4. “We Are All In It”: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Home Front

On the eve of World War II, America was depleted by years of economic depression and disillusioned by the bitter aftermath of the First World War, once billed as “the war to end all wars.” Much of American industry lay idle, its armed forces vastly underdeveloped. Whether measured in logistical terms or by morale, Americans were not ready to face the combined might of the Axis powers.

But Franklin D. Roosevelt understood that face it they must or surrender everything they held dear. He knew that in order to prevail, Americans must confront this tremendous threat as one people, with a unity of purpose perhaps not seen since the Revolution. In the annals of history, one of FDR’s greatest achievements was the way he summoned the American people to this mission.

After a tour around the country inspecting defense plants and other war-readiness programs in October 1942, FDR spoke to the country in a fireside chat. “This whole nation of one hundred and thirty million free men, women and children,” he said, “is becoming one great fighting force. . . . A few of
us are decorated with medals for heroic achievement, but all of us can have that deep and permanent inner satisfaction that comes from doing the best we know how—each of us playing an honorable part in the great struggle to save our democratic civilization.”

The American home front was indeed critical to Allied victory. Ultimately more than sixteen million Americans would serve in the armed forces during the conflict—far more than in any war before or since. But well before the country sent large numbers of soldiers overseas in 1943 and especially 1944, its home industries were beating the Axis in the vital area of armaments production. The United States outproduced all the Axis countries as well as the other Allies by a large margin, and many have argued this “crushing superiority of equipment,” as FDR put it shortly after Pearl Harbor, was a deciding factor in the war. In an extraordinary burst of effort, Americans converted industrial plants and ramped up output to arm both the Allies and themselves, nearly doubling the country’s gross domestic product in the process.

This undertaking required a very high level of cooperation and coordination. Labor and management had to lay aside their differences to keep plants running 24–7. Both had to relinquish prejudices against women and minority workers. Meanwhile, everyone accepted federal controls on prices and wages to prevent war spending from boosting the cost of living to untenable heights. They accepted bans on the manufacture of certain consumer products so that materials could be diverted to war production, and rationing of food and other commodities to make sure that everyone got the essentials despite inevitable shortages. People saved the earnings from their long hours on the job, conserved resources in their homes and neighborhoods, and invested in war bonds to support their country. They grew and canned their own food.

Throughout the war, FDR reminded Americans at home that every one of these choices mattered in the great contest that would decide whether their way of life stood or fell. Now more than ever, his fireside chats riveted listeners. In the summer of 1943, for example, FDR used a radio broadcast to admonish his countrymen, “The next time anyone says to you that this war is ‘in the bag,’ or says ‘it’s all over but the shouting,’ you should ask him these questions: ‘Are you working full time on your job? Are you growing all the food you can? Are you buying your limit of war bonds? Are you loyally and cheerfully cooperating with your Government in preventing inflation and profiteering, and in making rationing work with fairness to all?’ . . . It is not too much to say that we must pour into this war the entire strength and intelligence and will power of the United States.”

The challenge was formidable and even terrifying, but FDR’s sure-footedness and seemingly eternal optimism helped sustain Americans in the cause to which he had rallied them. He always believed that their strength and intelligence and willpower would carry them to victory. “Whatever our individual circumstances or opportunities,” he told them in 1942, “we are all in it, and our spirit is good, and we Americans and our allies are going to win—and do not let anyone tell you anything different.”
Arming America and Its Allies

On the threshold of World War II, the United States was no military superpower. Indeed, the U.S. Army ranked nineteenth in the world—with fewer than two hundred soldiers, it was smaller than Portugal’s—while the U.S. Navy, though expanding, had yet to achieve its vaunted two-ocean status.

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 led the Roosevelt administration to call for increased defense spending from Congress, but it was not until the fall of France in May–June 1940 that the United States began this effort in earnest. Recognizing that the advent of airpower had fundamentally changed the nature of warfare, FDR called for the production of a staggering fifty thousand warplanes per year as well as a massive increase in the size of the navy and the expansion and modernization of the army. By year’s end, Congress had appropriated more than $8 billion in defense spending; in 1941 it would appropriate $26 billion, dwarfing the mere half a billion dollars that had been appropriated for military expansion in 1939. In 1943 and 1944, America produced 40 percent of the munitions made by all the principal belligerents put together.

