

World War II

by Kenneth T. Jackson



General Eisenhower speaks with paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division on June 5, 1944, just before they board their planes to participate in the first assault of the Normandy invasion. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

World War II was the central event of the twentieth century. It involved all six major continents, all three of the great oceans on the planet, scores of countries, and billions of people. It caused 57 million deaths and unimaginable human suffering. It brought about the redrawing of national boundaries in Europe and Asia, forced the relocation of many ethnic groups, made millions of families homeless, and led to the virtual annihilation of the Jewish population of Europe. By the time it was over in 1945, Tokyo, Berlin, Hamburg, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Warsaw, Hiroshima, Dresden, Dusseldorf, Nagasaki, Osaka, Manila, Cologne, and dozens of other great cities had been obliterated. And population centers that had mostly avoided the worst of the death and destruction continued to see poverty and hunger linger for years after the surrender documents had been signed. Meanwhile, the prisoners and the wounded, making their way back to wives, sweethearts, parents, and children, often after an absence of many years, would carry the cost of the conflict with them for the rest of their lives.

A WORLD AT WAR

There is no one date that can be said to mark the beginning of the greatest of global conflicts. In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria, a northern province of China. In July 1937, the Japanese moved again, this time directly against the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek. The atrocities that followed shocked the world. Meanwhile, in 1936, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler moved aggressively into the Rhineland, previously a demilitarized zone, and in 1938, he incorporated Czechoslovakia and Austria into the Third Reich. By this time, the Western world was fully alert to the menace of the fanatically ambitious and confident Fuhrer. Then, in the early morning hours of September 1, 1939, Hitler sent his armies into Poland. Two days later, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Within a matter of weeks the Soviet Union, which had recently signed a non-aggression treaty with Hitler, attacked

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Poland from the east. Within a month, Polish resistance collapsed, and Warsaw fell. World War II had begun.

In general, the American people did not want to have any part in a European war. They felt protected by great oceans on both sides of the North American continent. And they felt that, in World War I, American boys had fought and bled in France mostly to make fortunes for munitions makers and arms merchants. Moreover, the United States had allowed its armed forces to wither in the 1920s and 1930, so that when World War II broke out in Europe, its army of 190,000 men ranked about eighteenth in the global rankings, about on a par with Rumania and Bulgaria.

The United States might never have entered World War II if Germany, Japan, and Italy had stopped after their initial conquests. But the three Axis powers made astonishing gains in the years before the Pearl Harbor attack. After taking over Norway and neutralizing Sweden, the Nazis turned their attention to the big prize. Early in the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler launched a *blitzkrieg* or lightning war against France, whose army had previously been considered the finest in the world. The revolutionary nature of the German offensive, generally credited to the brilliant strategist, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, was to concentrate all available tanks into a few specialized and highly mobile armored divisions rather than to spread them out evenly among infantry units. These panzer formations were to smash holes in the enemy line and then break out into the rear, creating havoc on the roads and, supported by Luftwaffe dive bombers, preventing the Allies from plugging the gaps. They did this by attacking through the dense Ardennes forests in Luxembourg and southern Belgium, crossing the Meuse River long before the Allied high command had thought possible. The British and French armies actually had more and better tanks than the attackers, but new strategic and tactical concepts carried the contest. The German tank columns swept everything before them, and the French defenses soon collapsed. In fact, the almost total collapse of the proud French army in May 1940 remains one of the most incredible events in all of military history. France sued for peace in June, and Hitler's victorious troops marched past the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

The British Expeditionary Force, which had been sent in 1939 to help defend France from the Wehrmacht, was cut off when German panzer divisions cut west toward the English Channel, effectively isolating more than 300,000 Allied troops. Fortunately for Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the Royal Navy was able to extricate his trapped soldiers from the port of Dunkirk. But at the end of June 1940, essentially all of western Europe was under the control of Berlin.

