

# America's History

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## The World at War 1937-1945

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After we have covered this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What were the key elements of American foreign policy prior to World War II?
2. How and why did America edge closer to war between 1939 and 1941?
3. How did mobilization and war affect American society?
4. How did the Allies fight and win World War II?
5. How did American war aims affect plans for post-war settlement?

### The Road to War

#### **The Rise of Fascism**

The nation's neutrality was challenged by the aggressive actions of Germany, Italy, and Japan, all determined to expand their borders and their influence. In 1931, Japan occupied Manchuria; then in 1937, it launched a full-scale invasion of China. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and by 1936, the Italian subjugation of Ethiopia was complete. The League of Nations condemned the aggression, but it could not stop Italy.



*Leaders of Germany, Italy, and Japan sign a defensive pact, the Tripartite Treaty, September 1940*

Germany presented the gravest threat to the world order in the 1930s. There, huge World War I reparations payments, economic depression, fear of communism, labor unrest, and rising unemployment fueled the rise of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party. Hitler became chancellor in 1933, assumed dictatorial powers, and, as he made clear in his book *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)*, sought to overturn the territorial settlements of the Versailles treaty, to “restore” all of the Germans of Central and Eastern Europe to a single German fatherland, and to annex large areas of Eastern Europe. Part of Hitler’s vision was that “inferior races” and other

“undesirables” had to make way for the “master race.” He also launched a persecution of Jews.

Wanting to avoid a war with Germany, Britain and France took no action. Hitler’s 1935 announcement of plans to rearm Germany—in violation of the Versailles treaty—met with no resistance. Germany reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936, and later that year Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini joined forces in the Rome-Berlin Axis. Also in 1936, Germany and Japan signed a pact to create a military alliance against the Soviet Union.

### **Isolationists versus Interventionists**

During the early years of the New Deal, America limited its involvement in international affairs. Partly owing to disillusionment with American participation in World War I, isolationism built in Congress and the nation throughout the 1920s. Gerald P. Nye, a senator from North Dakota, headed a congressional investigation into the profits of munitions makers during World War I; his committee concluded that war profiteers, whom it called “merchants of death,” had maneuvered the nation into World War I for financial gain. Although most of the committee’s charges were dubious or simplistic, they gave momentum to the isolationist movement, contributing to the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1935.

The Neutrality Act imposed an embargo on arms trading with countries at war and declared that American citizens traveled on the ships of belligerent nations at their own risk; in 1936, the Neutrality Act was expanded to ban loans to belligerents, and in 1937, it adopted a “cash-and-carry” provision.



*European leaders, including British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (left), and German dictator, Adolf Hitler (center) at the Munich Conference in 1938*

Despite their Loyalist sympathies, the neutral stance of the United States, Great Britain, and France virtually assured a fascist victory in the 1936 Spanish civil war. In 1938, Hitler sent troops to annex Austria, while simultaneously scheming to seize part of Czechoslovakia. At the Munich Conference in September 1938, Britain and France capitulated to Germany’s aggression, agreeing to let Germany annex the Sudetenland—the German-speaking border areas of Czechoslovakia—in return for Hitler’s pledge to seek no more territory. Within six months, Hitler’s forces had overrun the rest of Czechoslovakia and were threatening to march into Poland.

In August 1939, Hitler signed the Nonaggression Pact with the Soviet Union, which assured Germany it would not have to wage war on two fronts at once. On September 1, 1939, German troops attacked Poland; two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

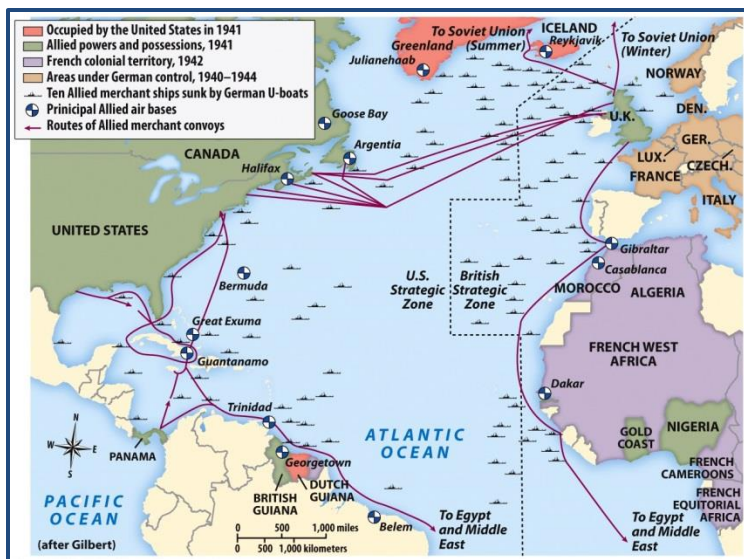
President Roosevelt, with the support of most Americans, sought to keep the United States neutral. By mid-1940, Germany had overrun Western Europe, leaving Great Britain as the only power in Europe fighting Hitler.

