

Fall 2015

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Recommended Citation

McCubbin, Sean, ""Trench Shovels and Battleships: The Rhetoric and Impact of Lend-Lease"" (2015). *History: Student Scholarship & Creative Work*. 4.

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Trench Shovels and Battleships: The Rhetoric and Impact of Lend-Lease

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FYS100HA: World War II
Dr. Newsome
30 November 2015

On September 7, 1940, the *Luftwaffe*, the air force of Nazi Germany, began a relentless reign of terror over London and other cities on the island of Great Britain. For fifty-seven nights, German bombing raids would batter British cities, killing tens of thousands, mostly civilians, and leaving millions of British citizens homeless. It was more than a year before the United States would enter the Second World War, but the British were already fighting fiercely. The British needed weapons with which to fight, though, and the logical provider of those weapons was the United States of America. However, the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s, passed by an isolationist United States Congress, permitted weapons sales only to countries which could pay in cash and transport the cargo themselves. At the same time that it needed to transport weapons, Britain was experiencing heavy financial problems, and the British Navy was busy weathering the constant storm of Nazi U-boats, which made the purchase and protection of arms shipments from the United States difficult. While isolationists in Congress were leery of deeper involvement, the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, introduced a law that would allow for an alleviation of these financial and shipping woes. Roosevelt's solution to the crisis was the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, which, through carefully constructed rhetoric, often as responses to international events, served as the catalyst for American interventionist policy leading up to direct military involvement in the Second World War.

While Roosevelt and his Cabinet used a remarkable degree of political rhetoric to push the Lend-Lease Act through Congress, scholarly research on the law has mainly focused on the economics of Lend-Lease. For example, American historian Warren Kimball, author of *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941*, critiques President Roosevelt not for his duplicitous use of language, but for his lack of understanding of British finances. Kimball argues that this led him to introduce and pass the bill later than he could have. He goes on to refute a popular theory

that the United States used Lend-Lease to further its own economic interests.¹ British historian David Reynolds refutes this argument, contending that the United States used its dominant position in Lend-Lease to do just that: exert influence over British economic policy.² Gavin Bailey, another British historian, agrees, arguing that Lend-Lease was the pivotal moment at which the United States took over Great Britain as the world's dominant economy.³ While these differences may be attributable to the nationalities of their particular historians, there has been a significantly larger amount of research on the economics of Lend-Lease than on the language surrounding it. However, that is not to say there has been none. For one, Kimball has argued that the politics and language involved in passing Lend-Lease were directed at keeping the debate limited to immediate consequences, not the long-term implications, of this new presidential power.⁴ Prior to Kimball's research, Harvard historian William Langer and intelligence analyst S. Everett Gleason prepared *The Undeclared War: 1940-1941*, an account of prewar foreign policy for the Council on Foreign Relations, in which they argue that Roosevelt's Cabinet members deliberately concealed their knowledge that Lend-Lease would bring about American involvement in the war.⁵ The present study seeks to build on that school of thought by focusing not on the economics of Lend-Lease but on identifying the effects of the rhetoric used by Roosevelt and his staff to pass Lend-Lease, knowing that it would serve as a major pretext for greater interventionist policy and the eventual entry of the United States into the war.

This trend began at the end of 1940, when the British were experiencing many heavy financial and military hardships. In October, for example, they had lost 400,000 tons of shipping at the hands of Axis navies, making the procedure of cash-and-carry mandated by the Neutrality Acts practically impossible.⁶ After President Roosevelt won reelection to an unprecedented third term in November, the British government told the United States that it was running drastically

low on the gold and dollar reserves necessary to purchase American weapons.⁷ The British also said that they would not be able to pay for orders already in effect, showing the inadequacy of the cash-and-carry policy. Clearly something had to be done if the British military was to continue receiving military goods, but the constraints of cash-and-carry and the American system of checks and balances prevented the Roosevelt administration from instituting a new procedure immediately. In the midst of this diplomatic crisis, Roosevelt suddenly announced that he was leaving Washington for a ten-day Caribbean cruise aboard the U.S.S. *Tuscaloosa*. He told the members of his Cabinet, who were understandably taken aback, “all of you use your imaginations to come up with an answer.”⁸ On his trip, Roosevelt learned that bombings of London, Coventry, Bristol and Birmingham had crippled several munitions factories, and that seven merchant vessels carrying many tons of vital British supplies had been sunk by the German Navy.⁹ Prime Minister Winston Churchill conveyed his nation’s desperation in a letter dated December 7. In it, he drew attention to the danger caused by the loss of sea tonnage and called for the United States to offer aid in the form of convoys for British ships and to find another way of supplying the nation than financially divesting it of what little assets it had left.¹⁰ Churchill’s words struck Roosevelt, and he returned on December 16 with a plan. His idea, which later became known as “Lend-Lease,” was the notion that the United States could send a belligerent nation, in this case Britain, weapons and supplies directly and be paid in kind after the war ended. When Roosevelt told his Cabinet, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins called it a “flash of almost clairvoyant knowledge and understanding.”¹¹ Roosevelt had sold the idea to his Cabinet; now he had to sell it to Congress and the American people.

