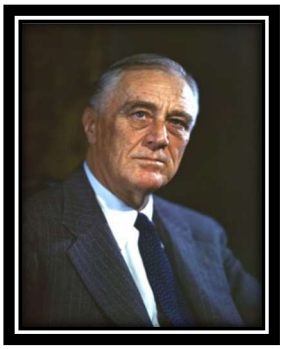
HOW WORLD WAR II ALMOST BROKE AMERICAN POLITICS

TODAY WE CELEBRATE THE WAR AS A FEEL-GOOD MOMENT OF UNITY
THE TRUTH IS, THE COUNTRY HAD HARSH DIVISIONS WE'D RECOGNIZE TODAY
THIS WAS THE "GREATEST GENERATION ?????

362

POLITICS & WAR



PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

POLITICO MAG

JUNE 6, 2019

When Allied forces launched a dramatic air-and-sea assault on German-occupied France 75 years ago Thursday, the very scale and audacity of the operation were awe-inspiring. In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, hordes of planes dropped more than 10,000 paratroopers behind enemy lines; hundreds of warships and thousands of landing craft delivered *130,000 troops to the beaches of Normandy*—most of them British or American—*on the first day of the assault.*

It was a remarkable achievement—and one of the reasons why, so many years later, Americans in a divided country now think of the World War II years as a beacon of feel-good unity and patriotism: Glenn Miller tunes on the radio, war bond posters in every window, Rosie the Riveter at her station "all the day long whether rain or shine, she's a part of the assembly line."

That image—the war as a moment of American domestic comity—however, might come as a surprise to anyone who lived through those years*. The nation that waged that war was racked by deep political divisions, some with echoes that are still reverberating today.*

In the years leading up to its entry into World War II, the United States *was bitterly divided over* the New Deal and vehemently at odds over whether it should enter the conflict erupting in Europe.

Even during the war, the country remained beset by racial and ethnic animosities that pitted Protestants against Catholics, Catholics against Jews, and white Americans against people of color. Partisan rancor posed a steep barrier to the extreme measures that mobilization required: mass taxation, rationing, wage and price fixing, conscription, and surveillance. *The business community sharply resisted the shift from civilian to military production*. Organized labor loudly demanded its share of wartime prosperity. Even as the country fell in line with this vast expansion of state authority, outwardly uniting behind the war effort, discord boiled just beneath the surface, revealing itself in violent home front outbursts and acid displays of political demagoguery.

The war almost tore America apart. And yet, it didn't. **The country ultimately rallied behind its popular but controversial wartime president to transform itself into the "arsenal of democracy."**

It's easy to forget how unlikely an achievement it was. Just four years before D-Day, as Franklin D. Roosevelt launched his campaign for an unprecedented third term as president, America's military lay in shambles. With just 175,000 serving on active duty, the U.S. Army was the 18th biggest in the world—smaller than those of even Switzerland and Bulgaria. When FDR arrived at Ogdensburg, New York, in the spring of 1940, several months before he signed into law a selective service act that instituted a draft of fighting-aged men, he encountered a woeful scene: *10,000 troops drilled without equipment, broomsticks substituting for rifles and trucks for tanks.* The men "haven't got the bodies soldiers must have," worried a seasoned military hand. "They haven't got the psychology of the soldier." They were "short-winded and with legs that won't stand up to a hard match." The following year, when Japan attacked and largely obliterated the Navy's Pacific fleet, little remained of America's capacity to wage war.

Vice-President Harry Truman
The man who would eventually end the War with the use of the atomic Bomb after Roosevelt's death

The story of how Americans surmounted their fractured political culture to mobilize for D-Day remains a trenchant example, in our age of discord and division*, of how a country desperately wanting consensus can rally together in a moment of common purpose.*

"Our bond with Europe is a bond of *race*, and not of political ideology," the famed aviator and outspoken isolationist Charles Lindbergh told a national radio audience in October 1939.

