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Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Occupation of Iceland

Michael T. Corgan

ON 7 JULY 1941 THE AMERICANS came to Iceland. This event was momentous in the history of a nation whose constitution declares its perpetual neutrality, for American forces have been stationed on its soil ever since. For the United States, however, this event was possibly even more important, because on that day President Franklin D. Roosevelt decisively effected the reversal of a cardinal principle of American foreign policy proclaimed by George Washington in his Farewell Address: avoid entanglement in European affairs.¹ To change so fundamental a policy, FDR was compelled to invoke a second fundamental policy—the Monroe Doctrine. To accomplish this, Iceland had to be “moved” into the Western Hemisphere. This legerdemain was performed not with smoke and mirrors but with maps, rhetoric, and by the powers he held as commander in chief of the army and navy.

FDR and American Foreign Policy Practice

Washington’s principle of non-involvement had been agreed upon even by the anti-Federalists. Thomas Jefferson had reminded Americans of their advantage in being “kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one-quarter of the globe.”² The political structure of the new republic, with its dispersion of foreign policy-making powers, reflected this disinclination for foreign involvement. Combined with the freedom of the seas principle, political isolation from European affairs served the new republic well in its formative years.

The Monroe Doctrine provided a corollary to these two pillars of policy in order to keep Europe out of America. As to the affairs of Europe, Americans “have always been anxious and interested spectators,” but “in the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any

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part. . . . It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparations for defense any attempt [by European powers] to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere [is] dangerous to our peace and safety." President Monroe never defined exactly what was included in the hemisphere, and Franklin Roosevelt took advantage of this ambiguity to include Iceland in the hemisphere.

During the early twentieth century the United States became involved briefly in European great-power politics when a pillar of American foreign policy—freedom of the seas—was, in Woodrow Wilson's view, placed in serious jeopardy. The seeming futility of the experience in that European war would require Franklin Roosevelt to posit a clear and present danger to both freedom of the seas and the Monroe Doctrine before the country could become involved in another such war.

The Expansion of Presidential Powers

Although the Constitution divides control over foreign policy-making between the legislative and executive branches, several important precedents set by the presidential exercise of power held in the title of commander in chief permitted Roosevelt the autonomous action to dispatch troops to Iceland.

This power was first exercised in peacetime by President James K. Polk when he dispatched army troops provocatively close to Mexican territory in 1846. Senator John C. Calhoun denounced this movement of troops into a troubled area: "It sets the example, which will enable all future presidents to bring about a state of things, in which Congress shall be forced, without deliberation or reflection, to declare war, however opposed to its convictions of justice or expediency."³ Abraham Lincoln, then a congressman from Illinois, echoed these sentiments in the House of Representatives. Ironically, it would be Lincoln himself who expanded the presidential powers significantly while he was commander in chief. In the first eleven weeks of the Civil War, Lincoln, according to some, virtually overturned the Constitution; he suspended habeas corpus, increased the standing army, blockaded the South, all without Congress in session.⁴ The Supreme Court upheld much of what he did, enlarging yet further the power of the president's role as commander in chief. Though Woodrow Wilson later used the military rather freely in hemispheric matters, he sought a congressional declaration of war in order to protect freedom of the seas.

The Supreme Court has commented very little about the extent or limits of the power of the president as commander in chief. Two cases, however, that occurred during Roosevelt's first administration produced decisions decidedly in the president's favor, although neither decision related to the worsening

situation in Europe. In *U.S. v. Belmont Bank*, the Court held that certain powers of the president were inherent in the idea of a chief executive and belonged to the president even if the Constitution did not specify them.⁵ In *U.S. v. Curtiss-Wright*, the Court observed that the president was the “sole organ” of the country in matters of foreign affairs.⁶ Both judgments were important gains in presidential power, and Roosevelt would not be reluctant to use them when he could.

During the mid to late thirties the American people were not ready for another military involvement in Europe, and Roosevelt’s resolve to aid England against Germany as much as possible would have to be advanced slowly. But at some point the line between involvement and non-involvement was irrevocably crossed, and that line ran right through Iceland.

Roosevelt and Aid to England

Roosevelt’s first attempt to rally Americans in support of European democracies was his “Quarantine the Aggressors” speech at the University of Chicago in 1937. It was one of his more conspicuous political miscalculations; widespread public support for his position failed to develop. American isolationists’ opposition to involvement in foreign affairs, especially with great European powers, had been confirmed by World War I. Isolationists were led and strongly represented by a group of senators who formed the only sustained political opposition to Roosevelt. FDR’s tremendous personal popularity had been earned largely for his domestic programs. In foreign affairs, as reaction to his “Quarantine” speech showed, he would have to tread far more carefully.

Perhaps second only to the popular approval of his domestic programs was approval of his major initiative in the remainder of the Western Hemisphere—his “Good Neighbor” policy. Concern for the well-being and stability of the other American republics was a necessary component of the Monroe Doctrine, even though that concern had too often been demonstrated by the landing of Marines. Later in the thirties, as war clouds gathered in Europe, FDR and his strategists became increasingly concerned about the possibility of a fascist-dominated Africa which could threaten the virtually undefended Caribbean region. Roosevelt began to stress a theme of Monroe Doctrine and hemispheric defense.⁷

Promoting U.S. defense for a European nation was a more difficult task. Every action he took in support of England was opposed by isolationists in and out of the Senate.⁸ His series of aid measures increased America’s involvement but always stopped short of explicit commitment. The Neutrality Acts in particular, though they became increasingly unneutral, always stayed the president’s hand. Even the last of these acts forbade escorting foreign ships that were carrying supplies to belligerents. The Selective Service Act of 1940, America’s first-ever

peacetime draft, was a victory for Rooseveltian policies, but there was an important condition that would cause great difficulty for the president: none of the men drafted could serve outside the Western Hemisphere. In order to free himself from congressional restraint, Roosevelt undertook a careful preparation, cultivation, and manipulation of American public opinion.

Roosevelt's public relations efforts were clearly intended to bring the country closer to war preparedness and de facto alliance with England, but the latter goal had to remain unspoken in the face of an isolationist opposition that was gaining in coherence. The "Destroyers for Bases" deal in September 1940, for instance, managed to still most of this opposition because it was presented as a defense measure for the Western Hemisphere.⁹ Even so, Roosevelt maneuvered this arrangement with his newly enlarged power of executive agreement—not through congressional action. But by March 1941 he had managed public opinion so skillfully that Lend-Lease was enacted as public law and the isolationists in Congress were put on the defensive.¹⁰ Still, public sentiment remained opposed to actual war, and most of Roosevelt's maneuvering to aid the Allies had to be kept very much out of public view. Thus, Roosevelt did not make unequivocal and public commitments to the Allies before 7 December 1941. Public opinion polls of the time show an ambivalent attitude among Americans. Many favored all aid to Britain and even convoying that aid across the Atlantic, but an even larger majority favored staying out of a European war.¹¹ Given his intimate involvement in foreign affairs, Roosevelt knew better than the public he courted that these aims were almost certainly incompatible.

