Chapter 35

The Impact of World War II on Americans

What kinds of opportunities and hardships did the war create for Americans at home and abroad?

35.1 Introduction

After the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack, many Americans wondered what would happen next. Would waves of Japanese bombers attack the West Coast? For months, rumors of an enemy invasion haunted the region. In time, the fears faded, but coastal communities remained wary.

As it turned out, the United States was not immediately endangered by an enemy invasion. Yet, as President Franklin Roosevelt warned, the threat was real. If the Allies failed to stop the Axis powers, then one day Americans could personally experience the horrors of war in their own land.

Roosevelt knew the war effort would require the enthusiastic backing of the American people in order to succeed. Millions of Americans would be needed to serve in the armed forces. Many others would help on the home front by working to expand the output of war materials. Everyone would have to make sacrifices in support of the armed forces. They would have to accept **rationing**—a system for limiting the distribution of food, gasoline, and other goods—so the military could have the weapons, equipment, and supplies it needed. As a result, life in the United States would change dramatically.

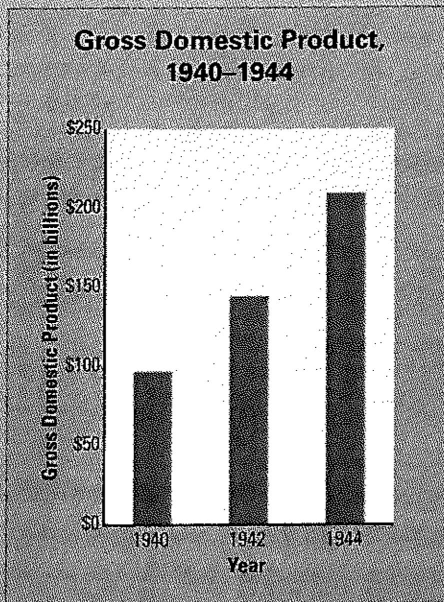
These changes were evident in many ways, even in clothing styles. The armed forces needed fabric for uniforms. In March 1942, the government announced rules aimed at saving more than 40 million pounds of wool a year. Men's suits could no longer be sold with a vest or an extra pair of pants. Cuffs were eliminated, as were patch pockets and wide lapels. The new rules also restricted the type and amount of fabric in women's clothes. Designers cooperated by using more synthetics, such as rayon, and by making skirts shorter and dresses simpler.

During the war, the entire country would endure hardships, many extending far beyond being forced to wear plainer clothes. Yet the war would also offer new opportunities to countless Americans.

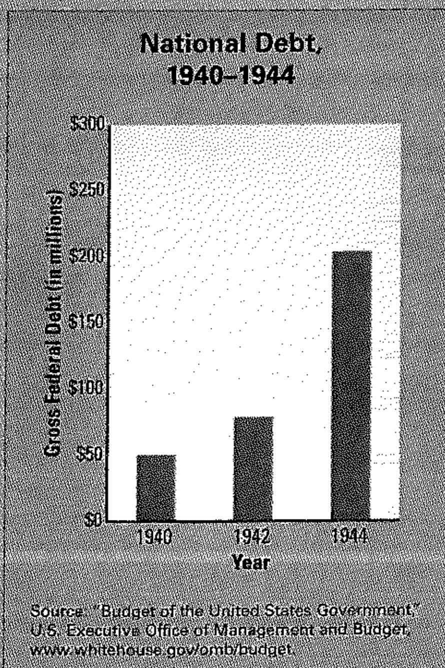
The Granger Collection, New York

Civilians contributed to the war effort when they took part in the rationing system. The key to the system was the ration book, which contained coupons that allowed consumers to buy rationed items, such as canned goods, sugar, coffee, and dairy products.

◂ Women workers at an aircraft plant



As the war effort got underway, the government spent billions of dollars on military supplies and equipment. War industries worked night and day to satisfy this demand. As a result, the nation's gross domestic product rose sharply. So did the national debt, as the government borrowed heavily to cover war expenses.



Source: "Budget of the United States Government," U.S. Executive Office of Management and Budget, www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget.

35.2 Organizing the American Economy for War

The job of organizing the wartime economy fell to the **War Producti** **Board (WPB)**. The WPB sought to meet Roosevelt's goal of making United States the "arsenal of democracy." As with the War Industrie Board of World War I, the WPB's main task was to manage the conve of industries to military production. Some of these makeovers seeme natural. Automobile manufacturers, for example, switched from mak car engines to making airplane and tank engines. Other conversions c for more dramatic changes. For example, a soft drink company migh retool its machinery and retrain its workers to pack artillery shells w explosives. A maker of model trains would begin producing bomb fu All across the country, businesses mobilized their resources to serve needs of the military.

A Wartime Production Boom Ends the Depression The huge dem for military supplies revived the economy. Businesses expanded and h more workers. Farmers prospered as crop prices and farm incomes r The Depression ended, and a period of vigorous economic growth be

As the economy moved into high gear, the **gross domestic prod** **(GDP)** rose rapidly. GDP is the total value of goods and services pro duced in a country in a year. From 1940 to 1944, this basic measure national output increased by 116 percent. During the same four years total personal income of American workers rose by more than 110 pe cent. Business income grew even faster, increasing by nearly 130 per cent.

During the New Deal, the government had taken an active role i stimulating the economy. To meet wartime needs, it expanded that r The WPB successfully mobilized businesses behind the war effort, le ing to closer relationships between the government and large corpor tions. As also happened during World War I, a National War Labor B (NWLB) was set up to mobilize labor.

The main task of the NWLB was to settle labor disputes before t disrupted the production of war goods. Immediately after the attack Pearl Harbor, union leaders agreed to a no-strike pledge. Eight mont later, the NWLB imposed limits on wage increases. The wage limits no-strike pledge left labor leaders with very little bargaining power. exchange, the NWLB guaranteed unions that all new employees at c panies with union contracts would automatically become union mem This policy boosted union membership.

