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Home Front Change

THE MAJOR ROLE the U.S. armed forces played in overcoming the Axis is an important part of the pride Americans take in World War II, but it is not what ultimately makes that war the best war ever. At the center of the popular view of the war is a picture of a rich, united, and confident America. It is this vision of home front strength and prosperity that makes the era appear as a golden age.

In the Great Depression, America's mighty economic machine seemed to stumble, become impotent. Millions were unemployed and millions more lost hope of improving their lives. Confidence in capitalism was seriously eroded. Though the situation was improving by 1939, the economy was still in low gear, and government, despite all its New Deal plans and agencies, didn't appear to have the answers. Unemployment stood around 8.9 million. Then came war, normally a scourge of humanity, to increase the burden of human misery.

But here is the remarkable thing. The nation not only rallied, the war inaugurated the greatest era of prosperity in human history. The U.S. gross national product increased 60 percent during the war. And while living costs rose 30 percent, total earnings went up 50 percent (Nelson, 99). By 1945, the United States owned two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, half its shipping, and more than half its manufacturing capacity.

Over time, and as later problems have seemed harder to overcome, this economic miracle has loomed large in the nation's imagination—to a point where anyone who was alive in the 1940s is assumed to be gifted with special powers. Evan Thomas, writing in *Newsweek* (Jan. 12, 1992) urged that President Bush, in his State of the Union address, call upon his generation to once more take the lead in resolving current U.S. difficulties. Paul Taylor, of the *Washington Post*, had a month earlier wondered if America's mood of self-doubt came from

fear that the passing of this can-do generation would mark the decline of the national genius. Was the American Century nearing its end? The *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Dec. 4, 1991), beneath a large picture of Bush and FDR superimposed on a background of war workers building B-17s, said that for decades America had trusted its leadership "to the generation of men who served in World War II." But this generation would soon pass, and how would America fare then for leadership?

World War II and the Depression are now nearly as far back as we can go in living memory, and so they loom large in our active folk story. And many who lived then were too young to understand it in depth; they remember only that the war was a great victory. Others have filtered their recollections over the years, forgetting the strain and pain—just as, when remembering a vacation, we forget the rainy days and bad motels. This is selective recall. In the same way, the achievements of the 1940s have, with time, become more spectacular than they really were. Not only was America prosperous, there were no ethnic or gender problems, families were happy and united, and children worked hard in school and read a great number of books. Americans knew who they were and what was right.

There is a lot of exaggeration in this; at times, faith in the can-do generation borders on ancestor worship. Thus Evan Thomas, after calling for the WWII generation to save us, admitted that about all most surviving members could do to help is use less Medicare and give back some of their social security pensions. Two major points need to be made about the home front boom of the war era. First, the economic recovery of 1940–45 came out of unique circumstances; it provides no magic formula to be applied whenever America is in trouble. Second, prosperity, important as it is to America's sense of well-being, is not a cure-all for social problems. Change, even positive change, is disruptive. America in the war was wrenched by change. And while the war brought good times for many, it put strain on the family and on ethnic, gender, and class relations. Despite the myth that all Americans were well adjusted back then, many felt great anxiety about their society and its future.

The unparalleled prosperity of the war period led to a popular belief that wars are normally good for the economy. Many people expected the Gulf War of 1991 to lift the country out of incipient depression, whereas it had the reverse effect. A comparison of the two situations suggests why. In World War II, unemployment left over from the Depression was sopped up when sixteen million potential workers were

absorbed into the military, leaving those at home to take advantage of the economic opportunities. The Gulf War, by comparison, was fought by professionals already in the forces, so that there was no absorption of the worker pool.

Perhaps 60 percent of the industrial plant that could be tooled for military production—to make tanks, planes, and so forth—lay idle in 1939. In 1991, the military used huge existing stockpiles from an arms industry that had already overproduced during the cold war, so there were no sluggish defense plants to jump start. In addition, Britain and France in 1939 had huge contracts with the United States for arms, boosting the American economy. This did not happen in 1991.

America in 1991 already had huge debts from immense deficit spending, whereas in 1940 America could afford a radically higher level of government investment to prime the economic pump, as the nation's wealth had not up to then been significantly tapped for public purposes. This ability of government to spend liberally was key. Despite the idea that the primary agency of economic recovery was private enterprise, it was in fact government spending acting upon an underutilized economy that energized the system. Private enterprise did not have the capital to bankroll a boom. Had the government spent as much during the Depression to pump the economy as it did during the war, it would have achieved the same spectacular results. In the two years 1939–41, Congress paid twice as much for defense as it had spent on the New Deal in the past eight years. Between 1940 and 1945 the government spent \$323 billion, largely on the war effort. Even by Pearl Harbor, the rate of military spending was two billion dollars per month (Nelson, 142–43; Blum, 90–91).

Thus, public spending was crucial in financing recovery. But it was not without long-term costs. It is wrong to think that World War II somehow paid for itself and that wars are therefore unalloyed economic positives. The immediate cost of the war was \$381 billion. Only about 44 percent of the bill was paid by direct taxation. To cover two-fifths of the remainder, the government floated bonds; it financed the rest through bank loans. The result was that the national debt more than quintupled, from \$50 billion to \$260 billion, and has not been under that figure since. It was not until 1970 that the original cost of the war was paid off, and America will be paying pensions and other war-related benefits well into the twenty-first century (Clayton, 661–63; Nelson, 99).

