CHAPTER 34

America in World War II, 1941–1945

# focus questions

1. How was America transformed from a peacetime to a wartime economy? What were the steps that America took to mobilize for their war with the Axis powers?

2. What was the impact of the war on domestic America?

3. What was America’s strategy for winning the war against the Axis powers?

4. What turned the tide of the war in the Pacific for American troops?

5. How did World War II end and what were the terms of settlement?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Unified by Pearl Harbor, America effectively carried out a war mobilization effort that produced vast social and economic changes within American society.

**Theme:** Following its “get Hitler first” strategy, the United States and its Allies invaded and liberated conquered Europe from Fascist rule. The slower strategy of island-hopping against Japan also proceeded successfully until the atomic bomb brought a sudden end to World War II.

chapter summary

America was wounded but roused to national unity by Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt settled on a fundamental strategy of dealing with Hitler first, while doing just enough in the Pacific to block the Japanese advance.

With the ugly exception of the Japanese-American concentration camps, World War II proceeded in the United States without the fanaticism and violations of civil liberties that occurred in World War I. The economy was effectively mobilized, using new sources of labor such as women and Mexican *braceros.* Numerous African Americans and Indians also left their traditional rural homelands and migrated to war-industry jobs in the cities of the North and West. The war brought full employment and prosperity, as well as enduring social changes, as millions of Americans were uprooted and thrown together in the military and in new communities across the country. Unlike European and Asian nations, however, the United States experienced relatively little economic and social devastation from the war.

The tide of Japanese conquest was stemmed at the Battles of Midway and the Coral Sea, and American forces then began a slow strategy of island hopping toward Tokyo. Allied troops first invaded North Africa and Italy in 1942–1943, providing a small, compromise second front that attempted to appease the badly weakened Soviet Union as well as the anxious British. The real second front came in June 1944 with the D-Day invasion of France. The Allies moved rapidly across France, but faced a setback in the Battle of the Bulge in the Low Countries.

Meanwhile, American capture of the Mariana Islands established the basis for extensive bombing of the Japanese home islands. Roosevelt won a fourth term as Allied troops entered Germany and finally met the Russians, bringing an end to Hitler’s rule in May 1945. After a last round of brutal warfare on Okinawa and Iwo Jima, the dropping of two atomic bombs ended the war against Japan in August 1945.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain the basic strategic military decisions of the war. The emphasis might be on the fact that there were, in a sense, two separate wars that had to be conducted simultaneously and that the European war required delicate political and military coordination with Britain and Russia.

REFERENCE: H.P. Willmott, *The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of the Second World War* (1990).

* Describe the social and economic changes brought by the war. Particular attention could be given to war-spawned prosperity after the depression and to the beginnings of the Sunbelt migrations that continued in the postwar era, including the African American exodus to the North and West.

REFERENCE: John W. Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Homefront* (1996).

* Examine the major military battles in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and their relation to the political tensions among the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union.

REFERENCES: Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (1990); David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (1999).

* Analyze the events of the war against Japan, including the development and use of the atomic bomb. The emphasis might be on the controversy over why the bomb was used.

REFERENCES: Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1975); Ronald Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (1985).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Examine the role of women during the war. Discuss the text’s point that American women’s lives were not altered as much as were the lives of women in other belligerent nations. (See boxed quote on page 794.)
* Discuss the varieties of warfare conducted by American forces during the conflict, ranging from the savage island fighting in the Pacific to the strategic bombing of German and Japanese military and civilian targets.
* Focus on Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin as the Big Three wartime leaders. Perhaps use their major decision-making meetings—Casablanca, Teheran, Yalta—to define the stages of the war. (See Examining the Evidence Section on page 808.)
* Analyze the immediate and long-term consequences of the war. Show how the basic international structure of the postwar world was determined by World War II, including the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. (See Thinking Globally Section on pages 812-813.)
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as The Internment of Japanese-Americans Was Justified and The United States Should Not Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following videos: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume III: Civilians at War*: “For the first time in history, more civilians than soldiers are killed during wartime. From Nazi concentration camps, to the blitz of London, to the atomic bombings of Japan, ordinary citizens come face-to-face with the horrors of war.” **Warning:** this is a very graphic episode—some students may find the images very disturbing. *Volume III: 1941–1945: Homefront*: “The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor and force American industries to retool for the Allies’ war effort. As a result, The Great Depression lifts, making way for Southern blacks and women to enter the work force in record numbers.”

# character sketches

## A. Philip Randolph (1889–1979)

Randolph was the longtime head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and an early black civil rights advocate.

A black minister’s son, Randolph became converted to socialism. In 1917, he and Chandler Owen started a radical black magazine, *The Messenger,* which called World War I a “white man’s war” and urged blacks to refuse to fight—in contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois’s support for the war effort and black soldiers.

In the 1920s, Randolph was considered a political spokesman for the racially conscious “new negro,” who emerged especially in Harlem and other northern ghettos. In 1925, Pullman porters, who were the lowest-paid rail workers and were all patronizingly called “George,” approached Randolph and asked him to head their union. In 1937, the brotherhood finally won a contract.

