Most Americans have agreed that the United States fought a just war to meet the crisis of military aggression by Nazi Germany and Japan. As the years passed, particularly after the traumas of the Vietnam War and the economic setbacks of the 1970s, that necessary war—a complex, uncertain, chaotic event—became remembered as a golden age, as the “Good War” fought by the “Greatest Generation.” Nostalgic myths abounded of a nation fully united and sure of its cause, of Americans of every race, religion, and ethnicity working together in the foxhole as well as the factory, of courageous U.S. soldiers—who never committed atrocities—quickly and easily returning to civilian life after clear-cut victories.

Such myths have little to do with the war experienced by E. B. Sledge. Born in 1923, Sledge enjoyed a carefree boyhood of fishing, hunting, and riding in Mobile, Alabama, until the United States entered the Second World War. Filled with idealism and patriotism, he dropped out of school to join the marines and defend his country. His harrowing experiences drove him to write a wartime memoir, *With the Old Breed*, of unrelenting horror. Describing the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa, Sledge depicts a brutal landscape of war without mercy, of kill or be killed, of prisoners tortured and the dead mutilated, of the most savage violence coupled with the most lethal technology of modern warfare.
On Peleliu, where Sledge’s Company K reported 64 percent casualties in an island campaign later deemed unnecessary, he witnessed helpless comrades being slaughtered. Because the closeness of the enemy made it too dangerous to try to reclaim the dead, he watched as buddies oozed into a wasteland of mud and excreta, land crabs feeding on them. He saw a fellow marine use a knife to try to extract the gold teeth of a wounded Japanese soldier. Frustrated in the attempt, the marine sliced open the prisoner’s cheeks and continued to gouge and pry, unfazed by the man’s thrashing and gurgling. On Okinawa’s Half Moon Hill he dreamed that the decomposed bodies of marines sprawled about him slowly rose, unblinkingly stared at him, and said, “It is over for us who are dead, but you must struggle, and will carry the memories all your life. People back home will wonder why you can’t forget.”

The wartime experiences of few Americans matched those of Sledge. Yet World War II fundamentally changed national institutions and behavior, immensely affecting most Americans. History’s greatest armed conflict proved as much a turning point in personal lives as in world affairs. Amidst strikes and overcrowding, profiteering and black markets, the war lifted the nation out of the depression, redistributed income, and transformed the United States into a middle-class society. Despite continuing discrimination and prejudice, it gave millions of women and minorities an opportunity to savor independence and prosperity. As it destroyed certain traditional American ways and communities, it created a new world order that left the United States at the pinnacle of its power and sowed the seeds of a postwar crisis. It was indeed, in Eleanor Roosevelt’s words, “no ordinary time.”

This chapter focuses on five major questions:

■ How did the Roosevelt administration and the American people respond to the international crises of the 1930s?

■ How did war mobilization transform the American economy and government?

■ What were the major aspects of Allied military strategy in Europe and Asia?

■ What were the major effects of World War II on American society, including minorities and women?

■ What were the arguments for and against the use of the atomic bomb to end the war with Japan?
nationalize the companies. After lengthy negotiations, Mexico and the oil companies reached a compromise compensation agreement.

The Good Neighbor policy thus neither ended U.S. interference in Latin American affairs nor stemmed the increasing envy of “rich Uncle Sam” by his southern neighbors. But it did substitute economic leverage for heavy-handed intervention, particularly military occupation. The better relations fostered by FDR would become important when the United States sought hemispheric solidarity in World War II, and later in the Cold War.

**The Rise of Aggressive States in Europe and Asia**

As early as 1922, economic and social unrest in Italy enabled Benito Mussolini and his Fascist party to seize power. The regime suppressed dissent, imposed one-party rule, and, hoping to recreate a Roman empire, invaded Ethiopia in October 1935.

The rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany proved more menacing. Hitler’s National Socialist (Nazi) party, capitalizing on Germany’s hard times and resentment of the harsh Versailles Treaty, gained strength. In January 1933, five weeks before the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt, Hitler became Germany’s chancellor. (The two men’s lives would fateful intertwine for the next twelve years until they died within two weeks of each other in April 1945.) Crushing opponents and potential rivals, Hitler imposed a brutal dictatorship on Germany and began a program to purify it of Jews—whom he considered an “inferior race” responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I.

Violating the Versailles treaty, Hitler began a military buildup in 1935. A year later German troops reoccupied the Rhineland, the demilitarized region west of the Rhine River that had been controlled by France since the end of World War I. In 1938, as German tanks rolled into Vienna, Hitler proclaimed an Anschluss (union) between Austria and Germany. London, Paris, and Washington murmured their disapproval but took no action (see Map 25.1).

An emboldened Hitler then turned to the Sudetenland, a part of neighboring Czechoslovakia containing 3 million ethnic Germans. Insisting that the area
must be part of Germany, Hitler thundered his determination to take it. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain and his French counterpart, eager to avoid hostilities, appeased Hitler and at a conference in Munich in September 1938 agreed to turn the Sudetenland over to Germany. Believing in Chamberlain’s claim to have achieved “peace in our time,” FDR and most Americans applauded the Munich Pact for having avoided war.

In Japan, meanwhile, militarists had gained control of the government. To gain the raw materials needed for heavy industry, especially coal, metals, petroleum, and timber, they launched a fateful course of expansion. In 1931 Japan sent troops into the northern Chinese province of Manchuria, and within two years took total control of the province. Then, having signed treaties of political alliance and mutual defense with Germany and Italy, Japan began a full-scale war against China in July 1937; within a year Japan controlled most of that vast nation (see Map 25.2). Weak protests by Washington did little to deter Japan’s plans for further aggression in Asia and the Pacific.

**The American Mood: No More War**

The feeble responses to aggression by the Roosevelt administration reflected the American people’s belief that the decision to go to war in April 1917 had been a mistake. This conviction was rooted in the nation’s isolationist tradition—its wish to avoid military and political entanglements in Old World quarrels—as well as in its desire to have the government focus on economic matters, not foreign affairs, in the midst of the Great Depression. A series of books and films stressing American disillusionment with World War I’s failure to make the world safe for democracy strengthened isolationist sentiment. So did a 1934–1936 Senate investigation headed by Republican Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota, which concluded that banking and munitions interests, whom it called “merchants of death,” had tricked the United States into war to protect loans and weapon sales to England and France.

By the mid-1930s an overwhelming majority of Americans thought that the United States should have stayed out of World War I and that the “mistake” of intervention should never be repeated. Congress responded by passing a series of Neutrality Acts in 1935–1937. To prevent a repetition of 1917, these measures outlawed arms sales and loans to nations at war and barred Americans from traveling on the ships of belligerent powers. Considering even these laws an insufficient safeguard against war, in 1938 Indiana congressman Louis Ludlow proposed a constitutional amendment requiring a national referendum on any U.S. declaration of war except in cases of direct attack. Only a direct appeal from FDR steered Congress to reject the Ludlow Amendment by the narrowest of margins.

With American companies like IBM heavily invested in Nazi Germany, the sole confrontation with the fascist onslaught in the thirties came in the sports arena. At the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, African-American track star Jesse Owens made a mockery of Nazi theories of racial superiority by winning four gold medals and breaking or tying three world records. In 1938, in a boxing match laden with symbolism,
the black American Joe Louis knocked out German fighter Max Schmeling in the first round of their world heavyweight championship fight. Although Americans cheered Lewis, they still opposed any policies that might involve them in war.

**The Gathering Storm: 1938–1939**

The reduced tension that followed the Munich Pact proved tragically brief. “Peace in our time” lasted a mere 5 1/2 months. On March 15, 1939, Nazi troops occupied what remained of Czechoslovakia, violating the Munich accords. Five months later, Hitler reached an agreement with Stalin in the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact that their nations would not fight one another and that they would divide Poland after Germany invaded it. No longer worried about a Soviet reaction, Hitler took aim on Poland despite claims by Britain and France that they would come to an invaded Poland’s assistance.

Such actions intensified the debate over America’s role abroad. Some warned that American involvement in war would destroy the reform impulse and spawn reaction, as it had a generation earlier. “The place to save democracy is at home,” argued historian Carl Becker. But pacifist and neutralist opinion was weakening. Warning of the “cancerous spread” of fascism, critic Lewis Mumford issued “A Call to Arms” in the *New Republic*, exhorting Americans to mobilize against fascism.

President Roosevelt began to do so. After the fall of Czechoslovakia, he called for actions “short of war” to demonstrate America’s will to check fascism, and he asked Hitler and Mussolini to pledge not to invade thirty-one listed nations. A jeering Hitler read FDR’s message to an amused German Reichstag (legislative assembly), while in Rome Mussolini mocked Roosevelt’s physical disability, joking that the president’s paralysis must have reached his brain.

Roosevelt, however, did more than send messages. In October 1938 he asked Congress for a $300 million military appropriation; in November he instructed the Army Air Corps to plan for an annual production of twenty thousand planes; and in January 1939 he submitted a $1.3 billion defense budget. Hitler and Mussolini, the now-aroused president proclaimed, were “two madmen” who “respect force and force alone.”

**America and the Jewish Refugees**

Hitler and the Nazis had used the power of the state and their own paramilitary organizations to assault German Jews, confiscate their property, and force them to emigrate. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 outlawed marriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and non-Jews, stripped Jews of the rights of German citizenship, and increased restrictions on Jews in all spheres of German educational, social, and economic life. This campaign of hatred reached a violent crescendo on November 9–10, 1938, when the Nazis unleashed *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass), a frenzy of arson, destruction, and looting against Jews throughout Germany.

No longer could anyone mistake the perilous situation of German Jews or misunderstand Hitler’s evil intent. Jews left Germany by the tens of thousands. Among those coming to the United States were hundreds of distinguished scholars, artists, and scientists including pianist Rudolph Serkin, architect Walter Gropius, political theorist Hannah Arendt, and future secretary of state Henry Kissinger. Among the many gifted physicists were Leo Szilard, James Franck, and Enrico Fermi, who would play key roles in building the atomic bomb. It is hard to imagine what the cultural, intellectual, and scientific achievements of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century would have been without the contributions of these refugees.
But the United States of the 1930s, in the grip of the depression and imbued with its own anti-Semitism, proved reluctant to grant sanctuary to the mass of Nazism’s Jewish victims. Roosevelt did little other than deplore Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, and Congress consistently rejected efforts to liberalize the immigration law or abolish its discriminatory quotas (see Chapter 23). Few Americans seemed bothered that the sixty thousand Jews admitted to the United States by the end of 1938 constituted just a tiny ripple of the refugee tide. When asked by pollsters that year whether the immigration law should be changed to admit “a larger number of Jewish refugees from Germany,” 75 percent said no.

The consequences of such attitudes became clear in June 1939 when the St. Louis, a vessel jammed with nine hundred Jewish refugees, asked permission to put its passengers ashore at Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Immigration officials refused the request and, according to the New York Times, had a Coast Guard ship deployed “to prevent possible attempts by refugees to jump off and swim ashore.” The St. Louis turned slowly away from the lights of America and sailed back to Germany, where the majority of its passengers would die at the hands of the Nazis.