All of this could be handled in the context of 1945 America, because the country was a rich creditor nation with an unprecedented worldwide demand for its goods. More recently, as America's competitors

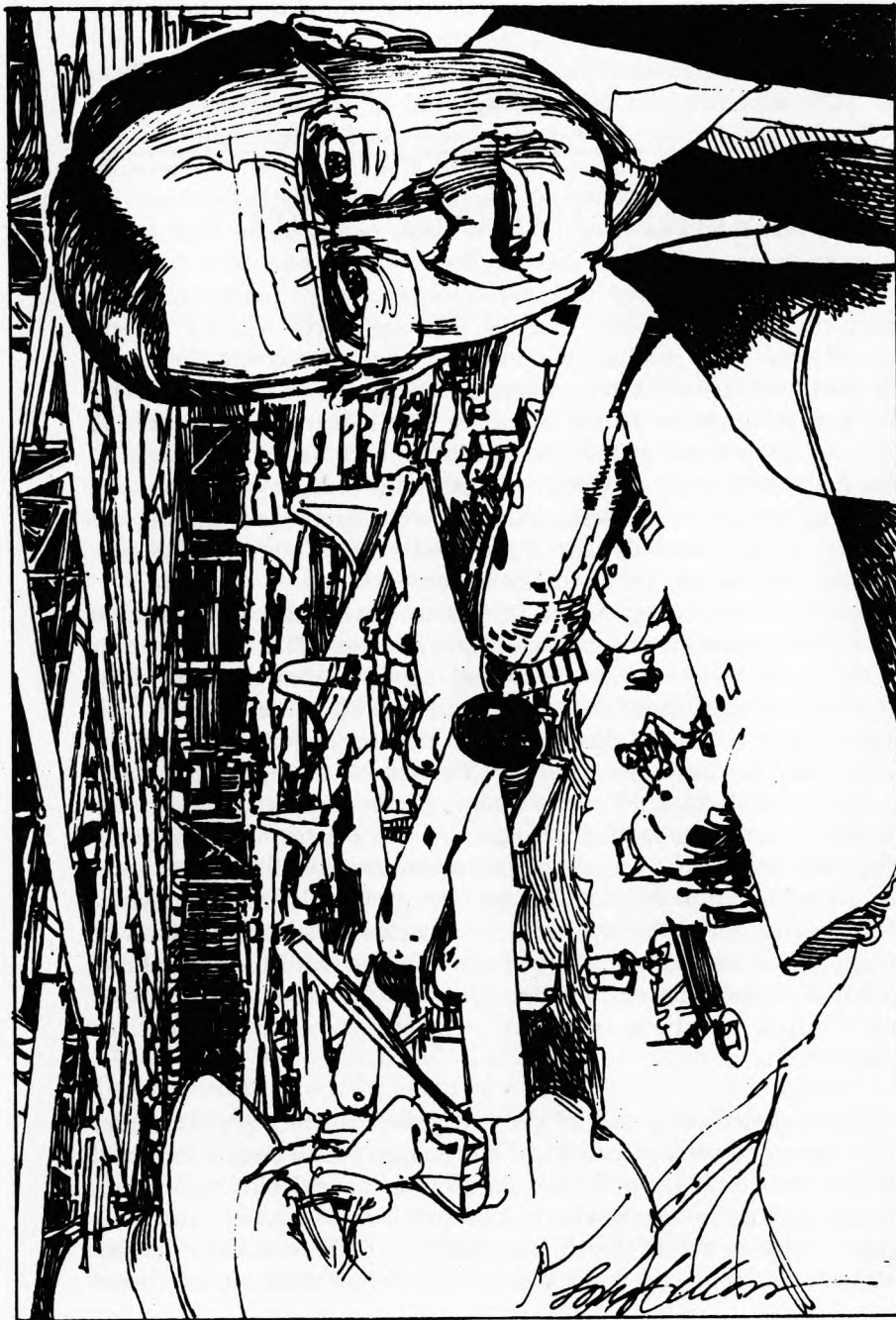


Fig. 5. FDR, George Bush, and B-17 bombers (Drawing by George Longfellow, reproduced with permission from the Cincinnati Enquirer and George Longfellow)

have increased in economic efficiency and power, America's economic takings have failed to handle the deficit. Thus the tradition of deficit spending established in World War II did not set a precedent that would work for less favorable economic times.

A corollary myth is that a well-organized war effort will unite people in a common cause. As a generalization, this has value: most Americans did support the war effort. But the emergency situation also changed the American way of life. As an example, many people today work for large organizations and feel small and powerless. They dream of a time when small farms and businessmen worked for themselves, a time when, if you built a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to your door. World War II undermined the world of the small producer in business and agriculture, completing the triumph of large corporations and inaugurating the organization society in which most of us work. In 1941, there were over two million small businesses. Many went under quickly, as products they sold went off the market due to war shortages. Independent car dealers and washing machine distributors are good examples.

In awarding production contracts, the government properly sought the most advanced technology, standardized parts, and economies of scale. This meant that orders went to the big producers, not the small craft shops. America's ten biggest corporations got 33 percent of the war contracts. The next largest forty-six companies received a further 42 percent (Nash, 135-36). Not all these giants made arms. Coca-Cola got a massive boost with a contract to supply its soft drink at a near monopoly to the forces. It controlled 95 percent of the overseas PX (post exchange) market, and the government assisted it in adding fifty-four more bottling plants to the five existing in 1940. Wrigley's got a boost when its gum was put in GI K rations. Corporate profits, after taxes, rose by 68 percent during the war (Blum, 107-8; Ellis, *Sharp End*, 288-89; Nelson, 108).

As the big got bigger, the little were squeezed out. Two months after Pearl Harbor, *Business Week* reported the loss of 200,000 small employers (Winkler, 13). The growth of big industry led to further radical change. Cities such as Knoxville, Tennessee, and Atlanta, Georgia, which were home to war industries, experienced mushrooming growth. In just two years, the Detroit area of Michigan received \$11 billion in war contracts. Such cities became host to huge migrant populations. Many migrants were attracted by high factory wages, others were floating workers from collapsed small businesses and economically depressed small towns. Some were farmers displaced by army camps and training ranges and by the same move to big production

that was changing industry. The new training base at Hinesville, Georgia, for example, threw fifteen thousand families off the land, while a Procter and Gamble shell-loading facility uprooted eight thousand. The number of farms in the United States declined by 17 percent (Nash, 139).