To accomplish this major buildup, the Roosevelt administration—over the objections of some New Dealers—turned largely to America’s corporate leadership, enlisting the help of big business to convert America’s factories to wartime production. FDR asked Sears executive Donald M. Nelson to head the War Production Board, created by presidential executive order in January 1942 to supervise munitions manufacturing. The board rationed materials such as steel, aluminum, and rubber and allocated raw materials according to war priorities, while banning the production of nonessential consumer goods such as cars, refrigerators and other domestic appliances, and tennis balls. In February 1942, for example, under FDR’s order, the entire U.S. automobile industry ceased production of cars and commercial trucks so plants could instead make jeeps, tanks, planes, and other weapons.

By the end of the war, the level of U.S. arms manufacturing was nothing short of astounding. Between 1940 and 1945, America produced more than 299,000 aircraft, over 1,500 naval vessels, 88,000 tanks, 634,000 jeeps, nearly six thousand merchant vessels, 6.5 million rifles, and forty billion bullets.

Equally impressive was the increase in military manpower. America’s first-ever peacetime draft was instituted in September 1940, after the fall of France. By the end of 1943, the U.S. Army numbered more than 7.5 million men, and by 1945 it topped 8.2 million. Of these, more than 1.4 million represented the pilots, navigators, bombardiers, gunners, and maintenance crews of the vastly expanded U.S. Army Air Corps. Meanwhile, by late 1943, the U.S. Navy had become the largest in the world, surpassing the combined fleets of all the other major powers, serviced by more than three million sailors and officers.

American industry was also providing critical arms and other supplies to its allies via the Lend-Lease program. Thanks to this “most unsordid act,” as British prime minister Winston Churchill called it, America supplied Great Britain with 25 percent of its wartime needs and the Soviet Union with 10 percent, to say nothing of the arms and other goods that were shipped to China, the Free French, and other forces.
In 1939 unemployment in America, though down from its peak in 1933, remained painfully high—17.2 percent. As the country swung into action to supply the war effort, Americans went back to work in droves. Unemployment sank to a scant 1.2 percent by 1944.

So massive was the Allies’ need for weapons, food, clothing, and other supplies that the effort to produce them quickly turned sky-high unemployment into labor shortages in particular areas and industries. Americans had to accomplish a great deal more work even as its workforce lost millions of employable young men to the armed forces. Farmers were pressed to produce more food for soldiers and civilians, but many farmhands had left the countryside for industrial jobs. Meanwhile, industrial production proceeded at such an urgent pace that many people worked two jobs, multiple shifts, or on weekends and holidays. As Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to United Auto Workers president R. J. Thomas in early 1942, “Every factory and every shipyard should be working seven days a week, night and day.”

In order to prevent labor disputes from creating even a pause in production, FDR established the National War Labor Board in January 1942 to monitor labor relations and, if necessary, intervene in disputes. “We shall not stop work for a single day,” he told Americans in February. “If any dispute arises we shall keep on working while the dispute is solved by mediation, conciliation, or arbitration—until the war is won.” Workers for the most part adhered to no-strike pledges, and some gave up overtime pay. Americans’ aggregate income nonetheless soared from $72.8 billion in 1939 to $165.3 billion in 1944, while corporate profits climbed even more.

In April 1942, FDR created the War Manpower Commission to recruit more workers and allocate them where needed. “We shall be compelled,” he explained to the country in an October fireside chat, “to stop workers from moving from one war job to another as a matter of personal preference; to stop employers from stealing labor from each other; to use older men, and handicapped people, and more women, and even grown boys and girls, wherever possible and reasonable, to replace men of military age and fitness; to train new personnel for essential war work; and to stop the wastage of labor in all non-essential activities.”