Iceland "Enters" the Western Hemisphere

At the beginning of 1940 Iceland enjoyed home rule, while its foreign affairs were governed by a crown union with Denmark. It was widely expected that when this 1918 union came due for re-ratification in 1944, it would be dissolved by the Icelandic parliament. There is no evidence that White House planning and strategy had taken Iceland into consideration early in 1940. Concern did arise about Iceland and Greenland when the Nazis occupied Denmark in April, but the Icelandic parliament, the Althing, immediately assumed all external affairs powers that had been held by the Danish king.¹² British occupation of Iceland in May 1940 abated concern momentarily, but as the year wore on and the situation grew worse in the Atlantic for the Allies, attention again returned to Iceland.

In December 1940 the administration began secret talks, which it soon broke off, with the Icelandic consul general in Washington, Thor Thors, about American defense plans for the Atlantic. As yet the public knew nothing of Roosevelt's interest in a possible defense of Iceland or Atlantic ocean areas beyond its mid-point.¹³ Moreover, Roosevelt and his secretary of the navy,

Frank Knox, vehemently denied that U.S. Navy ships were escorting vessels carrying supplies to England.¹⁴ However, Roosevelt and Knox did insist on the Navy's right to patrol areas essential to American security.

It behooved Roosevelt to be cautious in his efforts to aid Britain, and for reasons other than just isolationist opposition. Although recent court decisions relating to other matters had been resolved in his favor, the fact remained that he was still operating on the margin of precedent and of the law. There was also the Pacific to worry about. But ever the politician, he realized that in this election year 1940 his domestic opposition was primarily from the isolationists. In addition to the group in the Senate, there was the newly organized America First Committee, which called attention to every one of Roosevelt's moves that seemed to overstep the limits of presidential power or bring the country closer to war. Although the committee was too new to influence the 1940 elections, in early 1941 it was staging mass rallies and letter-writing campaigns, and Roosevelt was forced to reckon with it.¹⁵ It was this grassroots opposition that led Roosevelt to pledge to the American people that he would not send their boys overseas to die in foreign wars.

In spite of his unprecedented third-term presidential victory, Roosevelt was prevented in the first months of 1941 from taking more decisive action to aid England by yet another problem. He and his advisors were not sure where the German threat to the Western Hemisphere might arise. Particularly feared was a German assault upon the United States—across the Atlantic from Dakar, in Vichy-controlled Senegal, to Recife, Brazil, and then north through the Caribbean.¹⁶ Axis forces in early 1941 could, if they chose, traverse this route virtually unopposed; defense of the Azores seemed essential to block it. In late May, the Nazi success in taking Crete demonstrated their capability for power projection over water. This achievement by the Germans ensured that Allied defense planning would include the South Atlantic, keeping in mind the possibility of a German leapfrog assault across from Africa and northward. If the Germans could come by sea, however, then a northern thrust through Iceland would also be an important possibility, especially if Britain were out of the war. In any case, Iceland was becoming crucial even for keeping Britain in the war. Thus, Iceland grew in importance and was somewhat in competition with the Azores in plans for whatever contingency Roosevelt and his advisors were developing.

Roosevelt's earliest arguments to move America to a war footing had been couched in terms of hemispheric defense and the Monroe Doctrine. Initially this framework excluded Iceland, for in 1940 Iceland was not considered to be in the Western Hemisphere. But in April 1940, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an Icelandic explorer living in Canada, wrote a letter to the president's aide, Brigadier General Edwin M. Watson, arguing that "the Monroe Doctrine can be construed so as to cover Iceland."¹⁷ Apparently nothing issued from this correspondence, at least not immediately. British occupation in May 1940

brought Iceland into the ken of strategic planners, but if Iceland lay outside the Western Hemisphere, the president's hands were tied by the Selective Service Act. A July 1940 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Iceland and Greenland: America's Problem," by Professor Philip Mosely of Cornell University, listed some likely

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geopolitical consequences should the two islands fall under Nazi control.¹⁸ Professor Mosely observed that Iceland, though culturally and economically linked to Europe, was geographically in the Western Hemisphere since it lay wholly to the west of the easternmost part of Greenland.

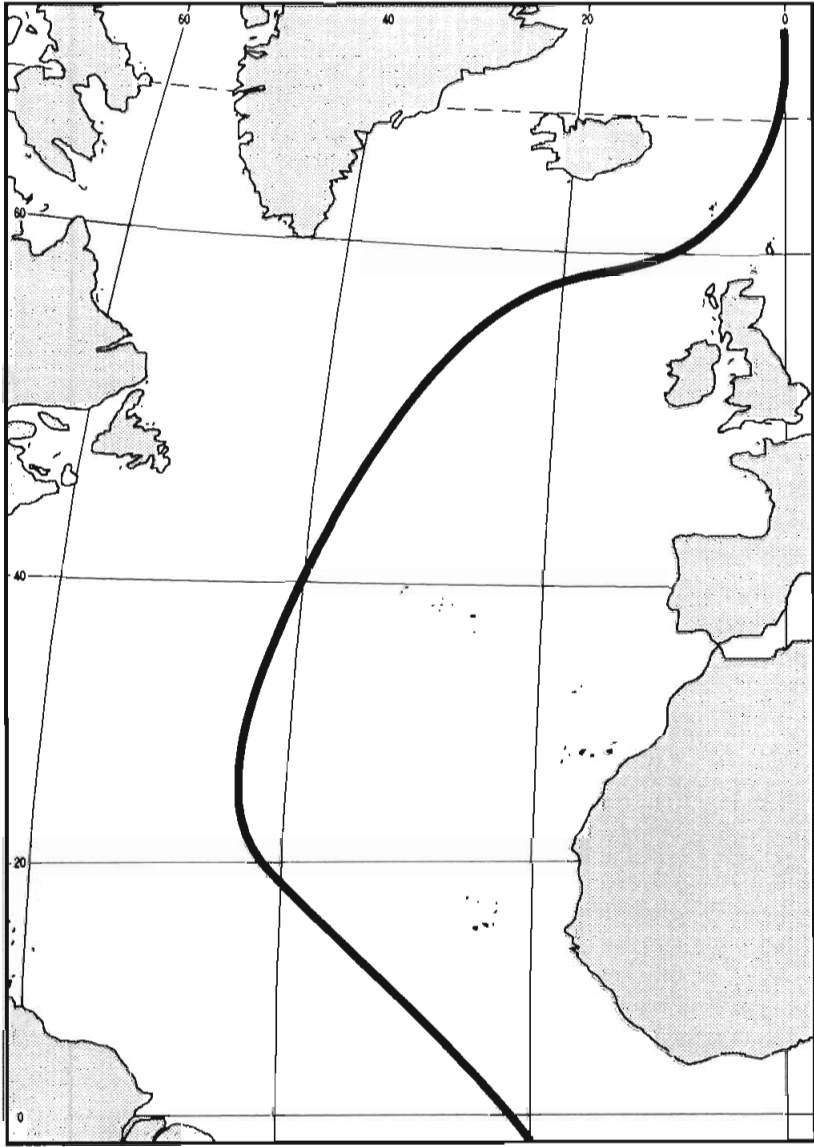
Still, most strategic thinkers did not include Iceland in the Western Hemisphere. For example, Hanson Baldwin, writing in late 1940 in *United We Stand*, issued a call to arms against the looming fascist threat but did not even mention Iceland in connection with the Western Hemisphere. In December 1940 the American consul in Reykjavik, Bertil E. Kuniholm, began discussions with Icelandic government officials about the possibility of Americans replacing British troops. Though administration officials in Washington were also talking to Thor Thors, Kuniholm's counterpart, Secretary of State Cordell Hull (who was not privy to strategic planning) discouraged further talks in Reykjavik.¹⁹

