

# The United States Homefront during World War II

## *The Economy*

America's success in WWII depended heavily on mobilization on the homefront. Ultimately, it was this war-time industrial boom that brought the nation out of the Great Depression and made the United States the wealthiest nation in the world after the war ended.

During the war years the U. S. economy expanded rapidly. Each year saw the Gross National Product (GNP) rise by 15 percent or more. Production skyrocketed from 1942-1945 as President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the construction of hundreds of thousands of planes and the nation exported massive quantities of supplies, including 2.5 million trucks and 50 million pairs of shoes. Government funding also subsidized new industries such as electronics, and enabled others such as rubber and chemicals. The Office of Scientific Research and Development entered into contracts for a variety of projects with universities and scientists. Radar, penicillin, rocket engines, and other innovative products were perfected for wartime use under this federal program.

To finance the war effort, government spending rose from \$9 billion in 1940 to \$98 billion in 1944. With few goods available for consumer purchase, Americans invested in war bonds, turning their savings into tanks and planes. War bonds contributed only a little to defense spending, but they did help increase the level of personal saving up to 25 percent of consumer income. As production became increasingly war-based, many consumer goods became scarce. Essentials such as food, fabrics, and gasoline were rationed and shared more equally among consumers. Higher taxes imposed on wealthy Americans served to redistribute income and narrow the socioeconomic gap between the lower and upper classes. These policies not only eased the class tensions of the 1930s but also gave Americans a sense of shared sacrifice toward winning the war.

Social and economic programs created by the New Deal began to wither as big businesses that were considered essential to victory flourished under government subsidies. Some of these "essential" products were Coca-Cola and Wrigley's chewing gum, not exactly central to a military operation. The Kaiser Corporation, whose growth during the 1930s had been the result of federal dam contracts, saw the profit potential in building ships, aircraft, and military vehicles. Federal subsidies, low-interest loans, and tax breaks enabled factories to expand and retool. The tendency of big businesses to expand their production to include weaponry or other military production has since become known as the military-industrial complex—composed of America's armed forces, its suppliers of weapons systems, goods and services, and its civil government.

This concentration of power and wealth in the hands of only the largest corporations was antithetical to Roosevelt's original approach of guarded hostility toward big business. The top 100 companies, which had provided 30 percent of the nation's total manufacturing output in 1940, were providing 70 percent by 1943. FDR even requested the postponement of the enforcement of antitrust laws. Legal challenges that had been years in preparation were merely tucked away because of this crisis atmosphere in Washington D. C.

## *The Workforce*

The initial military buildup brought back to work many laborers who had been unemployed by the Great Depression. During the war, average weekly earnings rose nearly 70 percent. Farmers who had suffered through years of low prices and overproduction doubled their income and then doubled it again.

Heavy industry jobs almost invariably went to men and most of the skilled positions went to whites. As military service drained the supply white male workers, however, women and minorities became more attractive candidates for production jobs. Soon, both private employers and the government were encouraging women to go to work, southern blacks to move to northern and western industrial cities, and Mexicans to enter the United States.

Women who joined the labor force as a result of World War II were often referred to as “production soldiers.” Their standard work week was 48 hours, and many female war-time laborers frequently worked overtime. Women of all ages operated large cranes that were used to move heavy tanks and artillery, loaded and fired weapons to make sure they worked, operated hydraulic presses, worked as volunteer fire fighters, and took on other essential roles such as welder, riveter, drill press operator, and taxi cab driver. The United States homefront during WWII saw women participating in every aspect of war industries—from making military clothing to building fighter jets, American women worked day and night.

The new labor market improved generally the economic position of African Americans. By Executive Order 8802 in June 1941, Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), which banned discrimination in hiring. In 1943, the federal government refused to further acknowledge labor unions that restricted minorities from joining. The War Labor Bond outlawed unequal pay to whites and non-whites doing equal work. Before the war, the African American population had been mainly southern, rural, and agricultural; within a few years, a substantial percentage of African Americans were northern, urban, and industrial. While discrimination in the workplace was hardly eliminated, twice as many blacks held skilled jobs at the end of the war as at the beginning.

The northward migration of African Americans accelerated the rising demands for racial equality. As nearly 750,000 blacks relocated to northern cities, many sensed the possibility of political power for the first time in their lives. Fortunately, they had an outspoken advocate of civil rights in the White House itself: Eleanor Roosevelt repeatedly antagonized southern Democrats and members of her husband’s administration by her advocacy of civil rights and her participation in integrated social functions.