Financing the War Effort with Taxes and Bonds During the war, g ernment spending rose to new levels. More than $175 billion worth defense contracts went out to businesses from 1940 to 1944. The go ernment met these costs the same way it had during World War I— through taxes and borrowing.

Taxes provided about 45 percent of the revenue needed to pay fo the war. The Revenue Act of 1942 increased individual and corporat

income tax rates and more than tripled the number of individuals required to pay income tax. To make tax collection easier, Congress devised a system of withholding. Employers held back a certain amount from every paycheck and sent it directly to the government. This system of payroll taxes is still in place today.

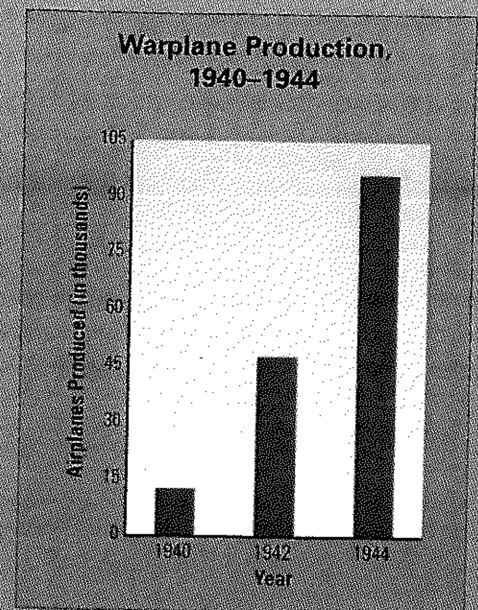
Borrowing provided much of the rest of the money to finance the war. The government borrowed from banks and other financial institutions. It also borrowed from the American people through the sale of war savings bonds. As during World War I, war bonds not only provided the government with cash but also gave people a way to show their support for the war effort. Government agencies and private companies once again produced advertisements urging Americans to buy war bonds. Campaigns to sell bonds involved a variety of Americans, from schoolchildren to glamorous celebrities.

Government Attempts to Curb Inflation and Consumption Inflation became a serious problem during the war. Americans had money to spend, but the focus on military production meant that few consumer goods were available. In a fireside chat, Roosevelt explained the supply-and-demand problem: "You do not have to be a professor of mathematics or economics to see that if people with plenty of cash start bidding against each other for scarce goods, the price of those goods goes up."

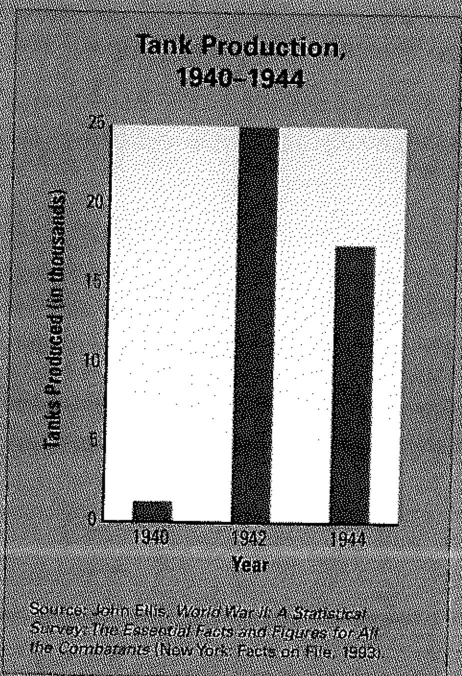
Congress gave the job of curbing inflation to the Office of Price Administration. The OPA instituted **price controls**—a system of legal restrictions on the prices charged for goods. These controls seemed to work. From 1940 to 1945, consumer prices rose only 35 percent, instead of doubling or tripling as some officials had feared.

The OPA also rationed about 20 basic consumer products, including gasoline, tires, sugar, meats, and processed foods. Each month, consumers received books of coupons that they turned in to the grocer when they bought rationed foods. When they ran out of coupons, they could buy no more until they received a new book the next month. Drivers used a different ration book to purchase gasoline. Americans grumbled about rationing, but most complied. This program succeeded in reducing the overconsumption of scarce goods and ensured that everyone would have fairly equal access to those goods.

Americans also aided the war effort in other ways. They formed car pools or rode bicycles to work. They recycled metals, paper, rubber, and other materials. One old shovel, Americans were told, contained enough iron to make four hand grenades. Children collected much of the scrap material. They also peeled the foil off cigarette packages and gum wrappers and rolled them into balls for recycling. Families also planted victory gardens to grow food. In 1943, more than 20 million gardens yielded one third of all the vegetables eaten in the country that year. Victory gardens and recycling campaigns not only boosted war production but also raised the morale of Americans on the home front. People understood they were making an important contribution to the war effort.



Warplanes and tanks were critical items for the U.S. military during the war. Production of both types of equipment increased rapidly during the early years of the war. Warplane production continued to grow through 1944, while the production of tanks was in decline.