**INTO THE STORM, 1939–1941**

After a decade of crises—worldwide depression and regional conflicts—war erupted in Europe in 1939. While initially relying on neutrality to keep America out of the war, President Roosevelt switched to economic intervention following the lightning German victories in western Europe in spring 1940. He knew that extending increasing amounts of aid to those resisting aggression by the so-called Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, as well as his toughening conduct toward Germany and Japan, could, as he said, “push” the U.S. into the crisis of worldwide war. Japan’s attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor would provide the push.

**The European War**

Hitler began the war by demanding that Poland return the city of Danzig (Gdansk), taken from Germany after World War I. When Poland refused, Nazi troops poured into Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, Britain and France, honoring commitments to Poland, declared war on Germany. Although FDR invoked the Neutrality Acts, he would not ask Americans to be impartial in thought and deed (as had President Wilson in 1914).

Tailoring his actions to the public mood, which favored both preventing a Nazi victory and staying out of war, FDR persuaded Congress in November to amend the Neutrality Acts to allow the belligerents to purchase weapons from the United States if they paid cash and carried the arms away in their own ships. He assumed that “cash-and-carry” would mainly aid the Allies, given their control of the seas.

“Cash-and-carry” did not stop the Nazis. In spring 1940, after a winter lull that followed the defeat of Poland, Hitler’s armies taught the world the meaning of **Blitzkrieg** (lightning war) as they quickly overwhelmed Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and France and pinned the British army against the sea at Dunkirk. Narrowly escaping disaster, the British used every possible craft to evacuate their army and some French troops across the English Channel. By then, however, Hitler virtually controlled western Europe, and on June 22 he dictated France’s surrender in the same spot and the same railway car in which Germany had surrendered in 1918.

Hitler now took aim at Great Britain. The **Luftwaffe** (German air force) intended to terror-bomb Britain into submission, or at least prepare the ground for a German invasion. Round-the-clock aerial assaults killed or wounded thousands of civilians, destroyed the city of Coventry, and reduced parts of London to rubble. Britain’s new Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who replaced Chamberlain in May 1940, pleaded for more U.S. aid. Most Americans, shocked at the use of German air power against British civilians, wanted to give it to him. But a large and vocal minority opposed it as wasteful of materials needed for U.S. defenses or as a ruse to draw Americans into a war not vital to their interests.

**From Isolation to Intervention**

In the United States in 1940, news of the “battle of Britain” competed with speculation about whether FDR would break with tradition and run for an unprecedented third term. Not until the eve of the Democrats’ July convention did he reveal that, given the world crisis, he would consent to being drafted by his party. The sense of being at a critical moment in world affairs clinched his renomination and forced conservative Democrats to accept the very liberal Henry Wallace, FDR’s former secretary of agriculture, as his running mate. Republicans bowed to the public mood by nominating an all-out internationalist who championed greater aid to Britain, Wendell Willkie of Indiana.

With the GOP uncertain how to oppose Roosevelt effectively, FDR played the role of the crisis leader too
busiest to engage in politics. He appointed Republicans Henry Stimson and Frank Knox as secretaries of war and the navy. He signed the Selective Service and Training Act, the first peacetime draft in U.S. history, and approved an enormous increase in spending for rearmament. With Willkie’s support, FDR engineered a “destroyers-for-bases” swap with England, sending fifty vintage ships to Britain in exchange for leases on British naval and air bases in the Western Hemisphere. Although FDR pictured the agreement as a way to keep the country out of war, it infuriated isolationists.

In the 1930s the isolationist camp had included prominent figures from both major parties and both the Right and Left. But in 1940 the arch-conservative America First Committee was isolationism’s dominant voice. Largely financed by Henry Ford, the committee featured pacifist Charles Lindbergh as its most popular speaker. It insisted that “Fortress America” could stand alone. But a majority of Americans supported Roosevelt’s effort to assist Great Britain while staying out of war. Reassured by the president’s promise never to “send an American boy to fight in a European war,” 55 percent of the voters chose to give Roosevelt a third term.

Calling on the United States to be the “great arsenal of democracy,” Roosevelt now proposed a “lend-lease” program to supply war materiel to cash-strapped Britain. While Roosevelt likened the plan to loaning a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire, isolationist Senator Robert Taft compared it to chewing gum: after a neighbor uses it, “you don’t want it back.” A large majority of Americans supported lend-lease, however, and Congress approved the bill in March 1941, abolishing the “cash” provision of the Neutrality Acts and allowing the president to lend or lease supplies to any nation deemed “vital to the defense of the United States.” Shipments to England began at once, and after Hitler invaded the USSR in June, U.S. war supplies flowed to the Soviet Union as well, despite American hostility toward communism. To defeat Hitler, FDR confided, “I would hold hands with the Devil.”

In April 1941, to counter the menace of German submarines to the transatlantic supply line, Roosevelt authorized the U.S. navy to help the British track U-boats. In mid-summer the navy began convoying British ships carrying lend-lease supplies, with orders to destroy enemy vessels if necessary to protect the shipments. U.S. forces also occupied Greenland and Iceland to keep those strategic Danish islands out of Nazi hands.

In August Roosevelt met with Churchill aboard a warship off the coast of Newfoundland to map strategy. They issued a document, the Atlantic Charter, that condemned international aggression, affirmed the right of national self-determination, and endorsed the principles of free trade, disarmament, and collective security. Providing the ideological foundation of the anti-Axis cause, the Charter envisioned a postwar world in which the peoples of “all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.”

After a U-boat torpedoed and sank the Reuben James, killing 115 American sailors, Roosevelt persuaded Congress in November to permit the arming of merchant ships and their entry into belligerent ports in war zones. Virtually nothing now remained of the Neutrality Acts. Unprepared for a major war, America was already fighting a limited one, and full-scale war seemed imminent.

**Pearl Harbor and the Coming of War**

Hitler’s triumphs in western Europe encouraged Japan to expand farther into Asia. Seeing Germany as its primary danger, the Roosevelt administration tried to apply just enough pressure to frighten off the Japanese without provoking Tokyo to war before the United States had built the “two-ocean navy” authorized by Congress in 1940. “It is terribly important for the control of the Atlantic for us to keep peace in the Pacific,” Roosevelt told Harold Ickes in mid-1941. “I simply have not got enough navy to go around—and every episode in the Pacific means fewer ships in the Atlantic.”

Both Japan and the United States hoped to avoid war, but neither would compromise. Japan’s desire to create a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (an empire embracing much of China, Southeast Asia, and the western Pacific) matched America’s insistence on the Open Door in China and status quo in the rest of Asia. Japan saw the U.S. stand as a ploy to block its rise to world power; and the United States viewed Japan’s talk of legitimate national aspirations as a smoke screen to hide aggression. Decades of “yellow peril” propaganda had hardened American attitudes toward Japan. Widely depicted in American media as bowlegged little people with buck teeth and thick spectacles, the Japanese appeared pushovers for the American navy. With isolationists as virulently anti-Japanese as internationalists, no significant groups organized to prevent a war with Japan.

The two nations became locked in a deadly dance. In 1940, believing that economic coercion would force the Japanese out of China, the United States ended a long-standing trade treaty with Japan and banned the sale of aviation fuel and scrap metal to it. Tokyo responded by occupying northern Indochina, a French colony, and signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in September, creating a military alliance, the
CHAPTER 25 Americans and a World in Crisis, 1933–1945

Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis, that required each government to help the others in the event of a U.S. attack.

With the French and Dutch defeated by Germany, and Britain with its back to the wall, Japan gambled on a war for hegemony in the western Pacific. It chose to conquer new lands to obtain the resources it needed rather than retreat from China to gain a resumption of trade with the United States. Fatefully, Japan overran the rest of Indochina in July 1941. In turn, expecting that firmness would more likely deter Japan than provoke her to war, FDR froze all Japanese assets in the United States, imposed a new fuel embargo, and clamped a total ban on trade with Japan. But as Japan's fuel meters dropped toward empty, the expansionist General Hideki Tojo replaced a more conciliatory prime minister in October. Tojo set the first week in December as a deadline for a preemptive attack if the United States did not yield.

By late November U.S. intelligence's deciphering of Japan's top diplomatic code alerted the Roosevelt administration that war was imminent. Negotiators made no concessions, however, during the eleventh-hour talks under way in Washington. "I have washed my hands of it," Secretary of State Hull told Secretary of War Stimson on November 27, "and it is now in the hands of you and Knox—the Army and the Navy." War warnings went out to all commanders in the Pacific, advising that negotiations were deadlocked and that a Japanese attack was expected. But where? U.S. officials assumed that the Japanese offensive would continue southward, striking Malaya or the Philippines. The Japanese banked on a knockout punch; they believed that a surprise raid on Pearl Harbor would destroy America's Pacific fleet and compel a Roosevelt preoccupied with Germany to seek accommodation with Japan.

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Japanese dive-bombers and torpedo planes attacked the U.S. fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Pounding the harbor and nearby airfields, the Japanese sank or crippled nearly a score of warships, destroyed or damaged some 350 aircraft, killed more than 2,400 Americans, and wounded another 1,200. American forces suffered their most devastating loss in history, and simultaneous attacks by Japan on the Philippines, Malaya, and Hong Kong opened the way for Japan's advance on Australia.

Some critics later charged that Roosevelt knew the attack on Pearl Harbor was coming and deliberately left the fleet exposed in order to bring the United States into the war against Germany. There is no conclusive evidence to support this accusation. Roosevelt and his advisers knew that war was close but did not expect an assault on Pearl Harbor. Neither did the U.S. military officials at Pearl Harbor, who took precautions only against possible sabotage by the Japanese in Hawaii. In part because of their own prejudices, Americans underestimated the resourcefulness, skill, and daring of the Japanese. They simply did not believe that Japan would attack an American stronghold nearly five thousand miles from its home base. At the same time, Japanese leaders counted on a paralyzing blow to compel the soft, weak-willed Americans, unready for a two-ocean war, to compromise rather than fight. That miscalculation ensured Roosevelt an aroused and united nation determined to avenge the attack that, he said, "will live in infamy."

On December 8 Congress approved a declaration of war against Japan. (The only dissenter was Montana's Jeannette Rankin, who had also cast a nay vote against U.S. entry into World War I.) Three days later, honoring Germany's treaty obligation to Japan, Hitler declared war on the "half Judaized and the other half Negrified" American people; Mussolini followed suit. Congress immediately reciprocated without a dissenting vote. The United States faced a global war that it was not ready to fight.

After Pearl Harbor, U-boats wreaked havoc in the North Atlantic and prowled the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States. Every twenty-four hours, five more Allied vessels went to the bottom. German submarines even bottled up the Chesapeake Bay for nearly six weeks. By the end of 1942, U-boat "wolf packs" had sunk more than a thousand Allied ships, offsetting the pace of American ship production. The United States was losing the Battle of the Atlantic.

The war news from Europe and Africa, as Roosevelt admitted, was also "all bad." Hitler had painted the swastika across an enormous swath of territory, from the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad—a thousand miles deep into Russia—to the Pyrenees on the Spanish-French border, and from northern Norway to the Libyan desert. In North Africa the German Afrika Korps swept toward Cairo and the Suez Canal, the British oil lifeline. It seemed as if the Mediterranean would become an Axis sea and that Hitler would be in India to greet Tojo marching across Asia before the United States was ready to fight.

