A Timeline of US Intervention into World War II

1935

August
Neutrality Act is passed by Congress.

1936

February 29
Second Neutrality Act passed by Congress.

1939

September 1
German troops and aircraft attack Poland. Soviet troops will invade Poland from the east on September 17, and Poland will surrender to the Germans on September 27.

September 3
After Hitler ignores their demand for German withdrawal from Poland, and as the British ship Athenia is sunk by German U-boats off the coast of Ireland, Great Britain and France formally declare war on Germany.

September 17
American aviation hero Charles A. Lindbergh makes his first anti-intervention radio speech. The U.S. non-intervention movement is supported not just by Lindbergh, but by former president Herbert Hoover, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., Henry Ford, Lindbergh and a number of senators and congressmen as well.

October
Congress passes the Cash & Carry Act. Belligerents now could purchase arms and other war goods provided they paid cash and transported their purchases on their own ships. The act still banned loans to belligerent governments and prohibited U.S. ships from entering war zones. Since the British navy ruled the seas, "Cash and Carry" obviously would benefit the Allies while giving Americans profits without any risk of involvement. The administration felt confident that, assured of U.S. supplies, Britain and France could defeat Hitler without American intervention.

November 4
Although President Roosevelt has declared American neutrality in the war in Europe, a Neutrality Act is signed that allows the US to send arms and other aid to Britain and France.

1940

May 7
British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigns in disgrace. He will be replaced by Winston Churchill on May 10.

June 10
Italy declares war on Britain and France, and U.S. President Roosevelt announces a shift from neutrality to "non-belligerency," meaning more active support for the Allies against the Axis.

June 14
German troops enter Paris and, as a French appeal for U.S. aid is declined, the French fortress at Verdun falls to the Germans.

June 28
In the U.S., the Alien Registration Act (the Smith Act) passed by Congress requires aliens to register and be fingerprinted; the Act makes it illegal to advocate the overthrow of the US government.

September
The US traded 50 old destroyers to the UK for 8 British naval bases to get around neutrality laws.

October 29
Conscription begins in the U.S. It is the first military draft to occur during peacetime in American history.

November 5
Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected to an unprecedented third term as president, with 54 percent of the popular vote. He defeats Republican Wendell L. Willkie.
1941

January 6
Contrary to widespread isolationist sentiment, President Roosevelt recommends a "Land-Lease" program that will provide U.S. aid to the Allies.

March
HR 1776, the Lend-Lease Act passes Congress. The US becomes the “arsenal of democracy.”

April 16
Britain receives its first American "Lend-Lease" aid shipments of food. By December, millions of tons of food will have arrived from the U.S.

The US occupies Greenland to relieve British troops stationed there.

June 22
German troops invade Soviet Russia, breaking the "nonaggression" pact signed in 1939. Two days later, President Roosevelt promises US aid to Russia.

June 25
President Roosevelt creates a U.S. Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), after a march by 50,000 black Americans is threatened by A. Philip Randolph to protest unfair labor practices in the government and the war industry.

June 28
Vannevar Bush is named director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD), which has just been created by President Roosevelt.

July
The US occupies Iceland to relieve British troops protecting the island.

August 9
Secret meetings between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill begin off the coast of Newfoundland. They will result in the Atlantic Charter, which contains eight points of agreement on the aims of the war.

September 11
After the USS Greer is attacked by a German U-Boat, President Roosevelt issues an order that German or Italian ships sighted in U.S. waters will be attacked immediately.

October 17
The USS Kearny, a U.S. destroyer, is torpedoed off the coast of Iceland by a German U-boat. On the 31st, the American destroyer Reuben James is sunk by a German U-boat, killing 100.

December 7
Just before 8 a.m., Honolulu time, 360 Japanese planes attack Pearl Harbor, the U.S. military base on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The attack cripples the U.S. Pacific fleet, and kills more than 2,300 American soldiers, sailors, and civilians. The attack precedes Japan's formal declaration of war, which is delivered by the Japanese foreign minister to the U.S. embassy in Tokyo more than seven hours later.

December 8
President Roosevelt addresses the U.S. Congress, saying that December 7 is "a date that will live in infamy." After a vote of 82-0 in the U.S. Senate, and 388-1 in the House, in favor of declaring war on Japan, Roosevelt signs the declaration of war. (See Roosevelt's famous address to Congress requesting that war be declared.)

December 11
Germany and Italy declare war on the U.S. President Roosevelt calls an end to official U.S. neutrality in the war in Europe, declaring war on Germany and Italy.