FDR went on to say that the country could “no longer afford to indulge . . . prejudices” against women and African American workers, for example. This expansion of the American workforce—and of opportunity—would be an important legacy of the war effort.
In 1941, at the urging of civil rights leaders and Eleanor Roosevelt, the president had issued Executive Order 8802 banning racial discrimination in war production facilities and established the Fair Labor Practices Commission to oversee its implementation. By war's end, blacks would make up some 8 percent of workers in war-related contracts, roughly proportional to their representation in the population. The lure of good war-industry jobs helped kick off the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to industrial cities of the North.

During the war years, female participation in the labor force surged, finding expression in the patriotic image of Rosie the Riveter. The name came from the title of a popular 1943 song: “All the day long, whether rain or shine, she’s a part of the assembly line. She’s making history, working for victory, Rosie the Riveter.” Soon after the song was released, in a Saturday Evening Post cover, Norman Rockwell depicted a muscular, grimy Rosie eating a sandwich with a drill resting in her lap and her feet propped insouciantly on a copy of Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf. A rippling American flag is the backdrop.

From 1940 to 1945, the female labor force boosted its ranks by 6.5 million, a 50 percent increase. By the war’s peak, well over a third of the civilian labor force was made up of women. Many married women and mothers of young children worked outside the home for the first time. Although many of these women left their jobs after the war, the American wartime experience presaged a decades-long increase in the percentage of women in the workforce.
Managing a Wartime Economy

Going to war produced an enormous demand for goods in America, dramatically stimulating its anemic economy. But the economic impact of war isn’t entirely benign. Warfare is expensive and society must bear the cost sooner or later. Also, wartime spending typically drives up prices, and inflation can impose hardships on civilians who can’t meet the cost of living, and lead to postwar shocks when demand dries up. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration took an active role in managing these risks.

The first question was how to pay for the war. FDR had always favored progressive tax schemes that rely most heavily on the wealthy and corporations. His approach to war finance was no exception. He opposed members of Congress and others who wanted to impose a mass tax in the form of a federal sales tax that would affect all consumers. Conservatives likewise rescinded FDR’s executive order capping after-tax income at $25,000 (“All excess income should go to win the war,” the president had said in promoting the measure in 1942.)

A compromise came with the Revenue Act of 1942, which instituted a new tax program that was both very broad and highly progressive. It lowered personal exemptions so that vastly more American workers—about three-quarters versus 5 percent before the war—would pay income taxes out of wages and salaries. It was progressive in that it imposed a steeply graduated surtax on incomes, taxing the wealthier at higher rates. The law lowered the threshold of the top income bracket to $200,000 and taxed it at 88 percent. It also imposed a wartime “excess profits” tax on corporations of 90 percent, seeking to funnel extraordinary war profits back into the war effort itself. The new law required Americans to pay much more in taxes, but in a February 1943 Gallup Poll, an astounding 78 percent of respondents who would have to pay federal income tax that year said they considered the tax fair.

The government also increased borrowing to cover war costs. By the end of the war, the ratio of debt to gross domestic product reached an all-time high of 113 percent, although the postwar economic boom would make this debt far less burdensome.

Limiting inflation in the burgeoning war economy was a major concern of FDR’s administration. To that end the government controlled prices, first by a series of executive actions, beginning in February 1941 when a division of the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense placed a ceiling on the skyrocketing price of used machine tools. In January 1942, just weeks after Pearl Harbor, Congress, at FDR’s urging and after months of heated debate, gave the Office of Price Administration (OPA) authority to establish sweeping price controls. The OPA ultimately froze the price of thousands of products, including some 90 percent of retail foods. It also controlled rents, to alleviate the effects of a housing shortage caused by the cessation of civilian construction and mass migrations to industrial areas. In October 1942, Congress authorized the government to also curtail wage and salary increases, and control the prices of farm products.

As the OPA explained in a public notice, “If prices were not controlled, the cost of everything would continue to climb until eventually only the extremely wealthy could buy even the necessities of life. Savings would be wiped out in the vain attempt to keep up with soaring prices. Prices would go up and up until the whole price structure grew so top-heavy it toppled to the ground. There would be panic and depression. The old saying is true: ‘Whatever goes up, must come down!’”