Over 15 million civilians moved during the war, and 700,000 people from rural Appalachia migrated to cities like Dayton, Muncie, and Detroit (Campbell, 219). Willow Run, site of a new Ford plant outside Detroit, grew from fifteen thousand to forty-seven thousand inhabitants almost overnight (Campbell, 170-71; Nash, 145). One resentful Willow Run native commented: "Everybody knew everybody else and all were happy and contented. Then came that bomber plant and all this influx of riff-raff, mostly southerners. You can't be sure of these people." A newcomer, equally disgruntled, said that Detroit was "a city without a heart or a soul" (Winkler, 44).

The inevitable housing shortages led to poor living conditions. By October 1942 in the country as a whole, 1.2 million families were doubled up in one-family units. Basements and garages, trailers, tents, and coal sheds were rented out as homes. Some new homes, quickly built to meet the crisis, had neither water nor sewage lines. By 1945, five million families were in substandard dwellings, like cellars and woodsheds (Hartmann, 166). Many natives of the exploding areas helped the migrant workers, offering free meals to travelers and accommodations at fair prices. Others exploited them. One Connecticut landlord boasted he could rent beds to women workers on three separate shifts, so they were occupied round-the-clock (Blum, 103).

Overcrowding was worst in the neighborhoods allotted to black workers. In San Francisco, people in the ghetto doubled, and Chicago's increased by 33 percent. The thrusting together of dissimilar ethnic and regional types generated distrust and hostility. In large areas of the country, segregation in housing, education, and recreational facilities was legal, so when emergency conditions forced working-class whites to live and work with blacks, violence often resulted. In June 1943, prolonged friction between blacks and whites living next door to each other in a predominantly Polish and Irish section of Detroit resulted in riots. It took six thousand National Guardsmen to restore order. The cost included thirty-four dead, a million lost work hours, and two million dollars in property damage. There were similar riots in New York and elsewhere (Nash, 145-52; Tyler, 101).

Many plants, such as North American Aviation, wouldn't hire persons of color. To combat this, FDR established the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate hiring abuses. Although it had a

small staff and no power to enforce its findings, there was improvement. Where the workplace and worker facilities were integrated, there might be peaceful acceptance of change, but some employers faced white retaliation. White women at a Western Electric plant in Baltimore struck rather than share a restroom with black women. Pleas to put the war effort first didn't always work: a white man in a wildcat strike at a Packard plant said, "I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside a nigger on the assembly line." The sociologist Gunnar Myrdal found a majority of whites in the South and the West agreed (Tyler, 99).

However, Afro-Americans saw in the booming war economy and in the crusade against the Nazi superman ideology factors that could immensely improve their place in society, and they showed a growing interest in civil rights. By 1943, black workers and sympathetic white colleagues started to try to integrate restrooms and eating places, despite being served eggshells in their burgers and garbage sandwiches. These pioneers paved the way for the civil rights movement of the postwar era.

Hispanic workers also faced hostility. In addition to American-born Hispanics, large numbers of Mexican workers entered the country in response to labor shortages on the Pacific Coast and in the Southwest. White uneasiness grew when Mexican-American teenagers, like many other adolescents, began forming street gangs and challenging the traditional restraints on their behavior. Identifiable by zoot suits (long tapered jackets and baggy pants tied at the ankle, and worn with broad-brimmed hats, an outfit also worn by many young blacks), these youths antagonized white GIs who thought they were flouting the very values they were going off to fight for. (It was rumored, incorrectly, that Hispanics weren't doing their share in the military.) In June 1943 the "zoot suit" riots exploded in Los Angeles. For almost a week, off-duty white enlisted personnel roamed the streets, assaulting Hispanics. When the police intervened, they usually arrested the Hispanics, sometimes for their protection. Don McFadden, then a sixteen-year-old mechanic, saw servicemen drag a boy off a trolley and beat him senseless: "Here's a guy riding a streetcar and he gets beat up 'cause he happens to be a Mexican" (Terkel, 144-45).

Also on the West Coast, Japanese-Americans became the focus of fear and hostility after Pearl Harbor. Most of the forty-seven thousand Issei (Japanese born abroad and therefore banned from citizenship) and eighty thousand Nissei (American-born children of the Issei, who were citizens) lived in the Pacific region. They were removed to detention