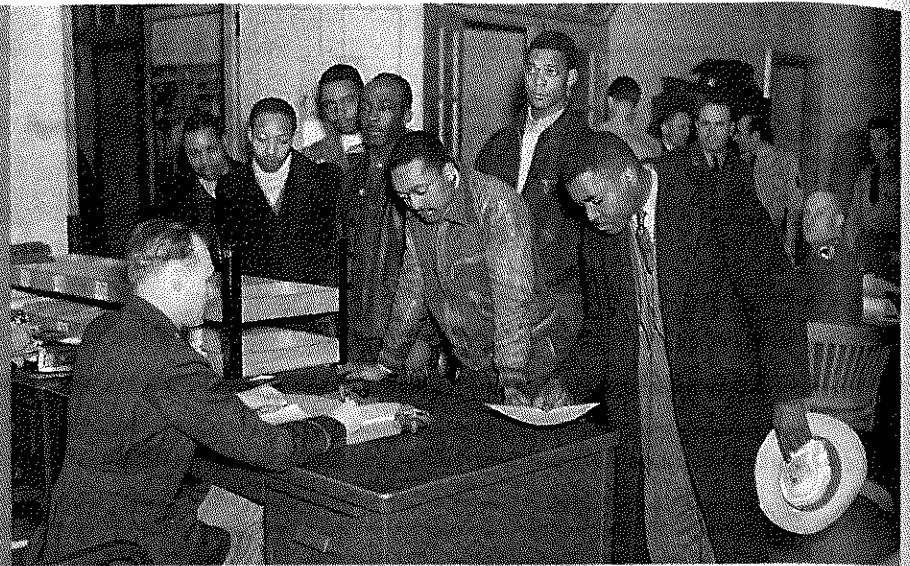


Source: John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993)

Service in World War II by Selected Groups

Group	Number
Japanese Americans	25,000
Women in military auxiliary	350,000
African Americans	1,057,000
Jewish Americans	550,000
Mexican Americans	500,000

Sources: "A More Perfect Union," americanhistory.si.edu. National Manpower Council, *Womanpower*, 1957. *Selective Service and Victory*, 1948. "When Jews Were GIs," Fathom, University of Michigan. National Park Service.



More than 16 million Americans served in the military during World War II. These men and women represented many different ethnic groups. Members of these groups often faced racism or other forms of discrimination. Some groups were segregated. Within each combat unit, however, a bond often emerged that crossed ethnic lines.

35.3 American GIs Go to War

Many young Americans left the comforts of home to join the military. While they were in the service, the government provided all of their food and supplies. Those items were often labeled "government issue," or GI. Soldiers had GI soap, GI socks, a GI helmet, and a GI rifle. For that reason, they began referring to themselves as GI soldiers, or simply **GIs**. The name stuck, and fighting men in all the armed forces used it proudly.

Assembling a Fighting Force In 1940, more than 16 million men between the ages of 21 and 35 had registered for the draft. Later registrations expanded the age limits to include men from 18 to 44. Most draftees ended up in the army. By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, they had swelled the army's ranks from 300,000 to a fighting force of more than 1.5 million troops.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, volunteers swamped military recruiting stations throughout the nation. They represented a broad range of American society, from miners and mill workers to professors and politicians. By the end of the war, nearly 6 million had enlisted, mainly in the navy or the army air corps.

For draftees and volunteers alike, the war offered an opportunity to show their patriotism by fighting for their country. Most willingly packed their bags and boarded buses and trains, not knowing whether they would ever return. Immigrants and ethnic minorities saw joining the military as an opportunity to show that they were truly Americans.

Preparing the Troops to Fight Draftees and recruits reported first to an army reception center within a huge complex, such as at Fort Dix, New Jersey, or Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Here they had their first taste of military life. They slept in barracks with no privacy and traded their civilian clothes for uniforms. They listened to lectures and submitted to medical exams. The main goal of the reception center, however, was to determine where each recruit should go for training. Various aptitude tests helped decide this.

After a couple weeks, most new soldiers were sent off to one of the many army training camps scattered across the country. Most of these young men had little experience with life outside their hometowns. Suddenly they found themselves thrown into an unfamiliar environment with fellow soldiers from all over the country. One GI from the Midwest recalled, "The first time I ever heard a New England accent was at Fort Benning . . . [and] the southerner was an exotic creature to me."

The trainers, or drill instructors, had as little as eight weeks to prepare men for combat. The job of the trainers was to turn soft civilians into rugged fighting men. Trainees followed a strict routine. They got up at 6 A.M., washed, dressed, ate, and made the long march to the training site by 8 A.M. For the next nine hours or so, they worked at becoming a soldier.

Instruction included tent pitching, map reading, guard duty, sanitation, weapons care, and endless physical training. Later, trainees took part in parachute jumping and live-ammunition exercises, which called for soldiers to crawl through the dirt while real machine gun bullets whizzed above their heads. They marched back to camp in the evening, exhausted. One draftee wrote home to his parents in May 1943: "I don't know whether I can stand to do what we have to do or not. I have to try it though." Near the end of his basic training, he wrote again: "It was 106 today and when we are out drilling we really do get hot, but I will tell you the truth, I have got so that I can stand it just as good as the next one. I sweat a lot but I go on like I was cool." The draftee had become a GI.

Most U.S. soldiers went off to fight in World War II with a strong commitment to the Allied cause. Nevertheless, they often found the experience of war shattering. Combat was grueling and traumatic, and many soldiers came home with a new respect for the horrors of war.

The GI's War: Hardships and Opportunities Training could only do so much to prepare a GI for combat. Few were ever truly ready for the intensity of the battlefield. The deafening blasts of artillery or grenades, the squeal and clatter of tanks on the move, and the billowing clouds of smoke all combined to create a surreal atmosphere.

Then there was the fear. Soldiers knew they could die at any time, especially if they were crossing an open field or storming a beach under heavy enemy fire. New soldiers, especially, tended to freeze at the first sign of danger—and they saw danger everywhere. Experienced soldiers learned to distinguish the real dangers, such as the sound of an enemy tank or incoming artillery fire, from the din of war. Yet even battle-hardened veterans often felt a heart-pounding sense of doom in the battle zone, where uncertainty ruled.

Between battles, boredom sometimes became the enemy. Soldiers with free time often felt homesick and lonely. Many men fought these feelings by writing letters. At night, they would try to put their thoughts and experiences down on paper for girlfriends, wives, or parents. A letter from home was a major event.

