

Through this lesson, students will understand the role Pembina, North Dakota, played leading up to the United States' involvement in World War II.

Supplies

- Printed or electronic copies of "[Borderline Neutrality: The Transport of Military Aircraft Near Pembina, North Dakota, 1940](#)"
- Paper
- Writing utensils
- Access to the internet for research

Setup

- Ensure students have access to the article above.

Objectives

- Students will understand the cash-and-carry policy and its implications for U.S. neutrality during WWII.
- Students will analyze the role of North Dakota, particularly Pembina, in supporting the Allies while maintaining a stance of neutrality.
- Students will explore the complexities of neutrality in wartime and the ethical considerations involved.
- Students will understand the continuing relevance of these questions today.

Background

Between World War I and World War II, the United States grappled with its role in international conflicts, leading to the implementation of several key policies aimed at maintaining neutrality. The Neutrality Acts, passed in the 1930s, were a series of laws designed to prevent U.S. involvement in foreign wars. These acts reflected a strong isolationist sentiment, which advocated against involvement in foreign wars. The Neutrality Acts prohibited arms sales and loans to nations at war and imposed restrictions on American citizens traveling on belligerent ships to avoid issues that could have drawn the United States into a European conflict.

The Nye Committee, led by North Dakota Sen. Gerald Nye in the early 1930s, further influenced public opinion on neutrality. The committee investigated the causes of U.S. involvement in WWI, focusing on the influence of arms manufacturers and financial interests. The findings suggested that profit motives had played a significant role in dragging the U.S. into the conflict, reinforcing isolationist sentiments and spurring stricter neutrality laws. The combination of the Nye Committee's findings and the establishment of the Neutrality Acts shaped the national discourse around U.S. involvement in foreign wars. As late as 1940, most Americans were strong supporters of neutrality.

As WWII loomed on the horizon for the U.S., one significant policy, the cash-and-carry program, was established under the Neutrality Act of 1939. This policy allowed nations at war to purchase war materials from the U.S. as long as they paid in cash and transported the goods themselves. This was a critical shift from previous neutrality measures, as it permitted the United States to provide support to Allied nations, particularly the United Kingdom and France, without direct military involvement. President Franklin Roosevelt and his supporters touted this law as a means of keeping the U.S. out of the war.

Pembina, North Dakota, played a notable role in the cash-and-carry program. As a border town with strong ties to Canada, Pembina became a strategic point for the transfer of goods. The Allies desperately needed airplanes, but the Neutrality Acts prohibited them from flying these planes in U.S. airspace. However, the Allies also needed to have the title transferred to them before they could take possession of the planes. As a workaround, U.S. airplane manufacturers built airplanes and had them flown to a field outside of Pembina where a Canadian farmer would hitch the airplane to a team of horses and pull it across

the border. Pembina was once again at the center of international trade, as it had been in the 1700s and 1800s during the fur trade era. However, many people, like Sen. Nye, felt that this was a breach of neutrality. This debate raged on until the U.S. was attacked at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Activity

1. This lesson would go best with a unit on neutrality laws between the world wars and the intent of those laws to keep the U.S. out of another European war.
2. Define or remind students about the Neutrality Acts and why they were passed. If the students have not been introduced to Sen. Gerald Nye of North Dakota and the Nye Committee, have a brief discussion about the committee and senator.
3. Discuss how cash and carry altered the Neutrality Acts.
4. Introduce the idea that neutrality can be complicated. Discuss questions such as these:
 - Can a country truly be neutral if it is providing support to one side in a conflict?
 - Does a country need to supply both sides equally to remain neutral?
 - Is neutrality simply not being physically involved in a conflict?
5. Have the students read the 1993 *North Dakota History* article "Borderline Neutrality: The Transport of Military Aircraft Near Pembina, North Dakota, 1940."
6. As they read, have students note arguments for and against neutrality and describe how the U.S. worked legally around cash and carry.
7. Discuss what the students found.
8. Divide the class into two groups. These groups will prepare for a debate on the question: "Is it possible to maintain true neutrality while supporting one side in a conflict?"
 - One group should advocate that neutrality can be maintained while supporting the Allies.
 - The other should argue that the U.S. is not neutral if it supports one side and not the other.
9. Each group should prepare arguments, considering historical context, ethical implications, and the role of the U.S. in the larger conflict.
10. Conduct a structured debate or Socratic seminar. Encourage students to use examples from the article and their discussions.
11. Explain that since WWII, the U.S. has been involved in many potential conflicts to keep the country safe from a larger war such as WWII. Here are some examples:
 - Korean War
 - Vietnam War
 - Persian Gulf War
 - Iran-Iraq War
 - Soviet-Afghan War
 - CIA covert operations (Bay of Pigs in Cuba, Operation PBSuccess in Guatemala, Mossedegh coup in Iran)
 - Current examples
12. Ask students to reflect on the complexities of neutrality and how it applies to modern conflicts.
13. Have the students research a current conflict and write a reflection paper on what role the U.S. should take in the conflict.
 - Should the U.S. provide support?
 - How much support or what kind?
 - Is the conflict really of interest to the U.S.? Why/why not?

Extension

1. Write a letter to one of North Dakota's members of Congress expressing your opinion on the role the U.S. should take in the conflict they researched.
2. Have students research other roles that North Dakota(ns) played in WWII.

Reflection questions

1. Given the interconnectivity of the world today, is complete neutrality even possible?
2. Why do you think Pembina was such a good spot for the transfer of planes?
3. What role has Pembina played in international trade in the past?