

from
ARE WE BEING LED INTO WAR?
1941

----- *George A. Dondero* -----

George Dondero (1883–1968) represented Michigan in the House of Representatives from 1933 to 1957. In this speech, he argues against the Lend-Lease bill, proposed by President Franklin Roosevelt in January 1941, which would allow the United States to lend arms to Britain without requiring immediate payment (the existing “cash and carry” policy). The Lend-Lease bill was passed by Congress in March 1941, despite the criticism of those who, like Dondero, wished the United States to remain neutral in the European conflict.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing Conclusions

What kind of arguments did Dondero use to justify neutrality? Why might they have been persuasive to his audience?

Mr. Chairman, this bill is entitled “A bill to promote the defense of the United States.” It is a strange coincidence that the number of this bill in the House is the same as a portentous year in the history of the United States—1776—a year in which the struggle for independence began, a year in which the fires of war were kindled and bloodshed commenced.

If this measure becomes law in its present form, it too, may be the flint on which the spark of the fires of war will be struck in the year 1941. It might very properly be designated as a bill to black out a form of government once known as the Republic of the United States; not the democracy of the United States, for such it never has been and is not now.

Never before in our history has the Congress of the United States been asked to abdicate or surrender its war-making power under the Constitution and entrust the destiny and the fate of the Nation to one man. No other measure ever asked such sweeping dictatorial powers as this from the chosen Representatives of a free people....

Section 3 of this bill strikes down and repeals by implication the Johnson Act and the Neutrality Act. Many Members of this House will recall with what enthusiasm and aggressiveness the administration urged to passage the Neutrality Act as a means of preventing this Nation from becoming involved in war. I shared in that enthusiasm, lifted my voice, and cast my vote in behalf of the passage of that act. I was moved with others, because of the fine objectives of that measure, that peace might be the coveted blessing of the American people. That law has been shorn and stripped of every vestige of neutrality. It is a forgotten measure. Its heart and life are dead. It is in the wastebasket as an obsolete principle on which the Nation might base its action, and the bill before us will relegate it to the cemetery of forgotten dreams.

Under section 3 of this proposal, which is little short of a declaration of war, the President, and not Congress, the Representatives and the Senators who are directly responsible to the people and speak for them, can “notwithstanding the provisions of any other law” sell our Navy, transfer our Navy, exchange our Navy, lease our Navy, lend our Navy, or otherwise dispose of it to any government he sees fit and with “any defense article.” The term “any defense article” is defined in the bill and means “any weapon, munition, aircraft, vessel, or boat.” It means—

any machinery, facility, tool, material, or supply necessary for the manufacture, production, processing, repair, servicing, or operation of any article described.

But that is not all the President can do.

I call attention to subsection 3 of section 3. Under that section he may authorize defense agencies of the Government to—

test, inspect, prove, repair, outfit, recondition, or otherwise to place in good working order any defense article for any such government.

“For any such government” means any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States. He is the sole judge. Senator BARKLEY frankly says that that section—

could conceivably mean, for example, that the British battle cruiser *Renown* could be repaired in the Brooklyn Navy Yard if the President considered it in the interest of our national defense to do so.

Precedent seems to mean nothing to many of the present generation nor to the President and this administration, and the lamp of history is disregarded as a guide to light our way in a war-mad world.

I call to the attention of the House an event in our own history that ought to warn us to caution and invite the most careful consideration and meditation before we commit an act which may jeopardize the future welfare of our country. In the midst of our Civil War the Lairds Shipbuilding Co., of Liverpool, England, built with English capital in an English shipyard and manned with English seamen, several ships having the appearance of ordinary merchant vessels. They later became ships of war or privateers for the Confederate States of America. They were constructed and sailed from English ports with the knowledge and consent of the English Government and over the protest of the accredited representatives of our Government. The method employed for their armament and equipment was the same for all. One of those ships in particular won great fame as a raider and for the destruction and havoc wrought upon United States commerce. She sailed from Liverpool as an ordinary merchantman, for the Azores Islands. There she was met by another English ship which had followed her with guns, ammunition, and equipment, and became the famed Confederate Privateer *Alabama*. At the end of the War Between the States this Nation called upon the English Government for damages or restitution to American commerce. A neutral and impartial tribunal

assessed the damages at \$15,500,000 in gold which the British Government paid for her failure to act the part of a neutral nation.

As a neutral government, she was bound to use due diligence to prevent the fitting out, arming, or equipping, within its jurisdiction, of any vessel which it had reasonable ground to believe was intended to cruise or to carry on war against a power with which England was at peace.

If we pass this bill in its present form, which clothes the President with unprecedented power of opening our Navy yards “for the repair, reconditioning, outfitting, or otherwise placing in good order” any British battleships or cruisers, or any American battleship or cruiser for the purpose of carrying on war against a power with which we are at peace, we will be in a far more unneutral position with the Axis Powers than England was with us in 1865. Let us remember, no matter where our sympathies may lie, that we are supposed to be a neutral Nation, that we believe in neutrality, and that we were sincere when we placed upon the statute books of the land the Neutrality Act. We are still at peace with Germany and Italy, and they have not committed any act of war against us. Should Germany win the war and our unneutral acts cause damage to her commerce or nationals, we may be held to strict accountability to her for far more flagrant violations of neutrality than we compelled England to settle the *Alabama* claims with us, and settle them in gold.

This bill may aid freedom in the old world, but we will get something far different in the New World. It may aid democracy to survive across the sea, but it will establish some form of totalitarian government here at home. This bill is a complete black-out of our republican form of government. It is the complete abdication of Congress from its constitutional duty to the people of this Nation.

Are we a nation of law-abiding people? Does our Government recognize and obey the rules of international law and the law of nations? Pass this sweeping proposal, and our answer must be “no,” for it violates every principle of neutrality and international law. Of course, our sympathies are with the Allies. Our sense of justice and humanity revolts against the ruthless invasion of defenseless, weak, and innocent nations. We condemn the merciless aggression of the invaders and their wanton murder of civilian populations. Yet we as a nation are at peace with the Axis Powers and they have been careful to observe, at least toward us, the rules of international law. This bill leads to war and invites it to our shores. I favor every possible aid to Britain within the provisions of our laws as they were when war broke out. Such is the course of a neutral nation—to remain unchanged after hostilities have begun.

Source: “Are We Being Led Into War?” by George A. Dondero from the *Congressional Record*, vol. 87, part 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941), pp. 562–563.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Dondero invokes international law and American history to justify neutrality. Dondero argues that the United States should remain neutral because a Neutrality Act had been passed in 1935 with the support of both Congress and President Roosevelt. He describes how Britain violated its neutrality during the U.S. Civil War and ended up paying a heavy penalty for assisting the losing side. Dondero also argues that the bill under consideration would make the President a dictator. He states the bill would be a violation of international law because the United States would be abandoning its neutral position even though it had not yet been attacked. Students may argue that Dondero's arguments would have been persuasive because it appeals to law and democratic ideals and because a neutrality policy did not **risk American lives in battle**.