

History Now

The World War II Home Front

by Allan M. Winkler

World War II had a profound impact on the United States. Although no battles occurred on the American mainland, the war affected all phases of American life. It required unprecedented efforts to coordinate strategy and tactics with other members of the Grand Alliance and then to plunge into battle against the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan. At the same time, it demanded a monumental

production effort to provide the materials necessary to fight. As the United States produced the weapons of war and became, in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's phrase, the "arsenal of democracy," the country experienced a fundamental reorientation of economic and social patterns at home that provided the template for the postwar years.

In the economic arena, the war ended the Great Depression. Military spending that began in 1940 to bolster the defense effort gave the nation's economy the boost it needed, and millions of unemployed Americans returned to work to make the weapons of war needed to protect the United States. The renewed prosperity vindicated the theory of English economist John Maynard Keynes, who had earlier argued that sizable government spending could end a depression if the private sector was unable or unwilling to engage in such spending itself.



Soldiers without Guns poster, Office of War Information, ca. 1944. (National Archives)

Mobilization required enormous organizational adjustments. The nation worked closely with businessmen, for, as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson observed, "If you are going to try to go to war, or to prepare for war, in a capitalist country, you have got to let business make money out of the process or business won't work." Business leaders who had incurred the wrath of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, when they balked at fully supporting New Deal programs, now found themselves invited to Washington, DC, to run the agencies that coordinated production. Paid a dollar a year for their services, they remained on company payrolls, still cognizant of the interests of the corporations they ran. A common pattern, which provided an incentive to business to cooperate, was the cost-plus-a-fixed-fee system, whereby the government guaranteed all development and production costs and then paid a percentage profit on the goods produced.

A huge network of wartime agencies developed to coordinate war production. FDR was never fond of dismantling administrative structures or firing people who worked for him, and so he created one agency after another, with new ones often in competition with old ones, to guide the war effort. That pattern allowed him to play off assistants against each other and to make the final choices himself. There was a National Defense Advisory Commission, then an Office of Production Management, then a War Production Board, and eventually an Office of War Mobilization to coordinate all parts of the war economy.

The system worked. By mid-1945, the United States had produced 80,000 landing craft, 100,000 tanks and armored cars, 300,000 airplanes, fifteen million guns, and forty-one billion rounds of ammunition. It had also produced the world's first two atomic bombs. And while wartime controls disappeared after the war was over, the experience provided a framework for future administrative organization of the economy.

As propaganda came of age, in a new Office of War Information, Americans rose to the challenge of doing whatever was necessary to support the war effort. They bought billions of dollars' worth of bonds to help defray the cost of the war. They saved metals and fats to be recycled into military materiel and collected rubber until the nation successfully produced synthetic rubber, necessary because shipping lanes to obtain natural rubber were blocked. They planted "victory gardens" to provide fruits and vegetables for personal use. "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without" became the slogan of the day.

Songs conveyed America's sense of optimism. "Goodbye, Momma, I'm off to Yokohama" was one example; "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" was another. Americans seeking a song like "Over There," which had summed up their confidence in World War I, never found one. Instead, the popular music industry ground out a series of trite but colorful titles including: "You're a Sap, Mister Jap," "Let's take a Rap at the Jap," "The Japs Don't Have a Chinaman's Chance," and "We're Gonna Find a Feller Who Is Yeller and Beat Him Red, White, and Blue."

The war caused disruptions at home. Americans faced shortages that required them to deal with the hassle of rationing. They had to provide the necessary coupons—issued by the Office of Price Administration—to be able to

purchase items in short supply like sugar, or meat, or gasoline. Housing shortages plagued people moving to war-production centers. Even so, midway through the conflict, seven out of ten Americans said they had not had to make any "real sacrifices" as a result of the war.

For groups discriminated against in the past, the war was a vehicle for lasting social and economic gains. For women and blacks in particular, the war was a stimulus—and a model—for future change.

The war brought enormous changes in American women's lives. Women were, without question, second-class citizens at the start of the struggle. Facing discrimination in the job market, they found many positions simply closed to them. In jobs they could find, they usually earned less than men. But then the huge productive effort that began in 1940 gave women the chance to do industrial work. As millions of men entered the military services, both government and industry waged a concerted campaign, with posters of "Rosie the Riveter," to get women to work in the factories, and they did—in huge numbers. The number of working women rose from 14,600,000 in 1941 to 19,370,000 in 1944. In the latter year, 37 percent of all adult women were in the labor force. At the peak of the industrial effort, women constituted 36 percent of the civilian work force. At the same time, the demographic composition of the female labor pool shifted. Traditionally, working women had been single and young. Between 1940 and 1944, married women made up over 72 percent of the total number of female employees. By the end of the war, half of all female workers were over thirty-five.