Japan followed its attack on Pearl Harbor by seizing Guam, Wake Island, Singapore, Burma, and the Dutch East Indies. Having pushed the U.S. garrison on the Philippines first onto the Bataan peninsula and then onto the tiny island of Corregidor, Japan took more than eleven thousand American soldiers prisoner early in
May 1942. Japan’s Rising Sun blazed over hundreds of islands in the Pacific and over the entire eastern perimeter of the Asian mainland from the border of Siberia to the border of India.

**AMERICA MOBILIZES FOR WAR**

In December 1941 American armed forces numbered just 1.6 million, and only 15 percent of industrial output was going to war production. Finally committed to full involvement in the world crisis, the United States now had to harness all the strengths and resources of the nation and the American people. Congress passed a War Powers Act granting the president unprecedented authority over all aspects of the conduct of the war. Volunteers and draftees swelled the armed forces; by war’s end more than 15 million men and nearly 350,000 women would serve. More would work in defense industries. Mobilization required unprecedented coordination of the American government, economy, and military. In 1942 those responsible for managing America’s growing war machine moved into the world’s largest building, the newly constructed Pentagon. Like the Pentagon, which was intended to house civilian agencies after the war, American attitudes, behavior, and institutions would also be significantly altered by far-reaching wartime domestic changes.

**Organizing for Victory**

To direct the military engine, Roosevelt formed the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made up of representatives of the army, navy, and army air force. (Only a minor “corps” within the army as late as June 1941, the air force would grow more dramatically than any other branch of the service, achieve virtual autonomy, and play a vital role in combat strategy.) The changing nature of modern warfare also led to the creation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, to conduct the espionage required for strategic planning.

To organize the conversion of American industry to war production, Roosevelt established a host of new government agencies. The War Production Board (WPB) allocated materials, limited the production of civilian goods, and distributed contracts among manufacturers. The War Manpower Commission (WMC) supervised the mobilization of men and women for the military, agriculture, and industry, while the National War Labor Board (NWLB) mediated disputes between management and labor. Finally, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) rationed scarce products and imposed price controls to check inflation. Late in 1942 FDR persuaded Justice James F. Byrnes to leave the Supreme Court to become his “assistant president” in charge of the domestic war effort, and in May 1943 he formally appointed him to head the new Office of War
Mobilization (OWM), which coordinated the production, procurement, transportation, and distribution of civilian and military supplies. “If you want something done, go see Jimmie Byrnes,” understood those in the know.

“The Americans can’t build planes,” a Nazi commander had jeered, “only electric iceboxes and razor blades.” But soon after February 1942, when the last civilian car came off an assembly line, the United States achieved a miracle of war production. Auto makers retooled to produce planes and tanks; a merry-go-round factory switched to fashioning gun mounts; a pinball-machine maker converted to armor-piercing shells. By late 1942 a third of the economy was committed to war production, equaling the military output of Germany, Italy, and Japan combined. Whole new industries appeared virtually overnight. With almost all of the nation’s crude-rubber supply now in Japanese-controlled territory, the government built some fifty new synthetic-rubber plants. By the end of the war, the United States, once the world’s largest importer of crude rubber, had become the world’s largest exporter of synthetic rubber.

America also became the world’s greatest weapons’ manufacturer, producing twice as much war material than all its Axis enemies by 1944. “To American production,” Stalin would toast FDR and Churchill, “without which the war would have been lost.” Indeed, the three hundred thousand military aircraft, 2.6 million machine guns, 6 million tons of bombs, and more than five thousand cargo ships and eighty-six thousand warships assembled by Americans did essentially win the war for the United States and its allies. Henry J. Kaiser, who had supervised the construction of Boulder Dam, introduced prefabrication to cut the time needed to produce a Liberty-class merchant ship from six months in 1941 to less than two weeks in 1943, and then just ten days. In 1945 Kaiser, dubbed “Sir Launchalot,” and other shipbuilders were completing a cargo ship a day.

Such breakneck production had its costs. The size and powers of the government swelled as defense spending zoomed from 9 percent of the GNP in 1940 to 46 percent in 1945 and the budget soared from $9 billion to $98 billion. The number of federal civilian employees mushroomed from 1.1 million to 3.8 million. The executive branch, directing the war effort, grew the most; and an alliance formed between the defense industry and the military. (A generation later, Americans would call these concentrations of power the “imperial presidency” and the “military-industrial complex.”) Because the government sought the greatest volume of war production in the shortest possible time, it encouraged corporate profits. “If you are going to try to go to war in a capitalist country,” Secretary of War Stimson pointed out, “you have to let business make money out of the process or business won’t work.”

“Dr. New Deal,” in FDR’s words, gave way to “Dr. Win the War.” To encourage business to convert to war production and expand its capacity, the government guaranteed profits, provided generous tax write-offs and subsidies, and suspended antitrust prosecutions. America’s ten biggest corporations got a third of the war contracts, and two-thirds of all war-production spending went to the hundred largest firms, greatly accelerating trends toward economic concentration.

The War Economy

The United States spent more than $320 billion ($250 million a day) to defeat the Axis—ten times more than the cost of World War I in real dollars and nearly twice the amount that had been spent by the government since its founding. This massive expenditure ended the depression and stimulated an industrial boom that brought prosperity to most American workers. It doubled U.S. industrial output and the per capita GNP, created 17 million new jobs, increased corporate after-tax profits by 70 percent, and raised the real wages or purchasing power of industrial workers by 50 percent (see Figure 25.1).

The government poured nearly $40 billion into the West, more than any other region, and four times as much as it had in the preceding decade, making the West an economic powerhouse. California alone secured more than 10 percent of all federal funds, and by 1945 nearly half the personal income in the state came from expenditures by the federal government.

A newly prospering South also contributed to the emergence of a dynamic Sunbelt. In an arc stretching from the Southeast to the Southwest, the billions spent by Uncle Sam meant millions of jobs in the textile, oil and natural gas, chemical, and aluminum industries, as well as in the shipyards of Norfolk, Mobile, and New Orleans, and the aircraft plants in Dallas-Fort Worth and Marietta, Georgia. The South’s industrial capacity increased by 40 percent, and per capita income tripled. Boom times enabled hundreds of thousands of sharecroppers and farm tenants to leave the land for better-paying industrial jobs. While the South’s farm population decreased by 20 percent in the 1940s, its urban population grew 36 percent.

Full employment, longer workweeks, larger paychecks, and the increased hiring of minorities, women, the elderly, and teenagers made the United States a truly...
America Mobilizes for War

**FIGURE 25.1**

U.S. Wartime Production

Between 1941 and 1945, the economy grew at a remarkable pace.
middle-class nation. In California the demand for workers in the shipyards and aircraft factories opened opportunities for thousands of Chinese-Americans previously confined to menial jobs in their own communities. In San Diego 40 percent of retirees returned to work. Deafening factories hired the hearing-impaired, and aircraft plants employed dwarfs as inspectors because of their ability to crawl inside small spaces. The war years produced the only significant twentieth-century shift in the distribution of income toward greater equality. The earnings of the bottom fifth of all workers rose 68 percent, and those of the middle class doubled. The richest 5 percent, conversely, saw their share of total disposable income drop from 23 to 17 percent.

Large-scale commercial farmers prospered as a result of higher consumer prices and increased productivity, thanks to improved fertilizers and more mechanization. As the consolidation of small farms into fewer large ones proceeded, commercial farming became dominated by corporations. Organized agriculture (later called agribusiness) took its seat in the council of power, alongside big government, big business, and organized labor.

Labor-union membership leaped from 9 million in 1940 to 14.8 million in 1945 (35 percent of nonagricultural employment). This growth resulted from the huge increase in the work force and the NWLB’s “maintenance-of-membership” rule, which automatically enrolled new workers in unions and required workers to retain their union membership through the life of a contract. In return, unions agreed not to strike and to limit wage increases to 15 percent. In lieu of higher pay, they negotiated unprecedented fringe benefits for their members, including paid vacation time, health insurance, and pension plans.

Only a tiny minority of unionists broke the no-strike pledge. Most were “wildcat strikes,” not authorized by union officials, and of brief duration. All told, strikes amounted to less than one-tenth of 1 percent of wartime working hours, barely affecting war production. In the most glaring exception, John L. Lewis, the iron-willed head of the United Mine Workers (UMW), led more than half a million coal-field workers out of the pits three times in 1943. Although the miners won wage concessions, their victory cost the union movement dearly. Many states passed laws to limit union power and, over Roosevelt’s veto, Congress passed the Smith-Connally War Labor Disputes Act of 1943, which empowered the president to take over any facility where strikes interrupted war production.

Far more than strikes, inflation threatened the wartime economy. Throughout 1942 prices climbed by 2 percent a month as a result of the combination of increased spending power and a scarcity of consumer goods. At the end of the year, Congress gave the president authority to control wages, prices, and rents, and as the OPA clamped down, inflation slowed dramatically. Consumer prices rose just 8 percent during the last two years of war.

The OPA also instituted rationing to combat inflation and conserve scarce materials. Under the slogan “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without,” the OPA rationed gasoline, coffee, sugar, butter, cheese, and meat. Americans endured “meatless Tuesdays” and cuffless trousers, ate sherbet instead of ice cream, and put up with imitation chocolate that tasted like soap and
imitation soap that did not lather. American men and women planted 20 million victory gardens, served as air-raid wardens, and organized collection drives to recycle cooking grease and used paper and tires, while their children, known as “Uncle Sam’s Scrappers” and “Tin-Can Colonels,” scoured their neighborhoods for scrap metal and other valuable trash.

Buying war bonds further curtailed inflation by decreasing consumer purchasing power, while giving civilians a sense of involvement in the distant war. The sale of bonds—“bullets in the bellies of Hitler’s hordes!” claimed the Treasury department—to school-children, small investors, and corporations raised almost half the money needed to finance the war. Roosevelt sought to raise the rest by drastically increasing taxes. Congress refused the president much of what he sought. Still, the Revenue Act of 1942 raised the top income-tax rate from 60 percent to 94 percent and imposed income taxes on middle-and lower-income Americans for the first time, quadrupling the number of people who paid taxes. Beginning in 1943, the payroll-deduction system automatically withheld income taxes from wages and salaries. By 1945 the federal government was taking in nearly twenty times the tax revenue that it had in 1940.

“A Wizard War”

Winston Churchill labeled the conflict “a wizard war” in tribute to the importance of wartime scientific and technological developments. As never before, the major combatants mobilized scientists into virtually armies of invention. Their labors brought forth both miracles in healing and advances in the technology of killing, as well as a new faith that the minds of engineers and scientists, plus enough money, could overcome any obstacles.

In early 1941 Roosevelt had formed a committee to organize scientists for a weapons race against the Axis, and created the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) for the development of new ordnance. OSRD spent more than $1 billion to generate radar and sonar devices, rocket weapons, and bomb fuses. It advanced the development of jet aircraft and high-altitude bombsights, and its employment of scientists to devise methods for utilizing new weapons resulted in a brand-new field called operational analysis. The need to improve military radar spurred the development of the laser, while research in quantum physics to build atomic bombs later became the basis for transistors and semiconductors. The need to supply rapidly advancing troops with unspoiled food resulted in the instant mashed potatoes we eat today.