Under the stress of war, soldiers developed strong bonds of friendship. "The reason you storm the beaches is not patriotism or bravery," one rifleman recalled. "It's that sense of not wanting to fail your buddies."

Those who survived the war often found their lives significantly changed. Many returned physically, mentally, or emotionally wounded by their combat experiences. Amid the horrors of war, though, many gained a greater appreciation for such American ideals as liberty and came home with a new sense of pride in themselves and in their country.

Many U.S. residents of Japanese descent, including this boy, were moved to internment camps during World War II. This measure was intended to prevent sabotage during the war. Most of the detainees were Japanese Americans, however, and relocation violated their rights as U.S. citizens.

35.4 The Internment of Japanese Americans

When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, there were about 150,000 Japanese Americans living in the Hawaiian Islands. Some people questioned their loyalty, even accusing them of helping plan the surprise attack. Fearing sabotage, the War Department recommended the mass evacuation of Japanese Americans from Hawaii. But the American military governor of Hawaii urged everyone to stay calm. Businesses on the islands opposed evacuation. They noted that losing so many workers would ruin the islands' economy. The press backed this position and worked hard to keep false rumors from circulating. In the end, nearly all of the Japanese Americans in Hawaii stayed there.

Dealing with the Fear of Potential Collaborators On the mainland, concerns about disloyalty extended to people of German or Italian ancestry. They were seen as potential collaborators—people who work with an enemy to undermine a nation's security. Shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Roosevelt signed proclamations declaring all German, Italian, and Japanese nationals, or non-U.S. citizens, to be "enemy aliens." These orders affected more than 314,000 people of German ancestry, 690,000 people of Italian ancestry, and 47,000 people of Japanese ancestry.

All "enemy aliens" had to register with the government and carry special identification cards. They had to turn in all firearms and cameras, as well as shortwave radios, which might be used to send information to the enemy. They also needed a travel permit to go more than 5 miles from their homes.

Government officials considered putting all "enemy aliens" into camps. However, the task of relocating all the German and Italian aliens posed huge problems. Also, politically influential groups of German Americans and Italian Americans resisted such a measure. The government did round up several thousand German and Italian aliens and sent them to **internment camps** in the middle of the country. An internment camp is a center for confining people who have been relocated for reasons of national security.

Roosevelt Authorizes the Removal of Japanese Americans The people of Japanese ancestry, in contrast, were a much smaller group with much less political power. They faced more racial discrimination than did people of German or Italian ancestry because they were of nonwhite, non-European ancestry. Their social isolation also worked against them. They had not assimilated into American culture as well as other immigrant groups had. They kept largely to themselves, in ethnic communities outside the American mainstream. In addition, they lived mainly on the West Coast, where fear of a Japanese invasion was strongest. Unlike in Hawaii, the mainland press whipped up that fear by accusing Japanese Americans of spying or of being more loyal to Japan than to the United States.

All these factors made it easier for the government to act against people of Japanese ancestry. In February 1942, Roosevelt issued **Executive Order 9066**. This order declared that large military zones could be set up to exclude current residents who were believed to be a threat to security. In March 1942, the military used this executive order to launch a mass evacuation of people of Japanese

ancestry from the Pacific Coast. Evacuees had just a few weeks to sell their homes and possessions.

The order to "move out and stay out" applied not only to Japanese "enemy aliens" but also to Japanese American citizens. Of the 127,000 people of Japanese ancestry living in the mainland United States, 80,000 were native-born American citizens. As such, they were entitled to the same constitutional rights as all citizens. This was the main argument made by a Japanese American named Fred Korematsu, who did not obey the order because it would mean leaving his non-Japanese girlfriend. After two months, Korematsu was arrested and convicted with remaining in a restricted military area.

Korematsu appealed the verdict all the way to the Supreme Court. In the case ***Korematsu v. United States,*** the Court upheld his conviction on the grounds that a group's civil rights can be set aside in a time of war. Three of the nine justices dissented from this opinion, including Justice Robert H. Jackson. He expressed his fear that "the Court for all time has validated the principle of racial discrimination in criminal procedure and of transplanting American citizens."

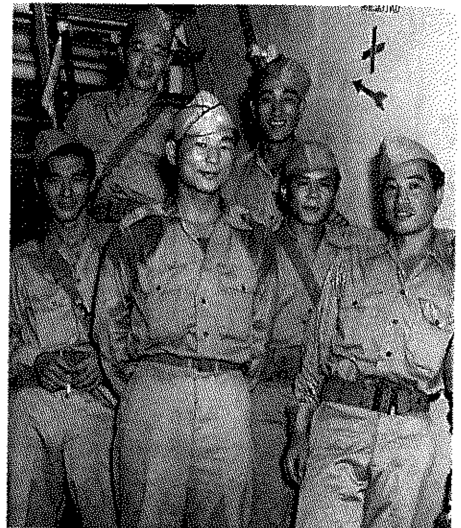
Most internment camps were located in the West. They were set up in desert areas away from the coast and far from population centers. The government referred to these camps as relocation centers, but critics called them concentration camps.

Life in the Internment Camps More than 100,000 Japanese "enemy aliens" and Japanese American citizens were forced to evacuate. Families collected their belongings in a few pieces of luggage and left their homes. First they gathered at assembly centers. Then, in the summer of 1942, they boarded trains for internment camps scattered throughout the western states. They had no idea where they were headed. The typical camp, officially known as a relocation center, was in a desert region far from any town. "No houses were in sight," one internee recalled. "No trees or anything green—only scrubby sagebrush and an occasional low cactus, and mostly dry, baked earth." In this setting, internees endured extreme heat in the summer and cold in the winter.