Over the course of December 1940 and January 1941, Roosevelt gave three major speeches which rallied support among sympathetic Congressmen, and by extension their

constituents, for the idea of Lend-Lease before a bill was even proposed. Roosevelt called a press conference for December 17, in which he mentioned several ways that Britain could be helped, such as repealing existing neutrality laws, loaning the British government money, or avoiding the restrictions of both by giving the supplies as a gift. He considered these actions to be central to the survival of Great Britain, and by extension the survival of the United States, saying:

“Well, let me give you an illustration: Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire. Now, what do I do? I don't say to him before that operation, ‘Neighbor, my garden hose cost me \$15; you have to pay me \$15 for it.’ What is the transaction that goes on? I don't want \$15—I want my garden hose back after the fire is over. All right. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it. But suppose it gets smashed up—holes in it—during the fire; we don't have to have too much formality about it, but I say to him, ‘I was glad to lend you that hose; I see I can't use it any more, it's all smashed up.’ He says, ‘How many feet of it were there?’ I tell him, ‘There were 150 feet of it.’ He says, ‘All right, I will replace it.’ Now, if I get a nice garden hose back, I am in pretty good shape.”¹²

In this way, Roosevelt highlighted the humanity and lack of overall risk inherent in Lend-Lease. There were mixed responses. One reporter, representative of the sizeable isolationist faction in America, commented “Mr. President, before you loan your hose to your neighbor you have to have the hose.”¹³ Perkins, on the other hand, argued that the president's idea was a moral, simplistic way of extending a hand to a neighbor in need.¹⁴

Twelve days later, Roosevelt delivered one of his famous “fireside chats,” in which he argued that instead of passively observing the demise of Western democracy, America should step into the role of “the great arsenal of democracy” that it was always meant to occupy. In the same speech, he charged isolationists with “aiding and abetting... the kind of work that the dictators want done in the United States.”¹⁵ Polls showed that 75 percent of Americans had heard Roosevelt's speech, and 61 percent of those agreed with his position.¹⁶ However, another poll

showed that 88 percent would not go as far as to say that they would support American entry into the war.¹⁷ These numbers shifted dramatically by the end of the year.

The next month, in his yearly State of the Union Address, he emphasized the peril that the United States would face if Britain fell. At the same time, he asked Congress for the funds to provide Allied nations with necessary supplies, so that together they could create a world with “four essential human freedoms:” the freedoms of speech, of worship, from want, and from fear.¹⁸ In this speech, as well as his press conference and “fireside chat,” Roosevelt highlighted the humanity and necessity of loaning aid to Britain with the need for the United States to act as the principal supplier. He noted that there would be consequences of death and destruction of freedom that would result if the United States did not assume that role. After outlining his case to the American people, Roosevelt had his staff draft the Lend-Lease Act of 1941.

The law went through many drafts and revisions. Treasury lawyers Ed Foley and Oscar Cox originally drafted the Lend-Lease Act to be an amendment to the Pittman-Bloom Act of 1940, which allowed the Secretaries of War and the Navy to sell American-produced war materials to Latin American nations. Roosevelt demanded the ability to send out aid without constant reference to Congress, and Foley made sure that several portions of the neutrality laws would be nullified. When the final version of the amendment was presented to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the latter had two major criticisms: first, that the names of nations to receive aid be left off of the bill, possibly predicting the future problem of the Soviet Union, and second, that the law be presented as an independent measure rather than an amendment, to ease progress through Congressional committees. The bill dropped the names of aid recipients, and the Lend-Lease Act of 1941 was given general approval by the other members of the administration.¹⁹

