Among the leaders of Western democracies, Franklin D. Roosevelt was perhaps the first to recognize a terrible threat in Adolf Hitler’s rise to absolute power in Germany. “Hitler is a madman,” FDR bluntly told the French ambassador to the United States in April 1933, just a month into his presidency, “and his counselors, some of whom I know personally, are even madder than he is.” A few weeks earlier, the German government had given Hitler dictatorial powers—a situation FDR characterized as “alarming.”

FDR’s antipathy for Hitler stemmed in part from personal experience. Having often spent summers in Germany as a schoolboy, the president felt his youthful exposure to German culture gave him a keen understanding of the German mind and its lamentable corruption by exposure to a cult of militarism. As assistant secretary for the navy during World War I, FDR had watched Germany launch its initial foray into unrestricted submarine warfare. With the ascendancy of Hitler and the Nazi Party, FDR’s serious concern about Germany’s authoritarian streak hardened into aversion.

For much of the 1930s, however, Americans wanted no part of another European war. Congress passed a series of neutrality laws designed to prevent American intervention in brewing conflicts overseas. The public, meanwhile, kept a wary eye on its leaders lest they commit the country to an engagement that would ultimately require a sacrifice of lives. This isolationism strictly limited FDR’s ability to counter Hitler’s aggression.
Besides this, FDR was deeply engaged in another problem—the worst economic depression in American history. Passing and implementing a series of laws to confront the Great Depression consumed most of FDR’s energy (and political capital) in the first five years of his presidency.

But FDR never lost sight of the danger posed by Hitler’s Germany. He certainly never subscribed to the popular belief that the Atlantic Ocean could buffer America from troubling events abroad. On the contrary, the president insisted the rogue Nazi state imperiled not only its neighbors in Europe, but also the United States—indeed much of the world.

It was in part out of this concern that FDR developed and promoted a “Good Neighbor Policy” in the Western Hemisphere, shunning military actions in Central and South America in favor of trade and mutually respectful engagement. He hoped this policy would serve the twin purposes of establishing greater security in the New World and setting an example of peaceful international relations for the world as a whole. Concern about Hitler’s aggression also played a part in this approach.

Above: Berlin, 1937. In the months leading up to Germany’s March 1938 annexation of Austria into a Greater Germany, long an aspiration of Hitler’s, the United States was coping with a sharp economic downturn after initial progress against the Great Depression. LOC

Left: Adolf Hitler at the annual rally of the Nazi Party in Nuremberg, September 10–16, 1935. It was at this rally that the Nazis introduced their infamous Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jews of the rights of German citizenship. Germany was also busy rearming in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Though alert to the threat, Franklin D. Roosevelt was much occupied with domestic issues. A month before the rally pictured here, FDR had signed the Social Security Act, which established old-age pensions and unemployment insurance for American workers. Norway National Archives
in FDR’s decision in 1933 to formally recognize the Soviet Union; the Soviets were hardly natural allies to the United States, but they might serve as a powerful bulwark against the stridently anticommunist Nazis.

FDR also made repeated attempts to educate the American public about Hitler’s growing ambition and the threat it posed to American security. In January 1936, for example, he warned of the rise of autocratic power in Europe and Asia coupled with a “trend towards aggression . . . which has in it many of the elements that lead to the tragedy of a general war.” In October 1937, he returned to the same theme, describing a “spreading epidemic of world lawlessness” and the need for peaceful nations to cooperate in an effort to “quarantine” aggressive states.

As of September 1938, FDR still hoped that European conflicts would not ignite into full-scale war. He was not opposed when British prime minister Neville Chamberlain met with Hitler in Munich and agreed to permit Germany’s seizure of Sudetenland, a largely German-speaking portion of Czechoslovakia. But the aftermath of the Munich Agreement—Czechoslovakia broke apart and Germany violated its promises by invading the country in 1939—deeply alarmed FDR.

It was from this moment that FDR began to embrace “all methods short of war” as an approach to the growing crisis in Europe. This meant building up American military capacity, especially airpower, as quickly as possible and, by 1941, funneling huge amounts of military aid to the British. By the time the United States entered World War II in December 1941, FDR was convinced the only way to secure America’s future was to destroy Nazi Germany—that “war breeding band of German militarists”—utterly. Once the conflict had begun in earnest, FDR insisted it could not come to a close without the Axis powers’ complete and unconditional surrender.

By late summer 1944, as the extent of Germany’s genocide became clear and Allied victory appeared close at hand, FDR supported bombing German cities to secure Nazi submission and favored a postwar occupation that would prohibit the Germans from even entertaining the possibility of resuming military ambitions. “Too many people here and in England hold the view that the German people as a whole are not responsible for what has taken place— that only a few Nazis are responsible,” FDR said. “That unfortunately is not based on fact. The German people must have it driven home to them that the whole nation has been engaged in a lawless conspiracy against the decencies of modern civilization.”