

Press Release on the Government During World War II

During World War II, the government played a heavy role in monitoring U.S. production, the economy, and communication. To support the soldiers fighting on the front lines, the government urged American farmers and workers to produce the food and equipment needed by U.S. and Allied troops. Roosevelt's administration controlled labor strikes, created a rationing system to control inflation, raised taxes to pay for the war, and censored communication to protect against leakage of strategic information.

In 1942 President Roosevelt announced previously unheard-of production goals: 60,000 airplanes, 45,000 tanks, 20,000 antiaircraft guns, and 8 million tons of merchant shipping. To meet these goals, Roosevelt created the War Production Board, which was responsible for converting factories and plants from consumer-oriented production to military production. Factories that had manufactured shirts redesigned assembly lines to make mosquito netting. Model-train producers made bomb fuses. Metal weatherstripping factories switched to producing mortar shells. Kitchen-sink assembly lines were retooled to produce cartridge cases. All manufacture of automobiles switched to full-time production of tanks, trucks, armored personnel carriers, and aircraft. Because vital manufacturing materials, such as rubber, tin, and quinine, were in dangerously short supply, the government carefully rationed existing supplies.

To meet the aggressive wartime production goals, the government felt the country could not afford delays in production that might be caused by labor disputes. To prevent potential problems, the government established the National War Labor Board to settle labor disputes through mediation and arbitration. The board restricted wage increases to equal increases in the cost of living. Congress also passed the Smith-Connally War Labor Disputes Act, which required unions to give 30 days' notice before a strike vote, authorized the president to seize an essential industry where production was interrupted by work stoppages, and made it a federal crime to initiate or assist strikes in government-operated plants. In December 1943 Roosevelt had the army take possession of the nation's railroads to prevent a threatened strike by railway workers. It was returned to private management within a month.

To pay for the war, the government had to raise huge amounts of money. It did so by raising taxes and by borrowing. Taxes reached as high as 94 percent for the highest incomes and still only amounted to 41 percent of the war cost. To supplement this income, the government borrowed from individuals through war bonds, from banks, and from corporations. Regular deductions, with the consent of the workers, were taken out of paychecks for bond purchases. The government mounted drives to sell bonds and boosted patriotic spirit using movie stars, and comic book heroes, such as Batman and Dick Tracy.

Such methods of collecting money also served to safeguard against inflation. With employment high, most Americans had money to spend. Because few goods were available to buy during the war, prices rose rapidly. The government determined that if people loaned their money to the government for war bonds, they would have less to spend on goods and prices could be kept down.

Roosevelt also established the Office of Price Administration (OPA) to help control inflation. The OPA set price ceilings on most items, and instituted rent control, since housing was scarce throughout the war. The agency created a system of rationing for such products as gasoline, tires, coffee, canned food, and meat. Under the rationing system, consumers were given a specific number of coupon books and stamps that stipulated their ration of goods. These measures succeeded in avoiding serious inflation during the war.

To protect national security and strategic military information, Roosevelt issued an executive order that set up the Office of Censorship. This office censored all communications between the United States and other nations. Letters written by soldiers to their friends and families were censored to prevent leakage of important military information that could get into the hands of the enemy. The news media agreed to voluntary censorship, promising not to publish or broadcast information relating to military security without first clearing it with the federal government.

The government also created the Office of War Information to keep the public informed on the progress of the war and the policies and aims of the government. It was hoped that this would make most news readily available; however, rigid government censorship stopped the spread of much detailed information. For example, it kept quiet a military blunder in the invasion of Sicily, Italy, that resulted in an Allied bombing of U.S. paratroopers.

Press Release on Mexican Americans During World War II

Tensions on the home front during World War II increased the discrimination faced by Mexican Americans and Mexicans working in the United States. With the conversion of the economy to war production, and departure from jobs of many Americans to join the armed forces, the need for labor rose rapidly. To help meet this need the United States and Mexico created the *bracero* program in 1942. Under this program, Mexicans were permitted to come and work in the United States under short-term contracts. In the same year, 17,000 people of Mexican descent took jobs in Los Angeles shipyards to support the war effort.

The Mexican-American population was centered in the Southwest, with a large group in Los Angeles. Most Mexican Americans were born and grew up in neighborhoods that were almost entirely Mexican, and many of them had not mastered written or spoken English. Like many recent immigrants, they were crowded into run-down urban areas, exploited as farm workers, suffered high unemployment rates, and met hostility from longtime residents. In Los Angeles, many places of entertainment refused to admit Mexican Americans. For example, at one skating rink, a sign was posted that said, "Wednesdays reserved for Negroes and Mexicans." The press in California often associated Mexican Americans with sex crimes, stabbings, gang violence, marijuana, and a racial inferiority that supposedly accounted for their poverty.