In America, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies led the interventionists, while the isolationists formed the America First Committee, which had the support of the conservative press, to keep America out of the war.

In 1940, the Roosevelt administration created the National Defense Advisory Commission to put America’s economy and government on a defense footing. After winning an unprecedented third term as president in the same year, Roosevelt concentrated on persuading the American people to increase aid to Britain.

In March 1941, Roosevelt convinced Congress to pass the Lend-Lease Act, to “lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of” arms and other equipment to any country whose defense was considered vital to the security of the United States. The “lend-lease” was extended to the Soviet Union, which became part of the Allied coalition after it was invaded by Germany; the full implementation of lend-lease marked the unofficial entrance of the United States into the European war. The United States and Britain’s **Atlantic Charter** called for economic collaboration between the two countries and for guarantees of political stability after the end of the war and also supported free trade, national self-determination, and the principle of collective security.

By September 1941, Nazi submarines and American vessels were fighting an undeclared naval war in the Atlantic, unknown to the American public; without a dramatic enemy attack, Roosevelt hesitated to ask Congress for a declaration of war.



*World War II in the North Atlantic, 1939-1943*

### The Attack on Pearl Harbor

The final provocation came not from Germany, but from Japan. Throughout the 1930s, Japanese military advances in China had upset the balance of political and economic power in the Pacific; Roosevelt suggested that aggressors such as Japan be “quarantined” by peace-loving nations, but the United States

avoided taking a strong stand. During the sack of Nanjing in 1937, the United States refused to intervene, leading to the deaths of 300,000 Chinese. Japan craved the conquest of more territory and signed a pact with Germany and Italy in 1940. After Japan occupied part of French Indochina, Roosevelt retaliated with trade restrictions

and embargoes on aviation fuel and scrap metal. When Japanese troops occupied the rest of Indochina, Roosevelt froze Japanese assets in the United States and instituted an embargo on trade with Japan, including oil shipments.



*Pearl Harbor, December 7 1941*

The United States knew that Japan was planning an attack but did not know when or where; on December 7, 1941, Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor. On December 8, Congress voted to declare war on Japan; three days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, and the United States in turn declared war on them.

## Organizing for Victory

### Financing the War

Presidential power expanded dramatically when Congress passed the War Powers Act of December 18, 1941. The act gave Roosevelt unprecedented authority over all aspects of the war. This act marked the beginning of what historians call the **imperial presidency**: the far-reaching use of executive authority during the latter part of the twentieth century.

Defense mobilization definitively ended the Great Depression. Between 1940 and 1945, the gross national product doubled, after-tax profits of American business doubled, and farm output grew by one-third. The Revenue Act of 1942 expanded the number of people paying income taxes from 3.9 million to 42.6 million. Taxes on personal income and business profits paid half the cost of the war.

The number of civilians employed by the government increased almost fourfold; leadership of federal agencies was turned over to volunteer business executives, such as Henry J. Kaiser, a contractor who had built the monumental Hoover Dam. Many wartime agencies extended the power of the federal government. One of the most important agencies was the **War Production Board (WPB)**, which awarded defense contracts, evaluated military and civilian requests for scarce resources, and oversaw the conversion of industry to military production. The WPB preferred to deal with major corporations; these very large businesses would later form the core of the military-industrial complex of the postwar years. Working together, American business and government turned out a prodigious supply of military hardware: 86,000 tanks,

296,000 airplanes, 15 million rifles and machine guns, 64,000 landing craft, and 6,500 cargo ships and naval vessels.

