extorted strategic bases in northern Indo-China. Secretary Hull roundly condemned this fresh act of aggression, and Washington retaliated by agreeing to lend China an additional \$25 million.⁵

Scenario 6: Last-Ditch Negotiations with Tokyo

The efforts of the diplomats to halt war-mad Nippon with words continued to be futile. At the Atlantic Conference in August, 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill had worked out a threatening protest against Japanese aggression, but Washington later presented it to Tokyo in a watered-down form. The next month, September, 1941, hope sprang anew when the conciliatory Prince Konoye, the Japanese Premier, indicated a willingness to meet with Roosevelt in a Pacific conference, perhaps at Honolulu. But the

President, fearing that the Japanese were plotting a propaganda victory by placing the onus for a diplomatic breakdown on America, insisted on specific concessions in advance. Konoye, suspecting that the news of such commitments would leak out and destroy him, was unwilling or unable to yield. The proposal for a conference was dropped, the Konoye ministry fell the next month, and a militaristic group, ominously headed by the unsmiling and truculent General Tojo ("The Razor"), took over. The drift toward war continued with seeming inevitability.⁶

a.

b.

Part B.

In your new group, circle the appropriate question from the question list below. Then discuss the following points regarding your proposed "What If."

- a. What issues would this action have raised?
- b. What additional information would you want to know to determine whether or not it would have been a sound policy?
- c. What would have been likely consequences of the proposed action?
- d. What alternative actions would have been possible?
- e. What policy would you have recommended in the situation? How would you justify your choice?

Question List

1. What if FDR had sent the fleet to the Yangtze River and landed troops in China?
2. What if FDR had viewed Russia's invasion of Finland as an act of war and immediately ordered the Air Force to supply the Finnish army?
3. What if FDR had declared war on Germany for sinking the *Robin Moor*?
4. What if FDR had not offered aid to the Soviet Union?
5. What if FDR had approved Japan's action?
6. What if Prince Konoye and FDR had met at Honolulu and reached an agreement?