

# An Introduction to Isolationism

## Isolationism

The First World War ended with over a million US soldiers fighting on the Western Front. The US President, Woodrow Wilson, was adoringly welcomed when he arrived in Europe to take part in the peace negotiations. He was the first US President to visit Europe during his term of office. His '14 Points' for a better, peaceful world after the war, played a big part in drawing up the Treaty of Versailles. (For more on these issues, see unit 3.) Yet when Wilson returned to the USA, he found that the mood of the country had changed. Many American people seemed to want to return to isolationism. This meant that they did not want the USA to join any foreign alliances or take much part in world affairs.

### Reasons for isolationism

#### TRADITION

- Isolation was the traditional US policy towards the rest of the world. Woodrow Wilson had in fact been re-elected President in 1916 on a promise to keep the USA out of the First World War. In a world before air travel, the USA was cut off from the rest of the world far more than it is today. Apart from other countries in the Americas, everywhere else was at least 6 days' journey away by sea.

#### DISLIKE OF THE 'OLD WORLD'

- The USA is a country of immigrants. In 1919, the majority of US citizens had been born in Europe and their experiences and memories of Europe were not happy ones. For them, Europe spelt poverty, lack of freedom, exploitation, and oppressive governments. Not surprisingly, they wanted to forget Europe and get on with building new lives for themselves.

#### DANGEROUS IDEAS

- The Europe of 1919 was full of revolutionary ideas – Socialism, Communism and Anarchism. There had been the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917 (see unit 5) and attempted Communist revolutions in Germany, Hungary and elsewhere. Many people in the USA hated and feared these ideas. Any further contact with Europe was therefore to be avoided.

#### US SOLDIERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

- Many Americans regretted that 100,000 US soldiers had died in the First World War, and wanted to pull out of any more entanglements that might lead to further wars.

### What did isolationism mean in practice?

#### REJECTION OF THE PEACE TREATIES

- Under the US Constitution, peace treaties have to be agreed by the Senate – one of the elected houses of the US Congress (Parliament). The Senate was isolationist and would not agree to the Treaty of Versailles because it involved joining the League of Nations. The Treaty, into which Wilson had put so much, was rejected. The USA never joined the League of Nations.



#### A\* EXTRA

- Wilson was very keen on his League of Nations. On his return from Europe, he made an exhausting speaking tour of the USA by train, trying to whip up support. He suffered a stroke and the important negotiations with the Senate were conducted from his sickbed. He could have got the Senate to agree to sign the treaty if he had compromised, but he refused to budge at all and lost the vote.
- Quite often a different party from the one the President belongs to controls the Congress, including the Senate. Wilson was a Democrat, but the 1918 elections gave the Republicans a majority in the Senate. The Republicans were more isolationist than Wilson.

## 3.2 How did the policy of isolationism work?

After the First World War, the USA tried to avoid getting involved in international disputes.

### Treaties

One of the ways in which the USA tried to avoid disputes was by signing treaties to keep the peace. The Washington Naval Agreements (1921–2) limited the size of various countries' navies.

### Conferences

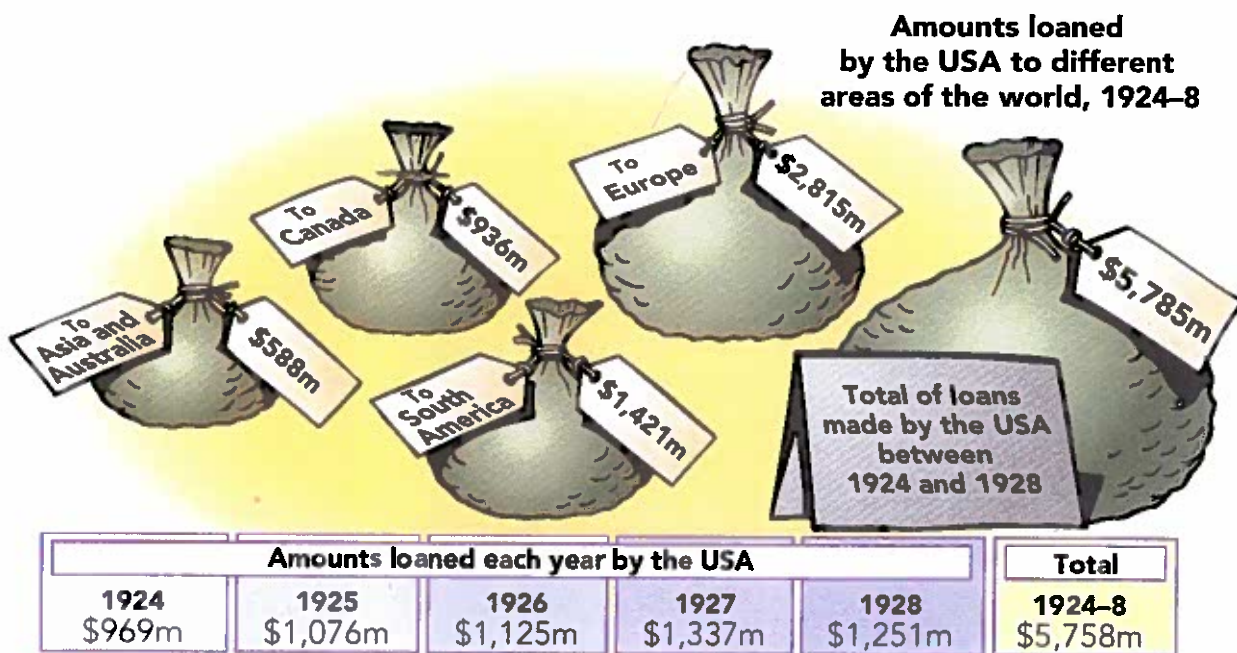
The USA believed that talking could sometimes stop fighting later on. The Americans took part in the Geneva Peace Conference (1932) and the World Economic Conference (1933).

### Economic help for Germany

The American government believed that the only way to keep peace in Europe was for Germany to be strong. So in 1924, a team of American experts worked out the **Dawes Plan**. This helped sort out a new currency for Germany and loaned the German government \$200 million.

### Economic help for South America

The American government gave aid to countries in South America like Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. This was to make sure their governments did not threaten the USA.



## Summary information .

### **Isolation**

- The tariffs were part of the return to 'isolationism' after the end of the war.
- Throughout the nineteenth century, the USA had had little to do with Europe. Many Americans had opposed entry into the First World War.
- In 1920, Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the USA did not join the League of Nations.
- Warren Harding (Republican president 1921-23) adopted the slogan 'America First'.
- Immigrants had come to the USA to escape the Old World; they did not want to be involved in the affairs of Europe.
- Isolation helped the US economy in the short term by protecting it from foreign competition.
- In the long term it harmed the economy; US industries were unable to sell abroad because other countries imposed tariffs against American goods.