Hitler expected Great Britain, his only remaining foe, to recognize the superiority of German arms and to remove itself from active involvement in Europe. After all, he reasoned, Germany sought *lebensraum* or growing space in the east and had no intention of dismantling the British Empire. Why not just divide the world? Why would the Anglo-Saxons not be content with their vast holdings in Asia, on the other side of the world? When London refused to capitulate or to do the sensible thing, the Fuhrer unleashed the Luftwaffe on the English homeland, expecting that its heavy blows would bring Churchill to his senses. At about the same time, in a dramatic BBC radio address from London on June 18, 1940, General Charles de Gaulle called upon his French countrymen to resist their German conquerors. Meanwhile, Italy, not satisfied with its conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–1936, turned its attention toward Greece. And Japan expanded its military operations in China.

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In 1941, however, Hitler made a colossal blunder. In fact, perhaps no event in human history can match in significance the Fuhrer's decision to invade the Soviet Union in the early summer. He had not defeated Great Britain, and yet he was turning his armies to the east, initiating a two-front war. When his soldiers crossed the USSR frontier on June 22, the Nazis leader's new opponent became Joseph Stalin, a dictator as ruthless and cunning as himself, and the head of both the largest country and the largest army on earth. The eastern front, which involved hundreds of combat divisions stretched over thousands of miles of windswept terrain, would turn out to be a human furnace that consumed soldiers as hungrily as steam engines consume coals. Germany essentially bled to death in Russia, as four-fifths of all Wehrmacht soldiers who perished in the war died while fighting the Red Army. For the Soviet Union, the carnage was even worse. A staggering 27 million USSR citizens died in what for them will always be "the Great Patriotic War."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt followed the news of fighting in Europe with obvious concern. He knew his countrymen did not want to be involved, and indeed he ran for an unprecedented third term in the White House with the slogan, "He kept us out of war." Isolationist sentiment was powerful, and no less a personage than Charles Lindbergh led an America First movement that aimed to avoid all foreign entanglements. Moreover, many ethnic Americans were not anxious to help the British. German Americans and Italian Americans, for example, while loyal to the United States, were also proud that Hitler and Mussolini had restored pride and confidence to their homelands, while Irish Americans, long hostile to the government in London, did not want to go to war to advance the interests of the hated English. On the other side of the interventionist divide, Jewish Americans were more aware of Hitler's intense anti-Semitism and of the new regulations and laws that limited Jewish access to the professions in Germany. They also knew that when brown-shirted, Nazi thugs attacked Jewish businesses and synagogues, the Berlin government had done nothing to protect its Jewish citizens.

FDR was of course aware of these cross-currents. And he also knew that if Germany ever controlled all of Europe, its power would be colossal. So, sometimes quietly, sometimes forcefully, he moved his nation to a state of greater preparedness. On July 19, 1940, he signed into law the largest shipbuilding program in American history, one that would essentially double the size of the already impressive United States Navy. And the Army, directed by Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, began to grow to a size more appropriate to a great power. Also in 1940, the President took the momentous step of federalizing the National Guard of all the states. If the American republic was ever to be dragged into the conflict, Roosevelt wanted the nation to be ready.

JAPANESE AMBITIONS

Japanese leaders felt that they were being unfairly held back by the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, which together controlled most of the natural resources, especially oil, to the south of Japan, in places now known as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Essentially, the Western powers said they would not send scrap iron and sell resources to the Japanese if their government did not remove its troops from China and renounce its ambitions there.

Why should the proud Japanese, with their centuries of tradition, their modern navy, and their ambitions for future glory, give up their dreams because those dreams did not fit with the wishes of white Westerners. They wanted their own empire and their own seat at the table among the great nations of the world.

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So, the Tokyo government would have to seize the resources it needed, which meant certain war with the West. But in which direction would the Japanese move? Essentially, they had three options. The first was to aid Nazi Germany and to attack to the north against the Russian Far East from Japanese bases in Manchuria. Such a Japanese strike against the Soviets would have divided Soviet resources and probably resulted in a victory for Hitler over the USSR. But Japan needed oil and rubber quickly, and those resources were not easily available to the north.

