Americans in the 1930s responded to the international crises of their day by referring to whatever lessons they drew from the Great War. Some, such as FDR, were convinced that some form of collective security was needed (Wilsonianism). Others, George Norris among them, were sure that the US had been misguided in entering that conflict and should do everything possible to stay out of any future European war (isolationism). Between Wilsonianism and isolationism were numerous other positions, most of which allowed that the US might have to fight to protect its vital interests but emphasized that the country should do so only as a last resort. Events obviously rendered most of these debates moot. Aggressive policies of Germany, Italy and Japan made neutrality a less and less tenable policy until the attack on Pearl Harbor settled the issue.

World War II was a total war in the sense that it required the complete mobilization of the economy. Food, gasoline, metals were all rationed. A draft, the first introduced in peacetime, took millions of men. Many of their places in the civilian economy were taken by women whose lives were thereby profoundly transformed.

One of the most important expressions of isolationist sentiment in the US in the 30s was the Senate investigation of the munitions industries headed by Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota. The investigation lasted from 1934 to 1936 and reflected anti-business sentiment as well as isolationism. The Nye Committee charged that American entry into WW I had been at the behest of the so-called “merchants of death,” the munitions manufacturers who allegedly made exorbitant profits as a result. Other business interests, the committee charged, were equally culpable. Bankers and financiers had loaned large sums to Britain and France and so could not permit a German victory. The sensational charges no doubt had a role in arousing popular hostility to American intervention in European affairs. And the Nye Committee was extremely influential in drafting the neutrality legislation which tied FDR’s hands in the early days of WW II.

THE WAGNER-ROGERS BILL: One of the great tragedies of American political life was the failure of the Wagner-Rogers Bill. The legislation would have permitted children, orphaned by Nazi atrocities, to enter the US in excess of the immigration quotas established by the restriction laws of the 1920s. All of the orphans had guaranteed sponsors and so none would have required public support. Opponents of the bill advanced a number of arguments against it, but three seem to have been basic: one was the fear that this would be the first of many refugee bills. If these children were admitted, others would seek admission and the restriction of immigration would collapse. A second was that these and other refugees would in the long run compete with American children for jobs and education. Finally, anti-Semitism reared its ugly head. While only half of the orphans were Jews, Jews were a special target of the Nazis. Many Americans just did not want all of these Jews. FDR’s failure to push for the passage of the bill is arguably the low point of his entire presidency. Most of those children might have lived had the US and other “free” countries been willing to take them in. (see video: “America and the Holocaust”)
JAPANESE INTERNMENT: The American unwillingness to accept more than a handful of refugees from the Nazis is not the only evidence that nativism continued to play a dominant role in American life throughout the 30s and 40s. “Relocation” was the polite term used to describe the policy of rounding up all of the Americans of Japanese birth (issei) or descent (nisei) and herding them into concentration camps. The real basis for this was the continuing prejudice against Asians. California, in particular, had long been a center of anti-Oriental sentiment. The Supreme Court refused to intervene even though the policy amounted to imprisoning tens of thousands of American citizens without trials—without even charges being made against them as individuals. Thus the Bill of Rights was suspended for the duration of the war. (see: feature film, “Come See the Paradise”)

THE THIRD WORLD: WW I, though hailed by Woodrow Wilson as a struggle to make the world safe for democracy, actually was in part a war to settle European imperial rivalries. In some respects, World War II was a continuation of this same contest. Japan sought an Asian empire and, in so doing, threatened not only American possessions and interests in the Pacific but also the French empire in Indochina, the Dutch control of Indonesia, British holdings in India, Burma, Malaysia and China, and Russian ambitions in Korea and Manchuria. Italy’s forays into Africa jeopardized both British and French possessions. And Germany sought a European empire for itself. The Japanese, Italian and German threats were all beaten, though at terrible cost. The old imperial powers found themselves no longer able to hold on to their empires. The so-called Third World was born. The US attempted to control the process of independence in a variety of places. But the breakup of the old empires proceeded too rapidly and in too many places for even the US to do much.

And so the old colonial possessions need to be counted among the victors of 20th century war. None of the major European powers intended that victory but it was perhaps the most important international consequence of a half-century of world war in the long run.