“All excess income should go to win the war.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1942
“Make It Do”: Saving and Rationing

Americans made more money during the war than they had in the grinding years of the Depression. Their purchasing did not keep pace. Personal savings went up and outstanding debt fell. This was partly because consumer goods were simply not available. Some, like new cars and appliances, were not being produced at all, and others, because of interruptions in importation and transportation as well as the requirements of war, were in short supply. In order to distribute supplies fairly and check the growth of black markets, the Office of Price Administration rationed an array of consumer goods, including sugar, coffee, butter, meat, gasoline, fuel oil and kerosene, tires, shoes, bicycles, and processed foods. So there was only so much families could buy.

In addition, the federal government launched a vigorous public campaign to encourage savings, thrift, and recycling of materials—an effort to both control inflation and stretch scarce materials. “All of us,” Franklin D. Roosevelt said in a fireside chat several months after Pearl Harbor, “are used to spending money for things that we want, things, however, which are not absolutely essential. We will all have to forgo that kind of spending. Because we must put every dime and every dollar we can possibly spare out of our earnings into war bonds and stamps. Because the demands of the war effort require the rationing of goods of which there is not enough to go around. Because the stopping of purchases of nonessentials will release thousands of workers who are needed in the war effort.”

**Buy bonds! Give bonds!**
War bonds were a central piece of this campaign. Buying war bonds issued by the Treasury gave Americans a way to save and invest their money at a modest return, but more importantly to contribute to the fight overseas. Posters urged Americans to do their part. “Keep ’em Flying! Buy War Bonds!” one urged. Another showed a machine gunner with the caption: “You can’t afford to miss either! Buy war bonds every payday.” Glamorous celebrities, such as Lana Turner, Mickey Rooney, and Lucille Ball, pitched the bonds. Even children saved ten-cent war stamps in special books to be redeemed for a bond.

In the spring of 1943, the president spoke to the country of the enormous military challenge to come—the attack on occupied France and the drive into the German heartland—while at the same time...
announcing a major war-bond drive. "And we can be sure," he said, "that our enemies will watch this drive with the keenest interest. They know that success in this undertaking will shorten the war. They know that the more money the American people lend to their Government, the more powerful and relentless will be the American forces in the field." To buy war bonds was to hasten Adolf Hitler’s demise.

Taken together, American companies and individuals purchased more than $150 billion in war bonds between 1940 and 1945.

Producing and recycling for victory

Other campaigns urged Americans to mend old clothes, drive slowly and keep their tires in good order to save rubber, and prepare nutritious foods using alternatives to scarce products. "Use it up—Wear it Out—Make it do!" read one poster showing a woman mending the seat of a man’s pants. "Sugar rationing is here!" proclaimed a government-issued bulletin with recipes using less sugar or sugar substitutes, such as maple. "Use fresh fruits liberally in place of desserts that call for sugar," it said. Homemakers were encouraged to pledge their personal commitment to uphold price controls and rationing: "I pay no more than top legal prices. I accept no rationed goods without giving up ration stamps." Every individual, including infants and children, received a ration book containing stamps for each rationed product.

To bolster the local supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, Americans turned thousands of acres of yards, parks, school grounds, and even urban rooftops into "victory gardens." At the peak of the war, more than twenty million victory gardens across the country produced 40 percent of all the vegetables grown in the United States, enhancing the diet of millions and saving on fuel and transport costs, thanks to the vast increase in local production.

Because to build the planes, ships, tanks, and weapons needed for the war required millions of tons of metal—eighteen tons for the average tank and more than nine hundred tons for the largest warships—metal was rationed in civilian life; even zippers and bobby pins were hard to come by. The government urged Americans to conserve metal and turn in for recycling anything from old shovels to broken-down farm equipment. Schools and businesses organized "scrap drives" throughout the war, at times resulting in the collection of thousands of tons of used metal. Children saved bits of tinfoil and rubber bands in balls.

