

The presidential
election of 1940: war,
controversy and the
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The Presidential Election of 1940: War, controversy and the “ new deal” Essay Sample

In modern-day America elections have become routine and, to a certain degree, taken for granted. All elections are important to the future of our country. Every once in a while an election comes along that promises to reshape the very nature of America. Some would argue that the election of 2008 is one such election. We tend to think of the major issues our elections are built around as being unique to our time in history. They are not.

Our economy is arguably in recession. Our nation is struggling with terrorism and how much power we should allow the government to protect us from it. In 1940 Americans grappled with an uncertain world, as well. The country was only just emerging from the worst times of the Great Depression, an economic and human calamity we can scarcely imagine today. A country still fatigued from the long-term consequences of the First World War was now being asked to prepare for another war. Victory would be anything but certain. Some Americans were getting uneasy to the unprecedented Presidential power wielded by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first two terms.

Sometimes the events of history conspire to remind us of the importance of participation in our Democracy. The 1940 election was destined to be history making, as is the upcoming election of 2008. At the outset of the 1940 campaign the stakes for the United States could not have been much higher.

The Second World War had erupted in Europe. Americans had suffered tremendously in the ten years since the stock market crash of 1929

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triggered the Great Depression. Looking back, Roosevelt was the right man at the right time. The public sensed this and chose to return him to office even when it broke one hundred and fifty years of tradition. Who will be the right person in 2008? In November, once again, the voters will have the chance to craft American history for generations to come.

The United States in 1940

By, 1940, the worst of the Great Depression had passed. Times were still difficult, though. The peak of unemployment was about 25% in 1933. At the time of the 1940 campaign the rate was still above 10%. ¹ Two recessions took place during the depression era. The second of the, in 1937-38, was dangerously close to the start of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) reelection campaign.

The U. S gross national product (GNP) was rising again but had still not reached pre-depression levels. It had not been that long since the "Hooverville" tent cities occupied Washington. The second recession aroused fears of a return to worse conditions.

In his eight years as President FDR had used massive government intervention in an attempt to restart the flagging national economy. There had been progress, but the recovery was slow and sluggish.

The "New Deal" ushered in an unprecedented level of government intervention into the economy and the lives of ordinary citizens. The 1940 election would be a referendum on the New Deal and Roosevelt's leadership. The second recession posed a problem for Roosevelt. It increased doubt in

the general public about the New Deal and at the same time increased nervousness about the level of power Roosevelt had attained. The expression of that doubt came in a dip in political support. As author David Kennedy

1. David Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999; 244.

puts it: "The President paid a stiff political price for it (recession) at the polls in 1938".²

Kennedy refers to the mid-term Congressional elections during Roosevelt's second term. The results were not as FDR had hoped. Many of FDR's initiatives were challenged and defeated before a conservative Supreme Court. Roosevelt thought that a handoff in power, even to another Democrat, would result in further dilution of his initiatives.

The American public, for its part, was anxious to emerge from government caretaking. At the time, acceptance of government, or any, assistance was still frowned upon. According to Watkins: "...dependence on others for help was accepted as a temporary expedient at best, and looked upon as a demonstration of moral weakness at worst".³

The last thing Americans wanted was for government aid to become a way of life. The Great Depression, for many, was an all consuming event. People lived from day to day, sometimes not knowing where they would work, live or eat tomorrow. At the same time, some of the elites of America were

conspicuous in their wealth. Many had not been affected a great deal by the Depression, or they were able to recover their wealth quickly. An undercurrent of resentment went through bread lines, picket lines and shanty homes. Roosevelt seized on this to develop his base of support.

Events outside the United States were disturbing to say the least. Freedom seemed to be on the run in Europe with fascist and communist regimes replacing democratic ones.

