Activity 1: The Debate over Lend-Lease

Student Name ___________________________________________ Date ____________________

Directions: The following should be read by the Opening Speaker, the Closing Speaker, and the Research and Publicity Teams for the America First Committee. They should also be read by the Opposition Research Team for the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.

Radio Address by Sen. Burton K. Wheeler (D-MT), December 31, 1940:

Burton Wheeler, a Democrat from Montana, served in the Senate from 1928 to 1946. Although a staunch Roosevelt supporter in the early 1930s, he broke with the president later in the decade, and had emerged by 1939 as one of the nation’s leading opponents of FDR’s foreign policy. In late 1940, Wheeler helped to found the America First Committee, whose goal it was to strengthen American defenses while at the same time staying out of any European entanglements.

The views I express to you tonight...are not the views of any international banker, nor are they dictated by interventionists or warmongers.

The thoughts I am about to express are not based upon any fear of wild boasts of American conquest by Stalin, Hitler or Mussolini. I know that neither they nor their ideologies will capture the people of the United States or our imagination to the point that we would adopt fascism, communism or nazism as an American doctrine....

We sympathize with the oppressed and persecuted everywhere. We also realize that we have great problems at home, that one-third of our population is ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clad, and we have been told repeatedly, upon the highest authority, that unless and until this situation is corrected our democracy is in danger. I fully subscribe to this view.

Believing as I do, in this thesis, I cannot help but feel that we should settle our own problems before we undertake to settle the problems of Asia, Africa, Australasia, South America and Europe. As Americans, interested first in America, what is our present stake? Our stakes are our independence, our democracy and our trade and commerce. Every red-blooded American would fight to preserve them.

What is the best way to preserve them? There are two schools of thought. One group feels, as they felt before the last World War, that England is our first line of defense, and that we must go to England's aid every time she declares war, and that some European dictator is after rich loot in the United States, perhaps our gold buried in the hills of Kentucky.

This group wants to repeal our Neutrality Act.... They want to loan our ships, our guns, and our planes, even though it may involve us in the European conflict. They profess to believe it is necessary for the preservation of our country, our religion and civilization. We were told the same things in almost the same terms before the last war.
The other group feels that we should build our defenses to meet any emergency that may arise. But we do not believe that the preservation of the American people depends upon any foreign nation. It is hard for us to visualize a nation of 130,000,000 people so weak that we cannot defend ourselves when our forefathers in the thirteen original colonies, poor, divided and weak, were not only able to conquer an army already in our midst but to build the greatest democracy the world has ever known.

Just as I love the United States so do I dislike Hitler and all that he symbolizes. My sympathy for the British is both deep and genuine and is exceeded only by the depth and sincerity of my Americanism. No anti-British feeling dictates my opposition to the evasion or repeal of the Johnson and Neutrality Acts. I oppose all these because they lead us down that road with only one ending, total complete and futile war. And Mr. William Allen White, chairman of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, agrees that the convoying of British ships by American vessels and the repeal of the Neutrality Acts would mean war for us.

Remember, if we lend or lease war materials today, we will lend or lease American boys tomorrow. Last night we heard the President promise that there would be no American expeditionary force, but we received no promise that our ships and sailors and our planes and pilots might not at some time within the near future be cast into the cauldron of blood and hate that is Europe today.

Our independence can only be lost or compromised if Germany invades the Western Hemisphere north of the equator. This would be fantastic, as it would require the transportation of at least 2,000,000 men, with planes, tanks, and equipment, in one convoy across the Atlantic. This would require two or three thousand transports plus a fleet larger than our Navy, plus thousands of fighter-escorted bombers.

Such a fleet cannot possibly be available. Certainly it cannot be trained efficiently before our two-ocean Navy is ready. It is not possible for the German Navy to prepare an effective plan for such an invasion which our Navy and Army with our air force cannot defeat. Remember, Hitler has already been seven months in vainly trying to cross twenty miles. If Hitler's army can't cross the narrow English Channel in seven months his bombers won't fly across the Rockies to bomb Denver tomorrow....

The cost of this war will come out of the millions of poor people, the common folk of the world who will toil for generations to pay the cost of destruction. War inevitably means back-breaking debt, blighted lives, bedeviled futures. War means the end of civil liberties, the end of free speech, free press, free enterprise. It means dictatorship and slavery, and the things we abhor in nazism, communism and fascism. It means Stalin or Hitler will have achieved their boasts for a totalitarian world without conquering America....

Regardless of when or who is proclaimed victor in the present war, it cannot last forever. Peace, fleeting though it may be, will eventually come to Europe. At some time in the future representatives of England and Germany will sit around a table. Some time they will agree upon peace, and until that day the world suffers. Each of us, from the President of the United States to the most humble citizen, should exert his every effort for peace now....

I firmly believe the German people want peace just as any people prefer peace to war. And the offer of a just reasonable and generous peace will more quickly and effectively crumble Hitlerism and break the morale of the German people than all the bombers that could be dispatched over Berlin....
The United States is no longer trudging along the road to war. We are running. Some feel that we have gone so fast and so far that there can be no stopping—no return to complete peace except via war. But we are at peace and we can remain at peace if either one of the two lines of action is pursued. First, Americans in greater number must firmly resolve and express themselves that we will fight no offensive war. And, secondly, we can remain at peace if the horrible European debacle of death and destruction ends in the near future.

