CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: WORLD WAR II, 1941–1945

THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II
The Shadows of War
Isolationism
Roosevelt Readies for War
Pearl Harbor

ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY
Mobilizing for War
Economic Conversion
New Workers
Wartime Strikes

THE HOME FRONT
Families in Wartime
The Internment of Japanese Americans
Civil Rights and Race Riots
Zoot-Suit Riots
Popular Culture and “The Good War”

MEN AND WOMEN IN UNIFORM
Creating the Armed Forces
Women Enter the Military
Old Practices and New Horizons
The Medical Corps
Prisoners of War

THE WORLD AT WAR
Soviets Halt Nazi Drive
The Allied Offensive
The Allied Invasion of Europe
The High Cost of European Victory
The War in Asia and the Pacific

THE LAST STAGES OF THE WAR
The Holocaust
The Yalta Conference
The Atomic Bomb

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
*The events leading to Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war
*The marshaling of national resources for war
*American society during wartime
*The mobilization of Americans into the armed forces
*The war in Europe and Asia
*Diplomacy and the atomic bomb

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO The Manhattan Project created a community of scientists whose mission was to build the atomic bomb. The scientists
and their families lived in the remote, isolated community of Los Alamos. They formed a close-knit community, united by antagonism toward the army and secrecy from the outside world. Led by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientists developed a strong sense of camaraderie as they struggled with numerous problems in the process of developing the atomic bomb. The vignette illustrates how the war was remaking communities and transforming nearly all aspects of society, especially through the movement of people.

**THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II** The global character of the Great Depression accelerated a breakdown in the political order. Militaristic authoritarian regimes that had emerged in Japan, Italy, and Germany threatened peace throughout the world. Japan took over Manchuria and then invaded China. Italy made Ethiopia a colony. German aggression against Czechoslovakia threatened to force Britain and France into the war. By the mid-1930s many Americans had concluded that entry into WWI and an active foreign role for the United States, had been a serious mistake. College students protested against the war. Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts to limit the sale of munitions to warring countries. Prominent Americans urged a policy of “America First” to promote non-intervention. FDR promoted military preparedness, despite little national support. The combined German-Soviet invasion of Poland plunged Europe into war. German blitzkrieg techniques quickly led to takeovers of Denmark, Norway, and later Belgium and France. As the Nazi air force pounded Britain, FDR pushed for increased military expenditures. As 1940 was an election year, FDR claimed these were for “hemispheric defense.” After winning his third term, FDR expanded American involvement, creating a security zone in much of the Atlantic, getting lend-lease legislation passed, and instituting a draft. FDR met with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and drafted the Atlantic Charter—a statement of war aims. The Japanese threatened to seize Europe’s Asian colonies. FDR cut off trade with Japan. Japan attacked the base in Pearl Harbor. The United States declared war, with declarations against Germany and Italy soon to follow.

**ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY** Soon after the United States entered the war, Congress and FDR began to create the laws and numerous new agencies to promote mobilization. The Office of War Information controlled war news and promoted morale at home. War bonds were used to promote support as well as raise funds. As mobilization proceeded, New Deal agencies vanished. Many observers believed that the industrial capacity of the United States was the decisive factor. Overseen by the War Production Board, civilian firms were converted to war purposes and American industries were primed for all-out production. An unprecedented economic boom pulled the country out of the depression. The largest firms received the lion’s share of the war profits. Defense production transformed the West and South, which received large shares of wartime contracts. The war led to increased farm profits, but thousands of small farms disappeared.

The demand for labor brought Mexicans, Indians, African Americans, and women into the industrial labor force. The entry of these new female workers broke down many stereotypes. Most of the women wanted to keep on working after the war was over, but the industries had already begun plans for their lay-offs to provide jobs for returning veterans. Workers’ wages went, but not as fast as profits or prices. Prior to American entry, militant unions had led a number of strikes. Once the United States entered the war, the major unions agreed to no-strike pledges—though they were able to increase their membership and win new benefits. African-
American union membership doubled. Some illegal strikes did break out, leading to federal antistrike legislation.