Blacks understood the irony of fighting for a country that denied their equality and they challenged the government to finally live up to its lofty creeds. Roosevelt let stand the policy of segregation in the armed forces. African Americans were relegated to inferior jobs in the military and excluded from combat status. However, toward the end of the war, when manpower shortages forced the administration to put black troops into combat, they performed with distinction. By the spring of 1943, more than a half million blacks were in the U. S. Army, but

only 79,000 of them were sent overseas. Most were repeating the experience of their fathers in World War I—serving chiefly in labor battalions.

The large-scale migration of minorities from rural to urban areas threw already overcrowded, working-class neighborhoods into turmoil. Many of the residents of these neighborhoods came from poor immigrant families and were reluctant to compete with blacks and other newcomers for jobs and housing.

### ***Japanese Internment***

During the two months that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor, West Coast communities became engulfed in hysteria against people of Japanese descent. Military and community leaders demanded that all enemy nationals be removed from war zones along the West Coast. Despite lack of evidence of disloyalty, the Roosevelt administration issued Executive Order 9066, directing the relocation and internment of first- and second-generation Japanese Americans. An estimated 130,000 people of Japanese descent living in California were suddenly faced with selling all or most of their possessions and uprooting themselves and their families. The most controversial part of the order included American born children and youth who had dual U. S. and Japanese citizenship.

In February 1943, when activating the 442nd Regimental Combat Team—a unit composed mostly of American-born citizens of Japanese descent living in Hawaii, of which about 57 percent were killed serving their country in Italy—Roosevelt said, “No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry. . . . Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.” In 1944, the U. S. Supreme Court upheld the legality of the executive order in the *Korematsu v. United States* case. The executive order remained in force until December when Roosevelt released the Japanese internees, except for those who announced their intention to return to Japan.

Italy was also an official enemy of the United States during WWII, and 58,000 Italians were forced to relocate from strategic coastal areas in California. The majority left on their own and were not put in camps, but all known spokesmen for Mussolini were arrested and held in prison. The restrictions were dropped in October 1942 and Italy switched sides in 1943, becoming an American ally. However, the large Italian populations of the northeast, especially in munitions-producing centers such as Bridgeport and New Haven, Connecticut, faced no restrictions and contributed just as much to the war effort as other Americans.

### ***The G. I. Bill—Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, 1944***

The G. I. Bill (officially titled the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) provided college or vocational education for returning World War II veterans (commonly referred to as G. I.s) as well as one year of unemployment compensation. It also provided loans for returning veterans to purchase homes and start businesses.

The G. I. Bill is considered to be the last piece of New Deal legislation; however, the bill that Roosevelt initially proposed was not as far reaching. The Bill was created to prevent a repeat of the Bonus March of 1932 and a relapse into the Great Depression after World War II ended. The American Legion (a veterans group) was essentially responsible for many of the Bill's provisions. The Legion managed to have the bill apply to all who served in the armed services, including African Americans and women.

The fact that the Bill paid for a G. I.'s entire education encouraged many universities across the country to expand enrollment. For example, the University of Michigan had fewer than 10,000 students prior to the war, but in 1948 its enrollment was well over 30,000. Syracuse University also embraced the spirit of the Bill and saw its enrollment skyrocket from approximately 6,000 before the war to 19,000 in 1947.

Another provision was known as the 52-20 clause. This enabled all former servicemen to receive \$20 once a week for 52 weeks a year while they were looking for work. Less than 20 percent of the money set aside for the 52-20 Club (as it was known) was distributed. Rather, most returning servicemen quickly found jobs or pursued higher education.

An important provision of the G. I. Bill was low interest, zero-down-payment home loans for servicemen. This enabled millions of American families to move out of urban apartments and into suburban homes. Prior to the war the suburbs tended to be dominated by the wealthy upper classes. Although black servicemen were eligible for these loans they tended to remain in the inner cities or in rural areas because many segregated suburban communities were inhospitable to African Americans and other minorities. The bill helped to democratize the "American Dream" primarily for white Americans. The G. I. Bill of Rights has since been modified but still partially remains.

### *Conclusion*

The United States changed dramatically during the era of WWII. Wartime mobilization ended the Great Depression and shifted the New Deal's focus away from domestic social issues and toward international concerns. In part as a result of the allied victory, the United States emerged as the world's preeminent power, owing two-thirds of the world's gold reserves and controlling more than half of its manufacturing capacity.

At home, the war totally transformed the nation's economic structure. A powerful national government, concerned with preserving national security, assumed nearly complete power over the nation's economy. Cooperative ties between government, business, labor, and scientific researchers meant that all sectors would work together to provide the growth in productivity that won the war. Many Americans saw WWII as a struggle to protect their power and liberties. Others, inspired by a struggle against racism and injustice abroad, believed that a war for freedom would help secure equal rights at home. Unfortunately, they were wrong.