Roosevelt himself said that “ clouds of suspicion, tides of ill will and intolerance gather

2. David Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999; 350.

3. T. H. Watkins. *The Hungry Years: a narrative history of the Great Depression in America* . (New York: Marian Books), 1999; 73.

darkly in many places”. 4

The Great Depression was not confined to the United States. Most of the countries of Europe suffered severe economic downturns leading to a range of reactions. In Germany, it helped pave the way for the rise of Adolf Hitler and the re-militarization of Germany. The Germans were still saddled with the emotional and financial debts of having lost World War 1 when the depression hit. Hitler promised the Germans a better day and a return to world prominence. For the rest of the world, he was a tremendous threat that

they were in no way ready to deal with. By the time of the 1940 U. S. election, Hitler had begun his conquest of Europe.

The collapse of the American economy had affected other nations profoundly. Desperate governments tried to raise taxes and tariffs. Entire political systems became unstable. Dictators such as Mussolini imposed strict government controls over the economy. The British began a process of trying to install a planned economy. Some believed that the solution to the depression was a Soviet-style economy. They reasoned that the controls, planning and ownership by the state could insure the nation against steep economic swings.

Roosevelt's popularity grew during his first two terms of office for two reasons. First, he was a man who took decisive actions to do something about the Great Depression. Americans, by and large, felt that their government was there to help them help themselves. Secondly, Roosevelt's personality eased people's fears and gave them hope that better days were ahead. He was probably inclined to confront the threat of despotism early on but knew it was not yet politically palatable. He had enough concerns

4. Lawrence Levine. *The People and the President: America's Conversation with FDR*. (Boston: Beacon Press), 2002; 269.

with domestic politics at the time.

Republicans had raised alarms that FDR was going beyond the Constitutional powers allotted to the President. With people starving and the economy in

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freefall, most people had little patience for theoretical arguments about the Constitution. FDR's support remained strong as he initiated a flurry of federal programs with the acronyms WPA, NRA, and CCC. Other important Roosevelt initiatives included the Social Security Act and banking reform.

Opponents of Roosevelt might accuse him of "telling people what they want to hear" or "playing to the basest instincts of the voters. Those who supported a third term for Roosevelt strongly disagreed. Quoting Raymond Moley, author David Kennedy writes; "He (Roosevelt) is outraged by hunger and unemployment, as though they were personal affronts".⁵ If the truth lies somewhere in the middle, there is no doubt whatsoever that Roosevelt was a masterful political actor. Those who chose to compete against him in 1940 knew they were up against a formidable opponent. FDR was not without his flaws, however.

FDR's most controversial act occurred during his second term. Frustrated by Supreme Court rulings against some of his initiatives, FDR tried to change the structure of the Court itself. He proposed that the number of sitting justices be increased. FDR could then nominate favorable candidates to fill the open seats. In this attempt, he failed. Republicans would use this incident as a central point of criticism during the 1940 campaign.

Roosevelt's personality has been credited as the key element in gaining

5. David Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999; 244.

acceptance of many of his early actions. When FDR took office, banks were failing at a remarkable rate. Life savings and national assets were being lost in the blink of an eye. In one of his first acts in office Roosevelt closed all the banks for four days while Congress met to develop a strategy to address the failure problem. In another administration, this action might have caused a severe panic among the American population as people tried, in any way they could, to draw their remaining money out of the institutions.

Roosevelt managed to effectively explain his action to the American people. He used the somewhat cheerful description of “ bank holiday” to put the best face on the situation. The panic never occurred and Roosevelt emerged from the situation with greater political capital. The “ bank holiday” sent a signal to the American people that the federal government was going to do all it could to stabilize the economic landscape.

The Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were among the most successful of Roosevelt’s initiatives. These programs had a dual benefit. Millions of people were put back to work. Also, the nation’s infrastructure was being vastly improved.

Another controversial action came in relation to the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). As part of the act, Roosevelt included a provision that forced businesses to increase wages when the price of their goods went up.

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In other words, FDR was trying to limit the profit margins of business owners so that profits would be spread more evenly to the rank and file employees. Opponents claimed that the act does not give due consideration to the increased cost of doing business. Business owners also argued that limiting profits will only discourage business activity even more.