In the January 1941 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Vilhjalmur Stefansson tried to persuade the American public, as he apparently had not persuaded the White House the year before, to consider defense of Iceland. With a map to illustrate, he proposed a definition of the Western Hemisphere based on a "mid-channel" concept that would place Iceland in the hemisphere and therefore under the Monroe Doctrine.²⁰ Stefansson's map proved a bellwether; over the next nine months a series of maps in various journals and newspapers helped to redefine the scope of Western Hemisphere defense by bringing Iceland under the aegis of the Monroe Doctrine.

Other voices outside the presidential circle of advisors urged FDR to act. A former assistant secretary of war, Henry Breckinridge, who was in touch with Stefansson, wrote a series of letters in March and April of 1941 to Roosevelt's aide, General Watson, about the importance of Iceland.²¹ What certainly fixed White House attention on Iceland, however, was Hitler's extension of the war zone to Iceland on 27 March 1941. The administration now began to focus on Iceland and to move at a rapid pace.

Coincidentally with Hitler's extension of the war zone, American, British, and Canadian military planners had just completed their joint operations plans

for the United States' anticipated entry into the war—the ABC-1 Plan, which designated the U.S. 5th Infantry Division to garrison Iceland.²² Presidential advisor Harry Hopkins also re-opened secret negotiations with Thor Thors in Washington on 14 April.²³ Secretary Hull was again kept ignorant of the true



Jerry Iamothé

Vilhjalmur Steffansson's "mid-channel" line showing demarcation of Eastern and Western Hemispheres.

Source: Vilhjalmur Steffansson, "What Is the Western Hemisphere?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 1941, p. 344.

nature of the negotiations. On 12 April Roosevelt took virtually the only possible action that offered a European power a specific guarantee of U.S. assistance; he signed an agreement in Washington with Danish Minister Henrik Kauffman that included Greenland in U.S. hemispheric defense plans. As American Coast Guard cutters took up antisubmarine patrol off Greenland, the administration continued to deny that the Navy was engaged in convoying. It was only, said White House press spokesman Stephen Early, protecting ships.²⁴

Roosevelt's actions as commander in chief now grew increasingly decisive. On 7 April he ordered reinforcements destined for the Pacific Fleet to be redirected to the Atlantic.²⁵ On the 10th of April he decided that the boundary of the American defense zone in the Atlantic would be at 25° west longitude; this line included the Azores, Greenland, and the Cape Verde Islands but *excluded* Iceland. (Later he shifted this line back to 26° west longitude to exclude the Cape Verde Islands as well.) Even though Iceland was outside FDR's current defense zone, however, the destroyer USS *Niblack* made at this time a hydrographic reconnaissance of the waters around Iceland to gather information required for execution of ABC-1, dropping in the process a few depth charges on a suspected submarine.

Although the American people knew that the Atlantic fleet was patrolling, they knew nothing of the activity concerning Iceland. Newspapers proclaimed the Battle of the Atlantic to be on, and *The New York Times* published a map showing the extent of "hemispheric defense" areas in the Atlantic.²⁶ This was to be the first in a series of maps in the *Times* over the next several months delineating the steady eastward expansion of American hemispheric defense activities—contributing to a popular acceptance of an extended hemisphere defense area, which was exactly what Roosevelt hoped to achieve.

The Decision to Occupy Iceland

British reverses in the Mideast in May 1940, and particularly the fall of Crete on the 22nd of May, lent a particularly gloomy tone to Churchill's communications at that time to American planners. Roosevelt then decided that something would have to be done soon in the Atlantic, if not to shore up the British then at least to defend the Western Hemisphere. For on the same day that Crete fell, the *Bismarck* made her breakout from the North Sea, giving substance to fears of German designs on the Americas. The subsequent tracking down of the battleship dramatically proved the necessity for air search capability in the North Atlantic and, consequently, air bases from which the planes could operate. Iceland was an obvious site for such a base. Some critics later charged that Roosevelt had increased the scope of naval actions in the Atlantic simply out of Anglophilia, but there is equally strong evidence of his longstanding concern for

the security of the Western Hemisphere. Addressing that concern demanded actions that could scarcely have differed greatly from those he actually took.

As for any overt military actions in those times, Roosevelt was still constrained by the isolationist opposition and obliged to maneuver within the bounds prescribed by the Constitution and somewhat broadened by the Supreme Court. He now, however, had to ready the American public for much stronger and definitive war preparations. If Americans were to provide effective aid to Britain across the mid-Atlantic, they would need Iceland as a base sooner or later. The Royal Navy had asked for American cruisers to help with patrolling near Iceland, and talks about this between Thor Thors and Roosevelt's advisors were continuing. If Iceland was to be an American base, Icelanders would want it adequately defended by American forces; unfortunately, the number of forces available was distressingly meager. FDR had to act decisively and explain his action in a way that would simultaneously catalyze an ambivalent public, mute his isolationist critics, reassure near-desperate allies, and persuade a wary Iceland.