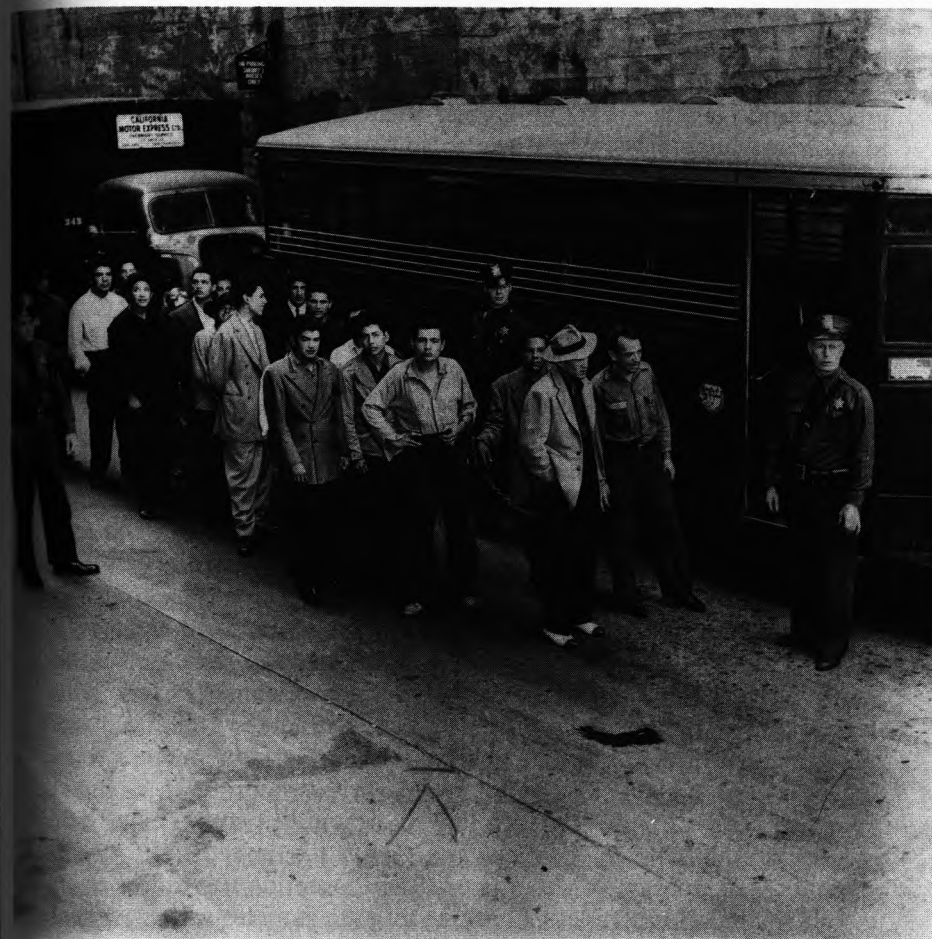


Fig. 6. The police arresting Hispanics during the zoot suit riots, June 1943 (Photograph reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress)

centers in the interior, suffering a \$400 million loss in forced property sales. The Supreme Court upheld the removals in 1944. Although most inmates were released later that year, few received any compensation until the 1980s. These removals, although intended to prevent Axis subversion, actually hindered the war effort, because they demoralized a loyal segment of society and required the diversion of military resources to build and guard the camps.

Adding to the strain imposed on housing and transportation facili-

ties by the civilian population movement, millions of service personnel were in transit throughout the war from one military base to another. The camps were often bleak facilities, and bars and houses of prostitution usually sprang up around them—places soldiers could go to ease their loneliness. There were also cheap souvenir stores selling such items as silver-plated dog tags and china ornaments to send home. Many new military bases were in the South and the West, where legal segregation was standard, on and off base, and black personnel suffered serious harassment. In a Kentucky railroad depot, police beat up three black WACs who used a white restroom. Elsewhere in the state, three WACs were roughed up and arrested for sitting in the front of a bus (Tyler, 94; Hartmann, 40).

Northern blacks, unaccustomed to Jim Crow laws, had numerous run-ins with southern laws that consigned them to the backs of buses and theaters. Governor Eugene Talmadge of Georgia ordered bus drivers to carry guns and to force black GIs to comply with Jim Crow seating (Tyler, 93). Some white troops supported black soldiers, and the military at times tried to protect its personnel. But the Justice Department was reluctant to challenge local mores: when a black GI was killed by a bus driver in Alexandria, Louisiana, the department would not take up the case. In streetcars, restaurants, and theaters in the South, black soldiers had to sit behind German prisoners of war, who were accorded the rights of white men. Lena Horne, the famous singer, refused to perform in one USO show because German soldiers were seated in front of black GIs (Terkel, 149, 153; Hartmann, 193).

Service personnel were often followed around the country by their spouses and children. Although many townfolk treated military dependents well, some cold-shouldered them, resenting the influx of an unstable population. Unused to seeing migrant females in large numbers, some civilians saw these army wives as “loose” women who “couldn’t get enough” and who should go back home (Klaw, 50, 100). Some guest house owners, fearing for their reputations, wouldn’t allow GI husbands in their wives’ rooms, so couples had to meet in alleys and phone booths (14–16). Housing around camps became so overcrowded that small sheds were put up, big enough only to hold one bed. In many houses, women had to wait in line to use the building’s one stove and one bathroom. Women with children often couldn’t get accommodation at all. Women of color had the worst time. At Camp Stewart, Georgia, wives and mothers of black soldiers had to carry army identification papers to keep the local police from arresting them as prostitutes (Tyler, 96–97). On the other hand, officers’ wives were

often able to get luxuries like soap and prompt dental appointments (Klaw, 20, 24; Litoff, 69, 99; Campbell, 191–98).

The movement of millions of people created a breakdown in traditional behavior patterns, which fed a growing anxiety over morality and the integrity of the family. And some people away from the watchful eye of relatives and neighbors did violate hometown mores. Homosexuals found safety and opportunity in the anonymous crowds of the big cities, using parks and youth hostels. Heterosexuals also found greater sexual freedom. A 1942 survey revealed that only 25 percent of single men and 40 percent of single women abstained sexually. Between 1939 and 1945, there was a 42 percent increase in the illegitimate birth rate, to ten per thousand newborns. With couples separated by the war, marital fidelity declined, and the divorce rate rose—from 16 percent in 1940 to 27 percent in 1944. By then, three million marriages had broken up under wartime strain (Costello, 5–7, 202–3; Winkler, 46).

Adding to the stress on traditional marriages was a government-business campaign to get married women to do paid work, reversing the conventional wisdom that said a wife should be a full-time homemaker. By 1942, the white male unemployment pool had dried up, and new worker groups were needed. Married white women were the most obvious labor source, and so propaganda badgered and enticed them into the labor market. “Mrs. Stay-at-Home” was the target of one ad saying that women were not doing their share (Gluck, 13). A 1943 editorial in the *Baltimore News Post* told unemployed wives: “Sister you’d better reform” (Anderson, 28). The War Manpower Commission asserted that “women have been allowed to fall into habits of extraordinary leisure” and were “getting by just by being ‘a good wife and mother’” (Rupp, 97). Women were also told that they had over-parented their children and that “momism,” the spoiling of male adolescents, was responsible for the high failure rate of army inductees to reach basic physical and mental standards of toughness (Wylie, 208; Strecker, 67).

The upshot was an influx of married women into the job market. In 1944, for the first time, married female workers outnumbered single female workers, representing 72 percent of the increase in employed women since 1940 (Gluck, 13; Winkler, 50). By then, 19 million women had paid jobs (Anderson, 4). We should not exaggerate the extent of real change that this represented: despite the Rosie the Riveter image, two-thirds of adult females were still full-time homemakers (Hartmann, 21–24). Moreover, 11.5 million of those in jobs were work-

ing in 1940 (Gluck, 7). And for only a handful of women was this their first job; most had worked before marriage. Nevertheless, the change in the lives of many families was real enough.