The quest for greater accuracy in ordnance, moreover, required the kind of rapid, detailed calculations that only computing machines could supply. So a half-dozen teams of scientists went to work in 1942 to develop what would become the earliest computers. By mid-1944 navy personnel in the basement of Harvard’s physics laboratory were operating IBM’s Automatic Sequence Controlled Calculator, known as Mark I—a cumbersome device 51 feet long and 8 feet high that weighed five tons, used 530 miles of wire, and contained 760,000 parts. ENIAC, developed to improve artillery accuracy for the army, reduced the time required to multiply two tenth-place numbers from Mark I’s three seconds to less than three-thousandths of a second.

Military needs also hastened improvements in blood-transfusion and blood-banking techniques, heart and lung surgery, and the use of synthetic drugs to substitute for scarce quinine and toxoid vaccine to prevent tetanus. So-called miracle drugs, antibiotics to combat infections, a rarity on the eve of war, would be copiously produced. The military, which had only enough penicillin for about a hundred patients at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, had enough for all major casualties by D-Day in June 1944, and far more than it could use by V-J Day in August 1945, allowing the beginning of the sale of penicillin for civilian use.

Insecticides initially seemed as much a miracle. The use of DDT cleared many islands of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, like those that in 1942 had infected more than half the men of the First Marine Division, forcing it to be withdrawn from the Pacific war. DDT also stopped an incipient typhus epidemic in Naples in January 1944. Along with innovations like the Mobile Auxiliary Surgical Hospital (MASH), science helped save tens of thousands of lives, halving the World War II death rate of wounded soldiers who reached medical installations. It improved the health of the nation as well. Life expectancy rose by three years during the war, and infant mortality fell by more than a third.

No scientific endeavor had a higher priority than the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb. In August 1939 physicist Albert Einstein, a Jewish refugee, warned Roosevelt that German scientists were seeking to construct a weapon of extraordinary destructiveness. The president promptly established an advisory committee and in late 1941 launched an Anglo-American secret program—the Soviets were excluded—to produce atomic bombs. In 1942 the participating physicists, both Americans and Europeans, achieved a controlled atomic reaction under the University of Chicago football stadium, the first step toward developing the bomb. In
1943–1944 the Manhattan Engineer District—the code name for the atomic project—stockpiled uranium-235 at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and plutonium at Hanford, Washington. In 1945 engineers and scientists headquartered in Los Alamos, New Mexico, assembled two bombs utilizing those fissionable materials. By then the Manhattan Project had employed more than 120,000 people and spent nearly $2 billion.

Just before dawn on July 16, 1945, a blinding fireball with “the brightness of several suns at midday” rose over the Alamogordo, New Mexico, desert at a test site named Trinity. A huge, billowing mushroom cloud soon towered 40,000 feet above the ground. With a force of twenty thousand tons of TNT, the blast shattered windows more than 120 miles away. “A few people laughed, a few people cried,” recalled J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Manhattan Project’s scientific director. “Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ ” A new era had dawned.

**Propaganda and Politics**

People as well as science and machinery had to be mobilized for the global conflict. To sustain a spirit of unity and fan the fires of patriotism, the Roosevelt administration managed public opinion. The Office of Censorship examined letters going overseas and worked with publishers and broadcasters to suppress information that might hinder the war effort. A year passed before casualty and damage figures from Pearl Harbor were disclosed. Fearful of demoralizing the public, the government banned the publication of photographs of American war dead until 1943. Then, concerned that the public had become overconfident, the media was prompted to display pictures of American servicemen killed by the enemy and to emphasize accounts of Japan’s atrocities against American prisoners.

To shape public opinion and sell the faraway war to the American people, Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942. The OWI employed more than four thousand artists, writers, and advertising specialists to explain the war and counter enemy propaganda. The OWI depicted the war as a mortal struggle between good and evil and harped on the necessity of totally destroying, not merely defeating, the enemy.

Hollywood answered the OWI directive—“Will this help win the war?”—by highlighting the heroism and unity of the American forces, while inciting hatred of the enemy. Films about the war portrayed the Japanese, in particular, as treacherous and cruel, as beasts in the jungle, as “slant-eyed rats.” Jukeboxes blared songs like “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap.” U.S. propaganda also presented the war as a struggle to preserve the “American way of life,” usually depicted in images of small-town, middle-class, white Americans enjoying a bountiful consumer society.

While the Roosevelt administration concentrated on the war, Republican critics seized the initiative in domestic politics. Full employment and higher wages undercut the appeal of the New Deal, and resentment over wartime shortages and dismay over Axis victories further weakened the Democrats. With voter turnout low because many soldiers and defense workers were far from the hometowns where they had registered and were thus unable to vote, the Republicans gained forty-four seats in the House and nine in the Senate in 1942.
Politics shifted to the Right. The conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats abolished some New Deal agencies, such as the WPA and CCC, drastically curtailed others, and rebuffed the adoption of new liberal programs. But the dynamics of the war enormously expanded governmental power, especially the power of the executive branch. As never before, the federal government managed the economy, molded public opinion, funded scientific research, and influenced people’s daily lives.

The Battlefront, 1942–1944

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the outlook for the Allies appeared critical. Then America’s industrial might and Soviet manpower turned the tides of war. Diplomacy followed the tides of war in its wake. Allied unity dwindled as Germany and Japan weakened. As the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain each sought wartime strategies and postwar arrangements best suited to its own interests, the Allies sowed the seeds of a postwar crisis.

Liberating Europe

Although British and American officials agreed to concentrate on defeating Germany first and then smashing Japan, they differed on where to attack. While German U-boats sank Allied ships at an appalling rate in early 1942, Hitler’s forces advanced toward the Suez Canal in Egypt and penetrated deeper into the Soviet Union. Roosevelt sought to placate Stalin, who demanded a second front in western Europe to relieve the pressure on the Soviet Union, which faced the full fury of two hundred German divisions. But Churchill, fearing a repeat of the World War I slaughter in the trenches of France and wanting American assistance in maintaining British control of the vital Suez Canal, persuaded FDR to postpone the “second front” in Europe and invade North Africa instead. In Operation Torch, begun in November 1942, American forces under U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower pressed eastward from Morocco and Algeria. General Bernard Montgomery’s British troops, which had stopped the Germans at El Alamein in Egypt and then advanced westward toward Tunisia, caught the retreating army of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel in a vise and forced some 260,000 German and Italian troops to surrender, despite Hitler’s orders to fight to the death (see Map 25.3).

The Soviet Union proved to be the graveyard of the Wehrmacht (German army). In the turning point of the European war, the Russians defeated the Germans in the protracted Battle of Stalingrad (August 1942–January 1943; see Map 25.3). As the Russian snow turned red with blood (costing each side more battle deaths in half a year than the United States suffered in the entire war), and its hills strewn with human bones became “white fields,” Soviet forces saved Stalingrad, defended Moscow, and relieved besieged Leningrad.

Stalin pleaded again for a second front; Churchill objected again; and again Roosevelt gave in to Churchill, agreeing to invade Sicily. In summer 1943, after a month of fighting, the Allies seized Sicily and landed in southern Italy. Italian military officials deposed Mussolini and surrendered to the Allies in early September. But as Allied forces moved up the Italian peninsula, German troops poured into Italy. Facing elite Nazi divisions in strong defensive positions, the Allies spent eight months inching their way 150 miles to Rome. They were still battling through the mud and snow of northern Italy when the war in Europe ended in 1945.

In 1943–1944 the Allies turned the tide in the Atlantic and instituted round-the-clock bombardment of Germany. American science and industry developed sophisticated radar and sonar systems and better torpedoes and depth charges, and produced ever-increasing quantities of destroyers and aircraft. Britain’s Royal Air Force by night and the U.S. army air force by day rained thousands of tons of bombs on German cities. In raids on Hamburg in July 1943 Allied planes dropped incendiary bombs mixed with high explosives, killing nearly a hundred thousand people and leveling the city, much as they had earlier done to Cologne and would do to Dresden in February 1945, where an estimated sixty thousand people died and another thirty-seven thousand were injured.

Meanwhile, in July 1943 German and Soviet divisions fought the largest tank battle in history near the city of Kursk in the Ukraine, and the victorious Red Army began an offensive that rid the Soviet Union of Germans by mid-1944. It then plunged into Poland and established a puppet government, took control of Romania and Bulgaria, and assisted communist guerrillas led by Josip Broz Tito in liberating Yugoslavia.

As the Soviets swept across eastern Europe, Allied forces finally opened the long-delayed second front. Early on the morning of June 6, 1944—D-Day—nearly two hundred thousand American, British, and Canadian troops, accompanied by six hundred warships and more than ten thousand planes, stormed a sixty-mile stretch
of the Normandy coast in the largest amphibious invasion in history. Led by General Eisenhower, now Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Western Europe, Operation Overlord gradually pushed inland, securing the low countries, liberating Paris, and approaching the border of Germany. There, in the face of supply problems and stiffened German resistance, the Allied offensive ground to a halt. In mid-December, as the Allies prepared for a full-scale assault on Germany, Hitler threw his last reserves against Americans in the forest of Ardennes. The Battle of the Bulge—named for the eighty-mile-long and fifty-mile-wide “bulge” that the German troops drove inside the American lines—raged for nearly a month, and ended
with American forces on the banks of the Rhine, the German Army depleted, and the end of the European war in sight.

**War in the Pacific**

The day after the Philippines fell to Japan in mid-May 1942, the U.S. and Japanese fleets clashed in the Coral Sea off northeastern Australia in the first battle in history fought entirely by planes from aircraft carriers (see Map 25.4). Each lost a carrier, but the battle stymied the Japanese advance on Australia.

Less than a month later, a Japanese armada, eager to knock the Americans out of the war, headed toward Midway Island, a crucial American outpost between Hawaii and Japan. The U.S. Signal Corps, however, had broken the Japanese naval code. Knowing the plans and locations of Japan's ships, the U.S. carriers and planes won a decisive victory, sinking four Japanese carriers and destroying hundreds of planes. Suddenly on the defensive, the stunned Japanese could now only try to hold what they had already won.

On the offensive, U.S. marines waded ashore at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942. Facing fierce resistance as well such tropical diseases as malaria, the Americans needed six months to take the island, a bitter preview of the battles to come. As the British moved from India to retake Burma, the United States began a two-pronged advance toward Japan in 1943. The army, under General Douglas MacArthur, advanced north on the islands between Australia and the Philippines, and the navy and marines, under
Admiral Chester Nimitz, "island-hopped" across the central Pacific to seize strategic bases and put Tokyo in range of American bombers. In fall 1944 the navy annihilated what remained of the Japanese fleet at the battles of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf, giving the United States control of Japan's air and shipping lanes and leaving the Japanese home islands open to invasion.

**The Grand Alliance**

President Roosevelt had two main goals for the war: the total defeat of the Axis at the least possible cost in American lives, and the establishment of a world order strong enough to preserve peace, open trade, and ensure national self-determination in the postwar era. Aware that only a common enemy fused the Grand Alliance together, Roosevelt tried to promote harmony by concentrating on military victory and postponing divisive postwar matters.