The camps had been constructed in a hurry. They consisted of "row after row of barracks," as one surprised visitor recalled, with "high barbed wire fences" and "machine gun towers all around." The single-story, wooden barracks contained several one-room apartments. Each came with cots, blankets, and a bare light bulb. Here, an entire family tried to make a home. They shared toilets with others in the barracks and used common bathing and dining facilities. The crowded conditions meant that sanitation was often a problem.

Despite these hardships, most of the internees worked to make camp life more bearable. They built chairs and tables from scrap lumber. They grew vegetables. They set up schools, libraries, hospitals, and newspaper offices.

As early as 1942, while the camps were still filling up, the government realized that the threat of a West Coast invasion had passed. Officials began allowing certain groups of Japanese Americans to leave the camps. These included about 10,000 farm workers and 4,300 college students. Starting in 1943, thousands of young men left the camps to join the army. Most of them served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This all-volunteer Japanese American unit became famous for its bravery in battle. In fact, it earned more medals than any other unit of its size in American history. In 1944, the government began letting the remaining internees return to the West Coast. Within the next year, all were free to leave the camps.



Several thousand Japanese American GIs fought with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This unit won many medals during the war, including the Congressional Medal of Honor. In 1946, President Harry Truman told the 442nd, "You fought for the free nations of the world. You fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won."

Women started out in the armed forces as secretaries and clerks but soon took on more challenging tasks. For example, Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) flew bombers, fighter planes, and new jet aircraft, though not in combat. Their main job was to fly planes from factories to air bases, but they also tested aircraft and trained pilots.

35.5 Women at War

In early 1942, a popular song called "Rosie the Riveter" captured the spirit of the home front:

> All the day long,
> Whether rain or shine,
> She's a part of the assembly line.
> She's making history,
> Working for victory,
> Rosie the Riveter.
> —"Rosie the Riveter," by Redd Evans
> and John Jacob Loeb, 1942

One of the country's most popular artists, Norman Rockwell, put his own version of Rosie on the cover of a national magazine, *The Saturday Evening Post*. Two films about Rosie followed. The fictional Rosie the Riveter came to represent all the real women who worked to support the war effort.

New Opportunities for Women in the Workforce The demand for workers skyrocketed during the war, as men left their jobs to serve in the armed forces. At first, industry hired unemployed men to fill those jobs. But as war production soared, businesses and the government started recruiting women, using slogans such as, "The more women at work, the sooner we win!" About 18 million women took jobs outside the home during the war, up from 12 million before the war.

Most women continued to work in occupations that were traditionally female, such as service, clerical, and sales work. Many women, however, took positions held traditionally by men. They became welders, mechanics, and lumberjacks, as well as lawyers, physicists, and architects.

Nearly 2 million women worked in shipyards and other heavy industries. Many toiled as riveters on the thousands of airplanes built during the war. Riveters operated in pairs. One woman used a heavy mechanical gun to shoot a rivet through a pair of metal sheets. The other woman stood on the opposite side to buck, or flatten, the rivet. The rivets held the metal sheets and the plane

together. Tough physical labor like this increased women's self-confidence and independence, as well as their income. As one riveter explained,

> "The war years had a tremendous impact on women. I know for myself it was the first time I had a chance to get out of the kitchen and work in industry and make a few bucks . . . You came out to California, put on your pants, and took your lunch pail to a man's job . . . This was the beginning of women's feeling that they could do something more."
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> —Sybil Lewis, quoted in *The Homefront: America During World War II,* 1984

Hardships on the Job and at Home Not everything about the workplace pleased women, though. They often faced hostility on the job, especially in male-dominated industries. African American women faced the added stress of racial hostility. Another issue was that women's wages did not increase as much as men's pay. In 1942, the NWLB ruled that women should get equal pay for "work of the same quality and quantity." However, businesses often ignored this rule. Even labor unions, whose female membership soared during the war, rarely challenged unfair wage rates.

During the war, most working women were married and were expected to keep up with their family responsibilities. Many husbands had gone off to war. As a result, women often faced the hardship of working a "double shift." They spent a full day at the plant or office and another full day cooking, cleaning, and performing other domestic duties.

By the end of the war, the typical working woman was over the age of 35. Relatively few of these women had young children at home. Those who did usually arranged for their children to stay with relatives or friends during the day. But older children were often left to fend for themselves. As a result, rates of juvenile delinquency and school truancy increased. Many teenage boys dropped out of school, lured by high-paying war-production jobs.

New Opportunities for Women in the Military Soon after the war started, military leaders realized that women could do much of the clerical and secretarial work done by male soldiers, freeing up the men for combat duty. Congress agreed. In 1942, it passed legislation creating a civilian support unit for the army known as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

On the first day of registration, more than 13,000 women volunteered to serve in this unit. The following year, the unit was granted military status and was renamed the **Women's Army Corps (WAC)**. Women in the WAC became members of the military and underwent rigorous army training. "If the guys can take it," one volunteer remarked, "so can I."

In 1942, the navy and the coast guard also established their own branches for women. Navy women were called WAVES and coast guard women were SPARs. Women in all the armed forces quickly moved beyond clerical work into jobs such as truck driver, mechanic, radio operator, air traffic controller, and parachute rigger. A select few became pilots, mainly to ferry aircraft from factories to bases. Only WACs, however, served on the battlefield, working behind the lines in various support roles, including nursing. More than 200 American women died overseas as a result of enemy action.

During the war, posters and magazine ads encouraged women to fill jobs left by men who joined the armed forces. Millions of women responded—some for patriotic reasons, some for higher pay. Women made up about a third of the new workers hired during the war.