All these efforts and adjustments in lifestyle helped Americans feel they were doing something to help the fighting forces overseas. "‘Sacrifice,’" as FDR told Americans, "is not exactly the proper word with which to describe this program of self-denial. When, at the end of this great struggle, we shall have saved our free way of life, we shall have made no ‘sacrifice.’"
A Nation of Volunteers

After enduring the forced idleness and seemingly pointless privations of the Great Depression, Americans eagerly threw themselves into the daily struggle against the Axis powers. Here the foe was vividly definite, and the cultural ethos, powerfully influenced by government messaging, held that everyone could be useful to the cause. In a 1943 poll, 44 percent of Americans said the government had not gone far enough in asking them to sacrifice for the war. Their energy flowed into volunteerism in myriad forms.

After Pearl Harbor, fearing enemy planes loaded with bombs might reach the U.S. mainland, millions of Americans volunteered to serve in civilian defense. Spotters watched the night sky from observation posts across the country; trained to identify various types of planes, they reported their sightings to Army Filter Centers, which, when appropriate, passed the information to an air force warning system. (Identifying Allied and enemy warplanes also became a popular hobby among children.) Civilian defense air-raid wardens ran blackout drills to practice hiding potential targets in bombing attacks, disseminated preparedness information among their neighbors, and received training in how to deal with fires and poison gas attacks.

Much effort also went into supporting those fighting overseas. Just two months after Pearl Harbor, five private service organizations came together, at Franklin D. Roosevelt’s behest, to create the United Service Organizations (USO). Its purpose was to give service personnel moral support through recreation and entertainment, and it would become a beloved feature of military life. The USO brought movies, dances, and live entertainment featuring major American celebrities, such as Judy Garland and Betty Grable—a taste of home, in other words—to lonesome and weary U.S. service personnel around the world.

Through the Red Cross, Americans gave millions of units of blood; knitted untold numbers of sweaters, socks, and other items for soldiers; and sent food to their prisoners of war overseas. Teenagers by the millions joined the Victory Corps, volunteering in scrap drives and other war programs, or the Junior Red Cross, which, among other activities, entertained wounded soldiers in military hospitals.

Ethel Washington and Louise Beleno pack surgical kits in a class for volunteer nurse’s aides at Freedmen’s Hospital, Washington, DC, February 1943. Volunteers like these helped relieve a shortage of graduate nurses. During the war, people also gave blood, knitted woolens and provided care packages for soldiers, participated in preparedness drills, and organized scrap drives. LOC
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R & R on the Home Front

Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the need to relax even and perhaps especially in the midst of the most intense pressures; his own ability to refresh his energies in this way was well known. It was this belief in the restorative powers of entertainment and rest that motivated FDR's call for the establishment of the United Service Organizations (USO) to bring a little fun into the lives of armed services personnel. He also thought that Americans on the home front would benefit from recreation and encouraged these activities when they wouldn't detract from the war effort.

Theaters and cinemas remained open and in fact their business thrived during the war. Hollywood continued to produce films, frequently treating themes of heroism, resistance to power, and the pull of home in works ranging from *Casablanca* (1942), set in Vichy-controlled North Africa, to *Lassie Come Home* (1943) to *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), based on a best-selling 1941 novel by Franz Werfel, an Austrian Jew who had narrowly escaped Nazi-occupied France to reach America. Before the feature film, audiences would take in a ten-minute newsreel often detailing news from the front or programs supporting the war at home. Some fifty million people viewed these newsreels each week. FDR's filmed fireside chats became some of the most popular newsreels, drawing big audiences eager to see the image of the leader whose voice was so familiar.

Newsreel companies, Hollywood studios, and news organizations all cooperated with the Office of War Information (OWI), which vetted material, especially news from the front, with an eye to promoting national unity and an upbeat attitude. The OWI also produced its own newsreels and radio broadcasts, not to mention the ubiquitous posters promoting the war effort. In this sense, entertainment became part and parcel of the war effort.