After promising a major speech for 14 May and then delaying it for health reasons (FDR actually was sick but the delay also allowed for some clarification of events), the president spoke to the nation on 27 May. Roosevelt's declaration of an "unlimited national emergency" was arguably his most important speech of the year. It signalled to the American people that war was approaching and the nation must prepare.²⁷ His overriding theme was the need to defend the Western Hemisphere, although just what constituted the Western Hemisphere he did not define. There were clues, however. Nazi occupation of the Azores or Cape Verde Islands, the president warned, could provide a "springboard for actual attack against the integrity and independence of Brazil and her neighboring Republics." Occupation of Greenland or Iceland would be even more serious, for that would provide the Nazis with "stepping-stones . . . to the Northern United States itself. . . . Our Bunker Hill of tomorrow may be several thousand miles from Boston." He concluded, "We are placing our armed forces in strategic military position." Popular approval ratings after the speech remained high, and Roosevelt now set in motion the actual process of placing forces in the strategic positions he had named.²⁸ The Navy was already patrolling farther out into the Atlantic than was generally known by the public. Now it was time to deploy the Army for hemisphere defense. On the 28th Roosevelt suggested to the British ambassador, Lord Halifax, that the Americans garrison Iceland.²⁹ Churchill replied immediately and with obvious relief, "We cordially welcome your taking over Iceland at the earliest possible moment."³⁰

As commander in chief, Roosevelt gave orders, secretly of course, to the Army and Navy to immediately prepare an expedition to Iceland. At this point, resource scarcity and intentions collided: there were enough forces to provide a garrison for either the Azores or Iceland, but not both.³¹ Moreover, military planners were concerned because, once dispatched, a garrison force would be

unavailable for service elsewhere. The essential dilemma was, which avenue of approach, Iceland or the Azores, was the more likely to be used by the Nazis?

From a strategic standpoint it might have made more sense to send the troops to the Azores, but Roosevelt was still bound by law and public perceptions. The key to his longstanding policy in Latin America, with its cultural and sentimental ties to the Azores, was nonaggressive, noninterventionist behavior. Roosevelt knew he might have to use Marines and did not want to stir fresh memories of Yankee imperialism by sending them uninvited to foreign soil. Hemispheric defense would be a joke if the Latin nations saw it as, once again, a screen for American imperialism. Portugal would not ask for U.S. protection, but Roosevelt was by now confident that the Icelandic government would make such a request. Therefore, the United States would go into Iceland and not the Azores.

For military planners, the go-ahead from Roosevelt threw into sharp relief the problem of whom to send to Iceland. The 5th Infantry Division would not be ready until September, much too late to meet the now-accelerated timetable. The 1st Infantry Division was ready, but there were two problems associated with deploying it. First, since it was the only Army division then ready for service overseas, sending it to Iceland would make it unavailable elsewhere, and there were still uncertainties about where Hitler would go next. Allied intelligence knew of preparations for an attack on the Soviet Union, but a capitulation of some sort by the unready Stalin, or yet another Nazi-Soviet pact, could not be ruled out altogether. Still, a Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union seemed imminent and Roosevelt did want to be able to react to it.

Second, there was the legal problem. The Selective Service Act forbade the use of draftees outside the Western Hemisphere—though no one, least of all Roosevelt, had yet defined it. Roosevelt had set the limits of American patrol in the Atlantic at 26° west longitude, and this did not include Iceland. Therefore, the only ready force composed entirely of volunteers, the U.S. Marines, would be sent to Iceland instead of the Army.

The president gave the order to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Harold R. Stark, on 5 June.³² All actions concerning Iceland were still under the veil of closest secrecy. The responsibility for initiating the occupation now passing to the Navy, Admiral Stark set his planners to work. On 17 June he was set to issue the final orders (dated the 16th of June) to his forces but delayed sending them because of their possible impact on the American public. "There is so much potential dynamite in this order," he wrote to Hopkins, that he would need FDR's "OK."³³ Stark assured Hopkins that all would be ready by 22 June but noted there was still no invitation from the government of Iceland.

Icelandic sensitivities toward the presence of foreign troops on its soil date back to the 1918 Act of Union with Denmark, which proclaimed Iceland's "perpetual neutrality." Though absorbed in 1940 in a constitutional crisis over its relations with Denmark, the Icelandic government recognized the strategic

significance of its island. German warships had visited the island recently, and German aircraft reconnaissance flights had been flying overhead. Nonetheless, in order to maintain its pledged neutrality, the government in May 1940 officially protested the British occupation it was powerless to prevent.³⁴ In fact, however, by early 1941 Icelanders cooperated substantially with the British occupiers, since by then Icelandic ships were falling victim in their home waters to German U-boats. When it came time to replace British troops (and Canadian forces were not available), the Icelandic government decided not to protest occupation by neutral U.S. forces. Observing its proclaimed neutrality, Iceland did not officially invite such occupation, although it did urge the Americans to send enough troops to replace the British entirely, and then leave at war's end.

Admiral Stark's orders, dated the 16th of June 1941, for operations in Iceland, in fact told the commanding general of the 1st Marine Brigade that the "British garrison will, after relief, be transferred elsewhere."³⁵ But there was a problem: there were not enough Marines to replace all 22,000 British troops, and the resulting interim joint American-British occupation force could create severe complications. A Nazi attack on Iceland would be resisted by either a confused and disunited force or an integrated one with Americans under British command. The Icelandic government feared that the former situation would result in catastrophe, but the latter would require forces of the neutral United States to act under the command of belligerent Britain. There was no precedent in American law or history for such a disposition of American forces in peacetime. Nonetheless, the Marines of the 1st Brigade were sent on their way. By coincidence, the ships carrying the Marines left Charleston, South Carolina, for Argentia in Newfoundland on the same day that Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa.

The Marines Have Landed

The anticipated complication that the simultaneous presence of U.S. and British forces in Iceland would cause forced the American troop convoy to wait at Argentia until an invitation or notice of acquiescence was issued by Prime Minister Herman Jonasson's government. The American public still knew nothing of the Navy and Marine departure for what Churchill called "that cold place."³⁶ Inevitably, however, with all the changes as to which forces would occupy Iceland, word did get out to the American people. This leak occurred in the context of the debate on the unresolved boundaries of the Western Hemisphere.

Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, had asked the secretary of war to seek the repeal of legislation that restricted trainees to serving in the United States or the Western Hemisphere. Marshall's request was headlined in *The New York Times* on Independence Day.³⁷ Isolationists in Congress objected

immediately, and Senator Burton K. Wheeler (D. Mont.), staunchest of the isolationists and an America Firster, denounced this request of the Army's (and obviously the administration's), noting to the press that he "was reliably" informed that "American troops will embark for Iceland to take over that island." "It might be all right to take over Iceland for national defense," he said, but he wondered what further involvement the service secretaries would order.³⁸