“Our racial strength is vital; politics is a luxury.” Urging listeners to close ranks with Germany in a common struggle against “Asiatic intruders”—Russians, Persians, Turks, and Jews—who would defile America’s “most priceless possession: our inheritance of European blood,” Lindbergh tapped into a deep well of popular nativism. It was a theme he hammered relentlessly from his perch as a spokesman for the America First Committee, an anti-interventionist organization that marshaled considerable support from prominent names in business and industry to oppose aid to Britain and France. The “three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration,” he intoned in a speech two years later.

It wasn’t just Lindbergh. The anti-interventionist movement enjoyed widespread support in 1939 and 1940, and Lindbergh’s brand of anti-interventionist politics—bordering on being pro-Nazi, and laced with a conspiratorial distrust of Jews—was common in circles opposed to Roosevelt’s domestic and foreign policies. The America First Committee counted among its rank’s outspoken anti-Semites such as Avery Brundage, *the former head of the U.S. Olympic Committee who had visited ignominy upon the athletic community when he booted two Jewish runners from the track team at the Berlin games in 1936*. In Kansas, the America First state chairman told followers that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the leading liberal light in FDR’s White House, was Jewish and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a “half-Jew.”

Even the most respectable opponents of Roosevelt’s mobilization policy verged on extremism. In an editorial titled “A Plea for Realism,*” the Wall Street Journal argued in 1940 that “our job today is not to stop Hitler,”* who had “already determined the broad lines of our national life at least for another generation.” Instead, Americans would better direct their focus to “modernize our thinking and our national planning,” a none-too-subtle nod to Nazi state planning and central power.

Isolationist politics were consistent with the increasingly shrill nature of opposition to the New Deal in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor. Though his overwhelming popularity largely inculcated FDR against political attacks in the first several years of his presidency, by the late 1930s, he had his back up against the wall. *A failed attempt to pack the Supreme Court in 1937,* followed by an unsuccessful purge of conservative Democrats in the 1938 primaries, had left the president bruised and battered.

With FDR's domestic policies stalled conservative opponents of the New Deal felt at greater liberty to attack the president in sometimes sharp tones, particularly after he broke with over 150 years of tradition and announced his bid for a third term. Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, campaigning unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination, warned there was “a good deal more danger of the infiltration of totalitarian ideas from the New Deal circle in Washington than there will ever be from any activities of the communists or Nazi bunds.”

When Roosevelt asked Congress to pass a conscription act in 1940—a bold move in the heat of a presidential campaign—Republican Rep. Hamilton Fish denounced the measure as “the very essence of Nazism and Hitlerism in the United States.” *The bill passed comfortably with moderate Republican support, but when it came up for reauthorization a year later, the new Congress passed it by just one vote.*

Even Wendell Willkie, the moderate internationalist who wrested the GOP nomination from Taft, unleashed a torrent of vicious charges in the closing days of the campaign, likening the president's **third term as "our very rapid drift toward totalitarianism" and decrying both "state socialism" and "national socialism"—a clear equation of the New Deal with German fascism.**

"I cannot say that my opponent is *consciously* aiming at State socialism," he cautioned, but "every major economic policy of the New Deal is pushing in that direction."

Roosevelt won a third term, but even after the United States entered the war, political culture remained coarse. *It wasn't always clear that Americans would achieve the necessary unity to mobilize and win.*

***Widespread support for isolationism ended with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941*.** **By a unanimous vote in the Senate and with the lone opposition of Rep. Jeannette Rankin in the House, Congress declared war on the Axis powers, and most Americans quickly rallied behind the war effort.**

In the four years between the exercises at Ogdensburg and the invasion of Normandy, Americans came together en mass to raise, equip transport, and feed a powerful Army and Navy that included 16 million men and 250,000 women. In total, 17 million men and women worked in war production plants, furnishing America and its allies with critical war matériel. At Henry Kaiser's shipyards, workers built "Liberty Ships"—which took 355 days to build in 1941 but, courtesy of managerial ingenuity and back-to-back shifts, could be assembled in just 56 days by the war's end. At Willow Run, Ford Motor Co.'s sprawling factory in the woods of Michigan, massive conveyor belts transported an endless train of parts that workers assembled into bombers. "It is the promise of revenge for Pearl Harbor," the *Detroit Free Press* crowed in 1942.