Prior to the war, America had several strong Allies in Europe. By 1940, they were beginning to fall like dominos. The loss of France increased the threat to both England and the U. S. A pro-Nazi regime had been installed and relations with the U. S. cut off. Before the war, the U. S. and England were working to assist the French Resistance and other anti-Nazi elements in subverted countries.

Relations with the British were strong but becoming more strained. Hitler was rampaging through Europe and appeared intent on an invasion of Britain. America was sending military hardware and advisors to Britain as they attempted to fight off the German Luftwaffe. Some of the supplies were lost to German U-boat attacks in the Atlantic. The U-boat menace also affected transatlantic passenger travel and trade. U-boat attacks were a provocative action. They had played a role in drawing the United States into the First World War. For the time being, Roosevelt toed a dangerous line of neutrality and the British became increasingly frustrated as the threat to them grew.

Relations with Japan were deteriorating rapidly as the 1940 election neared. The Japanese had invaded China and atrocities they committed there contributed to an escalating level of outrage among the western nations.

Before entering the war the United States was already conducting covert missions in an effort to help the Chinese. Many of these were humanitarian-based, but some were not. "Doolittle's Raiders" were a group of American pilots who conducted bombing raids in support of the Chinese.

On the diplomatic front things were not much better. Talks with the Japanese were proving to be unproductive. The two sides were increasingly suspicious of each other's motives. An oil boycott was imposed on the Japanese after talks broke down. The Japanese publicly stated that they considered this an act of war.

The Republican Candidates

The Republicans in 1940 had a built-in burden to run against. The last two Republican Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover had presided over the severe economic downturn in the late 1920's and early 1930s. The way in which the Hoover administration, in particular, chose to deal with the economic crisis was widely criticized. The Federal Reserve exacerbated the initial downturn by tightening the supply of money too much.

Hoover himself pledged to cut taxes and continue to balance the government's budget. Instead, he signed a bill that increased taxes and added tariffs on imports. Upon taking office, Hoover had stated publicly that he believed that the problem of poverty in America was nearly over. That same year, the stock market crashed and the Great Depression was underway.

Hoover's actions, inaction and missteps did not engender a sense of confidence in the American people. Worse yet, his stoic demeanor made him appear unfeeling to the plight of ordinary Americans. This probably was not the case. It was apparent, though, that Hoover was ill-equipped to handle an event of such magnitude. Few people would be. None the less, this is the reputation the Republicans in 1940 had to confront as they attempted to win back the oval office.

In 1940 the Republicans felt they had a chance to regain the presidency. They assembled a slate of moderate conservatives led by the eventual nominee, Wendell Willkie of Illinois. Willkie was actually a former Democrat and an executive in the utilities industry.

Willkie had opposed many elements of the first New Deal. He also had warned about the danger of America's military unpreparedness. At the same time, he attacked FDR's Lend-Lease program as inciting war.

Wendell Willkie faced opposition for the nomination from three other notable candidates. Thomas E. Dewey was a young energetic prosecutor from New York and one of the early favorites for the nomination. He made his name prosecuting a number of notable organized crime figures.

At the time, Dewey took an isolationist stance on foreign affairs. This, combined with his lack of experience in foreign matters would become points of criticism for his primary opponents. An increasing number of people felt that a firm hand was necessary to deal with the rising fascist threat, particularly in the hawkish right wing of the party. In the years after the

election, Dewey's isolationist position would evolve but in 1940 it was still a liability.

Another isolationist, Robert A. Taft, battled Willkie and Dewey for the nomination. Taft was the son of a former U. S. President and was a successful businessman and lawyer. In 1940, Taft was an incumbent Senator from Ohio. Taft wanted a smaller and less centralized federal government. He campaigned against foreign intervention, and for lower taxes and more restrictions on labor unions.

A fourth major candidate, Arthur Vandenburg, rounded out the Republican field. Vandenburg was a fifty-six year old Senator from Michigan. In the Senate he had voted against most provisions of the second New Deal as part of a very small group of Republican opposition. His position was that the FDR administration was not being fiscally responsible. He also complained that FDR had garnered too much power and, in

effect, was a dictator. ⁶ Vandenburg had been more of interventionist than either Dewey or Taft in prior years. Events in Europe were pushing him toward a more isolationist stance as the election neared.