### **Mobilizing the American Fighting Force**

An expanded state presence was also evident in the government’s mobilization of a fighting force; by the end of World War II, the armed forces of the United States numbered 15 million. The military segregated the nearly 1 million African Americans who fought in all branches of the armed forces and assigned them the most menial jobs; Mexican Americans and Native Americans were never officially segregated. Among the most instrumental soldiers were the Native American “code talkers.” No axis nation ever broke the codes devised by Native Americans.

Three hundred fifty thousand American women enlisted in the armed services and achieved a permanent status in the military. The armed forces limited the types of duty assigned to women; they were barred from combat, and most were assigned to jobs reflecting stereotypes of women’s roles in civilian life.

### **Workers and the War Effort**

Government and corporate recruiters sought to remedy the war-induced labor shortage and drew on patriotism to urge women into the workforce. Women made up 36 percent of the labor force in 1945, compared with 24 percent at the beginning of the war, though they faced much discrimination, sexual harassment, and inequitable pay. Women’s participation in the labor force dropped temporarily when the war ended, but it rebounded steadily for the rest of the 1940s.



*Rosie the Riveter*

Organized labor responded to the war with an initial burst of patriotic unity; on December 23, 1941, representatives of the major unions made a nonbinding “no-strike” pledge for the duration of the war. Unions expanded membership during World War II. Roosevelt set up the **National War Labor**

**Board (NWLB)**, which established wages, hours, and working conditions and had the authority to seize plants that did not comply. Dissatisfaction peaked in 1943, a year in which a nationwide railroad strike was narrowly averted and **John L. Lewis** led the United Mine Workers on a strike; Lewis won wage concessions, but he alienated Congress and the public. Congress passed the anti-union **Smith-Connally Labor Act** over Roosevelt’s veto, and strikes were entirely prohibited in defense industries.

In the face of domestic and wartime discrimination, African Americans manifested a new mood of militancy. African American leaders pointed out parallels between anti-Semitism in Germany and racial discrimination in America; they pledged themselves to a **“Double V” campaign**: victory over Nazism abroad and victory over racism and inequality at home. In response to the threat of a black “March on Washington,” Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, prohibiting “discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin,” and established the **Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC)**. The FEPC did not affect segregation in the armed forces and could not enforce compliance with its orders. African American groups flourished; the NAACP grew to 450,000 by 1945, and the Congress of Racial Equality was founded and became known nationwide for its demonstrations and sit-ins.

The **League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)** built on their communities’ patriotic contributions to the defense industry and the armed services to challenge discrimination and exclusion.

### **Politics in Wartime**

In his 1944 State of the Union address, FDR called for a second Bill of Rights to guarantee that all Americans had access to an education and a job, adequate food and clothing, and decent housing and medical care. FDR’s Bill of Rights remained largely rhetorical since it received no congressional support until after the war ended. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (1944), known as the **GI Bill**, provided education, job training, medical care, pensions, and mortgage loans for those who had served during the war. Roosevelt’s call for social legislation was part of a plan to woo Democratic voters and reinvigorate the New Deal coalition.

In 1944, Roosevelt sought a fourth term because of the war; Democrats dropped Henry Wallace as vice president, as his views were seen as too extreme, and teamed Roosevelt with Harry S. Truman to run against Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York. In a close election, Roosevelt received only 53.5 percent of the popular vote; the party’s margin of victory came from the cities, and a significant segment of this urban support came from organized labor.

### **Life on the Home Front**

#### **“For the Duration”**

People on the home front worked on civilian defense committees, collected old newspapers and scrap material, served on local rationing and draft boards, and planted “victory gardens” that produced 40 percent of the nation’s vegetables. The **Office of War Information (OWI)** strove to disseminate information and promote patriotism;



the OWI urged advertising agencies to link their clients' products to the war effort. Popular culture reflected America's new international involvement and built morale on the home front; many movies had patriotic themes, demonstrated heroism of ordinary citizens, or warned of the dangers of fascism, while newsreels and on-the-spot radio broadcasts kept the public up to date on the war.

Perhaps the greatest source of Americans' high morale was wartime prosperity as federal defense spending had ended the depression. Workers earned higher take-home pay, despite wage freezes, than at any point since the 1920s. The major inconveniences of the war were the limitations placed on consumption: almost everything Americans ate, wore, or used during the war was subjected to rationing or regulation by the Office of Price Administration.

