Chapter 25: The Second World War

Overview

Americans were particularly isolationist when war in Europe broke out. At most, some isolationists believed the United States should act to protect the Western Hemisphere. President Roosevelt and others believed the United States should actively aid England’s and France’s resistance of Germany. Until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the question of involvement was debated. Afterward there was no question. The American political economy was forced to adapt to war. It was a transformation that Americans made willingly.

Key Topics

- The strategic and domestic issues at stake in the debate over American entry into the war
- The United States had to balance its own interests with those of its allies in setting wartime strategy
- The war emergency increased the federal government’s power over individuals and created a “mixed economy” in which government intervention was as important as market forces
- War generated new economic opportunities for women and minorities, and wartime rhetoric highlighted issues of civil rights, but war also bred fear that crushed individual rights and humanitarian impulses

Review Questions

- How did Roosevelt’s strategy for coping with the global depression differ from Britain’s? From Japan’s?
- Which was more important to victory at Midway, planning or luck?
- Why did the population of the West grow so rapidly during the war?
- Thurgood Marshall and James Omura both refer to a “gestapo” in America. What are they talking about?
- According to American leaders, what caused World War II? How did their answers to that question affect their plans for the postwar world?

Annotated chapter outline

A. Philip Randolph: Randolph founded the labor union the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. In 1941 President Roosevelt signed an executive order prohibiting discrimination based on race, creed, color, or national origin in the defense industry because of Randolph’s influence.

Island in a Totalitarian Sea: The post-World War I years were tension-filled. The economic boom of the 1920s was not global but the economic chaos of the 1930s was global. Americans were particularly isolationist when war in Europe broke out. At most, some isolationists believed the United States should act to protect the Western Hemisphere. President Roosevelt and others believed the United States should actively aid England’s and France’s resistance of Germany. Both groups knew that participation in the war would change the United States. Until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the question of involvement was debated. Afterward there was no question.

- The economy of post-World War I Europe had stagnated under the heavy burdens imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Economic chaos in Europe and Asia contributed to the rise of massive unemployment, hunger, and despair. Free trade was abandoned in favor of national self-sufficiency -- a move called autarky. Americans used the term totalitarian to describe those fascist and communist governments that demanded total obedience.
- Economic disasters and resentment caused Europeans to look for causes: Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 was based in large part on his ability to exploit Germans’ fears and prejudices. He and Mussolini preached ethnic supremacy and Hitler built his Germany on racism and brutality.
Jews were the primary target although other groups were included in the subhuman category. As Germany, Italy, and Japan sought to solve their economic problems through military conquest, President Roosevelt grew apprehensive.

- Hitler militarized the Rhineland, Mussolini’s troops moved into Ethiopia, and Japan invaded China’s port cities. The allies, Great Britain and France, were powerless to stop the aggression and instead accepted, or appeased, Hitler’s promise that he would not take any more land.
- Roosevelt pushed for economic quarantine and military buildup but the Congress and the American public had no enthusiasm for the plans. After all, the United States had plenty of problems of its own. The Congress tried to prevent the United States from making similar mistakes that got them into the Great War.
- With another election looming on the horizon, Roosevelt’s third, he feared it would become a referendum on what the United States should do. The Republicans chose Wendell Wilkie, an ardent internationalist who supported the military draft. Roosevelt won a third term by a 5 million vote margin.
- Following the election, Prime Minister Winston Churchill disclosed that Great Britain was almost broke. “Cash and carry” was implemented and soon replaced with “Lend-Lease.” In 1940, Roosevelt and Churchill met off the coast of Newfoundland. The result was the Atlantic Charter which articulated the nations’ war aims.
- Japanese expansion into China and Southeast Asia was conducted alongside diplomatic talks. Despite warnings and troop movements, the United States was unprepared for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941. Following a deadly bombardment of military bases in Hawaii and the Philippines, the United States Congress declared war on Japan. On December 11, Germany, Japan’s ally, declared war on the United States.

