American History Name:

Date:

Sources: Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About History*, (2003); *America* (2003) Block:

Mobilizing for War

Well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, officials in the United States had begun to prepare for war. FDR understood that the outcome of the war in Europe ultimately depended on his country’s ability to produce planes, tanks, guns, uniforms, and other war materials for the Allies. FDR realized that a crucial step that he had to take was to strengthen the armed forced if the U.S. were to enter the war on the side of the Allies. In September 1940, Congress authorized the first peace-time draft in the nation’s history. The Selective Training and Service Act required all males aged 21 to 36 to register for military service. The United States also boosted its defense spending from $2 billion at the start of 1940 to more than $10 billion in September.

The United States entered the war at a time when the production levels of the other Allies had dropped sharply. Bombing campaigns and German advances had affected the production in Britain and the Soviet Union, and Japan’s conquests in the Pacific threatened to cut off supplies of such vital raw materials as rubber, oil, and tin. President Roosevelt pushed industries to move quickly into the production of war equipment.

FDR knew that the federal government would have to coordinate the production of American businesses to meet the Allied demand. The government had already assumed tremendous power over the economy during the New Deal. Now the Supreme Court, filled with Roosevelt appointees, tended to support FDR’s attempts to boost the government’s power even further. In January 1942, the government set up the War Production Board (WPB) to direct the conversion of peacetime industries to industries that produced war goods. It quickly halted the production of hundreds of civilian goods, from cars to lawn mowers to bird cages, and encouraged companies to make goods for the war. The armed forces decided which companies would receive contracts to manufacture military hardware, but the WPB set priorities and allocated raw materials.

As the war went on, the government established dozens of additional agencies to deal with war production, labor questions, and scarce resources. In May 1943, the President established the Office of War Mobilization, which would serve as a superagency in the centralization of resources. As production of consumer goods stopped, factories converted to war production. The Ford Motor Company built a huge new factory to make B-24 Liberator bombers using the same assembly-line techniques used to manufacture cars. Similar techniques were applied to the shipbuilding industry. The time needed to build one type of ship was cut from 200 days to 40 days. The vessels made were famously called Liberty Ships. They were large, sturdy merchant ships that carried supplies or troops.

To motivate businesses and guarantee profits, the government established the “cost-plus” system for military contracts. The military paid development and production costs and added a percentage of costs as profit for the manufacturer. Pride and patriotism also motivated business executives. Each year of the war, the U.S. raised its production goals for military materials, and each year it met these goals. In 1944, American production levels doubled those of all the Axis nations put together. By the middle of 1945, the nation had produced approximately 300,000 airplanes; 80,000 landing craft; 100,000 tanks and armored cars; 5,600 merchant ships; 6 million rifles, carbines, and machine guns; and 41 billion rounds of ammunition. This increased production benefitted workers as the massive unemployment of the early 1930s was ended. In fact, during the war, unemployment in the U.S. virtually vanished and Americans were able to earn a wage that would pay their cost of living.

The U.S. government vowed to spend whatever was necessary to sustain the war effort. Federal spending increased from $8.9 billion a year in 1939 to $95.2 billion in 1945. The Gross National Product (GNP) more than doubled. Overall, between 1941 and 1945, the federal government spent about $321 billion—ten times what the U.S. had spent in World War I.

Higher taxes accounted for about 41% of the cost of the war. The government borrowed the rest of the money from banks, private investors, and the public. The Treasury Department launched bond drives to encourage Americans to buy war bonds to help finance the war. Total war bond sales brought in about $186 billion.

In order to sustain such spending, cuts needed to be made by average Americans on the home front. While wartime jobs gave people their first taste of extra cash since before the Depression, shortages and rationing limited the goods that people could buy. Familiar consumer items were unavailable “for the duration of the war.” Metal to make zippers or typewriters went into guns, and rubber went to make tires for army trucks instead of bicycles. Nylon stockings, introduced in 1939, vanished from shops and were used instead to make parachutes. The supply of food was also limited. Coffee, sugar, and tropical fruits were some of the items limited to the public. In May 1942, gasoline was rationed. In February 1943, shoes were rationed to three pairs of leather shoes per person per year. In April 1943, meats, fats, and cheese were added to the list of rationed items. Victory Gardens were once again popular ideas to supplement rationed food items. Whether fighting on the front, or supporting troops at home, every American sacrificed something in WWII.