To finance the war effort, some 85 million citizens lent money to the government by purchasing war bonds, **becoming holders of America's rapidly expanding debt. *Roughly 42 million people paid federal income taxes for the first time in memory after 1942—they did so through a new withholding system that survives to this day.* In total, Americans willingly diverted over 20 percent of their monthly income to taxes and bonds—a considerable investment in their country's future and an important contribution to efforts to keep prices in check.**

Ordinary people, including many who had worried in recent years whether the New Deal had bloated the size of government in dangerous ways, sanctioned the expansion of state authority in all walks of life. Powerful new agencies such as the War Production Board and the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply controlled the flow of commodities such as sugar, meat, rubber, and steel and rationed consumer access to basic household items.

Businesses engaged in war production agreed to allow unions to organize their workforces, while unions, in turn, agreed to government caps on wage increases—a measure intended to keep wartime inflation in check.

Unlike the Civil War or World War I, the Second World War saw no mass resistance to civilian conscription, no major tax revolts, or protests against the expansion of the president's wartime powers. Remembering the ugly example of World War I, during which the federal government scapegoated German Americans and pacifists and attempted to manipulate public opinion, FDR and his advisers generally avoided blunt persuasion and emotion to sell the war. "No hysteria," Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., directed. "No appeal to hate or fear."

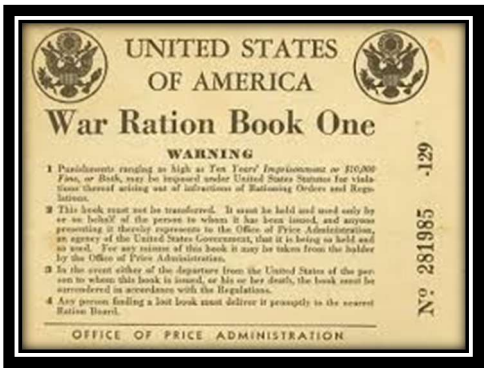
The administration's desire for unity did not, of course, erase deep-seated racial, ethnic, and religious tensions—tensions that flared up as Americans came to chafe at the imposition of greater government control and taxation in the war years. Drawing on the work of thousands of unpaid auxiliary volunteers, the Office of War Information kept close tabs on rumors throughout the war—a surveillance effort that would likely alarm many privacy advocates today. The OWI found that Jews, African Americans, and Japanese detainees were the subject of rampant gossip, usually tied in some way to rationing, military service, or war production. A police officer in Maricopa, Arizona, reported that his neighbors believed "the Jews in New York are sorting the rubber turned in during the rubber drive and are getting $400 a ton for some of it." Another OWI informant in Indiana overheard people complain: "The G.D. Jews … are ruining this country. The whole war is a farce. There's plenty of sugar and plenty of rubber." Another informant told of a friend who complained: "Roosevelt is putting Jews everywhere. Jewish doctors are on the Examining Boards and they accept their boys."

If Jews were widely rumored to be profiting from wartime mobilization and skirting military duty, in the South, white communities were rife with rumors that African Americans were stockpiling weapons in advance of a massive race riot. Black domestic workers were rumored to be forming "Eleanor Roosevelt Clubs," preparing for the day when white women would staff black women's kitchens. Black soldiers were said to be consorting with, and even marrying, young white women. These fears of caste inversion reflected an ugly response to the limited but appreciable wartime mobility African Americans achieved both in the military and civilian sectors.