A second option would have involved striking southwest against the British Empire in the Indian Ocean, taking Singapore, Malaysia, and French Indo-China and threatening to link up with German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps at the Suez Canal. This strategy had a good probability of success, but the Japanese supply lines to the Indian Ocean would have to run past the US-controlled Philippine Islands.

Thus, the Rising Sun had to take the third and militarily worst option—a direct strike against the United States—the one country with the natural resources, the population size, and the industrial capacity to crush Japan. It would require a bold and audacious attack on the United States Pacific Fleet, which President Roosevelt had recently redeployed from its home port in San Diego to its forward operating base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. Such an assault would require meticulous planning, intense training, absolute secrecy, and complete surprise. Fortunately for the Japanese, in Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of the Combined Fleet, they had the perfect leader. His plan was to first cripple the American fleet and then to force a gigantic naval battle somewhere in the vast Pacific. The Japanese, according to Yamamoto's plan, would win a decisive victory, and thus force President Roosevelt to yield to Tokyo's territorial demands in its theater of influence.

By every military measure, Japan's early morning attack on the great fleet anchorage at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was a success. Its aircraft carriers managed to cross the Pacific Ocean without being spotted, and its torpedo and dive bombers achieved complete surprise against the sleeping American fleet. All eight American battleships were disabled or sent to the bottom, as were dozens of smaller vessels. More than a thousand sailors died on the USS *Arizona* alone, and they represented less than half of the Navy losses that day. By contrast, the Japanese attackers lost only a few pilots and planes, and no ships. Admiral Yamamoto had every reason to be proud. He had only two reasons for immediate concern. First, the three large American aircraft carriers attached to the Pacific Fleet were not in Pearl Harbor, but were at sea on a practice mission, and the Japanese aviators could not find them. Second, Yamamoto had not thought to order his pilots to blow up the giant oil tanks and fuel storage facilities that dotted the area around Pearl Harbor.

But those were minor issues compared to the admiral's greatest worry. Despite his great victory, he thought the Japanese had simply awakened a sleeping giant. Yamamoto expected the Japanese army and navy to run wild for six months, but then, he feared, the United States would gather its enormous human and material resources and hurl them against the admiral's island nation. And in the case of a protracted war against the American republic, Japan's most famous officer realized that the cause was almost hopeless.

THE UNITED STATES GOES TO WAR

The great national debate about whether the United States should get involved in World War II essentially ended when the first bombs fell on the Hawaiian Islands. Few Americans had ever been to Japan, and fewer still cared about it one way or the other. But as radios across the land sent out the news of a sneak attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor, a gigantic nation, a “sleeping giant” as Admiral Yamamoto called it, was roused to fury. The next day, a Monday, President Roosevelt spoke before a joint session of Congress. Referring to December 7 as “a day which will live in infamy,” he asked for a Declaration of War against the Empire of Japan, which was approved without debate and almost without dissent. Surprisingly, on December 10, Germany declared war on the United States even though Hitler’s treaty with Japan was a defensive arrangement that did not require him to act, because Japan had been the aggressor. The Fuhrer made many miscalculations during the war; perhaps this was his biggest mistake.

President Roosevelt was happy that the United States was in the war, and in fact, he had manipulated the Japanese into firing the first shot. But he had expected the initial Japanese attack to be against the Philippines, not on a presumably impregnable naval base in the middle of a huge ocean. He was shocked by what happened at Pearl Harbor, and was horrified by the destruction of his battleships and the devastating number of deaths on December 7. But the American nation could make up such human and material losses. And the President knew how to funnel national anger at Japan into a much more critical war against Germany. FDR understood better than his countrymen that Germany was the greater threat and that Japan could be dealt with almost at leisure. It was a sentiment shared by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When he heard of the Pearl Harbor disaster, he actually breathed a sigh of relief, noting in his wartime diary: “So we have won after all.”