**Turning the Tide:** The first half of 1942 was nothing more than bad news of Axis expansions and Allied defeats. The tide began to turn in late 1942 but there remained three years before victory was secure.

- Japan’s goal in the Pacific was to eliminate American and British presence. Having partially broken the Japanese military code, the United States Navy prepared to defend its South Pacific possessions.
- The United States military was no more prepared to fight World War II than World War I. The Selective Service Act of 1940 saw some 16 million men registered. By December 1941, 2 million men and 80,000 women had enlisted. American service personnel made the difficult transition from civilian to military life. Roosevelt ordered the services to admit African Americans, and Benjamin O. Davis was appointed brigadier general, but these advances did not eradicate the injustices. The armed forces hesitantly enlisted women to perform service roles.
- World War II weapons technology advanced with blinding speed. American factories retooled to produce the latest in weapons although it took until 1943 for many of these innovative weapons to get to the front. Teams of university scientists were funded with government money to research and develop new kinds of bombs, most notably an atomic weapon. World War II brought about the marriage of technology and war.
- While holding Japan in check in the Pacific, the British, Soviet, and American focus was on defeating Nazi Germany. Holding the alliance of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union together was one of Roosevelt’s priorities as well as challenges. The three had conflicting aims and strategies.

**Organizing for Production:** American political economy was forced to adapt to war. During the war, the nation borrowed heavily, and wartime spending stimulated the economy. War contracts created 17 million jobs. People had jobs and they had money to spend and they spent it. As industry expanded into new cities and regions, workers relocated, too, and organized themselves into a powerful political and economic force.
Roosevelt’s administration created agencies to control prices, assign labor, and gear up industry. Tax breaks and other incentives encouraged cooperation between industry and government and when cooperation was not forthcoming the power of the federal government was used.

Industry’s geographic focus shifted to the South, Southwest, and the Pacific. The Manhattan Project located laboratories in Tennessee, New Mexico, and Washington. Jobs meant people and people flocked west to the new jobs. Population in the West increased 40 percent.

Labor was in short supply during the war. Wages increased and membership in organized labor unions swelled. Americans relocated to jobs. Braceros, Mexican farm workers, legally moved north to harvest crops. African Americans left the South for government jobs that featured anti-discrimination clauses and had wages set by the federal government. The movement of Americans to the industrialized cities changed the political complexion of their adopted hometowns and regions.

The war economy shifted women workers into new roles. Some women moved from service or agricultural jobs into industry and they enjoyed higher wages. What had once been seen as areas or jobs inappropriate for women, metal working for example, were now commonly filled by women.

Between Idealism and Fear: The idealism of earlier wars was lacking in World War II. Franklin Delano Roosevelt characterized the Americans’ philosophy in his Four Freedoms: freedom of speech and worship and freedom from want and fear.

The “Double V” campaign was launched by the Pittsburgh Courier in 1942. It linked two victories: the victory over fascism and the victory over racism at home. When African-American servicemen returned home from the service they were determined not to accept discrimination. They had fought and defeated the evil of Adolf Hitler. When they returned home they were able and willing to defeat the evil of Jim Crow.

Journalists, politicians, and military authorities, acting out of fear and prejudice, perpetrated an injustice on American citizens of Japanese descent. “Japanese aliens and nonaliens” were ordered to report to relocation centers for removal from the Pacific Coast “war zone.” The order applied to all Japanese and Japanese citizens and alien residents living in the Pacific coast states.

The United States knew about the plight of European Jews during the war but fear and anti-semitism kept Americans from doing much at all. The State Department, worried about spies, erected a paper wall of bureaucratic restrictions that kept the flow of immigrants to a trickle. When the camps were finally liberated in 1945, American servicemen, journalists, and the public came face to face with the extent of the fascist horror.

Closing with the Enemy: Americans attacked the Axis powers with speed and firepower. Following the Allied invasion of North Africa the United States carried the war to Japan and Europe with a destructiveness never before witnessed. Looking beyond the victory, Americans began to anticipate the difficulties of reconstructing the world and creating institutions necessary for a global economy at peace.

