

*from*  
**LET US FACE THE TRUTH**  
**1933**

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This 1941 editorial from the *New York Times* captures the spirit of the public debate over whether and in what way the U.S. should become involved in the escalating war in Europe. In the preceding two months, Congress had passed the Lend-Lease Act aiding Britain in its fight against Germany, Germany had successfully invaded and captured Greece and Yugoslavia, and Russia and Japan had signed a mutual non-aggression pact.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias**

Whose opinion is represented in this newspaper editorial, and how should this be considered when evaluating this document as historical evidence?

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In New York Harbor, on an island close to the steamship lanes, stands the most famous statue in the world. It is not the most beautiful statue, but to many millions of passengers coming up the bay it has seemed to be. It stands for one of the dearest dreams in human history—Liberty.

The millions who pursued that dream began to come before there was a statue to greet them. They came first when the shores were lined with solemn woods. They came in sailing ships when the voyage required two months or more. They came in crowded steamship steerage under hardships not much less. They came to Plymouth Rock and to Ellis Island.

They came for one reason, escape: escape from religious or political persecution, from caste systems, from overcrowding and from lack of opportunity. But the hope of leaving all of the Old World behind could not be realized. Their hearts and heads forbade it. Their roots in its culture ran too deep. And the sea itself grew ever narrower. Express steamers began to cross it long ago in less than a week. Airplanes can span it now in less than a day. The wireless leaps it in less than a second. Emotion, ideas, even physical force can now move around the world more effectively than they could cross the tiniest country a century and a half ago.

There is no isolation. There are only lines of defense. Distance is vanishing. Strategy is everything. And strategy in this year of grace has become the art and science of survival: survival in the personal sense, survival of ideas, survival of culture and tradition, survival of a way of life.

## II

Those who tell us now that the sea is still our certain bulwark, and that the tremendous forces sweeping the Old World threaten no danger to the New, give the lie to their own words in the precautions they would have us take.

To a man they favor an enormous strengthening of our defenses. Why? Against what danger would they have us arm if none exists? To what purpose would they have us spend these almost incredible billions upon billions for ships and planes, for tanks and guns, if there is no immediate threat to the security of the United States? Why are we training the youth of the country to bear arms? Under pressure of what fear are we racing against time to double and quadruple our industrial production?

No man in his senses will say that we are arming against Canada or our Latin-American neighbors to the south, against Britain or the captive states of Europe. We are arming solely for one reason. We are arming against Hitler's Germany—a great predatory Power in alliance with Japan...

That conqueror does not need to attempt at once an invasion of continental United States in order to place this country in deadly danger. We shall be in deadly danger the moment British sea power fails; the moment the eastern gates of the Atlantic are open to the aggressor; the moment we are compelled to divide our one-ocean Navy between two oceans simultaneously.

The combined Axis fleets outmatch our own: they are superior in numbers to our fleet in every category of vessel, from warships and aircraft-carriers to destroyers and submarines. The combined Axis air strength will be much greater than our own if Hitler strikes in time—and when has he failed to strike in time? The master of Europe will have at his command shipways that can out-build us, the resources of twenty conquered nations to furnish his materials, the oil of the Middle East to stoke his engines, the slave labor of a continent—bound by no union rules, and not working on a forty-hour week—to turn out his production.

Grant Hitler the gigantic prestige of a victory over Britain, and who can doubt that the first result, on our side of the ocean, would be the prompt appearance of imitation Nazi regimes in a half-dozen Latin-American nations, forced to be on the winning side, begging favors, clamoring for admission to the Axis? What shall we do then? Make war upon these neighbors; send armies to fight in the jungles of Central or South America; run the risk of outraging native sentiment and turning the whole continent against us? Or shall we sit tight while the area of Nazi influence draws ever closer to the Panama Canal and a spreading checkerboard of Nazi airfields provides ports of call for German planes that may choose to bomb our cities?

## III

But even if Hitler gave us time, what kind of "time" would we have at our disposal?

There are moral and spiritual dangers for this country as well as physical dangers in a Hitler victory. There are dangers to the mind and heart as well as to the body and the land.