The Republican Convention

The Republican Presidential convention of 1940 has been referred to as one of the greatest conventions in American history. It was not for the politically faint-of-heart. Little had been decided by the time of the convention and the

stakes were enormous. The Republican campaign was energized by the perception that for the first time since 1928 they had a chance to win the presidency. An undecided convention also presented the chance that a dark horse candidate could emerge and win the nomination.

Not only was the convention exciting, but the stakes were also high:

Would this country keep its head in the sands of isolationism, or would it face the menace of Adolf Hitler? ⁷

The early favorites in the Republican race had been Taft, Vandenburg and Dewey. The Taft campaign focused on shoring up his bases of support in the conservative Midwest and south. By contrast, Dewey was a high profile district attorney from New York City. He counted on the urban areas of the U. S. for support. Vandenburg was a home town favorite in his native Michigan. As the elder statesman of the campaign he emphasized his experience as a critical asset for the next President.

The race was still wide open at the time of the Republican convention. Less than half of the available delegates had been pledged to any candidate.

Each candidate and

6. Wayne Cole. *America First: the battle against intervention, 1940-41* . (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press). 1953; 34.

7. Charles Peters. " The Greatest Convention." *Washington Monthly* . July/Aug. 2006.

their supporters attempted to exploit the weaknesses of the others. Dewey's youth and

relative experience was criticized by Vandenburg and Taft. Dewey, in turn, complained

that Vandenburg was too isolationist, and Willkie was too corporate to win against

Roosevelt.

It was dangerous to attack a still popular incumbent President, but the Republicans felt emboldened. The Republicans felt that the rhetoric FDR used to promote his New Deal programs was unfair. In the party platform they included the statement:

Instead of leading us into More Perfect Union the Administration has deliberately fanned the flames of class hatred. 8

The Republican nominee, Wendell Willkie did not emerge until late in the process. Willkie took a moderate stance opposing some, but not all, of FDR's New Deal provisions. He advocated continuing and expanding the Lend-Lease program which sent military goods to U. S. allies in Europe. These positions and his image as a fresh face in the process allowed Willkie to surge late in the 1940 campaign. Hitler's increased aggression in the late 1930's made Willkie's positions seem all the more reasonable.

The nomination issue was still undecided at the time of the Republican convention. As the delegates held a series of votes Willkie gained

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progressively more support. After delegate rich New York, Michigan and Pennsylvania threw their support to Willkie he was able to win on the sixth ballot.

The Democrats

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the two-term incumbent President at the time of the 1940 campaign. Roosevelt's dramatic action and reassuring nature had made him

8. Gerhard Peters. 2008. " Republican Party Platform of 1940." *The American Presidency Project* . <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29640> . (Retrieved 15 Mar. 2008).

popular during a time when people needed a champion in the White House.

Roosevelt's policies certainly were not without opposition. In contrast, a continued Roosevelt presidency, the Democrats surmised, would provide a much needed continuity in a world that was in utter upheaval. The convention platform of the Democrats reiterated the dangers:

It is America's destiny, in these days of rampant despotism, to be the guardian of the world heritage of liberty and to hold aloft and aflame the torch of Western civilization. 9

FDR suffered from Polio, unbeknownst to many Americans at the time. This did not effect either his disposition or his political ambitions. According to DeGregorio, the President was " ebullient, charming, persuasive, gregarious

and genuinely interested in people and their problems” (DeGregorio, 1993).

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Roosevelt was either undetermined about running for a third term or engaging in political posturing up until the time of the Democratic convention. In the end he “ maneuvered to be drafted by the convention.” Once his candidacy was announced he won the nomination without a fight.

The Campaign

The Republicans had no intention of conceding a third term to Roosevelt. Willkie campaigned hard. He traveled over 30, 000 miles and gave over 500 speeches during the fall campaign. His treatment in the press was quite favorable. Amazingly 78% of America’s newspapers endorsed his candidacy. Only 9% endorsed Roosevelt

9. Gerhard Peters. 2008. “ Democratic Party Platform of 1940.” *The American Presidency Project* . <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29597> . (Retrieved 15 Mar. 2008).

