

11/15/41

THE CONGRESSIONAL FRONT
By Congressman Everett M. Dirksen
16th District.

THE STORY OF NEUTRALITY AND IT'S REPEAL.

On November 4, 1939 the Neutrality Act became law. It was approved just 65 days after Hitler invaded Poland, 63 days after France and Britain declared war on Hitler and 47 days after Russia invaded Poland. Off and on, one heard suggestions that it should be repealed in it's entirety but they remained little more than suggestions. On the 11th day of March 1941, Congress had enacted and the President had approved the lease-lend act to aid nations whose defense was deemed vital to the United States. One section of the lease-lend act provided that no part of the act should be construed as authority for an American vessel to enter a combat zone in time of war. The lease-lend act there fore reaffirmed a part of the neutrality law.

THE SECTIONS IN CONTROVERSY

The controversial features of the Neutrality Act were sections two, three, and six. Section six provided that when the President had issued a proclamation that a state of war existed between two foreign countries, it would be unlawful for an American merchant vessel engaged in foreign commerce to be armed. Section 3 provided that under such circumstances no citizen or American vessel should enter a combat zone as defined by the President. Section 2 provided that after the President had proclaimed the existence of a war and named the belligerent nations it would be unlawful for an American vessel to carry passengers or materials to such nations. The remaining sections of the Act dealing with financial transactions, travel to belligerent states, use of American ports, munitions control etc. were not especially in controversy.

PRESIDENTS' REQUEST

On October 9th, 1941 the President directed a message to Congress recommending that Section 6 which deals with the arming of merchant ships be repealed. He also requested reconsideration of the entire act and specifically Section 2 which forbids commerce with states at war. Pursuant to that request, a resolution was introduced which provided for the repeal of Section 6 only, dealing with the restriction on arming merchant ships. This bill was set down for hearings.

HOUSE ACTION.

Brief hearings were held on the repeal of Section 6. No other sections were considered nor was testimony taken with respect to repeal of other parts of the act. The Secretary of State, Secretary of War, Secretary of Navy, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Chairman of the Maritime Commission all testified in behalf of repealing section 6. On October 15th, this resolution passed the House by a very substantial majority of 121 votes. Generally speaking, the House looked with considerable favor on the repeal of section 6. In this form, the resolution went to the Senate.

SENATE ACTION.

The resolution as it passed the House was referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. That Committee then reported the resolution to the Senate with amendments which provided for the repeal of Section 2 and 3 also. The proposal was roundly debated on the Senate floor for many days. On October 27, the amended resolution passed the Senate by avote of 50 to 38.

FURTHER HOUSE ACTION

Thereupon it became necessary to send the resolution back to the House for consideration of the amendments which the Senate had incorporated. By agreement, debate was limited to 8 hours. Debate was maintained on a high and constructive plane. At no time was partisanship politics injected into the discussion. There was no heckling, no smart cracks, no personalities. There was due appreciation of the gravity of the vote. Early in the afternoon, the roll was called. At the conclusion of the roll call the Speaker announced "212 voted in the affirmative, 194 in the negative. The bill is passed and a motion to reconsider is laid on the table.

THE PROS.

Principal contentions in behalf of the measure were that

1. It will impress the Japanese and avoid a break in the Pacific.
2. That it will make lend-lease-aid more effective.
3. That it will keep us out of war.
4. It will help sustain Russia

THE CONS

Principal contentions of those opposed to the bill were.

1. That we are not ready for the eventualities which will flow from this course of policy.
2. That our domestic house is not in order
3. That it is a certain invitation to war.

OBSERVATIONS.

Most interesting thing about the vote was that while such consistent Republican critics of the administration as Gifford and Bates of Massachusetts, Tabler, Hancock and Wadsworth of New York, Eaton and McLean of New Jersey voted for the bill, stalwart administrative supporters such as Doughton and Barden of North Carolina, South and Summers of Texas, McGehee, Rankin, and Colmer of Mississippi, Cullen, Kennedy, Keogh and Lynch of New York, Sasscer of Maryland and Smith of Virginia voted against the bill. 189 Democrats, 22 Republicans and 1 American Labor voted for the bill; 53 Democrats, 137 Republicans, 1 Farmer-Labor and 3 Progressives voted against the bill. Thus goes the story of neutrality and it's repeal.