The Most Unsordid Act
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On March 11, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law H. R. 1776, popularly known as the Lend-Lease Act. The bill was an extraordinary grant of power to the executive branch of the United States government and made it possible for America to provide Great Britain with vast amounts of war materials, in spite of Britain's inability to pay for the goods. It was, in short, a subsidy. Although the act's provisions were later extended to all America's allies during World War II, its purpose in 1941 was to aid England. The primary focus of this study is on the development of that remarkable "common-law alliance," as Robert Sherwood called it. The story begins with the gradual depletion of Britain's dollars and gold between 1939 and 1941 and culminates in the drafting of the bill, the ensuing Congressional debate, and the political maneuvering required to get the legislation passed by Congress. In addition to a detailed presentation of the genesis of an important piece of legislation, this study also provides a glimpse into the formulation and operation of the foreign policy of Franklin Roosevelt. Thanks primarily to the remarkable amount of detail available in the Morgenthau Diaries, we are afforded an invaluable look at the give-and-take inside an administration which precedes any major policy decision but which is usually obscured by a facade of seemingly unanimous support once a policy is formally adopted.

Some are wont to dismiss the details of the development of American support for Britain between 1939 and 1941 as unimportant because such support was bound to come in time. Although it may look simple in retrospect, it was anything but a simple process to those who ran the American government. Franklin Roosevelt was firmly convinced that one wrong move might well jeopardize the entire aid to Britain
program, and he acted accordingly. R. S. Sayers, one of the authors of
the official British history of World War II, summed up this idea. After
noting that Americans supported aid to Britain in spite of their dis­
illusionment with World War I and all that had followed, he con­
cluded: "In retrospect the historian may emphasize that American
participation was sooner or later inevitable, . . . but a nation of
millions of people is not brought readily to decisions of this kind."
More than any other single event prior to the actual declaration of war
against Germany, the Lend-Lease Act signalled that participation.

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*The University of Georgia*

WARREN F. KIMBALL