10. William DeGregorio. *The Complete Book of U. S. Presidents: from George Washington to Bill Clinton* . (New York: Wings Books), 1993; 479.

(DeGregorio, 1993). 11

Willkie used the FDR third term issue to full effect in the fall campaign. In doing so, he hoped to enlist not only the support of Republicans but also of Democrats who were uneasy with the break in tradition. He also criticized <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidential-election-of-1940-war-controversy-and-the-new-deal-essay-sample/>

the inefficiency and waste of many of FDR's programs. A third major campaign issue for Willkie was the unpreparedness of America's military. He sometimes grew frustrated that the public seemed somewhat apathetic to the rising menace

Most Americans disliked Hitler, but they felt little danger from him

because the mighty British fleet appeared to control the seas, and on

land, behind the supposedly impregnable Maginot Line, there was the

French army, widely considered to be the best in the world, standing ready to repel the Nazis. ¹²

Willkie warned that America might be drawn into World War Two whether it liked it or not. He pledged to build up the military and expand military aid programs to foreign countries.

For his part, Roosevelt claimed to be the only man with the temperament and experience to lead America through this difficult time. He criticized Willkie's big business roots and lack of political experience. FDR pledged in 1940 that he would "not send American troops into foreign wars." It is not known how much this promise benefited his reelection campaign but within a year after the election the promise would be broken.

11. William DeGregorio. *The Complete Book of U. S. Presidents: from George Washington to Bill Clinton* . (New York: Wings Books), 1993; 491.
12. Charles Peters. " The Greatest Convention." *Washington Monthly* . July/Aug. 2006.

The election results of 1940 could be viewed in two different ways. By most standards the election was a landslide. Roosevelt carried 38 of the 48 states. He won the electoral college handily, 449 to 82.

When looking at the popular vote, though, Willkie showed unexpected strength. He garnered over 22 million votes, trailing Roosevelt by less than 5 million. It was a clear sign that opposition to Roosevelt was growing. The Congressional super majority may have been at risk in 1942. Willkie gained six million votes over his Republican predecessor in 1936, Alf Landon. He also made inroads for the Republicans in the rural Midwest. FDR might have lost a fourth election if history had not intervened. Roosevelt's coalition of urban voters and big labor could not be overcome in 1940. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 prompted U. S. entry into the war and solidified support for Roosevelt and the Democratic incumbents.

Exit polls, an attempt to measure public opinion in the immediate aftermath of an election, were first used in 1940. At the time, their usage was highly experimental and confined to a small area. In our age of media, exit polls are now an expected part of election coverage. To a large degree their use is still evolving. Since 1940 there have been several high profile failings of exit polls to predict the actual result. Because of exit polling, people now expect

election results in real time and mistakes can happen. The introduction of these polls in 1940 signified a step into the media age to come.

Impact of 1940 Election

The reelection of FDR meant continuation and expansion of his social and economic agenda. This would benefit the economy in untold ways in years to come. It is difficult to assess whether Roosevelt's policies actually ended the Great Depression. It is much clearer that the multitude of public works projects FDR initiated had an economic benefit that lasts to this day.

Dam building, bridge and road building and rural electrification in the 1930 greatly buttressed the American infrastructure. This infrastructure provided the underpinnings for the American economic powerhouse that would re-emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century.

It may have appeared in 1940 that the reelection of Roosevelt would keep the United States out of the Second World War. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 changed everything, however.

FDR was the first American President to seek a third term in office. In 1940 concerns were growing over the precedent that a three term President might set for future leaders. Prior to FDR tradition dictated that a President step down after no more than two terms. The tradition was not yet codified in law, however.

Republicans tried to make a major issue of FDR's tradition-breaking third run.

It was the extraordinary circumstances of the Great Depression and World

War Two that would allow Roosevelt a third, then a fourth, term. While FDR
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was in office and the Democrats had firm control of Congress there was little the opposition could do about the situation.