35.6 African Americans Fight for Two Victories

The United States was fighting in the name of democracy against Nazi Germany, which embraced an extreme form of racism based on the idea of Aryan supremacy. Yet racism was still a powerful force in American society. No one was more keenly aware of this contradiction than African Americans. After all, their participation in World War I had not helped their struggle against racism at home. As one black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender,* asked, "Why die for democracy for some foreign country when we don't even have it here?"

Other black leaders called for a battle against racism on two fronts. They wanted all citizens to join in the fight for a "double victory"—a victory for democracy both at home and abroad. This **Double V campaign** forced many white Americans to rethink their attitudes toward black Americans.

Confronting Segregation in the Military With the establishment of the draft in 1940, thousands of African Americans lined up to join the armed forces. By war's end, more than a million had served. They faced many hardships, beginning with their segregation in training camp. They ate in separate mess halls from the white troops and slept in separate barracks. Camps that had a single movie theater even made black trainees sit together in the last row.

In the early buildup to war, the marines and army air corps refused to take any African Americans. The navy limited African American duties to cooking, cleaning rooms, and shining shoes. One such "mess man" aboard the USS *Philadelphia* sent a letter to a newspaper hoping to discourage other black men from joining the navy. "All they would become," he wrote, "is seagoing bellhops, chambermaids, and dishwashers." The army accepted black GIs, but it excluded them from combat. The GIs served in segregated units led by white officers, often working in construction, supply, or other service groups.

Black leaders pressed the government to end military discrimination. In time, the armed services gave more black soldiers the opportunity to engage in combat and to become officers. The army air corps established its first black combat unit in 1941. Known as the **Tuskegee Airmen,** these pilots and their support crews showed that African Americans could handle the most demanding assignments. They served mainly as bomber escorts, engaging in direct

In 1941, the army air corps brought African Americans from around the country to train at a flying school in Tuskegee, Alabama. As one pilot recalled, "They recruited All-American athletes. They had mathematical geniuses. They had ministers, doctors, lawyers, farm boys, all down there trying to learn to fly." These men won fame as the Tuskegee Airmen.

combat with German fighter planes. The Tuskegee Airmen gained a reputation for skill and courage, shooting some 400 German attackers out of the sky. They were the only fighter group never to lose a bomber to enemy planes.

Seeking Opportunity and Equality on the Home Front Black leaders were also working to improve conditions at home. In June 1941, A. Philip Randolph, head of a powerful all-black railroad union, met with President Roosevelt at the White House. The government had done little to end discrimination in defense-related jobs. One steelmaker expressed the attitude of many in the defense industry when he said, "We have not had a Negro worker in twenty-five years, and do not plan to start now." Roosevelt sympathized with black Americans, but the war in Europe had kept him from paying much attention to civil rights—until Randolph's visit.

Randolph focused Roosevelt's attention by threatening to lead a massive march on Washington to protest discrimination. He promised that unless Roosevelt acted, tens of thousands of African Americans would swarm into the nation's capital on July 1. The threat worked. On June 25, 1941, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, outlawing discrimination by defense contractors.

This executive order helped pave the way for nearly a million African Americans to work for defense industries during the war. It also triggered a migration of African Americans out of the rural South and into the industrial cities of the North and the West. From 1940 to 1945, some 500,000 black Americans, attracted by higher-paying jobs, left the South. In the process, they escaped the Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation and kept many of them from voting. In the cities, however, black Americans faced other hardships, including a lack of housing and social services, as well as ongoing racial discrimination.

They also faced a white backlash. Race riots broke out in many cities across the country as black migrants competed with white residents for housing and jobs. One of the worst riots occurred in Detroit, Michigan, in the summer of 1943. A fistfight and other minor incidents ballooned into a widespread conflict. Mobs of rioters burned automobiles, looted stores, and engaged in bloody battles in the streets. The riots resulted in the deaths of 25 blacks and 9 whites.

Challenging Racism at Home The Double V campaign's call for an end to racism and segregation received support from several African American organizations. One group, the National Urban League, had been helping black migrants since its founding in 1910. It opposed discrimination in defense plants, fought to integrate labor unions, and pushed federal officials to ensure equal opportunity for African Americans in housing and employment. Another group, the NAACP, had been fighting for equality since 1909. It focused on seeking racial justice through the courts. During the war, its membership soared.

The National Urban League and the NAACP did not want to undermine the war effort, so they avoided making strident demands. Another organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), took a tougher stance. Founded in 1942, CORE believed in confronting discrimination through nonviolent protest. Its efforts, along with the work of the NAACP and the National Urban League, helped set the stage for the postwar civil rights movement.

In 1943, thousands of African Americans moved to Detroit, Michigan, to find work. The competition with whites for jobs and housing stirred up racial tensions. In June, those tensions boiled over in a race riot that left 34 people dead. Heavily armed federal troops finally restored order.

In wartime America, the letter V commonly stood for Allied victory. In 1942, someone wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, black America's leading newspaper, suggesting that African Americans should seek victory not just abroad but also at home. On February 7, the *Courier* printed this emblem on its front page. The Double V campaign was born.

On November 9, 1938, the Nazis organized riots that killed Jews and destroyed Jewish property. So much glass littered the streets that the event became known as *Kristallnacht,* or the "night of broken glass." Franklin Roosevelt told a reporter that he "could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization."

35.7 Jewish Americans and the War

The war brought special hardships for Jewish Americans. They not only made sacrifices like other Americans did, but they also suffered from knowing that millions of Jews were being imprisoned and murdered in Europe. Furthermore, they could do nothing to stop the slaughter.

Growing Alarm at Nazi Persecution of Jews American Jews started hearing reports of Nazi persecution in Germany shortly after Hitler took power in 1933. That year, the Nazi Party organized a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses. Two years later, the German parliament stripped Jews of their citizenship. It also forced them to sell their property to non-Jews. Shortly after taking over Austria in March 1938, Hitler began persecuting Austrian Jews. Tens of thousands fled.