Finally, on the West Coast, OWI informants encountered widespread rumors that Japanese Americans confined to internment camps were living high on the hog in the camps: consuming meat, sugar, and other items that fell under scarce rationing; burning gasoline during long joy rides; and buying up household luxuries. Despite government controls on wages and prices, the combination of a flush economy and scarce goods created a hike of 25 percent in the Consumer Price Index between 1939 and 1943.

***In retrospect, with the miseries of the camps now a subject of national shame, it's a bitter irony that their occupants were accused of high-living, but anti-Japanese rumors struck at the fear that someone was benefiting from the wartime economy at the expense of everyone else*. Anti-Japanese incitement was not merely the stuff of popular chitchat. In a typical display of demagoguery, the House Committee on Un-American Activities held hearings that lent a powerful platform to the purveyors of anti-Japanese provocations. "You have got some people here that have got boys in the Army … that have been killed," one man testified in 1943, "and they walk into a drug store for a Coca-Cola or something and all the Japanese have all the seats." Rep. Karl Mundt echoed this slur, complaining that "we are feeding their Japanese better than our white citizens."**

Rumors sometimes incited violence. In Detroit in June 1943, word spread among white neighborhoods that a group of black hoodlums had slit the throat of a white soldier and raped his girlfriend. *The rioting that ensued claimed 34 lives, injured 675 others, and took an expensive toll on property*. Later that summer, when a white policeman shot a black soldier in Harlem, variations on the story circulated widely in the black community, leading to a massive commodity riot that left hundreds of storefronts shattered and looted. In both cases, underlying tensions related to wartime mobilization expressed themselves in violent conflagrations.


UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA

War Ration Book One

WARNING

1 Punishments ranging as high as Ten Years' Imprisonment or $10,000 Fine, or Both, may be imposed under United States Statutes for violations thereof arising out of infractions of Rationing Orders and Regulations.

2 This book must not be transferred. It must be held and used only by or on behalf of the person to whom it has been issued, and anyone presenting it thereby represents to the Office of Price Administration, an agency of the United States Government, that it is being so held and so used. For any misuse of this book it may be taken from the holder by the Office of Price Administration.

3 In the event either of the departure from the United States of the person to whom this book is issued, or his or her death, the book must be surrendered in accordance with the Regulations.

4 Any person finding a lost book must deliver it promptly to the nearest Ration Board.

OFFICE OF PRICE ADMINISTRATION

-129

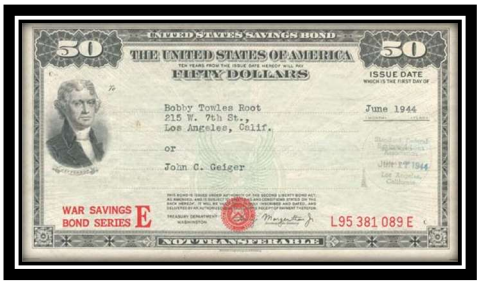
No. 281985

In Los Angeles that same summer, scores of off-duty sailors attacked young Latino men who sported "zoot suits"—flashy attire that typically included baggy, trousers, wide-lapeled jackets, watch fobs, and flamboyant hats. Forming "taxicab brigades," the sailors systematically located beat, and "de-zooted" the young men, whose attire probably violated rationing restrictions against pleats and on the length of material permitted for men's clothing. Once again, a minority population bore the brunt of popular dissatisfaction with sacrifices imposed by the wartime state. Partisanship among politicians also increased markedly during the war years. In 1944, it was all but a foregone conclusion that FDR would run for a fourth term. As a popular and probably apocryphal story went: When the president visited North Africa, a soldier who happened upon his open-top car cried out, "Oh, my God!"

"Just for one more term, son," FDR purportedly quipped.

For many Americans, and particularly for Republicans, who had been shut out of the White House since 1933, it seemed no laughing matter. *A fourth term would crown the president a king—and the king, they were convinced, was a communist*. The conservative press railed against "the New Deal-Communist axis" (*New York Daily Mirror*) and claimed "the people who support the New Deal … are supporting the Communists and building them up for the day when they plan to bring the Red Terror sweeping down upon America" (*Chicago Tribune*).