During the following Truman administration things changed. Fearing the power of a long-term President, Congress moved to place term limits on the office. In 1947, only two years after the death of FDR, the 22nd Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed and ratified. This amendment limited all future Presidents to no more than two terms in office.

The 2008 Election

On the surface it would appear that elections of 1940 and 2008 have little in common. Further examination, though, reveals several key similarities. War cast a shadow over both elections. Although not yet in a “ hot” war in 1940, America was being drawn inexorably toward the world conflict. Today America fights a war that has no clear end point. In both cases Americans had to assess whether to fight and how to fight these complicated global conflicts.

In both elections, opposition candidates have garnered support from anti-war, anti-interventionist factions. Echoing Roosevelt’s promise, some candidates have pledged to end American involvement in foreign conflicts altogether. The larger ideological battle of whether or not America should be involved in foreign issues is being fought today, as it was in 1940.

A similar ideological battle is being fought in relation to domestic policies. With the modern economy in a downturn, candidates are debating how much

government intervention should be undertaken. Bailouts of financial firms and other large corporate institutions are again causing controversy

That controversy extends to assistance programs for everyday citizens.

Willkie complained about the lack of efficiency in some of these programs while other candidates protested their existence altogether. The Republican and Democratic challengers have made the same complaints about the efficiency of public assistance programs, i. e. Hurricane Katrina, tax cuts and the stimulus program.

Interestingly, the Democrats have begun to use the phrase “ Bush’s recession” in much the same way Republicans used “ Roosevelt’s recession” in 1940. While the specific issues of the 1940 and 2008 elections are different, the larger themes are similar. How much government is too much? When and why should America fight? When should it isolate itself?

The 2008 election is wide open without an incumbent or his Vice President running for the first time in decades. A spirited challenge has been conducted in both the Republican and Democratic processes. In 1940, neither party candidate had been settled upon at the time of the conventions. In 2008, the possibility exists that at least one of the races will not be decided until the convention, a break with the tradition of recent decades.

As in 1940, the eventual Republican candidate was not the early front runner. Gov. Mitt Romney (R-Mass.) And Gov. Mike Huckabee (R-Ark.) provided a challenge from likely nominee John McCain’s right as Vandenberg and Taft had in 1940. McCain is described as a “ maverick” Republican who <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidential-election-of-1940-war-controversy-and-the-new-deal-essay-sample/>

may or may not fall in line with party recommendations. He is the elder statesman in the race and brings with him impressive credentials as Vandenberg had in 1940. It remains to be seen, however, whether his status as a longtime political actor will work for or against him.

The 2008 campaign is, so far, generating a high water mark of public interest when compared to other recent elections. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N. Y.) shares co-front runner status in the Democratic race with Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.). Either one of these candidates would signify a number of firsts. Clinton could be not only the first woman, but also the first former first lady, to win national election. Obama, on the other hand, would be the first black President of the United States. The two also share the somewhat unique designation of being viable candidates in their first run for the Presidency.

Analysis and Conclusion

The 1940 Presidential election was arguably the most important election of the 20th century. The storm clouds of war were quickly gathering. America was also struggling to emerge from the Great Depression. It had only been two decades since the end of World War One. That war was the most devastating in history as twentieth century technology entered the killing fields. In addition, the advent of Prohibition had helped organized crime grow to unprecedented levels. The American public in 1940 understandably had no taste for war.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 gave Roosevelt the chance to enter the war on the side of the Allies without sustaining political damage. His rallying call " We have nothing to fear but fear itself, " called the nation to arms and began a new era in American history. It is likely that any President faced with the Pearl Harbor attack would have declared war.

If Willkie or another candidate had been elected, there is only a small chance that events could have played out differently. A more non-interventionist President possibly could have made more concessions to the Japanese in the years leading up to the war. Most Presidents choose to continue the foreign policy stance of their predecessor, however. At best, concessions could have delayed America's entry into war.