Randolph’s proposed March on Washington in 1941 never occurred, but the idea remained alive in the black community, and Randolph was one of the speakers at the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

**Quote:** “This is an hour of crisis.… To American Negroes, it is the denial of jobs in government defense projects. It is racial discrimination in government departments. It is widespread Jim-Crowism in the armed forces of the Nation.… What a runaround! What a disgrace! What a blow below the belt!” (Call for March on Washington, 1941)

REFERENCES: Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (2001); William Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (1977).

## Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964)

MacArthur was the American army commander in the Pacific in World War II, the governor of occupied Japan, and the UN commander who was fired by President Truman during the Korean War.

His father, Arthur MacArthur, was a famous American officer in the Civil War, Spanish-American War, and Philippine War. Douglas MacArthur’s strong-arm tactics in ousting the Bonus Army from Washington in 1932 made him a controversial figure, and he remained surrounded by controversy for much of his career.

Although he is best known for saying “I shall return” to the Philippines, MacArthur’s greatest military accomplishment in World War II was actually his difficult battles in New Guinea and Los Negros.

MacArthur was virtually the absolute ruler of Japan from 1945 to 1947, and many Japanese looked on him as a kind of “white emperor.” Republicans several times approached MacArthur about running for president, but he always refused. In public, MacArthur was arrogant, egotistical, and self-promoting, but in private he was more genial and easygoing.

**Quote:** “When I joined the Army, even before the turn of the century, it was the fulfillment of all my boyish hopes and dreams.… I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day, which proclaimed, most proudly, that ‘Old soldiers never die. They just fade away.’ And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away.” (Speech to Congress, 1951)

REFERENCES: William Manchester, *American Caesar* (1978); Geoffrey Parrett. *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life of Douglas MacArthur* (1996).

## George Patton (1885–1945)

Patton was the American tank commander of World War II whose belligerent behavior and ideas made him a focus of controversy.

Descended from Revolutionary and Confederate officers, Patton grew up captivated by tales of his ancestors’ heroic military exploits. He was raised on his wealthy grandfather’s California estate and did not attend school until he was twelve years old.

Patton’s tactical skill, especially in the conquest of Sicily, earned great praise, but he was nearly fired from his command when he slapped and browbeat two shell-shocked GIs in an army hospital. Eisenhower reprimanded Patton but permitted him to remain at his post, deciding that his military ability was necessary to the war.

After his spectacular tank breakthrough across France, he entered Germany but became embroiled in further controversy when he advocated that American forces continue on and fight the Russians and that they use Nazi officials and soldiers to do so. Patton was an extreme personality, known for his hysterical outbursts, his constant profanity, and his sentimentality.

**Quote:** “Americans love to fight, traditionally. All real Americans love the sting and clash of battle. America loves a winner. America will not tolerate a loser.” (Speech to his troops before D-Day, 1944)

REFERENCE: Martin Bluminson, *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend, 1888–1945* (1985).

# questions for class discussion

1. How did America’s domestic response to World War II differ from its reaction to World War I? (See boxed quote on page 790.)

2. What was the wisest strategic decision in World War II, and what was the most questionable?

3. How were the European and Pacific wars similar and how were they different? (See boxed quote on page 802.)

4. What was the significance of the dropping of the atomic bomb, then and now? (See boxed quote on page 811.)

# makers of america: the japanese

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. How were the Japanese immigrants similar to other immigrants from East Asia, such as the Chinese and Filipinos? How were they different?

2. Should the World War II internment experience be seen as the most significant event in the Japanese-American experience? How did it affect those who lived through it and their descendants?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Use photographs or documents from early Japanese immigrants to glean their views of the United States.
* Consider the lives and careers of some prominent Japanese-Americans (such as Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii) in relation to the general Japanese-American experience.

**CONTENDING VOICES: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT VS. AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIER**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What did President Roosevelt claim in 1944 would be the result of WWII at home regarding race relations?

2. How did the black soldier see his experience during the war?

# varying viewpoints

## Expanding the View

* Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy* (rev. ed., 1985).

A view of the atomic bomb as aimed at Russia rather than Japan:

“The decision to use the weapon did not derive from overriding military considerations.… *Before the atomic bomb was dropped each of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised that it was highly likely that Japan could be forced to surrender ‘unconditionally,’ without use of the bomb and without an invasion.…*Unquestionably, political considerations related to Russia played a major role in the decision; from at least mid-May American policy makers hoped to end the hostilities before the Red Army entered Manchuria.… A combat demonstration was needed to convince the Russians to accept the American plan for a stable peace.”

* Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed* (1975).

A view of the atomic bomb as primarily aimed at Japan:

“Caught between the remnants of war and the uncertainties of peace, policymakers and scientists were trapped by their own unquestioned assumptions.… The secret development of this terrible weapon, during a war fought for a total victory, created a logic of its own: a quest for a total solution of a set of related problems that appeared incapable of being resolved incrementally.… As Szilard first suggested in January 1944, the bomb might provide its own solution.… The decision to use the bomb to end the war could no longer be distinguished from the desire to use it to stabilize the peace.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. Assess the validity of the claim that the dropping of the bombs on Japan was not so much an attempt to end the war against the Japanese, as it was “the first salvos in the emerging Cold War.”

2. What does each of these historians see as American officials’ thinking about the relationship between the bomb and the ending of the war against Japan? What does each regard as the primary reason for the use of the bomb?

3. What conclusions might be drawn from each of these views about the political and moral justifications for dropping the bomb? Could the use of the atomic bombs have been avoided?