The United States had great military potential, but in December of 1941 it was still more potential than reality. Immediately, the nation launched the greatest industrial expansion in human history. Within months, new orders for munitions, uniforms, and combat vehicles absorbed the remaining unemployed workers from the Great Depression. Old factories were expanded and modernized, and giant new ones sprang up as if by magic, especially in the South and West. Outside Detroit, the Chrysler Tank Arsenal produced the tanks and armored vehicles that would become the spearheads of General George S. Patton’s Third Army.

In the skies American dominance was clear. In Washington State and in Kansas, Boeing built the great four-engine, strategic bomber fleets that destroyed entire cities. As early as 1942, American factories were already churning out 48,000 airplanes, more than Germany and Japan *combined*. By 1944, assembly lines in southern California, Seattle, and Long Island were producing almost 100,000 aircraft, a total greater than the combined output of Germany, Japan, and the British Empire. Statistics for trucks, jeeps, landing ships, artillery pieces, and self-propelled guns were almost as dramatic.

Perhaps the most incredible numbers were put up at sea. By 1945, the United States Navy was larger and more powerful than the navies of all other countries put together. The Bath Iron Works in Maine produced more destroyers than all of Japan, while the Kaiser shipyards in California proved able to build an entire Victory ship, from beginning to end, in a mere seventy-two hours. And the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with 71,000 employees working around the clock, seven days a week, became the busiest and most productive such enterprise anywhere.

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In order to make the instruments of war, as well as uniforms, penicillin, light bulbs, and shoes, the need for manpower was great. Indeed, manpower became the wrong word. As millions of men joined the Army and as industrial production soared, women became the obvious source of labor. While many women remained at home with their children, and others worked in volunteer activities, the growth in female employment between 1942 and 1945 was staggering. At first, they took non-defense jobs as clerks, cabbies, truck drivers, waitresses, ambulance crews, streetcar conductors, and filling station attendants. Soon, however, opportunities in shipyards and aircraft factories opened up. One historian has estimated that a full one-third of aircraft industry employment in California was female.

Japanese Americans and African Americans had a harder time proving their importance and finding full citizenship. Prejudice against Asians on the West Coast had been a theme of American history for generations before World War II, but the Pearl Harbor attack meant that Japanese Americans, many of whom had been citizens of the United States since birth, were suspected of being enemy agents. In one of the more disgraceful aspects of American history, they were rounded up and sent to makeshift internment camps far from their homes and businesses. Yet not a single conviction ever resulted from an unpatriotic act by a Japanese American, and many served with courage and honor in the armed forces.

The color line has long been a defining part of the American experience, and World War II, despite being waged against two countries that celebrated racial homogeneity, did not bring immediate relief to the long-suffering black minority of the United States. In fact, blacks were not allowed in the Marine Corps and were inducted as sailors only to serve as cooks. Even in the Army, they served in segregated units under mostly white officers. Conditions were scarcely better at home. The worst incidents took place in Detroit in 1943, when Belle Isle became a site of racial warfare.

OVER THERE

The tanks, artillery, ships, and trucks churned out by the arsenal of democracy would be useful only if brave men could be found to take them into harm's way. In this respect, the United States proved to be exceptionally fruitful. After Pearl Harbor, induction centers across the nation were swamped with volunteers who were anxious to take a swing at the brash Japanese. Even so, by 1943 Washington had resorted to a draft of all able-bodied males between eighteen and forty. The Marine Corps expanded from one division to five, while the Navy put more than a thousand ships to sea. The Army was the largest of all the services, and its basic training facilities at Fort Benning, Georgia (infantry); Fort Bragg, North Carolina (airborne); Fort Sill, Oklahoma (artillery); and Fort Hood, Texas (armor), became small cities in their own right. By 1945, about sixteen million Americans had served in uniform, a figure that did not include the merchant marine, where responsibilities were as important and jobs as dangerous as those of any soldier, sailor, or airman.

As the war continued into 1942, 1943, and 1944, and as millions of newly minted soldiers and sailors joined the armed forces, separation and longing became the most common emotional experiences of the time. As long as the men were stateside, there was at least a chance of seeing a wife or a sweetheart for a stolen weekend somewhere far from home. The songs of the time—"Till We Meet Again" and "I'll Be Seeing You, in All the Old Familiar Places," among others—reflected the feelings of loneliness that were felt in every town and by almost every family.