FDR had a direct hand in ensuring that one of America's favorite pastimes, baseball, continued unabated during the war. Just weeks after Pearl Harbor, in January 1941, baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis wrote the president to ask whether, under the circumstances, the games should go on. FDR replied right away. "I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going," he wrote. "There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before." FDR pointed out that a baseball game was a relatively quick and inexpensive way to blow off steam, and that he hoped more nighttime games could be played as "an opportunity to the day shift to see a game occasionally."

FDR was careful to add that qualified ballplayers should go into the service or war-related work. Landis agreed. More than five hundred Major League players, including stars like Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams, did serve in the military during the war.
Home Again: The G.I. Bill

Even before the United States entered World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt was thinking about just what kind of world the Allies hoped to secure with their fighting. He considered the broader meaning of security and freedom, and he concluded that political liberties such as free speech are not enough—that in order to be truly free, a person must also enjoy basic economic security.

In his celebrated Four Freedoms speech laying out war aims in January 1941, FDR identified “freedom from want” as one of four essential freedoms required for a humane world and free society. In the Atlantic Charter, which he proposed and signed along with British prime minister Winston Churchill in August 1941, FDR set forth “hopes for a better future” that included “improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security.” And he presented a more elaborated version of his vision in his 1944 State of the Union address, introducing a “Second Bill of Rights” that would include the right to a job with adequate pay, to education, to a decent home, to protection from the risks of old age and unemployment, and even to medical care.

FDR’s ideas about economic freedom came to fruition in New Deal programs like Social Security. But nowhere was their expression more direct than in the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944—otherwise known as the G.I. Bill of Rights. This program sought to ensure that American service personnel came home to live as free people in the broad sense FDR had defined. It provided funds for veterans to enroll in higher education, government-backed low-interest loans to buy their own homes and businesses, and unemployment pay and hospitalization if required.

Veterans embraced college education more avidly than anyone had predicted. Roughly eight million went to college, graduate school, or job training through the G.I. Bill, which covered living expenses as well as tuition. Campuses, especially public campuses, expanded vigorously, throwing up temporary buildings to accommodate the returning veterans and, in many cases, their wives and young children. College education, once the province of the well-to-do, became something to which ordinary Americans aspired as the gateway to a productive, prosperous life. In 1940 American colleges and universities awarded 160,000 degrees. Ten years later, they handed out half a million diplomas.

A similar change took place in the area of homeownership. By 1953 the Veterans Administration had guaranteed 3.5 million home loans, helping to kick off a construction boom and drive an increase in American homeownership from 44 percent in 1940 to 62 percent in 1960.

FDR signed the G.I. Bill on June 12, 1944—six days after D-day. But he had begun talking to Americans about plans for returning service personnel nearly a year before. “We are, today, laying plans for the return to civilian life of our gallant men and women in the armed services,” he told the country in a July 1943 fireside chat. “They must not be demobilized into an environment of inflation and unemployment, to a place on a bread line, or on a corner selling apples. We must, this time, have plans ready—instead of waiting to do a hasty, inefficient, and ill-considered job at the last moment. I have assured our men in the armed forces that the American people would not let them down when the war is won.”

FDR was implicitly referring to the mishandling of veterans after World War I. These veterans had suffered even more than most in the Great Depression, their desperate protest to persuade Washington, DC, to release benefits actually repelled by government troops in the infamous Bonus March of 1932. As victory over the Axis approached in World War II, there was great anxiety in the country that the end of the war would renew the appalling depression that had preceded it. FDR and many allies were determined to prevent it.

FDR would not live to see it, of course, but this time would be different. The veterans of World War II would not find themselves selling apples on street corners. FDR’s New Deal, Americans’ industry and savings during the war, the pent-up demand of fifteen years of depression and wartime scrimping, and, indeed, the new opportunities of the G.I. Bill all helped to spark a period of great economic growth for America. Though FDR’s Second Bill of Rights never was fully implemented for all Americans, the postwar period saw the creation of a broad, educated, prosperous American middle class.