### Migration and the Wartime City

The war affected where people lived; families followed service members to training bases or points of debarkation, and the lure of high-paying defense jobs encouraged others to move. As a center of defense production, California was affected by the wartime migration more than any other state, experiencing a 53-percent growth in population. As more than a million African Americans migrated to defense centers in California, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, racial conflicts arose over jobs and housing.



*Zoot Suit youth in Los Angeles*

In Los Angeles, male Latinos who belonged to pachuco (youth) gangs dressed in "zoot suits"; blacks and some working-class white teenagers also wore zoot suits as a symbol of alienation and self-assertion, but to adults and Anglos, the attire symbolized wartime juvenile delinquency. These zoot-suiters became the target of white hostility toward Mexican Americans; in July 1943, rumors that a pachuco gang had beaten a white

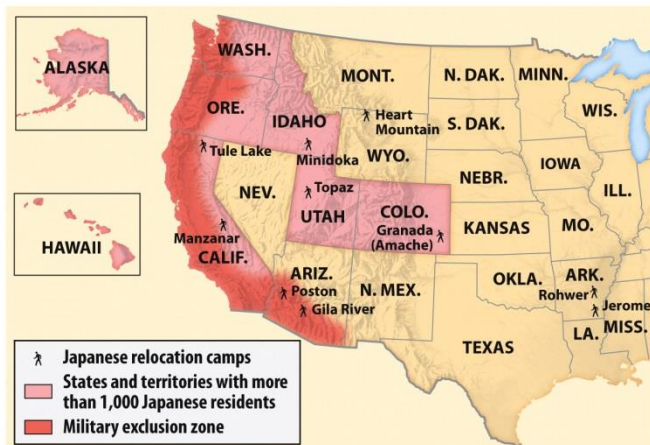
sailor set off a four-day riot.

For gays and lesbians, the wartime migration to urban centers created new opportunities for gay men and women to establish communities. But widespread hostility kept the vast majority of gays and lesbians silent and hidden. Once in the service, homosexuals found opportunities to participate in a gay culture often more extensive than that in civilian life.

## Japanese Removal

Despite some racial tension, the home front was generally calm in the 1940s; German and Italian Americans usually did not experience intense prejudice, and leftists and Communists faced little repression after the Soviet Union became an ally. The internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast was a glaring exception to racial tolerance, a reminder of the fragility of civil liberties in wartime.

In early 1942, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which gave the War Department the authority to evacuate Japanese Americans from the West Coast and intern them in relocation camps for the rest of the war. Despite the lack of any evidence of Nisei disloyalty or sedition, few public figures opposed the plan. The War Relocation Authority rounded up 112,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were citizens, and sent them to internment camps in California, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Arkansas. The Japanese Americans who made up one-third of the population of Hawaii were not interned; the Hawaiian economy could not function without them.



*Japanese Relocation Camps*

Furloughs for seasonal workers, attendance at a college, and enlistment in the armed services were some routes out of the internment camps. Nisei Gordon Hirabayashi was among the few Japanese Americans who actively resisted incarceration. A student at the University of Washington, Hirabayashi was a religious pacifist who had registered with his draft board as a conscientious objector. He challenged internment by refusing to register for evacuation; instead, he turned himself in to the FBI. Tried and convicted in 1942, he appealed his case to the Supreme Court in *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943). In that case, and also in *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), the Court allowed the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast on the basis of “military necessity” but avoided ruling on the constitutionality of the internment program. Congress issued a public apology in 1988 and awarded \$20,000 to each of the 80,000 surviving Japanese American internees.



## Fighting and Winning the War

### Wartime Aims and Tensions

The Allied coalition was composed mainly of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, and its leaders (Winston Churchill, Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin) set overall strategy. Churchill and Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter formed the basis of the Allies' vision of the postwar international order, but Stalin had not been part of that agreement, a fact that would later cause disagreements over its goals. The Russians argued for opening a second front in Europe—preferably in France—because it would draw German troops away from Russian soil.



*The Big 3 – Churchill, FDR, and Stalin*

In November 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to open a second front in return for Stalin's promise to fight against Japan when the war in Europe ended. The delay in creating the second front meant that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the land battle against Germany; Stalin's mistrust of the United States and Great Britain carried over into the Cold War.