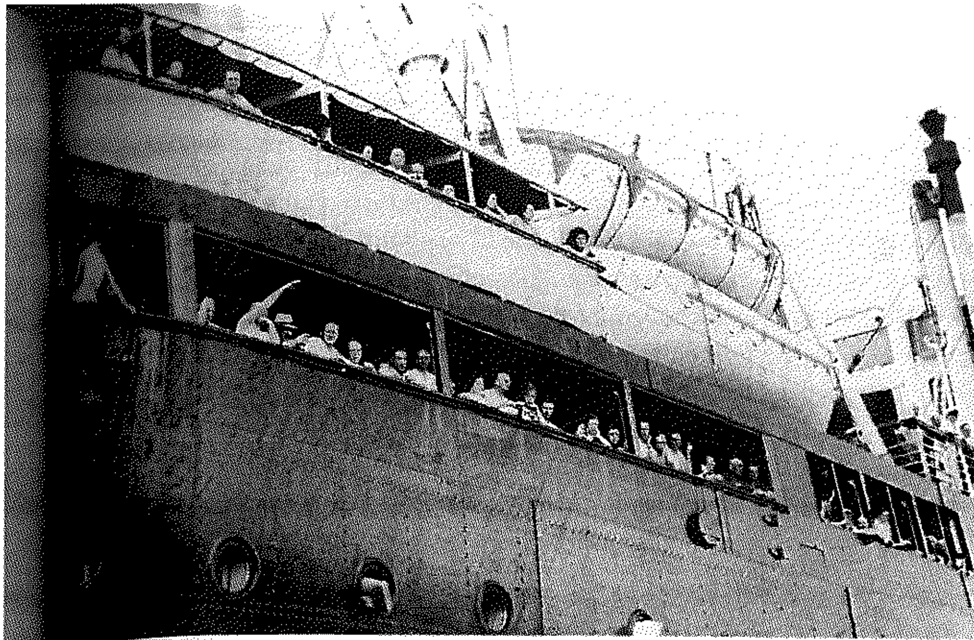
Then, on November 9, 1938, the Nazis instigated a night of anti-Jewish rioting known as *Kristallnacht,* or the "night of broken glass." Mobs smashed the windows of thousands of Jewish-owned shops, burned nearly every Jewish synagogue in Germany, and killed more than 90 Jews. Some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. These events received detailed coverage in the American press.

After *Kristallnacht,* thousands of Jews wanted to flee to the United States. But the 1924 National Origins Act placed severe limits on the number of immigrants from any one nation. Besides, very few Americans wanted to open the country to a flood of immigrants, especially during the Depression.

These factors, combined with widespread anti-Semitism, led to incidents such as the voyage of the steamship *St. Louis*. In 1939, the *St. Louis* carried 930 Jews from Germany across the Atlantic Ocean to Cuba. But Cuba refused to accept the refugees. The *St. Louis* next steamed north along the Florida coast. Roosevelt ignored pleas for help from the ship's passengers, however. With food and water running low, the captain decided to return to Europe. A number of passengers ended up in France and the Low Countries or back in Germany. Many would later die in concentration camps.

During the war, reports trickled out of Europe about mass killings of Jews by the Nazis. Accounts from Poland told of concentration camps that had gas chambers for killing Jews. Few American news sources passed this information along to the public, however. When they did, the stories did not make headlines. Editors failed to tie these stories together or explain that they represented a Nazi campaign to exterminate European Jews.

Jewish Americans Urge the Government to Help Jews in Europe Jewish Americans, however, were painfully aware of the mass murder of European Jews. Many had relatives and friends in Europe but felt helpless to save them. Others took action, such as boycotting German products, raising money for refugees, and holding public demonstrations. In July 1942, about 20,000 people gathered at Madison Square Garden in New York City to protest Nazi brutality. Similar rallies took place in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities. Jews urged officials to send food packages to concentration camps and to set up prisoner exchanges to free Jews. Jewish groups pleaded with legislators and the president to change immigration laws.



Passengers aboard the steamship *St. Louis* wave goodbye as the ship leaves Havana, Cuba, on May 3, 1939. The passengers, all Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, were refused entry to Cuba and to the United States. They ended up back in Europe, where many died at the hands of the Nazis.

Several factors kept the government from offering refuge to victims of the Nazis. Polls showed that most Americans, their views colored by anti-Semitism, were unwilling to admit large numbers of European Jews. Even many American Jews worried that massive immigration might intensify anti-Semitic feelings. Roosevelt also feared espionage and sabotage. Advisors insisted that any stream of Jewish refugees into the United States would include Nazi agents.

By the end of 1942, the government knew that Hitler was slaughtering Jews in a systematic way. Still, it was not until 1944 that Roosevelt issued an executive order creating the **War Refugee Board**. This agency arranged for Jewish refugees to stay at centers in Italy and North Africa, as well as in former army camps in the United States. Henry Morgenthau Jr., the only Jew in Roosevelt's cabinet, later recalled the mission of the War Refugee Board. "The stake was the Jewish population of Nazi-controlled Europe," he said. "The threat was their total obliteration. The hope was to get a few of them out."

Jewish American GIs Go to War Like other Americans, Jews did what they could to support the war effort. More than 500,000 Jewish Americans went to war, including half of all Jewish men aged 18 to 44.

The opportunity to serve in the armed forces transformed the lives of many Jewish American soldiers. Many had previously been unaware of life outside their urban neighborhoods. As GIs, they often trained in the rural South and then journeyed overseas. Both experiences opened their eyes to unfamiliar cultures.

In the armed forces, Jewish American GIs often felt the sting of prejudice. A frustrated corporal, after two years in the marines, sent a letter to the editor of a Jewish magazine. "I am the only Jewish boy in this detachment," he wrote. "I am confronted with anti-Semitism on all sides."