Churchill and Stalin had other goals. Britain wanted to create a balance of power in Europe and retain its imperial possessions. As Churchill said, he had "not become the King's First Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire." The Soviet Union wanted a permanently weakened Germany and a sphere of influence in eastern Europe to protect itself against future attacks from the West. To hold together this fragile alliance, FDR relied on personal diplomacy to mediate conflicts.

The first president to travel by plane while in office, Roosevelt arrived in Casablanca, Morocco's main port, in January 1943 to confer with Churchill. They resolved to attack Italy before invading France and proclaimed that the war would continue until the "unconditional surrender" of the Axis. By so doing, they sought to reduce Soviet mistrust of the West, which had deepened because of the postponement of the second front. Ten months later, in Cairo, Roosevelt met with Churchill and Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), the anticommunist head of the Chinese government. To keep China in the war, FDR promised the return of Manchuria and Taiwan to China and a "free and independent Korea." From Cairo, FDR and Churchill continued on to Tehran, Iran's capital, to meet with Stalin. Here they set the invasion of France for June 1944, and agreed to divide Germany into zones of occupation and to impose reparations on the Reich. Most importantly to Roosevelt, Stalin pledged to enter the war against Japan after Hitler's defeat.

Roosevelt then turned his attention to domestic politics. Increasing conservative sentiment in the nation led him to drop the liberal Henry A. Wallace from the ticket and accept Harry S. Truman as his vice-presidential candidate. A moderate senator from Missouri now dubbed "the new Missouri Compromise," Truman restored a semblance of unity to the Democrats for the 1944 campaign. To compete, the Republicans nominated moderate and noncontroversial New York governor Thomas E. Dewey. The campaign focused more on personalities than on issues, and the still-popular FDR defeated his dull GOP opponent, but with the narrowest margin since 1916—winning just 53 percent of the popular vote. A weary Roosevelt, secretly suffering from hypertension and heart disease, now directed his waning energies toward defeating the Axis and constructing an international peacekeeping system.

**War and American Society**

The crisis of war altered the most basic patterns of American life, powerfully affecting those on the home front as well as those who served in the armed forces. Few families were untouched: more than 15 million Americans went to the war, an equal number were on the move, and unprecedented numbers of women went to work outside the home. As well, the war opened some doors of opportunity for African Americans and other minorities, although most remained closed. It heightened minority aspirations and widened cracks in the wall of white racist attitudes and policy, while maintaining much of America's racial caste system, thereby tilling the ground for future crises.

**The GIs' War**

Most Americans in the armed forces griped about regimentation and were more interested in dry socks than in ideology. They knew little of the big strategies, and cared less. They fought because they were told to and wanted to stay alive. Reluctant recruits rather than heroic warriors, most had few aims beyond returning to a safe, familiar United States.

But the GIs' war dragged on for almost four years, transforming them in the process. Millions who had never been far from home traveled to unfamiliar cities and remote lands, shedding their parochialism. Sharing tents and foxholes with Americans of different religions, ethnicities, and classes, their military service acted as a "melting pot" experience that freed them from some prewar prejudices.

In countless ways, the war modified how GIs saw themselves and others. Besides serving with people they had never previously encountered, over a million mar-
ried overseas, broadening personal horizons and sowing the seeds of a more tolerant and diverse national culture that placed far less emphasis on divisions of class, national origin, region, and religion. At the same time, many GIs became evermore distrustful of foreigners and outsiders, and returned home obsessed with the flag as a symbol of patriotism.

Physical misery, chronic exhaustion, and, especially, intense combat took a heavy toll, leaving lasting psychological as well as physical wounds. Both American and Japanese troops saw the other in racist images, as animals to be exterminated, and brutality became as much the rule as the exception in “a war without mercy.” Both sides machine-gunned hostile flyers in parachutes; both tortured and killed prisoners in cold blood; both mutilated enemy dead for souvenirs. In the fight against Germany, cruelties and atrocities also occurred, although on a lesser scale. A battalion of the second armored division calling itself “Roosevelt’s Butchers” boasted that it shot all the German soldiers it captured. Some U.S. pilots laughed at the lifeboats they strafed and the bodies they exploded out of trucks. Some became cynical about human life. Some still languish in veterans’ hospitals, having nightmares about the war.

The Home Front

Nothing transformed the social topography more than the vast internal migration of an already mobile people. About 15 million men moved because of military service, often accompanied by family members. Many other Americans moved to secure new economic opportunities, especially in the Pacific Coast states. Nearly a quarter of a million found jobs in the shipyards of the Bay area and at least as many in the aircraft industry that arose in the orange groves of southern California. More than one hundred thousand worked in the Puget Sound shipyards of Washington State and half as many in the nearby Boeing airplane plants. Others flocked to the world’s largest magnesium plant in Henderson, Nevada, to the huge Geneva Steel Works near Provo, Utah, and to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Remington Rand arms plant outside Denver (see Map 25.5).

At least 6 million people left farms to work in urban areas, including several million southern blacks and whites. They doubled Albuquerque’s population and increased San Diego’s some 90 percent. This mass uprooting of people from familiar settings made Americans both more cosmopolitan and more lonely, alienated, and frustrated. Lifestyles became freewheeling as Americans left their hometowns and ignored traditional values. Housing shortages left millions living in converted garages and trailer camps, and even in their own cars. Some workers in Seattle lived in chicken coops. The swarms of migrants to Mobile, Alabama, attracted by a new aluminum plant, two massive shipyards, an air base, and an army supply depot, transformed a sleepy fishing village into a symbol of urban disorder.

There and elsewhere, overcrowding along with wartime separations strained family and community life. High rates of divorce, mental illness, family violence, and juvenile delinquency reflected the disruptions caused in part by the lack of privacy, the sense of impermanence, the absence of familiar settings, and the competition for scarce facilities. Few boom communities had the resources to supply their suddenly swollen populations with transportation, recreation, and social services. Urban blight and conflicts between newcomers and old-timers accelerated.

While military culture fostered a sexist mentality toward women, emphasizing the differences between “femininity” and “masculinity,” millions of American women donned pants, put their hair in bandannas, and went to work in defense plants. Reversing a decade of efforts to exclude women from the labor force, the federal government urged women into war production in 1942. Songs like “We’re the Janes Who Make the Planes” appealed to women to take up war work, and propaganda called upon them to “help save lives” and “release able-bodied men for fighting.” More than 6 million women entered the labor force during the war, increasing the number of employed women to 19 million. Less than a quarter of the labor force in 1940, women constituted well over a third of all workers in 1945.

Before the war most female wage earners had been young and single. By contrast, 75 percent of the new women workers were married, 60 percent were over thirty-five, and more than 33 percent had children under the age of fourteen. They tended blast furnaces, operated cranes, greased locomotives, drove taxis, welded hulls, loaded shells, and worked in coke plants and rolling mills. On the Pacific Coast, more than one-third of all workers in aircraft and shipbuilding were women. “Rosie the Riveter,” holding a pneumatic gun in arms bulging with muscles, became the symbol of the woman war worker; she was, in the words of a popular song, “making history working for victory.”

Yet wartime also strengthened traditional convictions, and gender discrimination flourished throughout the war. Women earned only about 65 percent of what men earned for the same work. Government propaganda
portrayed women’s war work as a temporary response to an emergency. “A woman is a substitute,” claimed a War Department brochure, “like plastic instead of metal.” Work was pictured as an extension of women’s roles as wives and mothers. A newspaperwoman wrote of the “deep satisfaction which a woman of today knows who has made a rubber boat which may save the life of her aviator husband, or helped fashion a bullet which may avenge her son!” As a result, the public attitude about women’s employment changed little in World War II. In 1945 only 18 percent of the respondents in a poll approved of married women working.

Traditional notions of a woman’s place and the stigma attached to working mothers also shaped government resistance to establishing child-care centers for women employed in defense. “A mother’s primary duty is to her home and children,” the Labor Department’s Children’s Bureau stated. “This duty is one she cannot lay aside, no matter what the emergency.” New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia proclaimed that the worst mother was better than the best nursery. Funds for federal child-care centers covered fewer than 10 percent of defense workers’ children, and the young suffered. Terms like “eight-hour orphans” and “latch-key children” were coined to describe unsupervised children forced to fend for themselves. Fueling the fears of those who believed that the employment of women outside the home would cause the family to disintegrate, juve-
nile delinquency increased fivefold and the divorce rate zoomed from 16 per 100 marriages in 1940 to 27 per 100 in 1944.

The impact of war on women and the family proved multifaceted and even contradictory. As the divorce rate soared, so did marriage rates and birthrates. Although some women remained content to roll bandages for the Red Cross, more than three hundred thousand joined the armed forces and, for the first time in American history, were given regular military status and served in positions other than that of nurse. As members of the Women's Army Corps (WACs) and the Navy's Women Appointed for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) they replaced men in such noncombat jobs as mechanics and radio operators. About a thousand women served as civilian pilots with the WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots). When they left the service, moreover, they had the same rights and privileges as the male veterans.

Despite lingering notions of separate spheres, female workers gained unprecedented employment opportunities and public recognition. Although some eagerly gave up their jobs at the end of the war, others did not relish losing the income and self-esteem they had gained in contributing to the war effort. As Inez Sauer, who went to work for Boeing in Seattle, recalled,

My mother warned me when I took the job that I would never be the same. She said, “You will never want to go back to being a housewife.” She was right, it definitely did. At Boeing I found a freedom and an independence I had never known. After the war I could never go back to playing bridge again, being a clubwoman and listening to a lot of inanities when I knew there were things you could use your mind for. The war changed my life completely.

Overall, women gained a new sense of their potential. The war proved their capabilities and widened their world. Recalled one war wife whose returning husband did not like her independence, “He had left a shrinking violet and come home to a very strong oak tree.” Wartime experiences markedly affected a generation of women and the sons and daughters they later raised.

Some of these women were among the 350,000 teachers who took better-paying war work or joined the armed services, leaving schools badly understaffed. Students, too, abandoned school in record numbers. High school enrollments sank as the full-time employment of teenagers rose from 900,000 in 1940 to 3 million in 1944.

The loss of students to war production and the armed services forced colleges to admit large numbers of women and to contract themselves out to the armed forces. Nearly a million servicemen took college classes in science, engineering, and foreign languages. The military presence was all-pervasive. Harvard University awarded four military-training certificates for every academic degree it conferred. The chancellor of one branch of the University of California announced that his school was “no longer an academic tent with military sideshows. It is a military tent with academic sideshows.” Higher education became more dependent on the federal government, and most universities sought increased federal contracts and subsidies, despite their having to submit to greater government interference and regulation. The universities in the West received some $100 billion from the Office of Scientific Research...
Racism and New Opportunities

Recognizing that the government needed the loyalty and labor of a united people, black leaders entered World War II determined to secure equal rights. In 1942 civil-rights spokesmen insisted that African-American support of the war hinged on America’s commitment to racial justice. They called for a “Double V” campaign—victory over racial discrimination as well as over the Axis.

Membership in the NAACP multiplied nearly ten times, reaching half a million in 1945. The association pressed for legislation outlawing the poll tax and lynching, decried discrimination in defense industries and the armed services, and sought to end black disfranchisement. The campaign for voting rights gained momentum when the Supreme Court, in Smith v. Allwright (1944), ruled the Texas all-white primary unconstitutional. The decision eliminated a bar that had existed in eight southern states, although these states promptly resorted to other devices to minimize voting by blacks.