Not everyone supported women being war workers. Conservative journals such as *American Home* and the Catholic *Commonweal* urged women to stay home. A judge in Seattle ordered a working woman to quit when her husband threatened divorce (Anderson, 82). Many Americans thought that married female factory workers were immoral and assumed that adultery was rife on the night shift. Male workers were openly hostile to women applying for the same work they did.

Many women felt great guilt about shirking their family responsibilities and tried to do two jobs, one in and one out of the home. They got some help from day-care centers for infants, but these were often expensive and inconvenient, and they carried a stigma of parental neglect, so most women relied on family help with children and worked hard to accommodate both family and employer. One woman, who worked nights, got home at 7:30 A.M. After a short sleep, she got up to shop, clean, wash clothes, and cook for her husband and daughter (Gluck, 190). Another rose at 5:45 A.M. to cook the family breakfast before punching in at work at 7 o'clock. "Some nights," if she didn't manage to get dinner on the table by 6 o'clock, her husband "was mad" (Hartmann, 83-84). Food stores were asked to stay open one night a week to enable women workers to shop. By early 1944, the strain on working women had led to high absenteeism.

When it became clear late in 1944 that the war was being won and that women were no longer needed in the work force, the media began encouraging women to return home, partly because of a growing fear that children were being neglected. The worry was no longer about momism but about the emotional and behavior problems of unsupervised adolescents.

Both the Depression and the war appeared to lessen parental authority. In the 1930s, the father's stature had been diminished by his unemployment or reduced wages, which undercut his place as breadwinner and the voice of authority in the family: Geoffrey Gorer noted that, in a row over who should use the family car, a father usually lost to his son (chap. 3). Fathers and elder brothers were often away at war, so important role models were lost. If the mother worked too, the stage seemed set for wildness among unsupervised children. Adults worried about adolescent hostility and rebellion, which was expressed in growing numbers of street gangs. Cutting school increased; in Detroit, truancy jumped 24 percent between 1938 and 1943. More girls got pregnant. And the venereal disease rate rose: between 1941 and 1944, New

York City's VD rate among girls aged fifteen to eighteen years old increased 204 percent (Winkler, 46-47).

This delinquency was part of a larger trend: the birth of teen culture as a separate and distinct phase of the American life cycle. Other factors were at play in this development besides the weakening of family ties; many of those aspects of adolescent group behavior that concern social critics today were already becoming apparent in the youth of the war years. To begin with, there appeared to be a decline in the authority of the schools and in the intellectual quality of education. The denunciations of the teaching profession at the time make clear that upholding educational standards was difficult in wartime.

Charges that are made against education today were common by the eve of war. Standardized tests, used to cope with large class numbers, were accused of producing a drop in analytical and writing skills. The Englishman Geoffrey Gorer observed that American tests were usually checklists of unrelated facts and dates. He charged that, compared to European systems, "the standard required at any given age is low" (74). Eric Sevareid called high school the "most fruitless" period of life. "It is astonishing how little one is taught in these schools." Civics, for example, meant little more than the rote learning of the Bill of Rights (11-12).

The armed services found students were poorly prepared in math, science, and foreign languages. Mass entertainment competed with books for the attention of youth, as students devoured film, radio, and comic books. Philip Wylie, a social critic, said that youth could no longer speak or write properly (92). It was estimated that by 1941 most teens listened to two to three hours of pop music per night. Teen devotion to singers like Frank Sinatra worried adults who saw teenaged girls mob him in the streets and swoon in pseudosexual ecstasy at his concerts. One reporter said that Sinatra "generated the nearest thing to mass hysteria in the country" (Gervasi, 440). A pervasive antiintellectualism was already apparent among many students: the school heroes were the athletes, and humanities courses were seen as boring and irrelevant to "real life."

The war only exacerbated these problems. The draft caused a drop in the quality of secondary teachers, but Congress in 1943 killed a bill that would have raised teachers' pay in order to attract better people (Blum, 239). In urban areas swamped by population influxes, schools had to go on split sessions, and their facilities were run down by overuse. The draft had another direct impact on secondary and higher education: to speed boys through to induction, schools and colleges

cut the requirements for graduation. And the needs of the army and navy also caused universities to offer fewer liberal arts courses and more technical and vocational subjects.

Military development projects, funded by federal grants, moved the focus from pure to applied scientific research and forged a link between university research and defense programs that continued after the war. Campuses became host to military training units. By 1942 Harvard had 4,500 troops training on its campus; the president of the University of California at Berkeley described his school as "a military tent with academic sideshows" (Hartmann, 103-4). A 1943 report by the American Association of University Professors, the watchdog society for academe, warned that the needs of the military were not only dictating curriculum but forcing the hiring of airplane mechanics and other technicians as teachers. The report also alleged that universities were using the emergency as an excuse to fire professors with unpopular views, eroding academic freedom in the name of patriotism.

Assertive patriotism also hurt the quality of debate in secondary schools. World history and current events had often been poorly covered by educators and the press before the war, and most students had little or no understanding of Asia or the causes of the war with Japan. But the wartime approach to social studies wasn't any better: a 1942 poll showed that 44 percent of high schoolers didn't know what the war was about and resented the space it took up on the radio and in magazines (Ugland, 43 and 53; Blum, 46). A typical world history text of 1943 devoted 2.7 percent of its pages to China and Japan and 1.6 percent to East Asia. Militant citizens' groups forced the revision of critical parts of social studies texts, removing negative references to slavery and to the treatment of the Indians, for example, on the basis that these promoted disunity in a time of crisis (Ugland, 111-13; Wylie, 86, 95).