Other Jewish soldiers had a different experience, however, that affirmed their faith in their country and its ideals. In 1944, GI and future novelist Leon Uris wrote a letter to his father noting that he "fought beside Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons, Indians, Irish, Italians, Poles." Uris's experience convinced him that "it's not the religion we look at, but the man himself."

GIs of Mexican ancestry served with distinction in World War II. Many received medals for bravery in combat. Some of these GIs were Mexican nationals—citizens of Mexico living in the United States. Service in the armed forces gave them a better chance to gain U.S. citizenship.

In June 1943, groups of sailors and marines attacked young Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles—in part because the teenagers were wearing zoot suits. In general, the police left the servicemen alone and arrested the victims instead.

35.8 Mexican Americans Leave the Fields for War Work

During the war, many Mexican Americans faced discrimination in their daily lives. Like African Americans, some wondered whether joining the armed forces made sense. "Why fight for America," one soldier asked, "when you have not been treated as an American?" Despite such doubts, many Mexican Americans enlisted in the armed forces, while others left their traditional farm jobs or segregated urban neighborhoods to join the industrial workforce. These changes opened up new opportunities for Mexican Americans.

Mexican Americans and Mexicans Join the War Effort About half a million Mexican Americans served in the armed forces during World War II. One of their slogans was "Americans All." As this suggests, many saw the war as an opportunity to prove their loyalty and become part of the mainstream.

A higher proportion of Mexican Americans fought in combat units than any other ethnic group. In addition, Mexican American soldiers suffered heavy casualties in comparison with other ethnic groups. They also received many combat awards. Fourteen Texans received the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism in the war. Of those, five were Mexican Americans. One Mexican American leader summed up the social effects of the war this way:

> "This war . . . has shown those 'across the tracks' that we all share the same problems. It has shown them what the Mexican American will do, what responsibility he will take, and what leadership qualities he will demonstrate. After this struggle, the status of the Mexican Americans will be different."
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> —Manuel de la Raza, quoted in Carlos Muñoz Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement,* 1989

Before the war, discrimination had barred most Mexican Americans from many high-paying industrial jobs. The war, with its labor shortages, changed that. Thousands of Mexican Americans left their rural, agricultural lives behind and migrated to industrial centers to work in the defense industry.

To replace Mexican American farm labor, the government looked south of the border. In August 1942, the United States and Mexico devised the Bracero Program. *Bracero* is the Spanish term for "manual laborer." Under the program, Mexican citizens received short-term contracts to come to the United States to work. By 1944, about 120,000 Mexican braceros were performing farm labor in 21 states. Other Mexicans did maintenance work on railroads in the West.

Prejudice Against Mexican Americans Erupts in Zoot Suit Riots Mexican Americans in major cities lived apart from whites. Their barrios, or neighborhoods, were nearly self-sufficient, with their own shops, churches, and schools. Like many immigrant communities, barrios tended to develop in poor, rundown parts of cities, where crime rates were often high. The barrio of East Los Angeles during the war was no different. Mexican Americans there had little regular contact with white Americans. Relations between the two groups were hostile. In 1943, a full-scale riot erupted in the barrio. Part of the focus of the riot was a fashion fad known as the "zoot suit."

A zoot suit consists of a flat, broad-brimmed felt hat, a long suit coat with large shoulder pads, and baggy pants that flared at the knee. Many Mexican American teenagers, or *pachucos,* in East Los Angeles began dressing in this flashy style and wearing their hair long in the back, in the ducktail fashion. White Americans tended to associate the zoot suit with Mexican American street gangs, many of whom also adopted the style. Thus, many people saw the outlandish zoot suit as a symbol of lawlessness.

Pachucos and servicemen from the local navy base occasionally clashed. Those small-scale clashes escalated in June 1943 into the **Zoot Suit Riots**. For several nights, mobs of sailors and marines roamed the streets of the barrio, attacking not just gang members but also anyone wearing a zoot suit. They beat hundreds of *pachucos* and ripped off their suits.

The Los Angeles police did little to stop the servicemen. Instead, they arrested the victims and hauled them off to jail. Meanwhile, newspapers whipped up the mobs with headlines such as "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen." Military police finally stepped in to end the violence. Later, an investigating committee found that the main causes of the Zoot Suit Riots were racial prejudice, police discrimination, and inflammatory articles in the press.

Summary

World War II had a great impact on Americans. Some aided the war effort by joining the armed forces. Others produced military equipment and supplies. Many tended victory gardens, recycled goods, and used ration coupons. Minority groups struggled for equal treatment.

Opportunities to serve For many young Americans, World War II provided an opportunity to fight for their country and its ideals. Members of minority groups also saw the war as an opportunity to show that they deserved the respect of white Americans.

New job opportunities Millions of workers left their jobs to join the military. The resulting labor shortage opened the doors of industry to many who had once been shut out. Women, African Americans, and Mexican Americans all found jobs in war-related industries.

Broader worldviews The war sent soldiers far from home and many to foreign lands. They came back with a broader view of the world and a new perspective on what it meant to be an American. Many civilians moved to industrial centers, where they lived and worked with different groups of people.

Hardships of war Most Americans knew little about the real hardships of war. GIs, however, faced those hardships every day as they risked their lives in battle.

Continued prejudice Racial and ethnic prejudice continued to plague American society. African Americans and Mexican Americans faced harassment at home and in the service. Japanese Americans lost their civil rights because of their ancestry. American Jews struggled against anti-Semitism that limited efforts to save European Jews from Nazi extermination.

Hardships at home Women often worked "double shifts" at a paying job and domestic jobs at home. All Americans learned to live with rationing and price controls.