

What would have happened if the Japanese had not attacked Pearl Harbor? Would the U.S. have still gotten into the war with Germany?

Would it have been possible for the United States to stay out of World War II?

In March 1941, the United States passed the “Lend Lease Act,” so the U.S. government could lend money to Britain and the U.S. military could lend military equipment to Britain. If Japan had not attacked Pearl Harbor in December would the US have still gotten into a war against Germany? Lend Lease made Hitler so angry that, in December 1941 (right after Pearl Harbor) Hitler made a speech before the Reichstag declaring war against the United States. Hitler hoped that if he declared war on the USA, his Japanese allies would declare war on the USSR and attack Russian forces in Siberia. But even if Japan never attacked a US territory, Hitler still might have declared war. It was certainly a mistake for Hitler to declare war, but from the German perspective, because of all the military assistance the United States was giving Britain and (after June 1941) the USSR, it was already in a de facto war against Germany.

How might the USA have been able to assist Britain, without direct American involvement in the war against Germany? There was a simple solution that President Franklin Roosevelt should have used. Lend Lease required the direct involvement of the US government lending its military equipment to Britain. A better way would be for Britain to publicize its need for money to fight Germany, and so it was putting up some of its colonies for sale, to the highest bidder. The first British colonies to be offered were the Bahamas Islands, right off the coast of Florida. The United States would respond by offering to purchase the Bahamas. It was a clear straightforward economic transaction.

What Britain decided to do with the payment was a separate transaction. The British government could have used the money to contract with their Commonwealth partner Canada, to order a specific number of tanks, jeeps, trucks, ships, and airplanes. Canada then could put out requests for bids. Next, manufacturers in the USA could sign contracts with the Canadian government to build these items. Canada could then ship the equipment on their own ships across the Atlantic. Rather than US ships sending lend lease goods in its ships to Britain, keeping the transport solely on British and Canadian ships would have kept the USA out of direct involvement.

As Britain needed more help, separate sales could be conducted. For example, the British Virgin Islands could be put up for sale, and then the USA could have offered to purchase those islands, and add them to the nearby U.S. Virgin Islands. Bit by bit, each British territory in the Caribbean could have been offered for sale, and the United States could have paid the price. All this would be a straight-forward sale and purchase deal, for the USA to expand its territories in the Caribbean.

There was precedent to this type of sale. In 1853, the USA paid Mexico for the Gadsden Purchase of southern Arizona. In 1867, the USA paid Russia for its colony in Alaska. In 1898, the USA paid Spain for its colony in Puerto Rico. In 1917, the USA paid Denmark for its colony in the Virgin Islands. Arizona, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands remain part of the United States to the present.

Since US ships would not be transporting goods lent to Britain (even if the ships were owned by Canada, which had previously bought them from USA shipbuilders), that would not be a direct involvement in the war. US diplomats could truthfully tell German diplomats that they were interested in purchasing more colonies (though Germany had no such colonies in the western hemisphere) from them and others. The USA might have purchased Greenland from Denmark's government-in-exile, and maybe Iceland as well. The USA might have purchased the Dutch West Indies, with that money also being paid to the Nederland government-in-exile. The fact that all these islands were owned by governments who were fighting against Germany was, from an economic point of view, immaterial. At least, that is the reasoning American diplomats could use to keep Germany from declaring war on the United States.

If Hitler had not been able to justify his own declaration of war against the USA, then perhaps American soldiers and sailors would not be directly involved in the war in Europe. And if Japan had not made the colossal mistake of attacking the US territories of Hawai'i and the Philippines, it is quite likely that Roosevelt would not have been able to persuade Congress to declare war on Japan.

Of course, once Japan attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, the USA would still be involved in war against Japan. But the Pacific War could have been kept separate from the war in Europe. Roosevelt could have made a deal with the British, French, and Dutch to withdraw their troops in Asia, in order to transfer them to fight against Germany in Europe, and the American military would take full responsibility for fighting Japan. Roosevelt was opposed to European imperialism, and he would have no doubt insisted on independence for not only the Philippines (which he in fact did do), but also he would have allied with independence leaders like Ho Chi Ming in French Indochina and Sukarno in the Dutch East Indies. If that had occurred (with the French, British, and Dutch colonialists gone), then India, Burma, Singapore, Malaya, and Hong Kong would have become independent earlier. More dramatically, the Indonesian war for independence against the Dutch, and the Vietnamese war against the French (and later against the USA), would never have happened.

Historians have a responsibility not only to write an accurate account of what happened at a specific time and place, but also to show better alternatives which might realistically have been enacted. Alternate scenarios are speculative, of course, but they can be useful to suggest what better alternatives might have been used, to avoid or minimize massive human tragedies, especially the horrid conflicts that convulsed the world from 1937 to 1945.

Walter L. Williams, Ph.D. retired professor of history