The war's most serious impact on the young was through prosperity and enhanced job opportunities. This, rather than the failure of parental attention, primarily created the teen culture, with its immense spending power, consumer rituals, and peer pressure to be in fashion. It also skewed the high school from a seat of learning into a social center, the fulcrum of teen life, where study competed with athletics, hair styles, clothing, pop idols, and dates. In this closed world, peer approval became of supreme importance, and adult concerns became more and more remote.

With many young adult males in the armed forces, jobs not usually available to younger teenagers, such as bowling alley attendants, were opened up. Whole new job areas, like baby-sitting needed by women

workers, were created. Many employers found they liked hiring adolescents, because they were more pliable than adults and worked cheaply. The result was that teens entered the work force in larger numbers than any other group. From 1940 to 1943, the number of working teens rose 300 percent. By 1942, three million youngsters aged fourteen to seventeen had jobs (Merrill, 230-34; Ugland, 154-55, 163-66, 188).

Most of their work was not essential to the war effort, yet schools felt obliged to modify their schedules to meet the demands of students and employers. The state superintendent of public instruction for Indiana urged schools to hold student working hours to four per day, but he also told principals to allow more if employers needed it. Some schools consented to a fifty-fifty split between work and school. Many closed down altogether during peak consumer periods, like Christmas rush (Gluck, 138; Ugland, 176, 183). In a sense, schools were trapped into compliance, because if they didn't acquiesce, students would quit. One state experienced a 17 percent increase in dropouts between 1940 and 1944. Schools increasingly gave credit for outside work and yielded to student demand for vocational courses useful in the marketplace (Ugland 160, 101-2; Anderson, 93-94). The result was that much education became shallow and vocation oriented (Cohn, 7-8).

The resultant adolescent affluence was, more than any other factor, at the root of the new teen culture, which became a potent new force in America. While the Depression had extended adulthood downward, thrusting adult status and problems on children at an early age, wartime affluence extended childhood upward, creating adolescents who often lacked maturity and direction (Elder, 28). By 1944, teens were estimated to have a spending power of \$750 million and, as adults bought the necessities, this was virtually all discretionary income. The media and business quickly exploited this wealth with products that were often utterly frivolous and priced too high. Magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Young America*, and *Calling All Girls* were created to mold and tap the juvenile market. Fads, such as wearing jewelry decorated with the American flag and sold to students as being a contribution to the war effort, swept the schools; epidemic buying became a feature of juvenile life (Ugland 65, 358-59, 391-93; Gilbert, 203-7).

Many adults, who felt that the Depression had robbed them of their youth, smiled on this youth culture, but the seeming immaturity of adolescent society and its disrespect for age were also bewildering and troubling. Teens' freedom seemed to symbolize, painfully, a world in flux, a world less and less subject to control by adults. Money meant freedom, since juveniles could afford the gas and the cars to get out

from under their parents' supervision. Polls showed that teens thought that gas rationing was the worst restriction of the war. With their new wealth and independence, they threw drinking parties and stayed up all night smoking cigarettes and reefers (a combination of tobacco and marijuana) in cinemas and bowling alleys (Shindler, 89; Gorer, 76). Some youths joined gangs and there was a rash of vandalism, such as slashing seats on public transport and stealing cars to joyride. The delinquency rate in Detroit increased 24 percent between 1938 and 1943 (Winkler, 46). Of most concern to the white middle class, the rise in crime rate for white youth outpaced that for black youth by 250 percent (Ugland, 241).

What was happening? Studies suggested that business prosperity and juvenile delinquency moved in the same direction. Money gave young people an exhilarating sense of unrestricted freedom and power, which produced immature or wild behavior. One irate letter to the Indianapolis *News* said that youth had too much, was too coddled, and had too little demanded of it. "They must have thrills, speed, excitement; that's one reason why they break laws" (Ugland, 261). The visiting French aviator and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, said that being a consumer did not give life a purpose: American youth was bored and at loose ends, a recipe for problems (67-68).

The ultimate difficulty was that, prosperous and unfettered as they might be, juveniles were outside the great events taking place. They were peripheral to the war effort and often felt slighted. Adolescents were attracted to personal freedom and yet yearned to be useful in the larger world. Some teachers and civic officials understood this and enlisted young people to aid the war effort through such activities as collecting scrap metal for the arms industry or building model planes for use in military aircraft spotting exercises. But some activities were of little importance, even silly at times, as when whole schools wore the national colors to encourage the troops. The anger created by feeling small and foolish was one cause of delinquency, as frustrated teens provoked adults to get their attention.

Boys could aspire to be soldiers when they reached enlistment age, but girls had few outlets for their patriotism. Many were too young to be USO workers, who dispensed refreshments and entertainment to soldiers. They could write to a man overseas, but this was far removed from daily reality—so girls who would not have sex with a civilian willingly gave themselves to men in uniform. It was estimated that 85 percent of the girls near army camps who had frequent sex with soldiers were not prostitutes but amateurs, who didn't charge (Costello, 206-7, 214).

These adolescents trying to do their bit were called Victory Girls. Many came out of their war experience all right, but for others there were severe psychological repercussions. One Victory Girl was fourteen and playing with dolls on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. She never played again: her father went away to do war work, and her mother was too busy watching over a large family to notice each child individually. She soon went off with uniformed men, sometimes two or three a day. This fed her young ego, but it also made her wild. She developed a local reputation for being fast and was shunned by family and neighbors. After so many brief liaisons in her formative years, she had trouble forming stable, lasting relationships. After the war, she had three marriages, all of which failed. Looking back in 1985, she felt that the war had given her too much adult freedom too quickly (Terkel, 241-43).

Young people who reached puberty in the late 1940s and early 1950s often felt little ambivalence about the teen culture they inherited. The hallmark of this culture included irresponsibility, freedom, being separate from the larger society, and antiintellectualism. An Italian-American, looking back on the war, most regretted that it led his generation to pursue the shallow excitements sold by the commercial leisure industry and to reject the cultural traditions of their ethnic community. In particular, Italian-American youth no longer knew or cared for opera, which in his youth had enriched the daily lives of many Italian-Americans and was now considered a pleasure accessible only to high-brows (Terkel, 139).

