**U.S. Lend-Lease Act**

[Roosevelt](javascript:;) realized that the survival of Great Britain was critical to the security of the United States. The question was how to aid Great Britain without being dragged into the war, since isolationist sentiment still ruled Congress and American public opinion. In autumn of 1940, the United States agreed to trade old American destroyers for rights to British bases in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt also extended American naval patrols across the Atlantic in order to alleviate the pressure on Britain's navy. In March 1941, Congress passed the [Lend-Lease Act](javascript:;). Lend-lease allowed countries whose defense was vital to the United States to buy, lease, or borrow materials of war. The United States provided naval escorts for ships carrying lend-lease goods to Great Britain. In addition, strengthening the United States' armed forces, Roosevelt also signed the Selective Training and Service Act in 1940, which established the first peacetime draft in American history.

After failing to force Great Britain's submission, Hitler prepared his war machine to invade the Soviet Union (code name: Operation Barbarossa). The United States feared that if the Soviet Union was defeated, Germany would be able to use the Soviet Union's natural resources to fuel its military. In addition, German forces could be re-deployed elsewhere. Therefore, the United States allowed the Soviet Union to utilize the lend-lease program, though on a more limited scale than Great Britain.

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**Pearl Harbor**

Besidessending supplies, Roosevelt could do little more than wait and see whether Great Britain and the Soviet Union would survive the German onslaught. Public opinion and Congress, though increasingly hostile to the Axis Powers, still favored keeping the U.S. out of the war. America's ability to stay out of the conflict came to an abrupt end on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese Imperial Navy attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in an attempt to destroy the U.S. Pacific fleet. Though losses were heavy, the fact that U.S. aircraft carriers, which were not then docked at Pearl Harbor, escaped the assault had a profound impact on the future course of the war.

**The United States Enters World War II**

Americans were outraged by the surprise Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. As a result of what President Franklin D. Roosevelt called a "day which will live in infamy," the U.S. declared war against Japan the following day. Germany and Italy, Japan's Axis allies, then declared war on America. The U.S. reciprocated by declaring war on the Axis and joined the Allied Powers. The German declaration of war allowed the United States to fully support the Allied war effort. Until Germany's defeat, the European Theater of war was always more important to the U.S. than the Pacific Theater because the Germans were perceived as the greater threat.

In addition to Pearl Harbor, Japan had also attacked the Philippines and other territories throughout the Pacific. Until May 1942, a small group of Americans held out in the Philippines on the Bataan Peninsula. Their subsequent capture, torture, and/or execution became known as the Bataan Death March. The war in the Pacific initially went extremely well for Japan. With the United States and Great Britain concentrating on Europe, Japan was able to expand throughout Asia.

**The American Economy**

Declaring war and being equipped to fight a war were two entirely different matters. Indeed, at the time of America's entry into World War II, military production lagged greatly. Thus, to ensure that the economy successfully and efficiently shifted to a war footing, President Roosevelt created the War Production Board (WPB) in January 1942. One of the WPB's tasks was to help auto manufacturers switch production from cars to tanks and planes. It also ensured that enough new factories were built to meet government orders for other war materials.

**Revenue Act and War Bonds**

The United States paid for the cost of World War II through taxation (41%) and borrowing (59%). Congress instituted a withholding tax system with the passage of the Revenue Act of 1942. Under such a system, employers withheld income taxes from employees' wages and sent the funds directly to the government. Congress also revised the tax structure such that many more Americans paid income taxes. As a result, many paid income taxes for the first time -- going from 4 million income tax payers in 1939 to 46 million in 1945. They also taxed other sources of income (such as excess profits), so that the wealthy were paying a larger portion of taxes. This had the effect of redistributing income.

The rest of the funds to fight the war were procured through the sale of government bonds -- a method that governments often resort to when they do not have sufficient funds to cover their expenses. Essentially, a bond is a loan

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**End of the Great Depression**

With the American economy expanding enormously during the war due to the requirements of wartime production, the Great Depression was finally brought to an end. Gross national production more than doubled from $100 billion in 1940 to $220 billion in 1945. American agricultural production soared from $11 billion to $25 billion as the amount of land under cultivation increased and the application of technology spread. Moreover, unemployment decreased dramatically as both farmers and laborers enjoyed a wave of prosperity. Indeed, after a decade of depression, the available labor pool diminished rapidly as the economy converted to wartime production and the number of military personnel grew.

**Labor Management Issues**

To reduce inflationary pressures caused by the labor shortage, the National War Labor Board -- established to deal with the labor management issues -- set ceilings on wage increases. In addition, in order to ensure continued production, most union leaders promised to refrain from striking during the war. Rank-and-file workers, however, had other ideas and often expressed their dissatisfaction with wage ceilings and other issues by going on wildcat strikes against the wishes of their leaders. Nevertheless, despite worker discontent, for the most part, the average laborer, as well as corporate America, prospered.

**Mexican Workers and Women in the Workforce**

With approximately 15 million men serving in the armed forces during World War II, replacements were needed to work in the industries that produced the materials and goods for both the military effort and for civilian consumption. American business and the government overcame the labor shortage in several ways.

One way to lessen the labor shortage was through an agreement with Mexico in 1942 that allowed braceros, Mexican agricultural workers, to enter the United States and seek employment on American farms.

Another way to lessen the labor shortage was through actively encouraging women to enter the workforce. Indeed, during the course of the war, over six million women entered the workforce, filling in for those men who were fighting overseas. Hundreds of thousands of women took jobs in industrial fields that had previously only employed men. In doing so, they transformed the popular image of women from being merely a caretaker of the home to that of "Rosie the Riveter" -- a strong and independent industrial worker capable of doing the work of men. When soldiers returned from overseas after the war, however, most women left the industrial workforce -- some unwillingly. As a result, this image of women as "Rosie the Riveter" was short-lived.

During the war, approximately 200,000 women also volunteered to serve in the military. Some joined the Women's Army Corps (WACs); others joined the Women Appointed for Voluntary Emergency Service in the Navy (WAVEs); and still others joined the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Service (WAFs).

**African Americans Move from South to North**

One notable exception to these migration trends was the African-American population. About 1.5 million African-Americans left the South in spite of its booming economy to seek opportunities in the industrial cities of the North and West. Entering heavily unionized fields, hundreds of thousands of blacks became union members for the first time, joining CIO unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the United Steel Workers. As blacks moved to the North, they also became increasingly important in the political balance of power in many cities. In several instances, it was the black turnout that decided the results of local and state elections. At the same time, however, African-Americans continued to face racial discrimination and prejudice. Having pride that they were spilling their blood on the battlefield and their sweat in wartime factories, African-Americans began demanding greater economic, social, and political equality. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which would play a key role in the civil rights movement, saw their membership rise as blacks pressed for equality.

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