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Eventually, most soldiers and Marines were shipped overseas, and their last view of America was from the ports of embarkation—New York on the East Coast and San Francisco on the West. But before leaving, they typically spent a week or ten days at a final staging area—Camp Shanks and Camp Kilmer near New York City were the largest—where they received required inoculations and made out their last wills and testaments.

That last period in the United States often offered the opportunity for a few days of liberty. Because trains across the country were jammed and overloaded, there was no chance for a trip home. But the port of embarkation, especially Manhattan, was another story. There, among the bright lights, nightclubs, and stage-door canteens of the largest city in the world, they drank and laughed and at least pretended to be confident and happy.

The next step was to board a troopship. Whether they sailed on converted transatlantic liners like the *Queen Elizabeth* or the *Queen Mary* or ordinary transports, quarters were tight, pleasures were few, and danger was constant. Especially in the Atlantic Ocean, where German U-boats lurked beneath the surface, the most common way to get to Europe was in a convoy of about fifty or sixty similar ships, all protected by a screen of destroyers and maybe one cruiser. Mercifully, the Allied navies gained superiority over the Nazi submarines before most American soldiers crossed the ocean, and only 8,000 men were lost out of four million who made the journey aboard the defenseless cargo vessels.

By late 1942, the tide had turned against the Axis. In June, the United States Navy won its greatest victory ever in the Battle of Midway, in which an outnumbered American carrier force inflicted devastating losses on the then superior Japanese fleet. By September, American Marines were clawing back on Guadalcanal, and beginning an island-hopping campaign that required them to fight their way across the Pacific. The good news, however, was that after the Battle of Midway, the Japanese were no longer able to undertake offensive operations. It was just a matter of time before the Rising Sun was crushed by American air and naval superiority.

The German army was another matter. Generally regarded as the finest fighting force in the war, it had superbly trained and battle-hardened soldiers, sophisticated weapons, and brilliant tactical leaders, such as von Manstein, Rommel, and Heinz Guderian. Only an enormous sacrifice by many nations could bring it down. But it happened. In the fall of 1942, the British Eighth Army counterattacked against the Afrika Korps and soon sent Rommel scurrying home to Germany. Meanwhile, the Americans who had landed in Morocco and Algeria trapped thousands of Nazi soldiers who could not escape across the Mediterranean Sea. In 1943, a combined Anglo-American force invaded Sicily and then Italy, ultimately knocking that country out of the war. And in perhaps the most devastating battle of all time, at Stalingrad between August 1942 and February 1943, the proud German Sixth Army, conquerors of France, was systematically annihilated by a vengeful Red Army. Thereafter, Hitler's legions were rarely able to attack. Instead, they were bludgeoned by enormous forces coordinated by the Big Three—Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin.

After the successful Allied landings in 1943 in Sicily and Italy, General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army and probably the most important officer on the Allied side in the war, recommended to FDR that Dwight D. Eisenhower be made Supreme Commander of the Allied crusade in Europe. Marshall had wanted the job for himself, but President Roosevelt said he would not be comfortable if his right-hand man were not nearby in Washington.

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So it fell to an obscure Kansan to take charge of the greatest invasion in history. Ike had been only a lieutenant colonel when the war began in 1939. But his good judgment, hard work, and devotion to duty were recognized early on by Marshall, who quickly promoted the affable staff officer over dozens of senior generals. By the early months of 1944, Eisenhower was in charge of all American and Allied ground, sea, and air forces in Europe and busy assembling a gigantic invasion force in England. His mission was to assault the Nazi Atlantic Wall, a network of artillery, beach hazards, and pillboxes that were designed to slaughter anyone foolish enough to come out of the water.