At one level, some teen behavior was not much more than an aping of adult patterns. Older people might call juveniles frivolous and irresponsible, but many of them were also enjoying a new buying power and shared little of the sacrifice of Americans overseas. Lee Oremont, a supermarket owner in Los Angeles, whose business did very well serving war workers, recalled: "I think the war was an unreal period for us here at home. Those of us who lost nobody at the front had a pretty good time. The war was not really in our consciousness as a war" (Terkel, 313-14). Those who visited the hospitals, such as the popular singing group the Andrews Sisters, saw some of the war's human cost. "We saw boys with no arms or legs, with half-faces." But they too did very well in the war, and it was hard not to enjoy it—their audiences were large, and their records were big sellers. Maxene Andrews recalled: "There was a sort of frenzy and a wonderful kind of gaiety. There was much more money around than there had ever been" (292).

Many people rationalized doing well from the war because they were involved in war work or other essential labor and could therefore say that their affluence was a fruit of patriotism. One woman who made and spent a lot of money during the war said, "It had been an enjoyable experience." "I was glad I did it, that I'd done my part" (Gluck, 113). Her correlation between fun and duty was not cynical. For many civilians on the "production front," the war allowed a correlation between victory and self-interest. A lot of people did do their best to conserve, living frugally, and putting their spare earnings into war bonds. But it was also true that corporations, organized labor, and many individuals equated their own interests with the national good and rationalized self-indulgence as patriotism: victory would come substantially through Americans making and spending on the home front.

Business attacked labor organizers, suggesting that worker agitation caused loss of productivity and led to the deaths of soldiers. But business, too, exploited the conflict. As Theodore S. Replier, executive director of the Advertising Council, put it: "Business and advertising have a continuing social responsibility, *which brings rich returns to those who act on it*" (Fox, 55). Business got immense tax incentives because, as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson said, the corporations wouldn't fully cooperate otherwise. In return for being on the team, big business also insisted that New Deal efforts to help labor through Social Security and other social welfare programs be curtailed (Winkler, 10, 87).

Companies used the war to sell their brands. General Electric touted a Mazda light bulb "that survived Pearl Harbor." Radio commercials for funeral homes and burial plots were always aired when the casualty lists were read. One ad suggested that to the Four Freedoms should be added a fifth: freedom from ruptured hernia by using their trusses. "You're unpatriotic, That's what!" was the cry of a husband whose shrunken shirt proved that his wife had failed to buy a Sanforized brand (Fox, 34, 37).

Business vulgarized the ideological meaning of the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy by equating the latter with consumer choice. Prevented after 1942 from making such items as cars, refrigerators, and toasters, business identified the Axis as enemies primarily of free enterprise and equated victory with the renewal of consumer choice. "WHAT THIS WAR IS ALL ABOUT," said one Royal typewriter ad, was the right to "once more walk into any store in the land and buy anything you want" (Fox, 34). The New York *Daily News* said the war was being fought to get back to baseball and a full tank of gas (Sevareid, 215).

Organized labor sometimes showed the same narrowness of vision. Industrial strikes doubled between 1942 and 1943 and jumped again in 1944 and 1945. In 1944 alone, nearly nine million workdays were lost to strikes (Winkler, 41). That same year, as Allied victory seemed assured, absenteeism became chronic, and voluntary labor turnover (workers quitting) reached 61 percent in the manufacturing industries (Nelson, 99). Much of this was due to stress on the worker, such as pressure on women to return home and raise the kids. But much came sheerly from the search for higher wages and better positions at the expense of war production.

People in the 1940s were no more and no less dedicated and selfless than other generations. John Kenneth Galbraith, an economist who was put in charge of price controls in 1942, recalled that in the war years domestic consumption doubled. "Never in the history of human conflict has there been so much talk of sacrifice and so little sacrifice," he thought (Terkel, 320). Many businessmen and consumers had come to equate democracy less with the right to vote than with the right to shop. Military victory was the means, but consumption was the end. Perhaps after the deprivation of the Depression, this was to be expected.

The taste for goods was sharpened by a combination of shortages and high wages. In addition to the ban on mechanical items such as radios, record players, and vacuum cleaners, there was rationing of staples like butter, sugar, and gas. Even women's stockings were in short supply. As items became scarce in 1942, there was panic buying; customers stampeded meat markets, and the hoarding of essentials added to the general scarcity. A black market developed, patronized by people who saw themselves as 100 percent American; middle-class customers and their regular merchants colluded to cheat fair rationing. One-third of those questioned by pollsters admitted that they would buy anything they needed on the black market (Blum, 94-97).

Many Americans, for the first time in history, had more money than they knew what to do with. The gap between the top fifth and bottom fifth in income actually narrowed for the only time in the century (Perret, 440). The middle class made the greatest proportionate gain. A lot of people had discretionary income, and business shaped new spending habits to tap this wealth. Some consumers would buy anything. Tiffany's sold a five-thousand-dollar V for Victory brooch (Shindler, 19). One store manager said: "People want to spend money, and if they don't spend it on textiles they'll spend it on furniture; or . . . we'll find something else for them." The average department store purchase rose from two dollars to ten dollars during the war (Winkler, 34).

The Best War Ever

With many families enjoying two incomes, there was a reassessment of what constituted need, and the trend began whereby many luxuries have come to be perceived as necessities. The war created a new and materialistic middle class. In 1944 the shops were stripped of goods long before Christmas, and on December 7, the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Macy's had its best sales day ever (Blum, 98).

However, if there was prosperity on the home front, an air of anxiety remained—and may have actually intensified as the war neared its end. One major fear was that there would be a new and worse depression when millions of men in uniform were demobilized, flooding the job market at the very time when war industries would be retooling for peacetime production.