The entry into the war was inevitable. The only question was *when* the United States would enter the conflict. Both Germany and Japan had designs upon America. A later entry into the war could have allowed both nations to consolidate their power and devise more sophisticated means of attacking the U. S. mainland. The events had already been set into motion. It is very unlikely that a different President could have changed them substantially.

For the American nation, the reelection of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940 provided a sense of stability the country needed as it entered another war. There was no time for the jockeying and power struggles that go on in the early years of an administration. A Republican President also would have been faced with a heavily democratic legislature, possibly making the process of mobilization more sluggish.

A more isolationist President might have also chosen to separate the European conflict from that in Asia. That is to say, he might have only gone to war with the nation that attacked us - Japan. The likely result of any kind of delay in entering the European theater would have been the fall of Great Britain to Hitler.

British Prime Minister Churchill had been urging Roosevelt for months to get in the conflict. FDR was sympathetic to the Allies but faced a thorny political situation at home. The second recession of 1937-38 had already eroded his support. Roosevelt knew that the last thing the public wanted to hear before the 1940 election is that America was going to war in Europe again.

Republican isolationist candidates were already gaining ground by referring to Roosevelt as a "warmonger".

Economists might argue whether the Great Depression was really over by the time of the 1940 election. Irregardless of the economic indicators it still would play a role in the election of a new President. The haunting not-so-distant memories of poverty, starvation and the dust bowl were still primary in the memories of many voters. During his term in office, Roosevelt had done an effective job of painting the Republican party as unfeeling, pro-business technocrats. This impression probably was not completely without truth. Republicans protested these simplistic labels.

The Republicans argued that government spending and activism was not the way out of the Great Depression. Roosevelt's recovery, they thought, was a house of cards destined to fall upon itself. Government spending might put some people back to work and provide a short-term stimulus for the

economy, but the debt and tax raises necessary to fund them would cause the house to fall sooner rather than later.

The die was cast for the roles the two political parties play today during the Great Depression. Each party has tried to box the other into the most negative interpretations of these roles ever since. Even today, Republicans portray Democrats as free spending government activists who want to take away personal freedoms, increase taxes and stir up class resentment. Democrats, on the other hand, often portray Republicans as pro-business shills who don't care about needy people.

Interestingly, roles on foreign policy seem to have switched. Roosevelt's tacit support of the Allies before the U. S. actually entered the war was a source of some criticism by the Republican opposition. Roosevelt was inciting war, they said. Meanwhile, FDR and a few Republicans were trying to educate the public on the threat posed by the rise in fascism. Most Republicans took an isolationist stance and made political gains as a result.

In 2008, the Democrats now score points by painting the Republicans as the party of war. Republican George W. Bush has spent much of his Presidency trying to convince the public that it is necessary to confront terrorism all over the world. The war in Iraq now casts a shadow over his Presidency and creates an opportunity for anti-war Democrats such as Sen. Barack Obama (D-III.). Additionally, it is now the Republicans who are accused of taking away personal freedoms in the name of safety.

As it was in 1940, it is up to the American public to decide what issues are important and how they will be addressed. The confluence of world and <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidential-election-of-1940-war-controversy-and-the-new-deal-essay-sample/>

domestic events makes the election of 2008 particularly important in charting the future of the United States. The voters of 1940 surely felt the same burden and opportunity. Roosevelt won an unprecedented third term despite erosion in his Congressional support. President Bush also had erosion in his Congressional support. It remains to be seen whether voters will elect his party to the Presidency for the third.

An old cliché' states that: " The more things change, the more they stay the same". Our world has changed dramatically since 1940. Technology has advanced at an astonishing rate. The United States is rapidly becoming more culturally and racially diverse. The internal and external threats to the nation are more oblique and ever changing.

At the same time many of the larger issues our Democracy deals with are the same. It is time, again, to determine what role government will have in our lives and how much personal freedom we will retain. It is also time to reassess our role in the larger world. In what situations will we fight in the name of freedom? and for who?

Notes

1. David Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999; 244..

2. David Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999; 350.

3. T. H. Watkins. *The Hungry Years: a narrative history of the Great Depression in America* . (New York: Marian Books), 1999; 73.
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