Victorious in Europe, dominating Africa and Asia through his Axis partners, Hitler could not afford to permit the United States to live an untroubled and successful life, even if he wished to. We are the arch-enemy of all he stands for: the very citadel of that "pluto-democracy" which he hates and scorns. As long as liberty and freedom prevailed in the United States there would be a constant risk for Hitler that our ideas and our example might infect the conquered countries which he was bending to his will. In his own interest he would be forced to harry us at every turn...

And who can doubt that, in response, we should have to turn our own nation into an armed camp, with all our traditional values of culture, education, social reform, democracy and liberty subordinated to the single, all-embracing aim of self-preservation? In this case we should indeed experience "regimentation." Every item of foreign trade, every transaction in domestic commerce, every present prerogative of labor, every civil liberty we cherish, would necessarily be regulated in the interest of defense.

But the most tragic aspect of this attempt to survive, alone on our continent, is that it would amount at best merely to sustaining life in a charnel-house. With Britain gone, with the bright lamp of English liberty extinguished, with all hope of resurrection denied to the little democracies that have contributed so generously to our civilization and our culture, with the hobnailed boots of an ignorant and obscene barbarism echoing in every capital from London to Athens, we should live in a new world, changed beyond all recognition.

In this downfall of democracy outside the United States there would come, for many of our own people, a loss of faith in our own democratic system. Our confidence would be undermined, our vision dimmed, our ranks divided. In a dark, uncertain world we should stand alone, deriving from no other country the sustaining strength of a common faith in our democratic institutions.

What would it profit us to achieve, at last, this perfect isolation?

#### IV

The Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor has looked down across the bay at many men who have crossed the ocean to find freedom. It stands now as a silent witness to the fact that we are already locked in mortal combat with the German system.

American courage and American idealism, together with the sound common sense of the American people, summon us to the defense both of our physical security and of those moral and spiritual values which alone make life worth living. This defense means many things. It means, in the first instance, a clear recognition that the most dangerous of all courses we could follow in this hour of decision is a policy of drift: of do-nothing while there is still time to act effectively; of letting hesitancy ripen into disagreement, and disagreement curdle into factions which will split the country.

It means strong leadership in Washington: a willingness to forego the methods of indirection and surprise and veiled hints and innuendo, and to state the plain facts of the situation boldly. It means leadership which is as generous as it is strong: leadership which is willing to forget old quarrels, ready to bring into positions of high power and into the innermost confidence of the Government the accredited spokesmen of the opposition party; leadership which is at last prepared to delegate all necessary authority to the engineers of American production.

It means a genuinely firm insistence that strikes or lockouts in defense industries will no longer be tolerated by public opinion. It means more immediate aid to the brave people who are now fighting in the front line of our defense. It means encouragement to American aviators who are ready to fly our own planes in the battle over Britain. It means a determination to see that our vital supplies reach England, under the protection of our own guns. Above all else it means a decision to avoid the same mistake that the democracies have made over and over again—the mistake of “too little and too late.”

There is no escape in isolation. We have only two alternatives. We can surrender or we can do our part in holding the line. We can defend, with all the means in our power, the rights that are morally and legally ours. If we decide for the American tradition, for the preservation of all that we hold dear in the years that lie ahead, we shall take our place in the line and play our part in the defense of freedom.

Source: “Let Us Face the Truth,” from *The New York Times*, April 30, 1941. Copyright © 1941 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission of the New York Times.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that this editorial reflects the opinions of the *New York Times* editors. Students may further answer that historians must consider many factors when evaluating this document as evidence. For example, individual newspapers often have consistent political ideologies that influence the writing of their editorials. Students may also note that the editorial makes a number of specific recommendations with which many Americans would have disagreed. Examples of these recommendations include urging an end to collective action by workers in defense industries and arguing that U.S. military force be used to ensure the delivery of war materials to Britain. Other students may point out that the *New York Times* has long been one of the most influential newspapers in the nation, and so this editorial may have had **an impact on public opinion**.