Just as disturbing for America's stability was a perceived decline in family values. "Are we facing a moral breakdown?" was by 1945 a favorite radio talk show topic. Delinquency continued to rise, as did divorce, with half a million breakups in 1945. Many of these failed relationships came out of unique wartime circumstances: young women had felt moral pressure to marry a GI and send him overseas happy. Often, such whirlwind romances, fuelled by the adrenaline flow of war, could not survive sustained separation or the reality of daily contact in the flatter atmosphere of peace. Where couples were clearly incompatible, these war marriages were best ended. But critics also saw in the statistics a decline in American values and identified as the major culprit women working outside the home during the war. A 1945 State Farm Insurance ad showed a hysterical girl being carted away to a foster home because her mother was out working (Honey, 54). Women were urged to leave their jobs, which would then be available for returning veterans, and to focus on restoring a healthy home life.

There was gratitude to women for their contribution to the war effort, but this stopped short of according them full legal equality. In 1945 the Equal Rights Amendment failed in the U.S. Senate. As the war ended, a disproportionate number of women workers were laid off. Many accepted this cheerfully, but others felt betrayed by the turnaround. A fired woman worker at the Tacoma Navy Yard said, "Many women in here are plenty unhappy though. The taste of independence has spoiled 'em" (Anderson, 163).

The exodus of women from the work force is intelligible when we understand that the bulk of Americans had seen women's war work as temporary and not a permanent change in labor patterns. Most wartime advertising and government propaganda had emphasized that women's work was only for the duration of hostilities, and it was as-

Mother, when will you stay home again?

Some jubilant day mother will stay home again, doing the job she likes best—making a home for you and daddy, when he gets back. She knows that all the hydraulic valves, line support clips and blocks and electric anti-icing equipment that ADEL turns out for airplanes are helping bring that day closer.

Meanwhile she's learning the vital importance of precision in equipment made by ADEL. In her post-war home she'll want appliances with the same high degree of precision and she will get them when ADEL converts its famous Design Simplicity to products of equal dependability for home and industry.

ADEL

ADEL PRECISION PRODUCTS CORP.
SUNBANK, CALIFORNIA, HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA
SERVICE OFFICES: DETROIT, HAGERSTOWN, SEATTLE
FOR WAR (AND PEACE) BUY BONDS



Fig. 7. Advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post*, May 1944

sumed that women would make a smooth transition back to the home—just as it was taken for granted that veterans would get back to work without too much emotional difficulty. There was limited patience for members of either group who evidenced long-term adjustment problems.

Throughout the war, ads reminded women that, though they might work, their first priority was to be attractive to men. The *Detroit News*, for example, suggested that the ideal female riveter was “like a cross between a campus queen and a Hollywood starlet” (Winkler, 53). A Tangee lipstick promotion said that one reason America was fighting was “the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely” (Hartmann, 199). The continuing accent on sex appeal suggests how little real change in the female persona the war had inaugurated. For many women, preserving the “feminine mystique” was a more important concern than opening career paths.

Despite the showcasing of the working woman during the war, women did not really break through the major barriers that kept the professional world a white male preserve. Men abandoned certain areas of work as women began joining the work force in 1942. Clerical, typing and secretarial jobs, which had been fifty-fifty between the genders in 1940, were in the female domain by 1945. Bank tellers and store clerks also came to be female positions. More women were employed in traditionally female occupations, such as nursing and teaching, but women in advanced technical work, like chemical or electrical engineering, remained few. They gained little ground in law or medicine and were kept out of most supervisory positions in business and industry; the assumptions being both that their careers were temporary and that they were temperamentally best suited to low-level, repetitive work. Further, they earned 60 percent of the male rate for the same work (Costello, 265). In short, the war did not radically change employment patterns, and most women were in the kind of low-echelon positions that were easily terminated.

A majority of middle-class women, who could afford to quit working after the war, wanted to. This is primarily why there was not a revolution in women’s roles because of the war. Women often refused to join unions, rejecting a permanent commitment to a trade. One postwar poll showed that 76 percent of returning homemakers felt they had made no sacrifice in quitting. In 1946, seven of eight adults polled felt that homemaking was a full-time job (Campbell, 87, 232).

The revolution many women of this generation wanted was not in the marketplace but in the home. They wished to return to the kitchen, but in doing so, they did not want to recreate the world of

their mothers; they wanted to reinterpret it. A dominant memory was of the Great Depression and of extended families: parents, siblings, grandparent, aunts, and unemployed uncles living on top of each other in cramped old houses, with little privacy or room for individuality. Parents had controlled the behavior and the finances of unmarried daughters, whose wages went into the family kitty. These daughters, now grown, dreamed of new, clean, well-lit, one-family homes in the suburbs, where they would have the latest labor-saving devices and could raise a nuclear family with the privileges and luxuries they had lacked in their youth. This was their dream of independence. A working woman who in 1944 rejected her daughter’s wish for a WAC uniform as her Christmas gift and instead gave her a doll to cultivate her “feminine interest” was articulating the prevalent view of the modern woman (Campbell, 234).

For many women, war work interrupted their dreams, albeit the prosperity of wartime meant that the dream could be fully realized after the war. The Rosie the Riveter image shouldn’t obscure the fact that the major enhancement of woman’s role in the war was not as producer but as consumer of goods. Women, along with juveniles, were the major buyers, particularly as traditionally male items, such as cars and lawn mowers, were off the market. And the role of consumer fit perfectly with middle-class aspirations for suburbia. From 1944 on, women’s magazines, powerful organs of consumerism, shaped and supported this vision with major articles on the new “victory home” and the wonderful world of appliances that would shortly be available to the homemaker. The war did not inaugurate or even set the stage for the later feminist campaign: that came in the 1970s, and it was a reaction by the daughters of the women who had marched to suburbia in 1945 and 1946.

In all, the war brought great prosperity to the United States, and many Americans—though not all—shared in it. But it also brought great geographic and social changes. The strain in the cultural fabric elicited a conservative reaction by 1944 and left America rich but somewhat anxious as it faced the postwar world.