

The American Home Front: Effects of World War II

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Events in the Pacific, particularly the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, shattered any remaining hope that the United States could remain neutral in World War II. Pearl Harbor united Americans behind the war effort as they sacrificed to ensure success abroad.

Wartime mobilization created opportunities for employment and wage earning. Fear, discrimination, and racism, however, were important problems in America's "arsenal of democracy."

This tutorial examines the American home front during World War II in five parts:

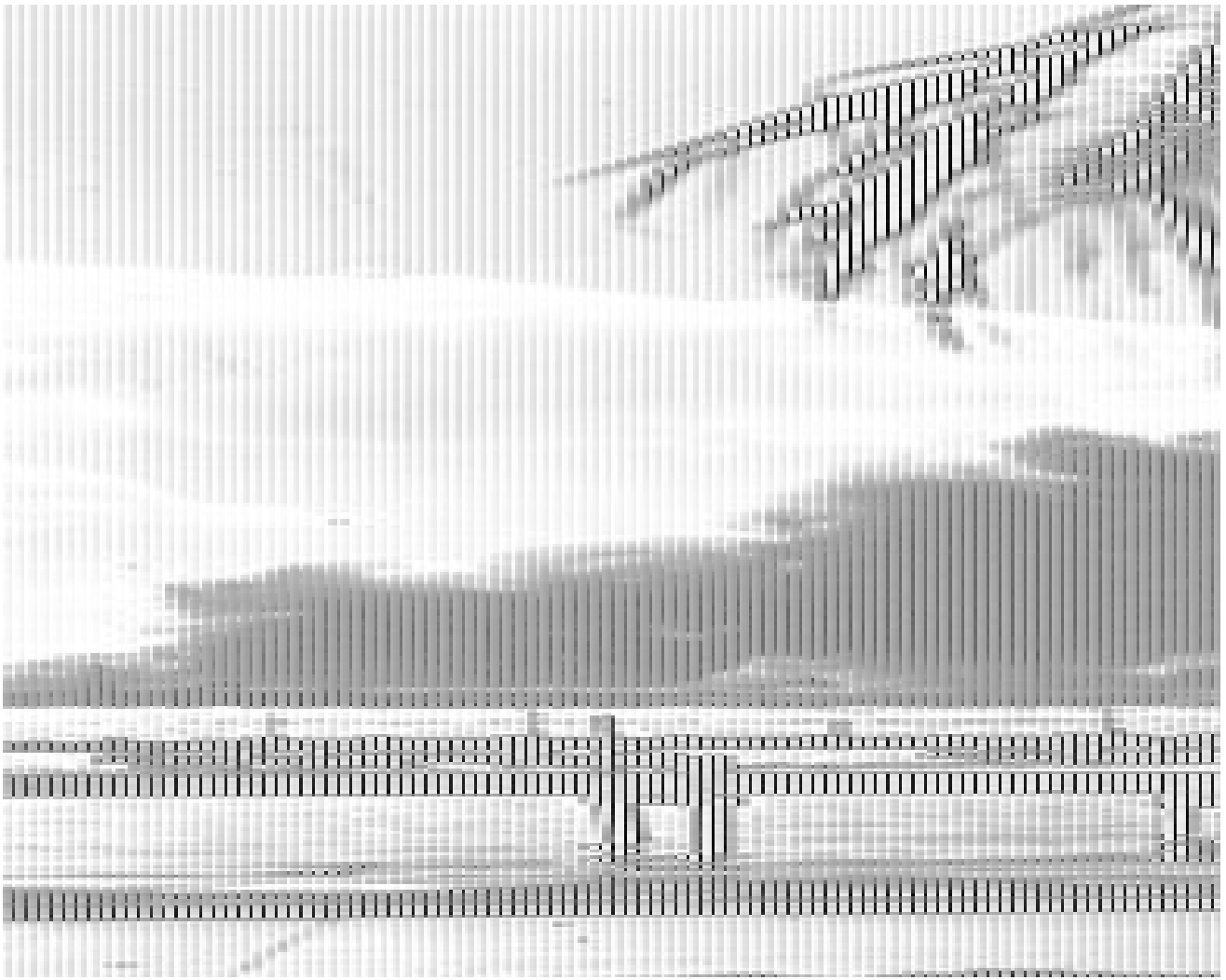
1. December 7, 1941

To protect its interests in the Pacific against Japanese expansion, the United States applied a series of economic sanctions against Japan and sent military supplies to the Chinese.

Beginning in July 1940, the United States enacted an embargo (i.e., a ban on trade) on the shipment of certain materials to Japan, including gasoline, machine tools, and scrap iron and steel. By late 1941, Japan felt the pressure resulting from the embargo.