John Bricker, the GOP nominee for vice president, warned that "insidious and ominous are the forces of communism linked with irreligion that are worming their way into national life. … First, the New Deal took over the Democratic Party and destroyed its very foundation. Now these Communist forces have taken over the New Deal." Governor Thomas Dewey of New York, FDR's opponent in 1944, called the president "indispensable to Earl Browder," the American communist leader. In case voters missed the point, he later clarified: "In Russia, a Communist is a man who supports the Government. In America, a Communist is a man who supports the fourth term so our form of government may more easily be changed."



It was a filthy fight, and all the more so with so many soldiers and sailors fighting abroad. The president won comfortably but with a smaller margin than in any of his previous elections.
In other ways, the spirit of unity and camaraderie that we remember may over-sentimentalize a more complicated story. Then and later, private sector barons who turned out tanks and rifles for the Army and who staffed wartime agencies as "dollar-a-year men," congratulated themselves on the victory of free markets over the state economies of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. "If Free Enterprise has not flourished here," wrote the *Saturday Evening Post*, "the cause of world freedom might be lost for centuries." Capitalism, it claimed, was "the last bulwark of civilization," and the reason America prevailed was "mass employment, mass production, mass advertising, mass distribution and mass ownership of the products of industry."

This spirit of triumphalism masked a darker reality: In 1940 and 1941, the Roosevelt administration faced widespread resistance, particularly from auto companies, to switch from civilian to war production. *The reason Chrysler converted to tank building, and Ford to bombers, was that the government was compelled to offer "cost-plus" contracts that guaranteed defense manufacturers a profit, no matter the efficiency of production*. America's triumph in World War II did not derive from the magic of private-sector genius. It owed to precisely the brand of top-down state planning that business leaders disdained during the New Deal era but learned to love when it delivered reliable profits in war years.

Organized labor, too, proved capable of exerting self-interest. With the economy operating at full employment, people implicitly understood that it was a seller's workplace. Absenteeism climbed as high as 25 percent in key defense industries, and wildcat strikes became a chronic headache for employers. When John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers took his members out on strike in 1943, FDR used troops to seize at least one mine and threatened to have strikers drafted into military service.

It should not surprise us that people could act both for the greater good and out of personal motivation. Wars are seldom one-dimensional political events, and people fight and mobilize for them out of a mix of emotions. A survey in 1942 found that 90 percent of respondents could not name a single provision of the Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration by the United States and Great Britain that delineated a clear and high-minded vision for the postwar world. A majority of those surveyed openly volunteered that they had "no clear idea what the war is all about." Neither could they name all of FDR's Four Freedoms, principles that the president laid out before Congress in 1941. That didn't mean that people acted without ideology.

Surveys found that citizens bought war bonds and volunteered for military service out of a vague but very clear sense of patriotism, duty to their communities and to the soldiers and sailors who hailed from those communities, and a sense of moral purpose that may not have found easy reference in a political document. At the same time, surveys also showed that Americans believed they were fighting for a better standard of living in the postwar period—for the promise of homes, jobs, and an end to Depression-era scarcity and wartime rationing. The motives that drove ordinary people were both high-minded and parochial. It wasn't either/or.

A country that could scarcely outfit its small Army with rifles in 1940 emerged within four years to outfit one of the most formidable militaries in modern history. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Churchill likened the United States to a "gigantic boiler."

"Once the fire is lighted under it, there is no limit to the power it can generate," the British prime minister said.

Seventy-five years ago, Operation Overlord proved Churchill right, as Americans saw the culmination of a collective effort unprecedented and since unseen—made all the more remarkable by its successful navigation of very real divisions that threatened but did not break the public spirit.

"WAR HAS RULES, MUD WRESTLING HAS RULES – POLITICS HAVE NO RULES"
ROSS PEROT

DISCLAIMER

PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE AUTHENTIC WEBSITES I CANNOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.