**THE HOME FRONT** The war spurred marriage rates. Shortages of housing and retail goods added to the difficulties families encountered. With one-parent households increasing, childcare issues arose. Some day-care assistance was available, though it scarcely met people’s needs. The rise in unsupervised youths created problems with juvenile crime. The availability of jobs led to higher high school dropout rates. Public health improved greatly during the war as increased earnings allowed for medical and dental care. After Pearl Harbor, anti-Japanese sentiment led by the government, singled out Japanese Americans for special restrictions. In 1942, over 112,000 Japanese were removed from their homes in the West to relocation centers, often enduring harsh living conditions. The Supreme Court upheld the policy, though in 1988 the U.S. Congress voted reparations and public apologies.

African American activists launched a “Double V” campaign calling for victory overseas and equal rights at home. FDR responded to a threatened march on Washington by banning racial discrimination in defense industries. New civil rights organizations emerged while older ones grew. Over 1 million blacks left the South to take jobs in war industries. They often encountered violent resistance from local whites. Whites’ bitter resentment against Mexican Americans exploded in 1943. The zoot-suit riots erupted when whites concluded that Mexican youths that wore the flamboyant clothes were unpatriotic. Ironically, most Mexican Americans served in the military or worked in war industries. Popular culture seemed to bridge the racial divisions. Southerners moving to northern cities brought musical styles and changed the sound of popular culture. Popular entertainment, whether in film or comic books, emphasized the wartime spirit, as did fashion.

**MEN AND WOMEN IN UNIFORM** Before the United States could become a first-rank military power it had to mobilize far more than the 200,000 men who were in uniform in 1939. Even before formally entering the war, the government had begun a draft. The officer corps, except for General Eisenhower, tended to be professional, conservative, and autocratic. Junior officers were trained in special military schools and developed close ties with their troops. For the first time, the War Department created women’s divisions of the major services. Most stayed within the country and performed clerical or health-related duties. But some flew planes and others went into combat with the troops. The military closely monitored sexual activity and practiced racial segregation.

Despite suspicions of the military’s racism, 1 million African Americans served in the armed forces. These soldiers encountered segregation at every point. Many racial or ethnic minorities (along with homosexuals) also served and often found their experience made them feel more included in American society. In Europe, American troops met a mixed welcome, in part dictated by their actions. The risk of injury was much higher than that of getting killed in battle. Battle fatigue also was a problem. The army depended on a variety of medical personnel to care for sick and wounded soldiers. The true heroes of the battlefront were the medics attached to each infantry battalion.

POWs held in German camps were treated much better than those held by the Japanese. This
treatment, along with racism, led Americans to treat Japanese POWs more harshly than those captured in the European theater.

THE WORLD AT WAR During the first year of American involvement, FDR called the war news “all bad.” But several things indicated a brighter future. The burden of fighting the Nazis fell to the Soviets who blocked the German advance on Moscow. The Soviets broke the siege of Stalingrad in February 1943 and began to push the Germans back. Although the Soviets appealed for the Allies to open up a “second front” in western Europe, they instead attacked North Africa and Italy. Churchill and FDR met in Casablanca and agreed to seek an unconditional German surrender. American and British planes poured bombs on German cities, which weakened the economy, undermined civilian morale, and crippled the German air force.

The Allied invasion forced Italy out of the war, though German troops stalled Allied advances. Uprisings against Nazi rule tied up German power. By early 1944, Allied units were preparing for the D-Day assault on France. By July, 1 million had landed in France. Paris was taken on August 25, 1944. France and other occupied countries fell as Allied units overran the Germans. The Battle of the Bulge temporarily halted the Allied advance, but by Christmas 1944 Germans had fallen back to their own territory. On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered. In the Pacific theater Allied forces stopped Japanese advances by June 1942. A series of naval battles and island hopping brought United States forces closer to the Japanese home islands. Victories in the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa enabled the Allies to bomb Japanese cities. Britain and the United States pressed for rapid surrender to prevent the Soviets from taking any Japanese-held territories.