Japan was determined to obtain a sufficient supply of oil and planned to seize the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) to satisfy this desire. A key American possession—the Philippines—was located between Japan and Indonesia. Japan first attempted to end the embargo diplomatically, but the negotiations broke down in November 1941. This convinced the Japanese that they would have to go to war against the United States.

In early December of 1941, two Japanese fleets were mobilized in the Pacific. One moved toward Hawaii under cloud cover and radio silence. On the morning of December 7, it launched a surprise attack on the American fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor.



This famous photograph shows the explosion of the U.S.S. *Arizona* after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. American losses were significant, but the Japanese lost only 29 planes and five miniature submarines.

Some 353 Japanese fighter planes, bombers, and torpedo bombers attacked the American ships, hitting all of the eight battleships anchored in the harbor. Four of them sank. Nearly 200 American planes were destroyed on the ground, and 2,400 servicemen were killed. Another 1,100 were wounded.

The second Japanese fleet moved southeast, attacking Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies in late 1941 and early 1942. It also attacked the American island possessions of Guam, Wake, and the Philippines.



A "Remember December 7th" poster produced by the U.S. Office of War Information in 1942.

Rather than provide a knockout blow to the United States, the attack on Pearl Harbor invigorated American support for involvement in World War II. It convinced citizens to support the war effort in any way that they could, including in the workplace. Unfortunately, the attack also revived racial discrimination toward Japanese Americans.

2. Wartime Migration and Employment

President Roosevelt, referring to December 7 (when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor) as “a date which will live in infamy,” asked Congress for a declaration of war. The declaration was delivered to Japan on December 8. On December 11, Germany and Italy, in observance of their alliance with Japan, declared war on the United States.

Additional Resource

Listen to the audio of FDR’s speech “December 8, 1941: Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War” (following the attack on Pearl Harbor) from the [Miller Center](#).

U.S. entry into World War II changed everyday life for all Americans. One positive result was that the demands of wartime production finally ended the economic depression that had plagued the country since 1929.

The United States had been preparing for war before the Pearl Harbor attack. The government had stimulated investment and development of factories and infrastructure in the West in anticipation of a war in the Pacific.



DID YOU KNOW

In August 1940, Congress created the Defense Plant Corporation. By 1945, it had organized the construction of 344 factories and invested over \$1.8 billion in the economies of the Western states. The populations of cities in California, Oregon, and Washington grew as thousands of Americans traveled to the West Coast to take up jobs in defense plants and shipyards.

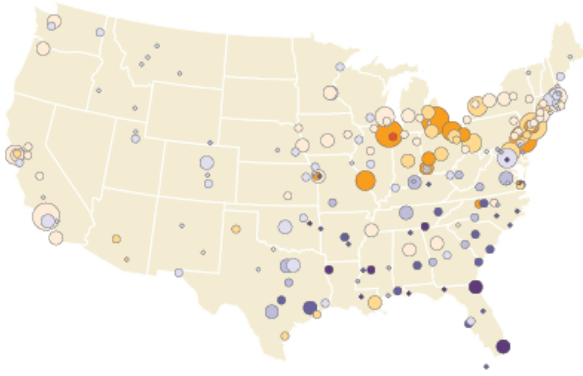
➞ **EXAMPLE** The population of Richmond, California, jumped from 20,000 to 100,000 within 3 years of Congress’s declaration of war.

Additional Resource

Watch a short newsreel about industrial production in WWII from [PBS](#).

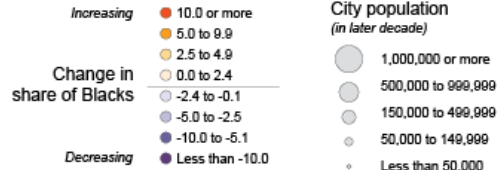
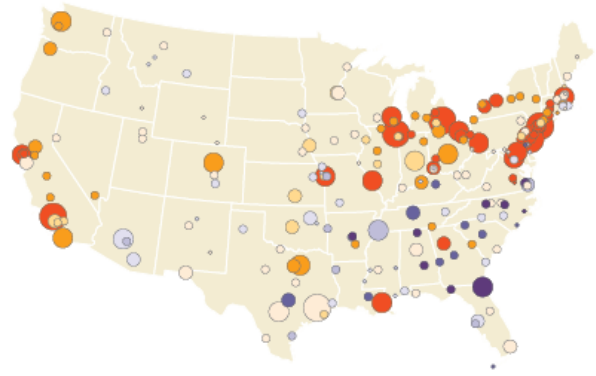
Mobilization of the economy for wartime production created opportunities for women. They often relocated on their own, or with their husbands, to military bases and cities to work at jobs in the defense industries. Like the Great Migration that followed World War I, many African Americans migrated from the South to Northern and Western cities in search of new places to live and work.