A new civil-rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), was founded in 1942. Employing the same forms of nonviolent direct action that Mohandas Gandhi used in his campaign for India’s independence, CORE sought to desegregate public facilities in northern cities.

Also proposing nonviolent direct action, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, in 1941 called for a “thundering march” of one hundred thousand blacks on Washington “to wake up and shock white America as it has never been shocked before.” He warned Roosevelt that if the president did not end discrimination in the armed services and the defense industry, African Americans would besiege Washington. FDR agreed to compromise.

In June 1941 Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, the first presidential directive on race since Reconstruction. It prohibited discriminatory employment practices by federal agencies and all unions and companies engaged in war-related work, and established the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to enforce this policy. Although the FEPC lacked effective enforcement powers, booming war production and a labor supply depleted by military service resulted in the employment of some 2 million African Americans in industry and two hundred thousand in the federal civil service. Between 1942 and 1945 the proportion of...
blacks in war-production work rose from 3 to 9 percent. Black membership in labor unions doubled to 1.25 million, and the number of skilled and semiskilled black workers tripled. Formerly mired in low-paying domestic and farm jobs, some three hundred thousand black women found work in factories and the civil service. “Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen,” recalled one black woman who went to work for Boeing in Seattle, a city whose black population rose from four thousand to forty thousand during the war. Overall, the average wage for African Americans increased from $457 to $1,976 a year, compared with a gain from $1,064 to $2,600 for whites.

About 1 million African Americans served in the armed forces. Wartime needs forced the military to end policies of excluding blacks from the marines and coast guard, restricting them to jobs as mess boys in the navy, and confining them to noncombatant units in the army. From just five in 1940, the number of black officers grew to over seven thousand in 1945. The all-black 761st tank battalion gained distinction fighting in Germany, and the 99th pursuit squadron won eighty Distinguished Flying Crosses for its combat against the Luftwaffe in Europe. In 1944 both the army and navy began token integration in some training facilities, ships, and battlefield platoons.

The great majority of blacks, however, served throughout the war in segregated service units commanded by white officers. This indignity, made worse by the failure of military authorities to protect black servicemen off the post and by the use of white military police to keep blacks “in their place,” sparked rioting on army bases. At least fifty black soldiers died in racial conflicts during the war. “I used to sing gospel songs until I joined the Army,” recalled blues-guitar great B. B. King, “then I sang the blues.”

Violence within the military mirrored growing racial tensions on the home front. As blacks protested against discrimination, many whites stiffened their resistance to racial equality. Numerous clashes occurred. Scores of cities reported pitched battles between blacks and whites. Race riots erupted in 1943 in Harlem, Mobile, and Beaumont, Texas. The bloodiest melee exploded in Detroit that year when white mobs assaulted blacks caught riding on trolleys or sitting in movie theaters and blacks smashed and looted white-owned stores and shops. After thirty hours of racial beatings, shootings, and burning, twenty-five African Americans and nine whites lay dead, more than seven hundred had been injured, and over $2 million of property had been destroyed. The fear of continued violence led to a greater emphasis on racial tolerance by liberal whites and to a reduction in the militancy of African-American leaders.

Yet the war brought significant changes that would eventually result in a successful drive for black civil rights. The migration of over seven hundred thousand blacks from the South turned a southern problem into a national concern. It created a new attitude of independence in African Americans freed from the stifling constraints of caste. Despite the continuation of racial prejudice and discrimination, most who left the rural South found a more abundant and hopeful life than the one they had left behind. As the growing numbers of blacks in the industrial cities of the North began to vote, moreover, the bloc of African-American voters could tip the victory to either Democrats or Republicans in close elections. This prompted politicians in both major parties to extend greater recognition to blacks and to pay more attention to civil-rights issues.

African-American expectations of greater government concern for their rights also resulted from the new prominence of the United States as a major power in a predominantly nonwhite world. As Japanese propaganda appeals to the peoples of Asia and Latin America emphasized lynchings and race riots in the United
States, Americans had to confront the peril that white racism posed to their national security. In addition, the horrors of Nazi racism made Americans more sensitive to the harm caused by their own white-supremacist attitudes and practices. As a former governor of Alabama complained, Nazism has “wrecked the theories of the master race with which we were so contented so long.” Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, in his massive study of race problems, An American Dilemma (1944), concluded that “not since Reconstruction had there been more reason to anticipate fundamental changes in American race relations.”

Black veterans, with a new sense of self-esteem gained from participating in the war effort, returned to civilian life with high expectations. Like the athlete Jackie Robinson, who as a young lieutenant had refused to take a seat at the rear of a segregated bus and had fought and won his subsequent court martial, African Americans faced the postwar era resolved to gain all the rights enjoyed by whites.

**War and Diversity**

Wartime winds of change also brought new opportunities and difficulties to other minorities. More than twenty-five thousand Native Americans served in the armed forces during the war. Navajo “code talkers” confounded the Japanese by using the Navajo language to relay messages between U.S. command centers. “Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima,” one Signal Corps officer declared.

Another fifty thousand Indians left the reservation to work in defense industries, mainly on the West Coast. The Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota lost more than a quarter of its population to migration during the war. It was the first time most had lived in a non-Indian world, and the average income of Native American households tripled during the war. Such economic improvement encouraged many Indians to remain outside the reservation and to try to assimilate into mainstream life. But anti-Indian discrimination, particularly in smaller towns near reservations such as Gallup, New Mexico, and Billings, Montana, forced many Native Americans back to their reservations, which had suffered severely from budget cuts during the war. Prodded by those who coveted Indian lands, lawmakers demanded that Indians be taken off the backs of the taxpayers and “freed from the reservations” to fend for themselves. To mobilize against the campaign to end all reservations and trust protections, Native Americans organized the National Congress of American Indians in 1944.

To relieve labor shortages in agriculture, caused by conscription and the movement of rural workers to city factories, the U.S. government negotiated an agreement with Mexico in July 1942 to import *braceros*, or temporary workers. Classified as foreign laborers rather than as immigrants, an estimated two hundred thousand *braceros*, half of them in California, received short-term contracts guaranteeing adequate wages, medical care, and decent living conditions. But farm owners frequently violated the terms of these contracts and also encouraged an influx of illegal migrants from Mexico desperate for employment. Unable to complain about their working conditions without risking arrest and deportation, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were exploited by agribusinesses in Arizona, California, and Texas. At the same time, tens of thousands of Chicanos left agricultural work for jobs in factories, shipbuilding yards, and steel mills. By 1943 about half a million Chicanos were living in Los Angeles County, 10 percent of the total population. In New Mexico nearly 20 percent of Mexican American farm laborers escaped from rural poverty to urban jobs. Even as their occupational status and material conditions improved, most Mexican Americans remained in communities called *colonias*, segregated from the larger society and frequently harassed by the police.

Much of the hostility toward Mexican Americans focused on young gang members who wore “zoot suits”—a fashion that originated in Harlem and emphasized long, broad-shouldered jackets and pleated trousers tightly pegged at the ankles. Known as *pachuco*, zoot-suited Mexican Americans aroused the ire of servicemen stationed or on leave in Los Angeles who saw them as delinquents and draft dodgers. After a series of minor clashes, bands of sailors from nearby bases and soldiers on leave in Los Angeles rampaged through the city in early June 1943, stripping *pachucos*, cutting their long hair, and beating them. Military authorities looked the other way. City police intervened only to arrest Mexican Americans. *Time* magazine described the violence as “the ugliest brand of mob action since the coolie race riots of the 1870s”; yet Los Angeles officials praised the servicemen’s actions, and the city council made the wearing of a zoot suit a misdemeanor. Nothing was done about the substandard housing, disease, and racism Hispanics had to endure.

Unlike African Americans, however, more than 350,000 Mexican Americans served in the armed forces without segregation, and in all combat units. They volunteered in much higher numbers than warranted by their percentage of the population and earned a disproportionate number of citations for distinguished service.
as well as seventeen Medals of Honor. Air corps hero Jose Holguin from Los Angeles won the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and the Silver Star. Returning Mexican-American GIs joined long-standing antidiscrimination groups, like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and organized their own associations, like the American GI Forum, to press for veterans’ interests and equal rights.

Thousands of gay men and lesbians who served in the armed forces also found new wartime opportunities. Although the military officially barred those they defined as “sexual perverts,” the urgency of building a massive armed forces led to just four to five thousand men out of eighteen million examined for induction to be excluded because of homosexuality. For the vast majority of gays not excluded, being emancipated from traditional expectations and the close scrutiny of family and neighbors, and living in overwhelmingly all-male or all-female environments, brought freedom to meet like-minded gay men and women and to express their sexual orientation. Like other minorities, many gays saw the war as a chance to prove their worth under fire. Some were ideologically committed because the Nazis had targeted European homosexuals for liquidation. On one American warship, the most highly regarded officer was “a notorious Queen” who wore a hair net. Yet others suspected of being gay were dishonorably discharged, sent to psychiatric hospitals, or imprisoned in so-called queer stockades, where some were mentally and physically abused by military police. The anger of gays at having fought against oppression while remaining oppressed themselves led them to think far more than ever before about their right to equal treatment and opportunity. In 1945 gay veterans established the Veteran’s Benevolent Association, the first major gay organization in the United States to combat discrimination.

**The Internment of Japanese-Americans**

Far more than any other minority in the United States, Japanese Americans suffered grievously during the war. The internment of about thirty-seven thousand first-generation Japanese immigrants (Issei) and nearly seventy-five thousand native-born Japanese-American citizens of the United States (Nisei) in “relocation centers” guarded by military police was a tragic reminder of the fragility of civil liberties in wartime.

The internment reflected forty years of anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast, rooted in racial prejudice and economic rivalry. Nativist politicians and farmers who wanted Japanese-American land had long decried the “yellow peril.” Following the attack on Pearl Harbor they whipped up the rage of white Californians, aided by a government report falsely blaming Japanese Americans in Hawaii for aiding the Japanese naval force. One barber advertised “free shave for Japs,” but “not responsible for accidents.” Patriotic associations and many newspapers clamored for evacuating the Japanese Americans, as did local politicians, West Coast congressional delegations, and the army general in charge of the Western Defense Command, who proclaimed, “A Jap is a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not...I don’t want any of them.”

In February 1942 President Roosevelt gave in to the pressure and issued Executive Order 9066, authorizing the removal from military areas of anyone deemed a threat. Although not a single Japanese American was apprehended for espionage or sedition and neither the FBI nor military intelligence uncovered any evidence of disloyal behavior by Japanese Americans, the military ordered the eviction of all Nisei and Issei from the West Coast. Only Hawaii was excepted. Despite the far larger number of Hawaiians of Japanese ancestry, as well as of...
Japanese living in Hawaii, no internment policy was implemented there, and no sabotage occurred (see A Place in Time: Honolulu, Hawaii, 1941–1945).