### The War in Europe

During the first seven months of the war, the Allies suffered severe defeats on land and sea in both Europe and Asia. The turning point in the war came when the Soviets halted the German advance in **the Battle of Stalingrad**; by 1944, Stalin's forces had driven the Germans out of the Soviet Union.

In North Africa, Allied troops, under the leadership of **General Dwight D. Eisenhower** and **General George S. Patton**, defeated Germany's Afrika Korps led by General Erwin Rommel. The Allied command moved to attack the Axis through Sicily and the Italian peninsula; in July 1943, Mussolini's fascist regime fell, and Italy's new government joined the Allies. The Allied forces finally entered Rome in June 1944, although the last German forces in Italy did not surrender until May 1945.

The invasion of France came on **D-Day, June 6, 1944**; under General Eisenhower's command, more than 1.5 million American, British, and Canadian troops crossed the English Channel. In August 1944, Allied troops helped to liberate Paris; by September, they had driven the Germans out of most of France and Belgium. In December 1944, after ten days of fighting, the Allies pushed the Germans back across the Rhine River

in the Battle of the Bulge, the final German offensive. As American, British, and Soviet troops advanced toward Berlin, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker on April 30; Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945.



*Hitting the Beach at Normandy*

As Allied troops advanced into Germany, they came upon the extermination camps where 6 million Jews, along with 6 million other people, were put to death. The Roosevelt administration had information about the camps as early as 1942, but so few Jews escaped the Holocaust because

the United States and the rest of the world would not take in the Jews. The War Refugee Board, established in 1944, eventually helped to save about 200,000 Jews who were placed in refugee camps in various countries.

Factors combining to inhibit U.S. action were anti-Semitism, fears of economic competition from a flood of immigrant refugees to a country just recovering from the depression, failure of the media to grasp the magnitude of the story and to publicize it accordingly, and the failure of religious and political leaders to speak out.

### The War in the Pacific



After Pearl Harbor, Japan continued its conquests in the Far East and began to threaten Australia and India. In May 1942, in the **Battle of the Coral Sea**, American naval forces halted the Japanese offensive against Australia, and in June, Americans inflicted crucial damage on the Japanese fleet at **Midway**. Over the next eighteen months, **General Douglas MacArthur** and **Admiral Chester W. Nimitz** led the offensive in the Pacific, advancing from one island to the next.

The reconquest of the Philippines began with a victory in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, in which the Japanese lost practically their entire fleet; by early 1945, triumph over Japan was in sight, with costly American victories at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The use of kamikaze missions, combined with the Japanese refusal to surrender, suggested to American military strategists that Japan would continue to fight despite overwhelming losses. When Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met at Yalta in February 1945, victory in

Europe and the Pacific was in sight, but no agreement had been reached on the peace to come.

When Harry Truman took over the presidency, he learned of the top-secret **Manhattan Project**, charged with developing the atomic bomb. It cost more than \$2 billion and employed 120,000 people. Truman ordered the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima**, on August 6, and **Nagasaki**, on August 9. At the time, the belief that Japan’s military leaders would never surrender unless their country was utterly devastated convinced policymakers that they had to deploy the atomic bomb. One hundred thousand people died at Hiroshima and sixty thousand at Nagasaki; tens of thousands more died slowly of radiation poisoning. Japan offered to surrender on August 10 and signed a formal treaty of surrender on September 2, 1945.



*Nagasaki, before and after*

### **Planning the Postwar World**



One source of conflict was Stalin’s desire for a band of Soviet-controlled satellite states to protect the Soviet Union’s western border.

Roosevelt and Churchill agreed in principle on the idea of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Roosevelt pressed for an agreement that guaranteed self-determination and democratic elections in Poland and neighboring countries but,

given the presence there of Soviet troops, had to accept a pledge from Stalin to hold “free and unfettered elections” at a future time. Germany was to be divided into four zones to be controlled by the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union; Berlin would be partitioned among the four.

The Big Four made progress toward the establishment of the United Nations; its Security Council would include the five major Allied powers, plus six other nations participating on a rotating basis, and permanent members of the Security Council would have veto power over decisions of the General Assembly. The United Nations was to convene in San Francisco on April 25, 1945; Roosevelt suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died on April 12, 1945.

Fascism had been defeated, thanks to a strange alliance between the capitalist nations of the West and the Communist government of the Soviet Union. The coming of peace would strain, and then destroy, the victorious coalition.