The First Great Migration: 1910-1940



The change in share of Blacks in cities is based on the percentage point difference in the percent of population that was Black in the later time period compared to the earlier. For example, 18.3 percent of the population in Gary, IN was Black in 1940 but was just 2.3 in 1910, which represented a 16.0 percentage-point change in the share of Blacks in the city. It was the largest change in share during the First Great Migration. By the end of the Second Great Migration, Newark, NJ had realized the largest increase in Black population share, with the Black proportion of the city rising from 10.6 in 1940 to 54.2 in 1970.

The Second Great Migration: 1940-1970



This U.S. Census Bureau map compares the migration of African Americans in the United States before and after 1940. African American migration patterns after 1940 mirrored those of the entire U.S. population.



Do some research on your family history. Do you have any relatives who moved to a new place during World War II to participate in the war effort?

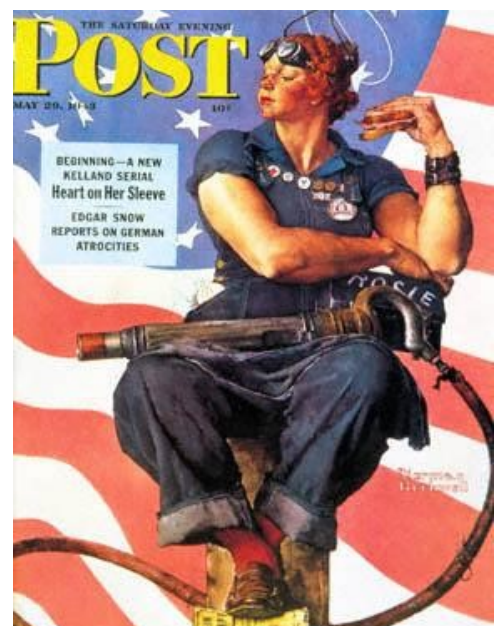
3. Rosie the Riveter and Beyond

As many American men joined the armed forces and went overseas, women gained employment opportunities. More than a third of the domestic workforce during the war comprised women. Married women outnumbered single women in the workplace.



In 1943, most workers in the aircraft industry were women. Wartime conditions enabled some women to work at high-paying defense plant jobs. Others were employed in factories and offices. This enabled them to earn more money than they ever had, but their wages remained lower than those earned by men for the same work. Despite this inequality, many women achieved a degree of independence and financial self-reliance by working during the war.

To recruit women for wartime jobs—and to counter criticism that women did not belong in such occupations—the federal government conducted an advertising campaign centered on a



character known as **Rosie the Riveter**.



TERM TO KNOW

Rosie the Riveter

A symbol of female workers in the defense industries during World War II.

Rosie, who was a composite based on several women, was depicted by illustrators such as Norman Rockwell and J. Howard Miller.

Rosie the Riveter, as depicted by Norman Rockwell on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1943.



The famous “We Can Do It!” poster created by J. Howard Miller in 1942 sought to motivate American workers.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Who is the audience for the images above?
2. What feminine characteristics do you notice in the Rosie depictions pictured above?

Rosie looked strong and tough but also feminine. By picturing Rosie wearing lipstick and makeup, illustrators and factory owners sought to reassure men that wartime employment would not result in “masculine” women. Some factories went so far as to give female employees lessons on how to apply makeup. The federal government did not ration cosmetics during the war.



DID YOU KNOW

Elizabeth Arden created a special red lipstick for use by female Marine Corps reservists.



“Rosie the Riveter” became a generic term for all women who worked in the defense industry. Although Rosie, as depicted on posters, was White, many female workers were Black—including the woman in the photo above, atop an airplane at the Lockheed Aircraft plant in Burbank, California (a), and Anna Bland, a worker at the Richmond Shipyards (b).

Employers and federal officials promoted female workers’ feminine attributes because the increased employment of women required recognition of their dual roles as employees and mothers.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1944, 33% of women working in defense industries were mothers who worked “double-day” shifts: one shift at the plant and another at home.

To address the dual roles of women, Eleanor Roosevelt urged her husband to approve the funding of childcare facilities by the federal government under the Community Facilities Act of 1942. She also urged employers to build childcare facilities for their workers. By the end of the war, the government had funded childcare centers that served hundreds of thousands of children.

4. The Double V Campaign

The need for Americans to come together to support the war effort after the Pearl Harbor attack led to a spirit of unity throughout the population. However, African Americans continued to be treated as second-class citizens, despite their proclamations of patriotism, participation in the workplace, and willingness to fight overseas.

By 1941, Black communities had forged promising relationships with the Roosevelt administration through the work of Mary McLeod Bethune and African Americans who were federal employees. However, the Southern states—and the armed forces—remained legally segregated. Private corporations also discriminated in their hiring and compensation policies.