Women loved the work. Many agreed with a Baltimore advertisement that told them that working in a war plant was "a lot more exciting than polishing the family furniture." They remained frustrated at unfair pay differentials, but wanted to continue working after the war. Some recognized, as one woman in Tacoma noted, "My husband wants a wife, not a career woman," and complied with the propaganda campaign as the war drew to an end to get them out of the factories so that returning servicemen could take back their jobs. Some were able to continue working, but most left their positions. Still, their experience helped lay the groundwork for a women's movement in later years and the war was an important step on the road to equal rights.

African Americans likewise benefited from the demands of war. At the start of the struggle, their unemployment rate was twice that of whites, and many of the jobs they held were unskilled. They could not join the Air Corps or the Marine Corps. In the Navy, they could enlist only in the all-black messmen's branch. In the Army they were segregated from whites, and they were bothered by constant slights. One black American soldier recalled being turned away from a lunchroom in Salina, Kansas, only to see German prisoners of war being served at the same counter. "This was really happening," he said sadly. "It was no jive talk. The people of Salina would serve these enemy soldiers and turn away black American GIs."

Blacks became increasingly assertive. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a widely circulated black newspaper, proclaimed a "Double V" campaign—V for victory in the struggle against the dictators abroad and V for victory in the campaign for equality at home. Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl

Harbor brought the United States into the war, A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proposed a massive March on Washington under the slogan "WE LOYAL NEGRO AMERICAN CITIZENS DEMAND THE RIGHT TO WORK AND FIGHT FOR OUR COUNTRY." He agreed to call off the march only when FDR signed an executive order creating a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate complaints about discrimination and take appropriate action. While the FEPC was never wholly effective, it enjoyed a few notable successes when the pressure of war production made employers willing to hire African American workers. Meanwhile, black students at Howard University in Washington, DC, picketed segregated restaurants. Some black airmen finally had the chance to fly, and black soldiers served with distinction in increasing numbers. These efforts foreshadowed the protest campaigns of the subsequent Civil Rights Movement.

Not all groups of outsiders fared well. Japanese Americans were the worst civilian casualties of the war. Though but a tiny minority on the West Coast, they were visible and vulnerable, particularly after Pearl Harbor. Rumors spread about possible sabotage. *Time* and *Life* magazines told readers how to tell friendly Chinese from enemy Japanese: "The Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant." Government officials added their own observations. "A Jap's a Jap," said General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command. Faced with mounting pressure, the Army cited military necessity as the reason to evacuate Japanese Americans, whether or not they were citizens, from the West Coast. When it became clear that other parts of the country did not want the evacuees, a new War Relocation Authority ignored constitutional qualms and forcibly moved Japanese Americans to ten detention camps in seven western states. Harsh conditions undermined a sense of social cohesion. Eventually, some Japanese Americans accepted the chance to fight in the war. Others, who refused, faced further internment, sometimes in even harsher conditions.

For the most part, Americans looked back fondly on World War II. They had fought against totalitarian dictatorships for democratic ideals and they had won. The world was a better place for the sacrifices they had made, and veterans and others took pride in a job well done. For many Americans, this was, in the phrase journalist Studs Terkel helped popularize in 1984 in the title of his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "the Good War." Yet more recently some observers have pointed out that in the pursuit of victory, the United States on occasion failed to live up to its own democratic principles.

They have debated, too, the degree to which World War II was a watershed that changed the nation's course. The war clearly brought a return of prosperity after the dismal depression of the 1930s. It promoted the growth of big business and solidified military industrial links. It brought about permanent demographic change. For groups discriminated against in the past, the war was a vehicle for lasting social and economic gains. The war changed configurations of political power. Americans now looked to the federal government to deal with problems handled privately, or at a state or local level, before. Meanwhile, the presidency grew more powerful than it had ever been before.

And yet, continuity with the past was also important, and basic American values endured. As Americans looked ahead, they did so through the lens of the past. They remained attached to the status quo as they sought to create a more attractive, stable, and secure future based on the model that still influenced their lives. They hungered for the prosperity they recalled from the 1920s, so elusive in the 1930s, now once again possible thanks to the spending for war. Their vision of the future included no brave and bold new world, but a revived and refurbished version of the world they had known before. The war restored the self-confidence they had felt prior to the depression and convinced them that what they wanted was within their grasp. The American dream, its contours the same, remained alive and well.

Despite such continuities, the changes that occurred between 1940 and 1945 stand out vividly. Even when seen against a broader perspective, the transformation the United States experienced was profound. In responding to extraordinary challenges, the United States was undeniably different at the end of the war than it had been at the start.

War, by its very nature, has always been a catalyst for change, and World War II followed that pattern. In the United States, World War II made Americans more willing to involve themselves—politically and diplomatically—with the outside world. It also expanded their hopes and expectations and forever altered the patterns of their lives at home.

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