The bill was introduced to the House of Representatives on January 10 with the purposeful patriotic designation “H.R. 1776”²⁰ and the citation “An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States.” Its terms allowed for the president to extend aid to any nation “whose defense the president deems vital to the defense of the United States,” with the type of aid—termed “defense articles” and “defense information”—having no clear definition.²¹ *Newsweek* accurately encapsulated the vague terms of the Lend-Lease Act when it said that it would give Roosevelt the power to loan “anything from a trench shovel to a battle ship.”²² The bill faced more doom-laden criticism from American isolationists, with *Christian Century* calling it “the most un-American proposal which the American people have ever seriously had to consider,” and historian Howard Beale claiming that “the very fate of our democratic government” was at stake.²³ The America First Committee, in its campaign against Lend-Lease, distributed 1.5 million leaflets, 750,000 buttons, and 500,000 bumper stickers.²⁴ Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, however, was the only critic to provoke a public response from Roosevelt, one of disgust, when Wheeler decried the law as “triple-A foreign policy; it will plough under every fourth American boy.”²⁵ All criticism boiled down to the notion that a measure designed to keep America protected from war would drive it into war itself,²⁶ a theme that would be present in isolationist minds when the bill was debated in Congress.

The House Committee on Foreign Affairs, with Congressman Sol Bloom of New York as Chairman, began hearings on H.R. 1776 on January 15, 1941, before a standing-room-only crowd of reporters and spectators.²⁷ Scheduled to testify in the early days of the hearings were Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Secretary of the Navy William Franklin Knox, and Chairman of the Office of Production Management William Knudsen, all of whom had worked with Roosevelt to prepare

statements for the committee. Hull, who had been told by Roosevelt to carefully outline how the present course of events had come about and suggest steps to remedy them, noted the danger that the world faced by allowing a power bent on conquest to control the high seas and highlighted that the United States needed to act rapidly. Hull admitted that the possibility of entry into the war was present, but when pressed by Massachusetts Congressman George Tinkham he was adamant that the Lend-Lease Act was “the safest course” to take. Secretary Morgenthau, the next to testify, was aware along with Roosevelt that his history of British support made him a target for isolationists. Therefore, he spoke in a purposefully monotonous tone while presenting numerous statistics that would be difficult to refute without thorough research. Secretary Stimson highlighted the possibility of imminent crisis and the necessity of maintaining America’s defense, while Secretary Knox explained how the British fleet had helped maintain the Monroe Doctrine in the Atlantic Ocean, and that if it were destroyed the Axis fleet would outnumber America’s own. Knudsen concluded by maintaining that aid would not reach Britain unless rapid action was taken. Following the President’s guidance, Hull, Morgenthau, Stimson, Knox, and Knudsen had presented H.R. 1776 as a bill to maintain national defense, not one to bring about military intervention.²⁸ Charles Lindbergh, who headlined the isolationist opposition, argued that the United States would be better with a negotiated peace and that the probability of attack by the Axis Powers was minimal, if not nonexistent.²⁹ Roosevelt’s coaching to his Cabinet on effective rhetoric proved successful, however, as the bill passed the House by a vote of 260 to 165 on February 8 and passed the Senate with a similar strategy on March 8 by a margin of 60 to 31.³⁰ President Roosevelt signed the bill into law on March 11 and sent a request to Congress for 7 billion dollars in appropriations the next day. Appropriately, the first list of Lend-Lease goods to be sent to Britain included 900,000 feet of fire hose.³¹

The Lend-Lease Act served as congressional recognition of the popular conviction that the fate of the United States was intertwined with the fate of the United Kingdom.³² At the time of Lend-Lease's signage and implementation, Churchill spoke in Parliament, heralding what he called "the most unsordid act in the history of any nation."³³ Approval was also high in the United States, with 58 percent of the populace giving unqualified support for Lend-Lease and 14 percent giving conditional support in one poll.³⁴ One of those conditional issues, however, was convoying, an issue exhaustingly exploited by isolationists. Isolationists and many Americans were still strongly against the military escort of goods shipped to Britain, and Roosevelt publicly scoffed at the notion that American naval vessels were escorting Lend-Lease shipments.³⁵ Some polls showed that a majority of Americans were against convoying by the American Navy, and isolationist Senator Charles Tobey of New Hampshire published a letter from the mother of an American sailor claiming that U.S. ships were escorting merchant convoys of Lend-Lease shipments. While the accusations were true, Roosevelt maintained that the ships were "patrolling" rather than "convoying."³⁶

In order to help Britain by bringing the United States closer to war, Roosevelt needed to shift public opinion on convoying. On May 6, Secretary of War Stimson, in a radio broadcast approved by Roosevelt, called for naval protection of cargo headed to Britain.³⁷ The administration's case for military escorts was strengthened when, on May 21, the *Robin Moor*, a steamship flying the American flag, was sunk by a German submarine. Roosevelt responded by closing all German and Italian consulates and freezing all Axis assets in the United States.³⁸ While social psychologist Hadley Cantril assured Roosevelt that American public opinion would at that time support more active intervention than just the Lend-Lease Act, Roosevelt was convinced that he needed more public support.³⁹ To gather this support, Roosevelt gave a radio

address from the White House on May 27. He reiterated the importance of Allied naval supremacy and proclaimed that “an unlimited national emergency exists and requires the strengthening of our defense to the extreme limit of our national power and authority.”⁴⁰ By June 14, according to one poll, 55 percent of Americans sided with Roosevelt, favoring armed escorts of American shipments.⁴¹ In a remarkably short period of time, Roosevelt and his Cabinet had dramatically shifted American public opinion through a series of carefully-constructed speeches and handlings of international events.