From North Africa, the American and English forces moved up the Italian peninsula. June 6, 1944, the promised invasion of France was begun in an amphibious assault on the coast of Normandy. Americans began the slow and deadly process of reclaiming France from the Germans.

In the Pacific the Americans had to break through Japanese fortifications on islands stretching from Alaska to Australia. The process was simple: reclaim one island at a time. It came to be known as “island hopping,” and despite its simple strategy, the war in the Pacific was horrific and costly. Ground troops, air force, and naval forces were brought to bear on the enemy forces. As the battle lines moved closer to Tokyo, American bombers got close enough to attack Japanese cities. Eventually more than 60 percent of Japan’s urban areas were fire bombed.

While servicemen fought, officials in Europe planned the postwar future. American planners believed that American security would depend on having a functional international organization,
global free trade, and a worldwide network of American military bases. Roosevelt envisioned a stronger international organization led by the world’s principal powers which would act to disband empires. The United States was trying not to repeat the mistakes that had led to World War II.

- The planners also wanted to create an open door world. Participants at a conference designed to make arrangements for global economic cooperation created a system to manage and stabilize the international movement for money.
- Military planners, with the smoke of Pearl Harbor still hanging in the air, were unwilling to leave the nation’s security to economists. Instead they argued for a global system of military bases.
- Roosevelt, who had been elected to an unprecedented third term, was elected for a fourth term in 1944. In April, the president was dead. Harry Truman, former vice president, was now president. He took office and aides briefed him of the Manhattan Project and the planned test on July 16, 1945. Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6. Two days later the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria. On August 9, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Japanese Emperor Hirohito unconditionally surrendered August 14, 1945. The war was over.

**Conclusion:** With Japan’s surrender World War II was over. The world had changed and the future was both certain and uncertain. The United States was the richest and most powerful nation in the world, but despite its power America and Americans looked to the future with many unanswerable questions.

**Analytical reading** These questions refer to the passage “A World of Hostile Blocs” on pages 593-594.

1. From the passages which precede this, define the term “autarky” and provide examples of how Germany and Japan implemented this idea. Did their actions have anything to do with global economic collapse of the early 1930s?
2. In light of economic conditions in Germany, for example, why would the German people sacrifice their liberty, prosperity, and lives for the good of the nation?

**Lecture Strategies**

Few topics offer so many opportunities to lecture on material interesting to your students than World War II. If you have examined the problems that World War I created, then you can pick up that narrative to discuss the problems of the Treaty of Versailles, failure to help European nations rebuild after World War I and its contribution to economic collapse in the 1930s, and so on. You also have the opportunity to try and make the totalitarian dictators make sense to your students by examining the conditions in Europe that brought the dictators to power.

Adolf Hitler’s personality, leadership style, charisma, and philosophy help to make the war make sense. Included in this topic is the unfathomable horror of the extermination camps. This topic also means that your students have to confront American anti-semitism and the failure of the government to do anything to aid European Jews trying to leave or fight Hitler.

The war strategy, troop movements, technology, and American military leaders provide a good opportunity to discuss America’s past and present.

Renewed interest in things related to World War II and oral histories of the war generation should prove a big help in this regard. Have your students examine economic and technological changes in American manufacturing as well as demographic changes because of the war.

The lives of women and minorities are also changed because of the war and this is a good opportunity to look at these changes as well as those implemented during the New Deal to view profound social change.

The racial climate in the United States and the irony of minority Americans fighting abroad for freedom and democracy only to have it denied to them at home is a compelling topic.
Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.


Documents Collection see Part Twenty-Five: World War Two

*Albert Einstein, Letter to President Roosevelt 1939
*Charles Lindbergh, Radio Address 1941
*Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Four Freedoms 1941
*Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress 1941
*A. Philip Randolph, “Why Should We March?” 1942
*Japanese Relocation Order, February 19, 1942
*Sterling A. Brown, “Out of Their Mouths” 1942

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.