Roosevelt's Fourth of July message to the American people, also appearing on the 4 July front page of *The New York Times*, evoked the two oldest pillars of American foreign policy. He declared that the purpose of the serious, mighty, unified course (the "state of emergency") upon which the nation was now embarked was the defense of the hemisphere and the freedom of the seas. U.S. Marines were already halfway from Argentina to Iceland in pursuit of those ends when President Roosevelt issued this statement. He knew that news of the Marines' arrival in Iceland would have to be delivered to the American public with great care. An American expeditionary force was being sent outside the hemisphere to what was, however else defined, a war zone, while the nation was still in a neutral status. Moreover, he had personally pledged, "again and again and again" that "American boys" would not be sent to die in the wars of foreign nations. On 7 July press secretary Stephen Early called reporters to the White House to receive explicit instructions on how they were to cover the landing that was now only a few hours away. The presidential message about to be given to Congress was not, he emphasized, to be treated as a news bulletin but as a conventional news story.³⁹ In addition, he warned reporters that once the word was out they were to minimize the seriousness of the action and provide no details; they were not to talk about "troops, army, navy, numbers."⁴⁰

On 7 July, as the American Marines were going ashore, President Roosevelt delivered his message to Congress announcing the occupation of Iceland and the exchange of messages with the Prime Minister of Iceland. As did his 27 May "unlimited national emergency" speech, this address had gone through a total of five drafts and was painstakingly worded to elicit maximum support and to quiet objections from the non-interventionists.⁴¹ Although he had often faced criticism from political opponents, Roosevelt's actions in the Atlantic were particularly beset by imputations that the administration was misleading the public. The issue of convoying, as the press referred to it, was a major source of contention and left many questions unanswered. Since January, Roosevelt had personally denied that the United States was engaged in escorting (convoying), and insisted it was only patrolling—but many Americans suspected otherwise.⁴²

The several drafts of this Iceland speech exhibit the care that Roosevelt exercised to preserve his prerogatives and to downplay the extent of the military activity that was underway. The first draft discloses the president asserting his right to covert action as commander in chief and indicates the extent to which, he wished military action could go. The operation was characterized here as

“strictly a military operation” in which secrecy was essential, and for which, therefore, no submission to Congress for prior approval was possible. The draft shows that the president had given consideration to directing the armed forces to clear the sea lanes of “the marauders on the water, under the water and over the water.” These passages, which assert extraordinary if not unprecedented powers for the president and suggest a very wide scope of military action, are heavily crossed out. By the third draft, the briefest of all versions of the proposed message to Congress, the description of naval action around Iceland had become less specific, possibly to enlarge the operational latitude. It was not the “sea lanes” that were to be protected by the Navy, but rather the “approaches” to Iceland and the United States. Such a change also avoided introducing images of escorting or convoying. The fourth draft took account of Icelandic sensitivities with the statement that there would be no change in the “present sovereignty” of the regions to be protected. The messages between the prime minister of Iceland and President Roosevelt, to be incorporated in the message to Congress, had already been agreed upon, and each showed the language of compromise.⁴³ The prime minister did not actually “invite” the Americans, but merely “acknowledged” the usefulness of their coming. For his part, Roosevelt promised only that the Americans would “eventually” replace British troops.⁴⁴

“The Selective Service Act forbade the use of draftees outside the Western Hemisphere. . . . Therefore, the only ready force composed entirely of volunteers, the U.S. Marines, would be sent to Iceland. . . .”

The way in which the announcement of the Americans’ arrival in Iceland was handled illustrates as well as any episode in 1941 how readily the administration was able to control the press and characterize its actions favorably. The president’s carefully worded announcement of the arrival of American troops was given to Congress in the briefest of messages, one that did not raise the troublesome issue of convoying. The press, as press secretary Early had demanded, treated the presidential announcement as a news story, not as a bulletin.

For the first time in its history the United States was sending forces, if not to Europe, at least across the Atlantic in peacetime to act in conjunction or become entangled with those of another European power. The very thing George Washington had cautioned against had come to pass, and there was remarkably little press comment—at least at first—about this reversal of a one-hundred-fifty-year-old American policy. When the landing of Marines was eventually criticized, the administration’s objective that Iceland appear as part of the American defense system (i.e., in the Western Hemisphere) was well on its way to being realized.

The press took official statements at their word, and their first news stories supported the administration's line. An Atlantic map was published in *The New York Times* proclaiming the "United States Extends Its Defense Front Farther East," but without reference to the previously established patrol area or hemispheric limits.⁴⁵ In spite of Prime Minister Jonasson's careful avoidance of the term, news reports stated that Americans had been "invited" to Iceland and that British troops were to leave. Britain's prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was outraged at Senator Wheeler's premature announcement of the plan. He called Wheeler's remarks an "indiscretion or worse." Thor Thors was featured in an interview and Icelanders were reported to have observed the unloading of men and supplies with "interest and understanding."⁴⁶ Even Senator Wheeler was quoted as having expressed approval. But his approval, as his subsequent objections made clear, had been contingent on the accuracy of his assumption that the American purpose was solely to protect Iceland. Although press coverage of the landings at Reykjavik must be counted a success for the administration, Hanson Baldwin, in his articles on the landings still insisted, curiously, that Iceland was not essential to Western Hemisphere defense.⁴⁷

Newspapers initially printed the expected reactions from Axis spokesmen, but unfavorable and hostile reactions were not published until a few days later. Domestic opposition to the movement of troops to Iceland was slow to materialize, but when it did it was a force with which the administration had to deal. The America First Committee's Research Bureau in Washington published the seventh of its "Did You Know" series of pamphlets on 9 July. The burden of this pamphlet was that Iceland is closer to Europe than to any place in the Americas and its "occupation . . . a 'defensive' measure is equivalent to making a joke of attempts to define the Western Hemisphere rigidly." The Bureau noted that the "official geographer" of the United States (possibly the Geographer of the State Department) had placed Iceland in the Eastern Hemisphere. "Obviously," the pamphlet concludes, "the occupation of Iceland is another evasion of the convoy issue."⁴⁸

More significant to the administration than this expected criticism was the opposition of influential senators and representatives. Adding fuel to the fire of their anger over the president's sending troops into a war zone were statements by secretary of the navy Frank Knox hinting that American ships might "shoot on sight" if they encountered German units.⁴⁹ Upon reconsideration of his earlier approval, Senator Wheeler was the first to attack the administration on its move. "Why doesn't the President come to Congress and ask for a declaration of war?" he asked. "That is the honest thing to do and that is the decent thing to do."⁵⁰ He insisted that, Churchill's and Knox's objections notwithstanding, he would keep the public informed of "all attempts to drag this country into war." In the ensuing debate, Senator Robert Taft (R. Ohio) labelled the occupation an "act of war." Raising the constitutional law question, he also

denounced the President's usurpation of the Congress' powers. Senator John Danaher (R. Conn.) joined Taft in denouncing the president's actions, especially their secrecy. "Why cannot we in the Senate of the United States know what is the objective of the administration?" Senator David Clark, chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee, also joined the chorus of opposition.