The story of D-Day, June 6, 1944, has been told many times. Suffice it to say here that General Eisenhower did four things that will distinguish him forever. First, he made a decision on June 5 that only he could make—to go forward with the invasion despite a terrible weather forecast. By contrast, Field Marshal Rommel, the commander of the Atlantic Wall, who no doubt saw the same predictions, decided that the weather would be so awful that he could safely go back to Germany to visit his wife and son. Eisenhower took a chance that the weather would break and allow the landings to go forward. Fortunately, his hunch proved to be correct.

Second, the Supreme Commander took personal responsibility for possible failure, preparing a statement for release to the press in case the invasion force was hurled back into the sea. In such a circumstance, General Eisenhower reported that his soldiers and sailors had done everything he or anyone else could have expected, and that his withdrawal from the beachhead was his fault alone. As it happened, his message never had to be released.

Third, Eisenhower, knowing that having given the order to attack, he could do nothing more of a supervisory nature on the afternoon and evening of June 5, visited the airfields where many thousands of American paratroopers were already making final preparations to be dropped into the midnight darkness behind German lines. With parachutes on their backs, they had blackened their faces and wore heavy camouflage as they stood in groups waiting to board their aircraft. Members of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, they would be the first invaders to land anywhere in Nazi-occupied France, and Ike knew that hundreds of them, maybe more, would be killed the next day. So the commanding general walked informally among the young men, many of them only teenagers, chatting about their hometowns, working his way through the throng, recognizing the perils they would all soon be facing.

Finally, as the thousands of ships of the main invasion force pushed away from piers and began to cross the English Channel for the short voyage to Normandy, General Eisenhower read a personal message to the troops who were about to go ashore:

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

THE END OF THE WAR

The D-Day landings were successful, and despite bitter fighting over the coming months, the Allies used their heavy artillery, their enormous air armada, and their dozens of well-equipped infantry divisions to

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pulverize the once invincible German war machine. With the Red Army smashing into East Prussia from the east, the British and American heavy bombers raining destruction from the skies on German cities, and Allied armored columns crossing the Rhine River and encircling trapped Wehrmacht divisions, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945. All resistance ceased within the week. Upon accepting the surrender of Nazi officials, General Eisenhower sent to his superiors what is surely the most succinct message ever sent by a victorious commander: "The mission of this Allied force was accomplished at 0241hours, May 7th, 1945."

JAPANESE COLLAPSE

Although the warlords in Tokyo could boast of brave and devoted soldiers, of airplanes (like the vaunted "Zero") that were as fine as any anywhere, and of ships and sailors that were world class, Japan never had a chance against the United States. It did not have enough of anything, except courage and fanaticism, to compete with a continental nation with almost infinite resources. At Tarawa, at Iwo Jima, and at Okinawa, the Japanese fought almost to the last man. It was no use. In desperation, they created an elite force of suicide pilots, called kamakazees, who took off with only enough fuel for a one-way trip. Their mission was to crash their aircraft into the ships of the United States Navy. They died in glory, but they were too few and too late. And after President Harry S. Truman (FDR had died in April 1945) ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even the most fanatical Japanese militarist had to realize that further resistance was madness. On August 14, 1945, Truman announced over the radio that the war was over. On September 2, 1945, on the deck of the great battleship, the USS *Missouri*, representatives of the Japanese government signed the formal instrument of surrender. World War II had ended.

THE WAR IN RETROSPECT

In many respects, the United States was the big winner in World War II. Relative to Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, its battle deaths were relatively few in number. Its great cities, like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, were never occupied by enemy armies or laid waste by falling bombs. Its factories and steel mills, farms and subdivisions, and stores and schools were unscathed by the conflict. Alone among major world capitals, Washington emerged from the war more confident than ever, and its airplanes, fleets, and armies, not to mention its atomic weapons, gave it military superiority over any potential opponent. By every measure, the United States led the world in 1945, and it was about to begin two generations of prosperity unmatched in history.

But no one in America who had lived as an adult through the Great Depression and the years of total mobilization and total war that followed it would claim that the experience had been easy or had been achieved without enormous sacrifice and cost. Indeed, those years of deprivation, fear, and longing would always be as central to their lives as they were to the century in which they lived.

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