Forced to sell their lands and homes quickly at whatever prices they could obtain, Japanese Americans lost an estimated $2 billion in property and possessions. Tagged with numbers rather than names, they were herded into barbed-wire-encircled detention camps in the most remote and desolate parts of the West and Great Plains—places, wrote one historian, “where nobody had lived before and no one has lived since.” Few other Americans protested the incarceration. Stating that it would not question government claims of military necessity during time of war, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the evacuation in the Korematsu case (1944). By then the hysteria had subsided, and the government had begun a program of gradual release, allowing some Nisei to attend college or take factory jobs (but not on the West Coast); about eighteen thousand served in the military. The 442nd regimental combat team, entirely Japanese American, became the most decorated unit in the military.

In 1982 a special government commission concluded in its report, Personal Justice Denied, that internment “was not justified by military necessity.” It blamed the Roosevelt administration’s action on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” and apologized to Japanese Americans for “a grave injustice.” In 1988 Congress voted to pay twenty thousand dollars in compensation to each of the nearly sixty-two thousand surviving internees; and in 1998 President Bill Clinton further apologized for the injustice by giving the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to Fred Korematsu, who had protested the evacuation decree all the way to the Supreme Court.

**Triumph and Tragedy, 1945**

Spring and summer 1945 brought stunning changes and new crises. In Europe a new balance of power emerged after the collapse of the Third Reich. In Asia continued Japanese reluctance to surrender led to the use of atomic bombs. And in the United States a new president, Harry Truman, presided over both the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War and the nuclear age.

**The Yalta Conference**

By the time Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met in the Soviet city of Yalta in February 1945, the military situation favored the Soviet Union. The Red Army had over-run Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria; driven the Nazis out of Yugoslavia; penetrated Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia; and was massed just fifty miles from Berlin. American forces, in contrast, were still recovering from the Battle of the Bulge and facing stiff resistance on the route to Japan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, contemplating the awesome cost in American casualties of an invasion of Japan, insisted that Stalin’s help was worth almost any price. And Stalin was in a position to make demands. The Soviet Union had suffered most in the war against Germany, it already dominated eastern Europe, and, knowing that the United States did not want to fight a prolonged war against Japan, Stalin had the luxury of deciding whether and when to enter the Pacific war.

The Yalta accords reflected these realities. Stalin again vowed to declare war on Japan “two or three months” after Germany’s surrender, and in return Churchill and Roosevelt reneged on their arrangement with Jiang Jieshi (made in Cairo) and promised the Soviet Union concessions in Manchuria and the territories it had lost in the Russo-Japanese War (1904). Unable to reach agreement about the future of Germany, the Big Three delegated a final settlement of the reparations issue to a postwar commission, and left vague the matter of partitioning Germany and its eventual reunification. Similarly without specific provisions or timetables, the conference called for interim governments in eastern Europe “broadly representative of all democratic elements” and, ultimately, for freely elected permanent governments. On the matter dearest to FDR’s heart, the negotiators accepted a plan for a new international organization and agreed to convene a founding conference of the new United Nations in San Francisco in April 1945.

Stalin proved adamant about the nature of the post-war Polish government. Twice in the twentieth century German troops had used Poland as a springboard for invading Russia. Stalin would not expose his land again, and after the Red Army had captured Warsaw in January 1945 he installed a procommunist regime and brutally subdued the anticommunist Poles. Refusing to recognize the communist government, Roosevelt and Churchill called for free, democratic elections. But at Yalta they sidestepped this crucial issue by accepting Stalin’s vague pledge to include some provesterners in the new Polish government and to allow elections “as soon as possible.” Conservative critics would later charge that FDR “gave away” eastern Europe. Actually, the Soviet Union gained little it did not already control, and short of going to war against the Soviet Union while still battling Germany and Japan, FDR could only hope that Stalin would keep his word.
**Victory in Europe**

As the Soviets prepared for their assault on Berlin, American troops crossed the Rhine at Remagen in March 1945 and encircled the Ruhr Valley, Germany’s industrial heartland. Churchill now proposed a rapid thrust to Berlin. But Eisenhower, with Roosevelt’s backing, overruled Churchill. They saw no point in risking high casualties to rush to an area of Germany that had already been designated as the Soviet occupation zone. So Eisenhower advanced methodically along a broad front until the Americans met the Russians at the Elbe River on April 25. By then the Red Army had taken Vienna and reached the suburbs of Berlin. On April 30, as Soviet troops approached his headquarters, Hitler committed suicide. Berlin fell to the Soviets on May 2, and on May 8 a new German government surrendered unconditionally.

Jubilant Americans celebrated Victory in Europe (V-E) Day less than a month after they had mourned the death of their president. On April 12 an exhausted President Roosevelt had abruptly clutched his head, moaned that he had a “terrific headache,” and fell unconscious. A cerebral hemorrhage ended his life. As the nation grieved, Roosevelt’s unprepared successor assumed the burden of ending the war and dealing with the Soviet Union.

“I don’t know whether you fellows ever had a load of hay or a bull fall on you,” Harry S. Truman told reporters on his first full day in office, “but last night the moon, the stars, and all the planets fell on me.” An unpretentious politician awed by his new responsibilities, Truman struggled to continue FDR’s policies. But Roosevelt had made no effort to familiarize his vice president with world affairs. Perhaps sensing his own inadequacies, Truman adopted a tough pose toward adversaries. In office less than two weeks, he lashed out at Soviet ambassador V. M. Molotov that the United States was tired of waiting for the Russians to allow free elections in Poland, and he threatened to cut off lend-lease aid if the Soviet Union did not cooperate. The Truman administration then reduced U.S. economic assistance to the Soviets and stalled on their request for a $1 billion reconstruction loan. Simultaneously, Stalin strengthened his grip on eastern Europe, ignoring the promises he had made at Yalta.

The United States would neither concede the Soviet sphere of influence in eastern Europe nor take steps to terminate it. Although Truman still sought Stalin’s cooperation in establishing the United Nations and in defeating Japan, Soviet-American relations deteriorated. By June 1945, when the Allied countries succeeded in framing the United Nations Charter, hopes for a new international order had dimmed, and the United Nations emerged as a diplomatic battleground. Truman, Churchill, and Stalin met at Potsdam, Germany, from July 16 to August 2 to complete the postwar arrangements begun at Yalta. But the Allied leaders could barely agree to demilitarize Germany and to punish Nazi war criminals. All the major divisive issues were postponed and left to the Council of Foreign Ministers to resolve later. Given the diplomatic impasse, only military power remained to determine the contours of the postwar world.

**The Holocaust**

When news of the Holocaust—the term later given to the Nazis’ extermination of European Jewry—first leaked out in early 1942, many Americans discounted the reports. Not until November did the State Department admit knowledge of the massacres. More than a month later the American broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, listened to nationwide, reported on the systematic killing of millions of Jews, “It is a picture of mass murder and moral depravity unequalled in the history of the world. It is a horror beyond what imagination can grasp . . . . There are no longer ‘concentration camps’—we must speak now only of ‘extermination camps.’ ”
Much as the war came to the United States initially and most dramatically at Pearl Harbor, the outlines of an increasingly multicultural United States emerging from the Second World War could be seen first and most clearly in Hawaii. The nearly one million soldiers, sailors, and marines stopping in Hawaii on their way to the battlefront, as well as the more than one hundred thousand men and women who left the mainland to find war work on the islands, expected the Hollywood image of a simple Pacific paradise: blue sky, green sea, white sand, palm trees, tropical sunsets, and exotic women with flowers in their hair. They found instead a complex multiracial and multiethnic society. The experience would change them, as they in turn would change the islands.

Before December 7, 1941, few Americans knew where Hawaii was or that it was part of their country, a colonial possession annexed by the U.S. government in 1898. Few realized that Honolulu, a tiny fishing village when Captain James Cook sailed by its harbor in 1778, had become a gritty port city that would serve as the major staging ground for the war to be waged in the Pacific. And few knew that, as a result of successive waves of immigration by Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, and Filipinos, this American outpost had a population in which native Hawaiians and white Americans (called haoles, which in Hawaiian means “strangers”) each constituted only 15 percent of the islands’ inhabitants.

The approximately 160,000 Hawaiians of Japanese ancestry—including some 100,000 second-generation Japanese, or Nisei, who had been born in Hawaii and were therefore U.S. citizens—made up Hawaii’s largest ethnic group, more than a third of the population. Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor immediately raised fears of sabotage or espionage by them. Rumors flew of arrow-shaped signs cut in the sugar-cane fields to direct Japanese planes to military targets and of Nisei women waving kimonos to signal Japanese pilots. But in stark contrast to the internment of Japanese Americans in the Pacific coast states, military policy in the islands was to maintain traditional interracial harmony throughout the war, and to treat all law-abiding inhabitants of Japanese ancestry justly and humanely. “This is America and we must do things the American way,” announced Hawaii’s military governor. “We must distinguish between loyalty and disloyalty among our people.” There was no mass internment of the Nisei and Issei (those who emigrated from Japan) and there were no acts of sabotage.

For many Issei, loyalty to the United States had become an obligation, a matter of honor. To eliminate potential associations with the enemy, they destroyed old books, photographs of relatives, and brocaded obi (kimono sashes) and replaced portraits of the Japanese emperor with pictures of President Roosevelt. A burning desire to prove that they were true Americans prompted many of their Hawaiian-born children, often referred to as AJAs (Americans of Japanese ancestry), to become superpatriots. AJAs contributed heavily to war-bond drives and sponsored their own “Bombs on Tokyo” campaign. They converted the halls of Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and Japanese-language schools (all closed for the duration and reopened after the war) into manufactories of bandages and hospital gowns. Their newly expanded contact with other Hawaiians, including haoles, hastened their assimilation into the larger Hawaiian society. In addition, AJAs served in the military campaigns in the Pacific as interpreters—translating, interrogating, intercepting transmissions, and cracking enemy codes—and they fought in Europe with the all-Nisei 442d regimental combat team, the most highly decorated organization in the U.S. Army.

These contributions gave the Japanese in Hawaii, as it did other ethnic groups in the United States, a new sense of their worth and dignity. The war experience aroused expectations of equal opportunity and equal treatment, of full participation in island politics, of no longer accepting a subordinate status to haoles.
The attitudes of many Hawaiians toward *haoles* changed as native islanders witnessed large numbers of whites doing manual labor for the first time. Their view that whites would always hold superior positions in society—as bosses, plantation owners, and politicians—was turned topsy-turvy by the flood of Caucasian mainland war workers, mostly from the fringes of respectability, and easily stereotyped as drunks and troublemakers. The hordes of white servicemen crowding into Honolulu’s Hotel Street vice district for liquor, for posed pictures with hula girls in grass skirts, for three-dollar sex at the many brothels, and then for treatment at prophylaxis stations to ward off venereal diseases also tarnished traditional notions of white superiority. White prostitutes who brazenly operated in Honolulu further mocked the belief that those with white skin had a “natural” right to rule those of a darker hue.

The Hawaiian experience, in turn, changed the outlooks of many of the servicemen and war workers stationed there. In Honolulu they grew accustomed to women holding full-time jobs, as a far higher percentage of women worked outside the home than was the case on the mainland. Given the scarcity of “available” white women, the men gradually became less uneasy about interracial dating, joking that “the longer you were on the island, the lighter [skinned] the girls became.” Not a few GIs ultimately married women of Chinese, Filipino, or Hawaiian ancestry.