At the same time that he was using his impeccable speaking skills to rally public support for Lend-Lease and convoying, Roosevelt was adeptly navigating the world of geopolitics to make convoying a military reality. The United States Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark had not waited for President Roosevelt’s approval before making plans to convoy British ships under the Lend-Lease Act. As early as February, he ordered the commander of the Atlantic Fleet, which had only recently been created, to make preparations to shift the burden of convoying from the Royal Navy to the American Navy and he notified Roosevelt in March that the preparations had been made. On April 10, Roosevelt called a meeting with Secretaries Stimson and Knox and, after asking for a map of the Atlantic, drew a line from Greenland and Iceland down the ocean toward Brazil. That same day, he had made an agreement with the Danish government-in-exile to include Greenland in what he called a “sphere of cooperative hemispheric defense.” In these ways, Roosevelt had redefined President James Monroe’s “American continents”⁴² to include Greenland, and he promptly made arrangements for American naval patrols in the surrounding waters.⁴³ On July 7, Roosevelt ordered American troops into Iceland, under the pretense that the Axis Powers must not be allowed to maintain bases in the North Atlantic. He had 61 percent popular support, according to a Gallup poll of

July 17.⁴⁴ On July 11, Roosevelt issued a secret order mandating an attack on enemy vessels in the American sphere of influence, as well as military convoying of American and Icelandic vessels including those of other nations which may join them, which created policy that allowed Britain to participate in American convoys.⁴⁵ By this point, Roosevelt had skillfully escalated the Lend-Lease Act to a policy that allowed for active assistance to Allied ships and engagement with Axis ships, all while using speeches in the public arena to build popular support for doing so, leading the United States further down the road to war on the side of the Allies.

The war and its politics had become more complex back in June, when Germany had launched the largest invasion in the history of warfare by attacking the Soviet Union with a force of 3.2 million soldiers. There was considerable dissent in the United States as Roosevelt unfroze 39 million dollars' worth of Soviet assets in the United States, as the Soviet Union's totalitarian dictatorship represented a hostile ideology that many thought was unworthy of American aid, particularly aid under the Lend-Lease Act.⁴⁶ After the invasion began, Roosevelt's advisor Harry Hopkins flew to Moscow to meet with Joseph Stalin,⁴⁷ who demanded 1.8 billion dollars in Lend-Lease aid.⁴⁸ Roosevelt extended this aid liberally, despite the popular protest, making use of the lack of any clause listing the countries to receive Lend-Lease aid, as had been suggested by Cordell Hull. On September 18, he included the Soviet Union in a Lend-Lease appropriations bill totaling 6 billion dollars.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the public accepted this move, as a Gallup poll showed that 72 percent of Americans favored a Soviet victory in the war compared with 4 percent who desired a German victory.⁵⁰ However, Stalin was a man who needed to be handled with extreme care, and diplomatic relations with him would affect the Roosevelt-Churchill alliance throughout the conflict.⁵¹

As Roosevelt was consolidating relations with Stalin for a future American-Soviet alliance, the American and British militaries were fortifying an alliance themselves. Back at the time of the passage of the Lend-Lease Act, a secret meeting between American and British military officials produced the A.B.C.-1 agreement, which outlined a Germany-first strategy that would headline American implementation of Lend-Lease aid.⁵² In August, after the fight in the Soviet Union was well underway, Roosevelt and Churchill met covertly off of the coast of Newfoundland where they produced what became known as the Atlantic Charter, a document which further outlined American-British war aims. The United States wanted to remove Britain's preferential trade system with its colonies and replace it with a free trade system, helping establish a doctrine of national self-determination that Churchill found difficult to accept, given Britain's power as an empire.⁵³ The Lend-Lease Act had bound the two nations together in a way that had not existed in the opening year of the war, and Britain's willingness to accept American economic goals in the Atlantic Charter, and ultimately after the war, served as payments in kind for that connection. In this instance, Roosevelt was maneuvering to extract payment while fortifying an American-British alliance, bringing the United States closer to war.