To protest the near-complete exclusion of African Americans from jobs in wartime industries, **A. Philip Randolph** of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) called for a “March on Washington.” On June 25, 1942, days before the march was scheduled to occur, **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** issued **Executive Order 8802**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

A. Philip Randolph

Civil rights activist and leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who called for a “March on Washington” in 1942 to pressure Roosevelt’s administration to help desegregate wartime industries.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Democratic U.S. president from 1933 until his death in 1945, who was elected for an unprecedented four terms; led the United States through the Great Depression and World War II; member of the Allied Powers’ “Big Three” leaders.



TERM TO KNOW

Executive Order 8802

Issued by President Roosevelt; forbade racial discrimination in defense industries and government offices.

To enforce the order, Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate complaints of discriminatory practices. The FEPC required the defense industries to hire Black workers.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1944, over 1 million African Americans were employed in manufacturing jobs.

However, the FEPC was often unable to force corporations to place African Americans in well-paid and managerial positions.

➔ **EXAMPLE** At a plutonium production plant in Hanford, Washington (overseen by the DuPont Corporation), African Americans were hired as low-paid construction workers but not as laboratory technicians.

Still, the existence of the FEPC indicated a shift in federal policy regarding Black equality and reflected the emergence of a civil rights movement in the United States.

At this time, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded by **James Farmer**, engaged in sit-ins and other forms of peaceful protest to desegregate public facilities in Washington, DC. CORE’s goal was to deprive the Axis Powers of the ability to label the United States a racist country. They argued that since the United States had denounced Germany and Japan for violating human rights, our country should be a positive example in

that area.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

James Farmer

Activist and founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization that would be instrumental in advancing Black civil rights in the 20th century.

The efforts of Black civil rights activists to advance equality during World War II were in accordance with the **Double V campaign** outlined in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest Black newspaper in the country.



TERM TO KNOW

Double V Campaign

The civil rights campaign by African Americans to achieve victory over the Axis Powers abroad and victory over racism at home.



Black Americans volunteered for government work during World War II, just like White Americans did. These Washington, DC, residents became civil defense workers as a result of the Double V campaign, which called for victory at home and abroad.

The campaign attempted to broaden the wartime goals of the United States by encouraging African Americans to win two “Vs”: victory over racism at home and victory over America’s enemies abroad. These goals became the key tenets of the modern civil rights movement after World War II ended.

5. The Tragedy of Japanese American Internment

The desire for American unity in support of the war following Pearl Harbor led President Roosevelt and military leaders to discriminate against Japanese Americans through forced relocation and **internment** policies.



TERM TO KNOW

Internment

The forced collection and relocation of Japanese Americans on the West Coast to guarded camps in the United States for the greater part of World War II.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor reinvigorated racist assumptions about Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans in the United States. As a result of revived racism and widespread fear of espionage and sabotage in the West, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. It gave the army the authority to remove people from “military areas” to prevent sabotage or espionage.

After the order went into effect, Lt. General John L. DeWitt, in charge of the Western Defense Command, ordered approximately 127,000 people of Japanese descent who lived on the West Coast to report to assembly centers. This was roughly 90% of the U.S. Japanese population. Over 60% of them were born in the United States and were American citizens. From the assembly centers, they were transferred to hastily prepared camps in the interior of California, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Arkansas.



Japanese Americans standing in line in front of a poster detailing internment orders in California.



Photographer Dorothea Lange photographed the stark landscape of the Manzanar Internment Camp in California on July 3, 1942.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How do the images above portray the uncertainties and hardships that Japanese Americans experienced during interment?
2. Do you think Dorothea Lange attempted to make a political statement by making the American flag the centerpiece of her photograph of an internment camp?

Those who lived in the camps reported deeply traumatic experiences. Families were sometimes separated. People could only bring a few of their belongings and had to abandon the rest of their possessions. The camps were dismal: Many residents lived in crudely constructed shacks. The camps were also overcrowded. Privacy was difficult to come by.

Despite these hardships, internees built communities within the camps. Adults served in camp government and worked at a variety of jobs. Families planted gardens. Children attended school, played basketball against local teams, and organized Boy Scout troops.



DID YOU KNOW

Approximately 14,000 German Americans and Italian Americans were also placed in internment camps.

Unlike the Japanese Americans, however, these internees represented a tiny percentage of their U.S. populations.

Japanese Americans were essentially imprisoned. Minor violations of rules, like walking too close to the fence, could have severe consequences. They endured these hardships without due process: No internees had been convicted of sabotage or espionage.



REFLECT

Few Americans protested Japanese American internment, and many viewed it as a military necessity. Much of the mainstream press would not begin to criticize internment until late in the war. Imagine yourself as an American living in California in 1942. Would you have spoken out against Japanese American internment? Why or why not?



SUMMARY

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought the United States into World War II. The war provided opportunities for the advancement of women and African Americans. However, concerns about working mothers and family stability, discrimination against African Americans, and the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans revealed that fear and racism persisted at home as the United States fought for freedom abroad.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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