

# A LETTER TO ROOSEVELT

1940

----- *Winston Churchill* -----

Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill's predecessor as Prime Minister of Britain, had followed a policy of "appeasement" toward Germany and had not adequately prepared Britain for war. By May 1940, German forces had overrun Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium "like matchwood," according to Churchill. He sent this letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, hoping to secure some form of assistance, but Roosevelt continued his wait-and-see policy. Roosevelt hoped French forces would resist the Germans and keep the war contained on the European continent.

## **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying Problems**

What does Churchill mean by "nonbelligerency"? As a foreign policy adviser to President Roosevelt, would you have agreed or disagreed with Churchill's definition?

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London [via U.S. Embassy]

May 15, 1940

Most Secret and Personal. President Roosevelt from Former Naval Person.

Although I have changed my office, I am sure you would not wish me to discontinue our intimate, private correspondence. As you are no doubt aware, the scene has darkened swiftly. The enemy have a marked preponderance in the air, and their new technique is making a deep impression upon the French. I think myself the battle on land has only just begun, and I should like to see tanks [masses] engaged. Up to the present, Hitler is working with specialized units in tanks and air. The small countries are simply smashed up, one by one, like matchwood. We must expect, though it is not yet certain, that Mussolini will hurry in to share the loot of civilization. We expect to be attacked here ourselves, both from the air and by parachute and air borne troops in the near future, and are getting ready for them. If necessary, we shall continue the war alone and we are not afraid of that. But I trust you realize, Mr. President, that the voice and force of the United States may count for nothing if they are withheld too long. You may have a completely subjugated, Nazified Europe established with astonishing swiftness, and the weight may be more than we can bear. All I ask now is that you should proclaim nonbelligerency, which would mean that you would help us with everything short of actually engaging armed forces. Immediate needs are: first of all, the loan of forty or fifty of your older

destroyers to bridge the gap between what we have now and the large new construction we put in hand at the beginning of the war. This time next year we shall have plenty. But if in the interval Italy comes in against us with another one hundred submarines, we may be strained to breaking point. Secondly, we want several hundred of the latest types of aircraft, of which you are now getting delivery. These can be repaid by those now being constructed in the United States for us. Thirdly, anti-aircraft equipment and ammunition, of which again there will be plenty next year, if we are alive to see it. Fourthly, the fact that our ore supply is being compromised from Sweden, from North Africa, and perhaps from northern Spain, makes it necessary to purchase steel in the United States. This also applies to other materials. We shall go on paying dollars for as long as we can, but I should like to feel reasonably sure that when we can pay no more, you will give us the stuff all the same. Fifthly, we have many reports of possible German parachute or air borne descents in Ireland. The visit of a United States squadron to Irish ports, which might well be prolonged, would be invaluable. Sixthly, I am looking to you to keep that Japanese dog quiet in the Pacific, using Singapore in any way convenient. The details of the material which we have in mind will be communicated to you separately.

With all good wishes and respect.

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**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that Churchill defines “nonbelligerency” as the United States’ providing all forms of military assistance to Britain except for sending military forces into battle. Students also may answer that Roosevelt’s foreign policy advisers should have agreed with Churchill’s proposal, arguing that the situation in Europe was urgent and that by declaring nonbelligerency the United States could help prevent Germany from gaining complete control of western Europe. These students may agree with Churchill’s definition of nonbelligerency as non-combat involvement. Other students may answer that Roosevelt’s foreign policy advisers should have counseled against accepting Churchill’s proposal, since it would mean serious and expensive U.S. involvement in the war when many Americans were against involvement. These students may disagree with Churchill’s definition of nonbelligerency, arguing that it constituted clear and significant support for one side in the war.