The United States would find itself on the threshold of war in September when the U.S.S. *Greer*, carrying American mail to Iceland, was sunk by a German submarine. Roosevelt, in a strategic rhetorical response, announced a policy of attacking German vessels on sight. This marked the beginning of unrestricted American Atlantic warfare, for which the President enjoyed 62 percent public support, according to a Gallup poll of September 11.⁵⁴ By October 5, 70 percent favored intervention in the war.⁵⁵ Lend-Lease had escalated from a bill to aid the Allies into a justification for total Atlantic warfare, which ultimately made the final declarations of war

following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December hardly groundbreaking from a naval perspective.

Over the course of the end of 1940 and most of 1941, President Roosevelt engaged in a campaign of manipulative rhetoric to allow for the passage of the Lend-Lease bill, and he then stretched the law with further rhetoric and sheer political will to bring the United States into the Second World War on the side of the Allies. Through such speeches as his press conference upon his return to the United States in December 1940, his fireside chat of the same month, the 1941 State of the Union Address, and his May “national emergency” speech, as well as his coaching of his Cabinet on what to say regarding the law, Roosevelt produced an image of the Lend-Lease Act as a bill that would protect the United States from war. But, as time went on after its passage, the law became a justification for forging a closer connection to the global war effort. He used the *Robin Moor* and *Greer* incidents to justify greater involvement in the Atlantic and made diplomatic agreements to extend the American sphere of influence, all while dodging allegations that he was illegally convoying Lend-Lease shipments to Britain. All of these speeches and responses to international incidents make it clear that the Lend-Lease Act was not only well-handled politically, but was intended to bring the United States into war. From a larger perspective than the Second World War, Roosevelt’s rhetoric and actions serve as an example of expert political maneuvering, and his economic policy surrounding Lend-Lease, including the Atlantic Charter by extension, would provide a foundation and serve as a model for the United States in the Marshall Plan of the early Cold War and beyond.

¹ Robert La Forte, “Review of *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941* by Warren F. Kimball,” *The Journal of American History* 56, No. 4 (1970): 949, DOI: 10.2307/1917579.

² David Reynolds, “Review of *US Wartime Aid to Britain, 1940-1946* by Alan P. Dobson,” *English Historical Review* 104, No. 410 (1989): 273, Journal Storage.

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- ³ Gavin Bailey, *The Arsenal of Democracy: Aircraft Supply and the Anglo-American Alliance, 1938-1942* (2013; Journal Storage) 1-2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt5hh32v.6>.
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- ⁶ Justus Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention, 1939-1941* (Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company, 1997), 39.
- ⁷ Doris Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 190.
- ⁸ Franklin Roosevelt, quoted in Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 191.
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- ¹⁰ Winston Churchill to Franklin Roosevelt, 7 December 1940 in *Diplomatic Correspondence Great Britain: October-December 1940*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.
- ¹¹ Frances Perkins, quoted in Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 193.
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- ²¹ United States Congress, *Lend-Lease Act, 77th Cong., 1st sess.* (Washington, DC: 1941). In *Our Documents*, National Archives and Records Administration.
- ²² Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention*, 40.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁴ David Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, 111.
- ²⁵ Langer and Gleason, *The Undeclared War*, 259.
- ²⁶ Nicholas Wapshott, *The Sphinx: Franklin Roosevelt, the Isolationists, and the Road to World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015), 260.
- ²⁷ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 210.
- ²⁸ Langer and Gleason, *The Undeclared War*, 262-267.
- ²⁹ Jon Meacham, *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship* (New York: Random House, 2003), 95.
- ³⁰ Langer and Gleason, *The Undeclared War*, 275.
- ³¹ Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, 114.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 132.
- ³³ Winston Churchill, quoted in Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 214.
- ³⁴ Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention*, 42.
- ³⁵ Wapshott, *The Sphinx*, 260.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-300.
- ³⁷ Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight over World War II, 1939-1941* (New York: Random House, 2013), 297.
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- ³⁹ Olson, *Those Angry Days*, 344.
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- ⁴⁵ Wapshott, *The Sphinx*, 316.
⁴⁶ Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention*, 47-49.
⁴⁷ Meacham, *Franklin and Winston*, 103-104.
⁴⁸ Wapshott, *The Sphinx*, 313.
⁴⁹ Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention*, 49.
⁵⁰ Wapshott, *The Sphinx*, 313.
⁵¹ Meacham, *Franklin and Winston*, 104.
⁵² Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, 116-118.
⁵³ Wapshott, *The Sphinx*, 321.
⁵⁴ Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention*, 56.
⁵⁵ Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, 155.

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