Most of the whites who had come to Hawaii had never lived where whites did not constitute a majority and where they were the ones who were different. Most had never before encountered or conversed with people of African or Asian ancestry. Suddenly, they were in the midst of a mixture of ethnic and racial groups unmatched anywhere in the United States, in a diverse society where people of different backgrounds worked together for a common cause. This example of multicultural harmony was especially an eye-opener for the nearly thirty thousand African-American servicemen and workers who came to Honolulu before the war’s end. In the fluid and relaxed racial relations of Hawaiian society, blacks discovered an alternative to the racist America they knew. “I thank God often,” wrote a black shipyard worker, “for letting me experience the occasion to spend a part of my life in a part of the world where one can be respected and live as a free man should.” Some chose never to go back to the mainland. Others returned home to press for the rights and freedoms they had first tasted in Hawaii. In so many ways, wartime Hawaii, termed “the first strange place” by historians Beth Bailey and David Farber, would anticipate the “strangeness” of U.S. society today.
Most Americans considered the annihilation of Europe’s 6 million Jews beyond belief. There were no photographs to prove it, and, some argued, the atrocities attributed to the Germans in World War I had turned out to be false. So few took issue with the military’s view that the way to liberate those enslaved by Hitler was by speedily winning the war. Pleas by American Jews for the Allies to bomb the death camps and the railroad tracks leading to them fell on deaf ears. In fall 1944 U.S. planes flying over Auschwitz in southern Poland bombed nearby factories but left the gas chambers and crematoria intact, in order, American officials explained, not to divert air power from more vital raids elsewhere. “How could it be,” historian David Wyman has asked, “that Government officials knew that a place existed where 2,000 helpless human beings could be killed in less than an hour, knew that this occurred over and over again, and yet did not feel driven to search for some way to wipe such a scourge from the earth?”

How much could have been done remains uncertain. Still, the U.S. government never seriously considered rescue schemes or searched for a way to curtail the Nazis’ “final solution” to the “Jewish question.” Its feeble response was due to its overwhelming focus on winning the war as quickly as possible, congressional and public fears of an influx of destitute Jews into the United States, Britain’s wish to placate the Arabs by keeping Jewish settlers out of Palestine, and the fear of some Jewish-American leaders that pressing the issue would increase anti-Semitism at home. The War Refugee Board managed to save the lives of just two hundred thousand Jews and twenty thousand non-Jews. Six million other Jews, about 75 percent of the European Jewish population, were gassed, shot, and incinerated, as were several million gypsies, communists, homosexuals, Polish Catholics, and others deemed unfit to live in the Third Reich.

“The things I saw beggar description,” wrote General Eisenhower after visiting the first death camp liberated by the U.S. army. He sent immediately for a delegation of congressional leaders and newspaper editors to make sure Americans would never forget the gas chambers and human ovens. Only after viewing the photographs and newsreels of corpses stacked like cordwood, boxcars heaped with the bones of dead prisoners, bulldozers shoving emaciated bodies into hastily dug ditches, and liberated, barely alive living skeletons lying in their own filth, their vacant, sunken eyes staring through barbed wire, did most Americans see that the Holocaust was no myth.

The Atomic Bombs

Meanwhile, the war with Japan ground on. Early in 1945 an assault force of marines invaded Iwo Jima, 700 miles from Japan. In places termed the “Meat Grinder” and “Bloody Gorge,” the marines savagely battled thousands of Japanese soldiers hidden in tunnels and behind concrete bunkers and pillboxes. Securing the five-square-mile island would cost the marines nearly twenty-seven thousand casualties, and one-third of all the marines killed in the Pacific. In June American troops waded ashore on Okinawa, 350 miles from Japan and a key staging area for the planned U.S. invasion of the Japanese home islands. Death and destruction engulfed Okinawa as waves of Americans attacked nearly impregnable
Japanese defenses head-on, repeating the bloody strategy of World War I. After eighty-three days of fighting on land and sea, twelve thousand Americans lay dead and three times as many wounded, a 35 percent casualty rate, higher than at Normandy.

The appalling rate of loss on Iwo Jima and Okinawa weighed on the minds of American strategists as they thought about an invasion of the Japanese home islands. The Japanese Cabinet showed no willingness to give up the war despite Japan's being blockaded and bombed daily (on March 9–10 a fleet of B-29s dropped napalm-and-magnesium-bombs on Tokyo, burning sixteen square miles of the city to the ground and killing some eighty-four thousand). Its military leaders insisted on fighting to the bitter end; surrender was unthinkable. Japan possessed an army of over two million, plus up to four million reservists and five thousand kamikaze aircraft, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs estimated that American casualties in invasions of Kyushu and Honshu (the main island of Japan) might exceed 1 million.

The successful detonation of history's first nuclear explosion at Alamagordo in mid-July gave Truman an alternative. On July 25, while meeting with Stalin and Churchill in Potsdam, Truman ordered the use of an atomic bomb if Japan did not surrender before August 3. The next day he warned Japan to surrender unconditionally or face "prompt and utter destruction." Japan rejected the Potsdam Declaration on July 28. On August 6 a B-29 bomber named Enola Gay took off from the Marianas island of Tinian and dropped a uranium bomb on Hiroshima, plunging the city into what Japanese novelist Masuji Ibuse termed "a hell of unspeakable torments." The 300,000 degree centigrade fireball incinerated houses and pulverized people. More than sixty thousand died in the initial searing blast of heat, and many of the seventy thousand injured died later from burns and radiation poisoning. On August 8 Stalin declared war on Japan, and U.S. planes dropped leaflets on Japan warning that another bomb would be dropped if it did not surrender. The next day, at high noon, the Bock's Car flattened Nagasaki with a plutonium bomb, killing thirty-five thousand and injuring more than sixty thousand. On August 14 Japan accepted the American terms of surrender, which implicitly permitted the emperor to retain his throne but subordinated him to the U.S. commander of the occupation forces.

General MacArthur received Japan's surrender on the battleship Missouri on September 2, 1945. The war was over.

Some historians have subsequently questioned whether the United States needed to resort to atomic weapons to end the war promptly. They believe that racist American attitudes toward the Japanese motivated the decision to drop the bombs. As war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote, “The Japanese are looked upon as something inhuman and squirmy—like some people feel about cockroaches or mice.” While racial hatred undoubtedly stirred exterminationist sentiment, those involved in the Manhattan Project had regarded Germany as the target; and considering the ferocity of the Allied bombings of Hamburg and Dresden, there is little reason to assume that the Allies would not have dropped atomic bombs on Germany had they been available. By 1945 the Allies as well as the Axis had abandoned restraints on attacking civilians.

Other historians contend that demonstrating the bomb's terrible destructiveness on an uninhabited island would have moved Japan to surrender. We will never know for sure. American policy makers had rejected a demonstration bombing because the United States
had an atomic arsenal of only two bombs, and they did not know whether the mechanism for detonating them in the air would work. Still others argue that Japan was ready to surrender and that an invasion of the home islands was unnecessary. Again, we cannot know for sure. All that is certain is that as late as July 28, 1945, Japan refused a demand for surrender, and not until after the bombs were used did Japan capitulate.

The largest number of historians critical of Truman’s decision believe that the president, aware of worsening relations between the United States and the USSR, ordered the atomic attack primarily to end the Pacific war before Stalin could enter it and also to intimidate Stalin into making concessions in eastern Europe. Referring to the Soviets, President Truman noted just before the atomic test at Alamogordo, “If it explodes, as I think it will, I’ll certainly have a hammer on those boys.” Truman’s new secretary of state, James Byrnes, thought that the bomb would “make Russia more manageable” and would “put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war.”

Although the president and his advisers believed that the atomic bombs would strengthen their hand against the Soviets, that was not the foremost reason the bombs were dropped. As throughout the war, American leaders in August 1945 relied on production and technology to win the war with the minimum loss of American life. Every new weapon was put to use; the concept of “total war” easily accommodated the bombing of civilians; and the atomic bomb was one more item in an arsenal that had already wreaked enormous destruction on the Axis. The rules of war that had once stayed the use of weapons of mass destruction against enemy civilians no longer prevailed. No responsible official counseled that the United States should sacrifice American servicemen to lessen death and destruction in Japan, or not use a weapon developed with 2 billion taxpayer dollars. To the vast majority of Americans, the atomic bomb was, in Churchill’s words, “a miracle of deliverance” that saved Allied lives. So E. B. Sledge and his comrades in the First Marine Division, slanted to take part in the first wave of the invasion of Japan’s home islands, breathed “an indescribable sense of relief.” Hearing the news of the atomic bombs and Japan’s surrender, Sledge wrote, they sat in stunned silence:

We remembered our dead. So many dead. So many maimed. So many bright futures consigned to the ashes of the past. So many dreams lost in the madness that engulfed us. Except for a few widely scattered shouts of joy, the survivors of the abyss sat hollow-eyed and silent, trying to comprehend a world without war.

**Conclusion**

The atomic bombs ended the deadliest war in history. More than 20 million men and women under arms, including more than three hundred thousand Americans, had died. Another 25 million civilians had perished. Much of Asia and Europe was rubble. Although physically unscathed, the United States was profoundly changed by the crisis of world war—for better and worse. Mobilizing for war transformed the scope and authority of the federal government, vastly expanding presidential powers. It ended the unemployment of the depression and stimulated an unprecedented economic boom that would enable millions of Americans to become middle-class citizens. It tilted the national economic balance toward the South Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts. It accelerated trends toward bigness in business, agriculture, and labor. It involved the military in the economy and education as never before. The war also catalyzed vital changes in racial and social relations, sometimes intensifying prejudices against minorities and women, but also broadening educational and employment opportunities that widened their public spheres and heightened their expectations. Fighting and winning the greatest war in history, moreover, was a vital coming-of-age experience for an entire generation that did much to give postwar American society a “can-do” spirit.

The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union each met the crisis of war in a manner best suited to enlarge or preserve its sphere of influence in the world. To keep the Allies united and force the unconditional surrender of the Nazis and the Japanese, Roosevelt gave in to Churchill’s pleas to delay a second front in Europe until 1944 and reluctantly accepted Soviet dominance in eastern Europe. To end the war in the Pacific as rapidly as possible, to minimize American losses, and to gain leverage over the Soviet Union, Truman ordered the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan. The United States became the world’s superpower; and the mass destruction of the war and total defeat of the Axis created new crises and a Cold War that would see the United States play a role in global affairs that would have seemed inconceivable to most Americans just five years before.

**For Further Reference**

**Readings**


John Keegan, *The Second World War* (1990). This is the standard account of the military aspects of the war.


**WEBSITES**

**A People at War**

http://www.nara.gov/exhall/people/people.html

A National Archives exhibit on American contributions to the war effort.

**Photographs from the FSA and OWI**

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html

Photographs of the American people, 1935–1945, from the Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information.

**Resource Listing for WWII**

http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/pha/index.html

A good introductory site to primary documents on all aspects of World War II.

**The Atomic Bomb Controversy**

http://www.glue.umd.edu/~enola/

A comprehensive site on the atomic bomb and the controversy surrounding its use.

**The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

http://ushmm.org/index.html

The official website of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

**World War II Links**

http://wrightmuseum.org/links.html

The Wright Museum’s link to diverse information about the World War II era.

For additional works, please consult the Bibliography at the end of the book.