LAST STAGES OF THE WAR The horror of the Nazi’s systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other “inferior” races was slow to enter American consciousness. Although Jewish refugees pleaded for a military strike to stop the killings, the War Department vetoed any such plans.

The “Big Three” attempted to hammer out the shape of the postwar world. The ideals of the Atlantic Charter fell before Soviet and British demands for spheres of influence. FDR continued to hold on to his idealism, but his death in April cast a shadow over hopes for peaceful solutions to global problems. The new president, Harry S. Truman, lacked FDR’s finesse and planned a get-tough policy with the Soviet Union. At Potsdam, little progress was made on planning the future. Truman decided to use nuclear weapons against the Japanese even though he was aware that the war could have been brought to a peaceful conclusion with only a slight modification in policy. Truman claimed the use of the bomb would substantially shorten the war and save American lives.

CONCLUSION The war led to enormous casualties and transformed the United States. The U.S. emerged as the dominant power in the world.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Make a connection between the events that led to WWI and the events that led to WWII. Compare the 14 Points with the Atlantic Charter and note their basic similarities. Connect
the problems leading to WWII with the decisions that were reached in the Versailles Conference. Students need to see the war in its context.

2. The war laid the groundwork for the foreign policy problems with which Americans had to cope in the post-war era. A lecture that emphasizes what the United States was doing with regard to the Soviet Union should shed light on why a Cold War developed. Most students assume that the United States defeated Germany with a little help from the Soviets. In fact, the opposite is closer to reality. A lecture on how Americans went along with the British request to hold off opening a second front should help students understand why the Soviets felt entitled to a better post-war settlement than Truman was willing to give.

3. The war also laid the groundwork for the domestic policy problems with which Americans had to cope in the post-war era. Explore this theme by examining wartime racial conflicts, growth in national debt, rise of hostility to “big government,” and changes in family structure.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the reasons that during the 1930s so many Americans strongly opposed playing an active role in foreign affairs?

2. What were American goals in WWII? Can you make a connection between those goals and the goals in WWI?

3. Most Americans believe that the United States won the war with a little help from the Soviets. Most Russians believe the opposite. Which side is closer to the truth? Can you anticipate that these differences of opinion could lead to problems after the war?

4. In what ways did women and minorities benefit from their WWII experience? Can you anticipate how this would lead to problems after the war?

5. Why were Japanese Americans singled out for special treatment? Why not German or Italian Americans?

6. Harry Truman claimed that dropping the bomb saved half a million lives. Do you buy his explanation?

Out of Class Activity

Students who have conducted interviews with depression-era relatives (see Chapter 24) may wish to follow up these interviews by asking their subjects to discuss their WWII experiences. Students might look at Studs Terkel’s The Good War for some insight into how ordinary men and women saw things. They should focus on to examining how the war shaped people’s lives, whether in uniform or at home and how the war affected their communities.
If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

As the reader may have noticed, it’s hard to go wrong with Walter LaFeber’s *The American Age* (Norton, 1994), the best general guide to foreign policy. Gerald D. Nash’s *The Crucial Era* (St. Martin’s, 2nd edition, 1992) deals with both the New Deal and WWII and has good material on the home front.

Audio Visual Aids

The TV series “The World at War” covers virtually every conceivable aspect of the path to war and its conclusion. There are far too many programs on the war to list here. Films on the home front are less abundant. See for example:

“A Question of Loyalty” Examines the internment of Japanese Americans. (Color, 50 minutes, 1980)

“The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter” Tells the stories of five women workers. (Color, 60 minutes, 1980)

“American People in World War II” Describes the home front during WWII. (Color, 25 minutes, 1973)