The eastern press was generally sympathetic to the administration. Articles that featured opponents to the dispatch of troops invariably carry rebuttals by supporters of the administration; Senator Wheeler, for instance, was characterized as "clinging to his positions." Newspapers obeyed the censorship imposed by Secretary Knox as to whether or not the U.S. Navy was convoying. On 9 July, when asked how the Navy would keep the "waters clear from here to Iceland," press secretary Early curtly told reporters he would not answer such questions. "I'm not going to give you any 'scare' headlines."⁵¹

Roosevelt expected opposition from the Senate, but he could proceed with confidence if he felt the public now supported his move. The Gallup Poll was one means of estimating that support, but its results could easily be misinterpreted. Consider the phrasing of the Gallup Poll question reported on 25 July. "Do you approve of the government's action *in taking over the defense of Iceland?*" [emphasis added]. The response was: approve—61 percent; disapprove—17 percent; and no opinion—22 percent.⁵² The problem with this question is that it assumes the Marines had "taken over" the defense of Iceland. In fact, there were too few Marines, about 4,400, to take over for the more than 20,000 British stationed there. If the question had been phrased to suggest that the Marines were sharing the defense responsibilities for Iceland, the Gallup Poll response may well have been different.

Letters to the White House had long been encouraged by Roosevelt. He used them to get a sense of the popular mood. The mail response of about eight hundred letters that addressed the occupation of Iceland was evenly divided, pro and con.⁵³ Those favoring the president's action, including many organizations writing as groups, generally saw it as an appropriate defense of the United States. The Icelandic National League supported Roosevelt, as did such notables as Presidents Conant of Harvard and Dodd of Princeton, and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. One man, identifying himself simply as an "ex-sailor," told Roosevelt to "occupy any country you deem necessary."⁵⁴ Some supporters characterized Iceland, doubtless in a strategic sense, as "the Hawaii of the Atlantic." The Irish war veterans even proclaimed their support in a verse of a dozen or so couplets (in green ink, no less) including such gems as: "And don't disremember this island of Iceland was found by the Irish, who found it a nice land."

But there were as many letters opposing the president's action, mostly from private citizens. As might be expected, the Midwest tended to be well represented. Surprisingly, the well-organized America First chapters did not wage a successful letter-writing campaign on this occasion. Several themes recur, singly

or in combination, in letters of opposition. Many who characterized themselves as supporters of the administration faulted Roosevelt here for breaking his promise to keep American boys out of foreign wars. Equally, Roosevelt was charged with failing to consult Congress and with being a dupe of British imperial interests. "When did Iceland move into the Western Hemisphere?" was a question often asked explicitly. One woman wrote that "Our troops must not be sent to die in such a god-forsaken country as Iceland."

It is evident from Roosevelt's subsequent actions that although he may have had strong public support, the support did not yet grant him *carte blanche*. He took care to answer or deflect some of the more cogent criticisms from his opponents. First of all, in his 7 July speech announcing the landings in Iceland, he was far more muted on the matter of this action being in support of aid to Britain than his advisors wished, particularly Harry Hopkins and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson.⁵⁵ Second, there was a more startling card up his sleeve. In an act of incredible cartographic finesse, the president also undertook to extend his powers by "moving" Iceland into the Western Hemisphere.

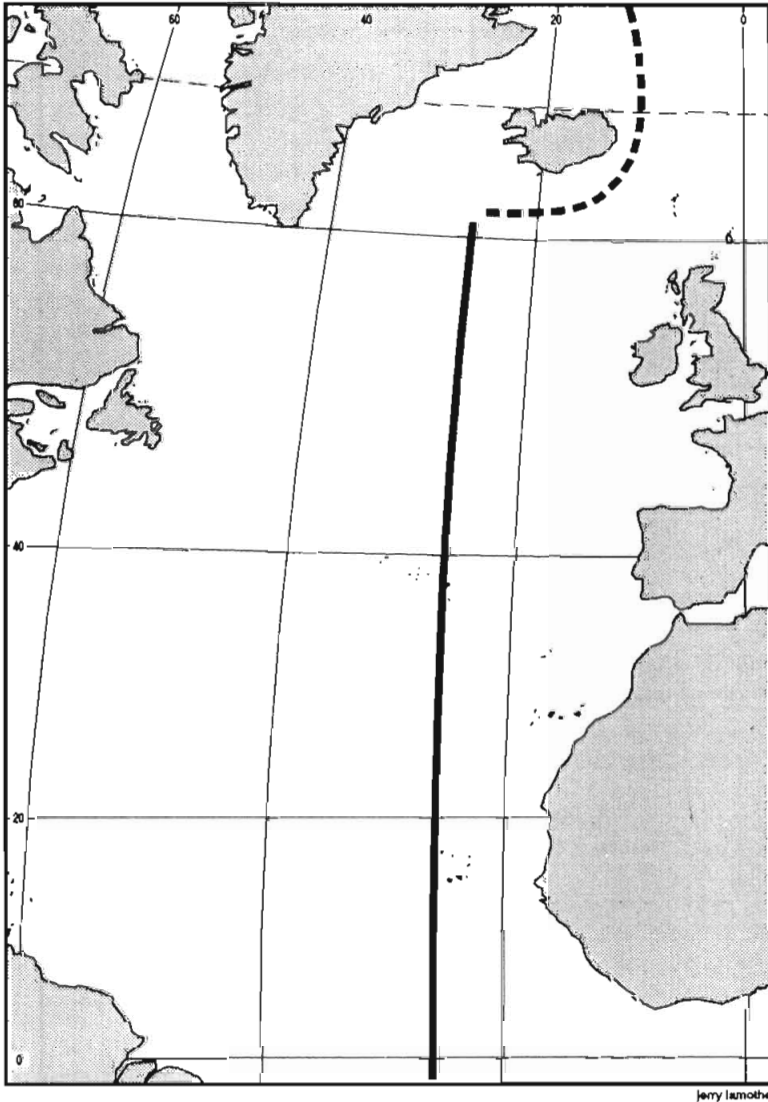
On 11 July Roosevelt showed Hopkins a map he had torn from a *National Geographic* magazine.⁵⁶ On this map Roosevelt drew a line to show his idea of the extent of the Western Hemisphere the U.S. Navy was to defend; Iceland was conspicuously within that area. The following day, in its Sunday "News of the Week in Review" section, *The New York Times* published the map (the second to be published in five days); this one was labelled "The Widening Area of Europe's War." It had no line demarcating the hemisphere or patrol limits, but this map, compared to its predecessors, implied that the threat to the hemisphere had moved closer.