Though today we stand as close to the brink of war as we stood in January of 1917, some people still oppose a European peace. War-mongers, sordid romanticists, reckless adventurers and some whose sympathies and sentiments are stronger than their reasoning powers would plunge this nation into war. Plunge us into a war from which we would gain nothing. Plunge us into a war that would destroy democracy, that would bring deep harrowing anguish to millions of hearts. And how would they bring this to pass? They would take us in today as they did in 1917....

My friends, it is this satanically clever propaganda that appeals to Christianity, the idealism, the humanity and the loyalty of the American people that takes us into war. It is this that we must resist. It is this that we must cast aside if we truly love our country and democracy. We must remain at peace and dedicate ourselves to effecting peace for a war-torn world....

I do not believe that the great majority of our people are eager to be embraced by war and I call upon them not to be afraid to say so. I, for one, believe the policy advocated by the interventionists is insane and it will lead to total war, and war is insanity... Americans! Do not let yourselves be swayed by mass hysteria. Do not travel again the road that took you in 1917. You hanged [the late Senator] Bob LaFollette [of Wisconsin] in effigy because he opposed war—and lived to repent your action and put him in the hall of fame.... Are the facts of yesterday no longer facts? Has this war a sweeter odor than the last? Don't let yourselves be misled by the so-called notables. Numerically they are few—even though they command the newspaper headlines. But they do not speak for the mass of Americans. They do not represent labor, the farmer, the youth, the mothers or fathers of America. The great mass of our people are inarticulate, but it is time you were heard. You must not be driven like sheep to the slaughtering pens.... America's war ought to be against industrial unemployment and low farm prices.... Let your representatives in Washington know that you have not surrendered the independence of America to war-mongers and interventionists, and God will bless America.

What arguments does Wheeler offer in opposition to Lend-Lease?

Best known for having made the first solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927, Charles Lindbergh became increasingly involved in politics in the late 1930s. Lindbergh was one of the founders of the America First Committee, as well as one of that organization’s most popular speakers. The following is an excerpt from the testimony that he gave against the Lend-Lease Act before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the hope that it will save time and add to clarity, I have attempted to outline briefly my reasons for opposition to this bill. In general, I have two. I oppose it, first, because I believe it is a step away from the system of government in which most of us in this country believe. Secondly, I oppose it because I think it represents a policy which will weaken rather than strengthen our nation.

The first point is simply my opinion as an American citizen. The second is closely connected with the development of aviation as a factor in modern warfare. It is this second point, if you will permit me, that I would like to discuss. I shall have to speak with the utmost frankness in order to make my position clear. If my discussion seems materialistic, it is because war is materialistic, and must be met, at least for the moment, with material resources. No one deplores this fact more than I. Possibly if our outlook had been more spiritual during the years of peace, it would not have to be so material today.

And here I would like to say that I have never taken the stand that it makes no difference to us who wins this war in Europe. It does make a difference to us, a great difference. But I do not believe that it is either possible or desirable for us in America to control the outcome of European wars. When I am asked which side I would like to have win, it would be very easy for me to say "the English." But, gentlemen, an English victory, if it were possible at all, would necessitate years of war and an invasion of the Continent of Europe. I believe this would create prostration, famine and disease in Europe—and probably in America—such as the whole world has never experience before. This is why I say that I prefer a negotiated peace to a complete victory by either side.
This bill is obviously the most recent step in a policy which attempts to obtain security for America by controlling internal conditions in Europe. The policy of depleting our own forces to aid England is based upon the assumption that England will win this war. Personally, I do not believe that England will win this war. If she does not win, or unless our aid is used in negotiating a better peace than could otherwise be obtained, we will be responsible for futilely prolonging the war and adding to the bloodshed and devastation in Europe, particularly among the democracies.

In that case, the only advantage we can gain by our action lies in what additional time we obtain to prepare ourselves for defense. But instead of consolidating our own defensive position in America, we are sending a large portion of our armament production abroad. In the case of aviation, for instance, we have sent most of it, yet our own air forces are in deplorable condition for lack of modern equipment. The majority of the planes we now have are obsolescent on the standards of modern warfare. This bill even authorizes the transfer of the equipment that our air forces now possess. From the standpoint of aviation, at least, I believe this policy weakens our security in America....

What we are doing in following our present policy is giving up an ideal defense position in America for a very precarious offensive position in Europe. I would be opposed to our entering the internal wars of Europe under any circumstances. But it is an established fact today, that our Army and our Air Force are but poorly equipped on modern standards, and even our Navy is in urgent need of new equipment. If we deplete our forces still further, as this bill indicates we may, I think we may be in danger of invasion, although I do not believe we are today. If we ever are invaded in America, the responsibility will lie upon those who send our arms abroad.

I advocate building strength in America because I believe we can be successful in this hemisphere. I oppose placing our security in an English victory because I believe that such a victory is extremely doubtful. I am opposed to this bill because I believe it endorses a policy that will lead to failure in war and to conditions in our own country as bad as or worse than we now desire to overthrow in Nazi Germany.

I do not believe that the danger to America lies in an invasion from abroad. I believe it lies here in our own midst, and that it is exemplified by the terms of this bill—the placing of our security in the success of foreign armies and the removal of power from the representatives of the people in our own land.

| What arguments does Lindbergh offer in opposition to Lend-Lease? |

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