For the interventionists who were intent on bringing Iceland into the Western Hemisphere, no clue was too small. On 15 July, an Army lieutenant colonel, F. V. Fitzgerald of the War Department's Public Relations Office, informed the White House that the *Catholic Encyclopedia* contained an article by a German scholar stating that "Iceland is really a part of America from a geographic point of view."⁵⁷ The state department prepared a legal brief chronicling the occasions, especially President Polk's 1846 action, when American presidents had dispatched U.S. forces abroad to protect American interests.⁵⁸

Finally, all of Roosevelt's efforts as commander in chief to "move" Iceland into the Western Hemisphere paid off by allowing him to dispatch troops to the island. The first concrete sign was a 7 September *New York Times* map showing the "Bastions of Hemisphere Defense." Iceland was clearly one of those bastions, which suggested that Iceland was not only integral to hemispheric defense but might even be *in* the Western Hemisphere.⁵⁹ Manifold concerns notwithstanding, this deployment of American forces overseas was more than "hemispheric defense," and Roosevelt, a history buff, knew it. His cautious and secretive moves substantiated that he understood the magnitude of the step he was taking

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in sending U.S. forces abroad at a time when the country was not in a declared state of war. At least part of his motivation was to aid a European power in a European war, and therefore, Iceland was a turning point in the longstanding, tradition-sanctified policy of American unilateralism regarding global affairs. Roosevelt also knew from his reading of U.S. history that the *fait accompli* of military deployments presented to Congress by former U.S. presidents had not been reversed.



Line drawn on map in crayon by Franklin Roosevelt to show eastern limit of Western Hemisphere to be policed by U.S. Navy (as shown to Harry Hopkins on 11 July 1941).

Source: Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 312.

Roosevelt, for all the haste and confusion in which the actual movement of American forces to Iceland was carried out, had done all he could to accustom U.S. citizens to the greater role that the military would play in the Atlantic. He had done all he could specifically do to characterize that role in terms of defense of the Western Hemisphere. It cannot be said that Roosevelt's concern for the defense of the Americas was simply a political gambit for public consumption. He had been, from the early days of his first administration, genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Americas. But the occupation of Iceland satisfied both that concern as well as another equally dear concern of Roosevelt's—all aid possible to Britain.

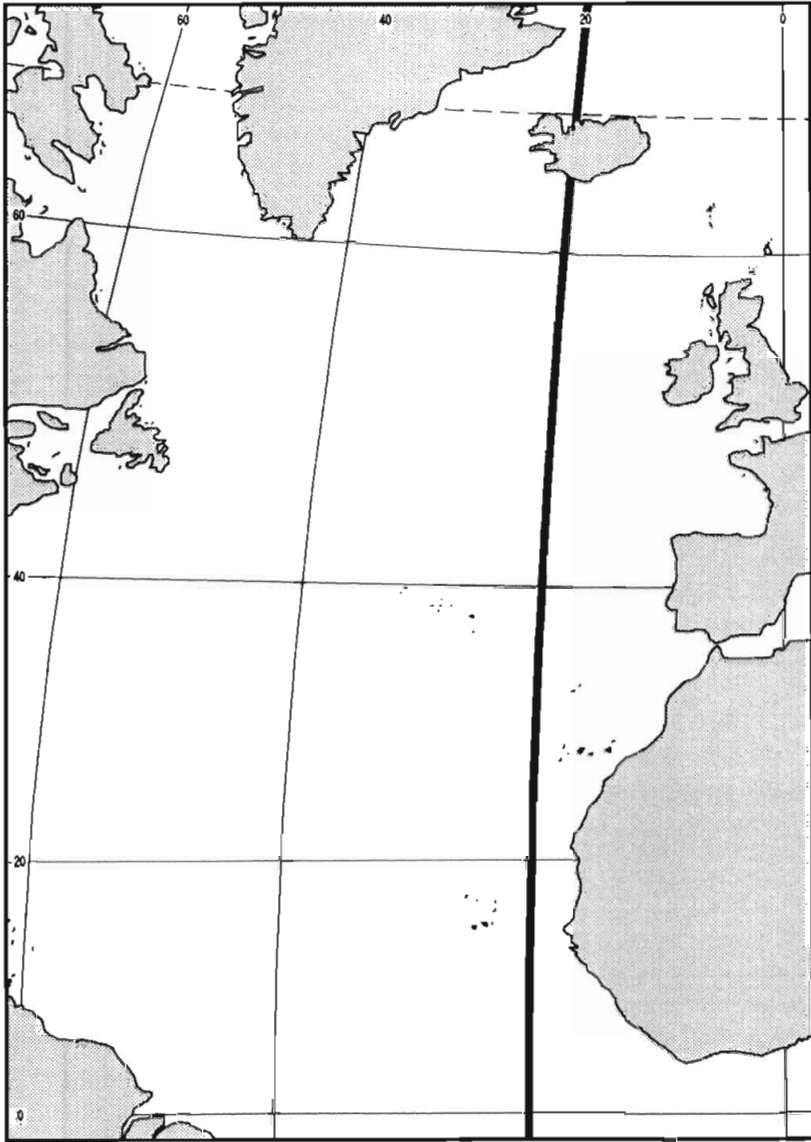
Roosevelt was able to cast the occupation of Iceland not as a departure from the first principle of American foreign policy—avoidance of European entanglements—but as an affirmation of the two next most august principles of traditional American foreign policy: freedom of the seas, and the Monroe Doctrine. Roosevelt's efforts to "relocate" Iceland were finally realized on 14 September 1941 when Iceland was finally "placed" in the Western Hemisphere. A *New York Times* map detailing actions in the Atlantic carried a line at approximately 20° west longitude, running through Iceland, identified as "The cartographers' limit to the Western Hemisphere," with the note that "the limit of the waters described by President Roosevelt as 'necessary for our defense' remains undefined."⁶⁰

As well as a genuine concern for the Americas, Roosevelt also exhibited a concern for Iceland's well-being. In spite of all that happened in the ensuing months, Roosevelt instructed the War Department to minimize the disruption that the American presence in Iceland might have on the economy and daily life of the Icelanders.⁶¹ Even on 8 December, when the pride of the U.S. Navy lay on the bottom of Pearl Harbor and Roosevelt had called Congress into special session for, at last, a declaration of war, he took time to send a memo to Secretary of War Stimson concerning the need to encourage the Americans in Iceland to buy food and supplies from local merchants in order to provide a source of U.S. currency for Icelanders.⁶²

The impact of the American occupation on Iceland was immediate and obvious, but the impact on the United States, though less immediately obvious, was just as profound. Since World War II the United States has been an active and constant participant in world affairs. This participation with other nations finds the United States in a complexity of international interactions that are economic, military, cultural, and political—unimaginable to the Founders, yet sometimes difficult for us today to remember when it was otherwise. Unlike nearly any other nation in the world, America remained essentially outside the normal tumult of inter-state politics and interactions for its first one hundred and fifty years. Even when it participated in a world war, the United States did not do so as part of a formal alliance. And afterward, America returned to being

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“kindly separated by Nature and a wide ocean” from the rest of the globe. Non-involvement in the politics of Europe appears to have changed for all time on 7 July 1941, the day the Americans came to Iceland.



“The Cartographer’s limit of the Western Hemisphere” (2300 miles out of New York), aligned from a mercator projection of the Atlantic, published in *The New York Times* for 14 September 1941, p. E1, section 4.

Notes

1. "Annals of America," *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, v. 3, p. 613.
2. *Ibid.*, v. 4, p. 144.
3. As quoted in T. Harry Williams, *The History of American Wars* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), p. 155.
4. See T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison, Wis.: Knoff, 1941), p. 24ff. for an account of the opposition from Lincoln's own party.
5. See Edward S. Corwin's *The Constitution and What It Means Today*, rev. ed. by Harold W. Chase and Craig R. Ducat (N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 5, 175 for discussion.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 63.
7. For specifics of how Roosevelt dealt with aid to Britain and America's preparations for war see Waldo Heinrichs' *Threshold of War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). This is a dispassionate and thoughtful account. I have drawn on this study for the setting of my own assessment of the importance of the landing of Americans in Iceland.
8. Robert Sherwood's *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York: Harper, 1948) and Wayne S. Cole's *America First* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1953), to name only two works, chronicle the play of factions urging the president to a greater or a lesser commitment to Europe's defense.
9. Frank B. Friedel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Little Brown, 1990), pp. 333-336.
10. Cole, p. 155ff.
11. George Gallup's *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), gives a sampling of poll questions, year by year. Questions on war and peace in 1941 were not always identical, but results show that while most Americans favored all aid to Britain and believed that the United States would get involved in the war, a majority did not want trainees (i.e. conscripts) to serve outside the Western Hemisphere. The largest majority, about eighty percent, also said they would vote against going to war if given the choice.
12. Sigurdur A. Magnusson, *Northern Sphinx* (London: McGill Univ. Press, 1977), p. 140.
13. Even the president's own files show no references to Iceland except as otherwise herein noted. (Author's inspection of files at FDR Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.)
14. *The New York Times*, 12 January 1941. Also see FDR press conference of 25 April 1941 in Samuel I. Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses of FDR* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 132-138, for an example of the president's adroitness and even delight in side-stepping questions about convoying. It should be noted that often the term "convoying" was used by the press when "escorting" (i.e. armed protection of particular vessels rather than controlled movements of ships) was meant.
15. Cole's *America First* remains the definitive work on this movement.
16. Stetson Conn et al., *The Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* (Washington: Dept. of the Army, Off. of the Chief of Military History, 1964), pp. 459-493 has the best summary of the various defensive plans considered, but Byron Fairchild's "Decision to Land United States Forces in Iceland, 1941," in *Command Decisions*, Kent R. Greenfield, ed. (Washington: U.S. Army, Off. of Chief of Military History, 1960) pp. 73-98, is more detailed on Iceland. Waldo Heinrichs' *Threshold of War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), provides the best overall context in which Roosevelt's decisions had to be made.
17. FDRL, President's Official Files, 660, Box 1, Memo from Louis Johnson to Brigadier General Edwin M. Watson.
18. Philip Mosely, "Iceland and Greenland: America's Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1940, pp. 742-746.
19. Sherwood, p. 290.
20. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, "What Is the Western Hemisphere?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 1941, pp. 343-346.
21. FDRL, President's Official Files, 660, Box 2, Letters of 13 March, 19 March and 17 April 1941.
22. See Fairchild.
23. See Sherwood.
24. *The New York Times*, 17 April 1941.
25. Heinrichs, pp. 46-47 provides the best chronology of these closely spaced events.
26. *The New York Times*, 27 April 1941.
27. Rosenman, pp. 181-195.
28. *The Gallup Poll*.
29. Heinrichs, p. 88.
30. FDRL, Messages to Roosevelt from Churchill, "Former Naval Person" to FDR, 29 May 1941.
31. Fairchild, pp. 80-86.
32. Heinrichs, p. 88.
33. FDRL, Hopkins papers, Box 158, Letter of 17 June 1941.

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34. The most complete study of Icelandic activities in this period is the ongoing history series by the distinguished Icelandic historian, Thor Whitehead (not yet available in English). Benedikt Grondahl's *Iceland: From Neutrality to NATO Membership* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), provides a brief but useful account.

35. FDRL, President's Secretary's File, Box 39, Chief of Naval Operations letter to Commanding General 1st Marine Brigade [signed "Betty"] of 16 June 1941.

36. FDRL, President's Official File, 660, Box 2, WSC message to FDR of 19 June 1941.

37. *The New York Times*, 4 July 1941, p. 1.

38. *Ibid.*

39. FDRL, Stephen T. Early papers, Box 41, Notes of 7 July 1941.

40. *Ibid.*, 8 July 1941.

41. FDRL, President's Speech File, 7 July 1941.

42. *The New York Times*, 12 January 1941.

43. Then-Prime Minister Herman Jonasson is the father of the present prime minister, Steingrímur Hermannsson.

44. Brief discussions on the complications of Americans replacing some but not all British troops in Iceland can be found in Conn et al., Fairchild, and Sherwood. Like most writers compiling institutional or official histories, they have little sympathy for the Icelandic viewpoint. Charles A. Beard, *The Undeclared War* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 170-171, gives more credence to the Icelanders' concerns.

45. *The New York Times*, 8 July 1941.

46. *Ibid.*, 8, 9, 10 July 1941.

47. *Ibid.*, 12 July 1941.

48. *Did You Know*, Pamphlet No. 7, America First Research Bureau (Washington: Committee to Defend America First, 9 July 1941).

49. *The New York Times*, 8 July 1941.

50. *Ibid.*, 11 July, 1941.

51. FDRL, Stephen T. Early papers, notes of 9 July 1941.

52. *The Gallup Poll*, v. 1, p. 291.

53. FDRL, President's Official File, 660, Boxes 1 and 2. The letters are found in eight folders separated into "pro" and "con," although there are few whose thrust is not quite clear. As a rule, the "con" letters are longer though less discursive than the "pro" letters.

54. *Ibid.*, 12 July 1941.

55. Sherwood, pp. 290-292.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

57. FDRL, President's Official file, 660, Box 1, letter of 15 July 1941.

58. FDRL, President's Secretary's File, Box 80 (Navy 1941-42), Memorandum to FDR of 21 August 1941.

59. *The New York Times*, 7 September 1941, p. 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 14 September 1941.

61. FDRL, President's Official File, 660, Box 1, letters and memoranda to Stimson from FDR throughout fall of 1941.

62. *Ibid.*, FDR memorandum to Stimson of 8 December 1941.

Ψ

It is better to arrive in time than to be invited.

Gabriel García Márquez
Love in the Time of Cholera