During the early 1940s some Mexican Americans adopted a flamboyant style of dress, called a "zoot suit," which had originated in Harlem and spread to the West Coast. The zoot suit consisted of a long jacket and trousers tightly pegged at the cuff, fully draped around the knees, and deeply pleated at the waist. The boys and men who dressed in this fashion became known as "zooters." Most zooters also wore their hair long, full, greased, and gathered in a ducktail. Many of them belonged to youth gangs, some of which had wholly social purposes, and others of which were organized for delinquent activities.

Many white people lumped all Mexican Americans into the category of zooter gang members, and white servicemen from across the country who were stationed in and around Los Angeles shared the prejudice. In July 1943 sailors and soldiers stormed Mexican-American neighborhoods to beat up zooters, demanding revenge for alleged attacks against GIs. One report stated: "Procedure was standard: grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them. Trim the... 'ducktail' haircut that goes with the screwy costume." In the streets, boys as young as 12 and 13 were being beaten and stripped of their clothes. The Shore Patrol, Military Police, and city police either looked the other way while

the violence was taking place, or followed the mobs and jailed not the attackers but the victims. The violence escalated into the “Zoot-Suit Race Riots,” which lasted for a week. The press attributed the violence to zooter hoodlums, and the city of Los Angeles passed an ordinance making it a crime to wear a zoot suit within city limits.

The riots raised important questions about the rights of citizens against the military. In a letter to President Roosevelt, one man defended the zooters, explaining that “zoot-suiters dressed as they did to compensate for a sense of being rejected by society. The wearers are almost invariably the victims of poverty, proscription, and segregation.” He added: “It is essential to discipline the offending soldiers and sailors, for otherwise these members of the armed services will believe the wearing of the uniform gives them the license to act as arbiters of how civilians may dress, speak, act or think.”

A citizens’ committee investigated the riots and found the soldiers to blame for starting the aggressive actions. The committee declared that the GIs’ actions were motivated by racial prejudice, and called for punishment of those men guilty of violent crimes. They also noted the need for public programs to improve conditions in Mexican-American neighborhoods and to combat the racial prejudice that led to events such as those in Los Angeles.

Press Release on Women During World War II

During World War II, U.S. industry converted from consumer production to military production. Unemployment, which had been high during the Great Depression, dropped from 9.9 percent on the eve of Pearl Harbor to 1.2 percent by the end of the war. Aircraft production increased from a prewar rate of 2,100 planes a year to nearly 100,000 planes in 1944. More than 70,000 ships were constructed during the war years. This increased production created a huge demand for labor, exacerbated by the many American men who left jobs to join the U.S. military forces.

In response to the need for labor, many American women entered the workforce for the first time. Posters of “Rosie the Riveter,” who symbolized women who worked on factory assembly lines, and popular songs persuaded women to fulfill their patriotic duty and join the war effort. The following slogans were created to reassure women that they could do factory work as easily as household work: “If you’ve sewed on buttons, or made buttonholes on a machine, you can learn to do spot welding on airplane parts” and “If you’ve used an electric mixer in your kitchen, you can learn to run a drill press. If you’ve followed recipes exactly in making cakes, you can learn to load shell.” Urged by the government, tens of thousands of women who had never worked outside the home took jobs from clerical positions to riveters and welders in factories.

By 1944, 3.5 million women worked with the 6 million men on assembly lines. During the course of the war, over 6 million women entered the labor force. Women who had already been working, usually in service and menial jobs, eagerly applied for the better-paying positions in war industries. War work increased women’s independence, income, and pride. One woman involved in the war effort said, “We were happy to be doing it. We felt terrific. Lunch hour would find us spread out on the sidewalk. Women welders with our outfits on, and usually a quart of milk in one hand and a salami sandwich in another. It was an experience that none of us had ever had before. Workers from other ships would look at us and see that we were welders and it was a terrifically wonderful thing.” The opportunities the war offered women started a societal trend of women working outside the home that extended into the rest of the century.

Women also served in the military during the war. For the first time in U.S. history women were permitted to volunteer for noncombat duty. Except for combat, they were enlisted to perform all types of jobs. For instance, women flew as civilians in the Women’s Air Force Service, transporting military planes to Great Britain and other war fronts. By the war’s end, more than 200,000 women had served in the armed forces.

Although women made important strides in gaining new skills, income, and freedom, men continued to dominate supervisory positions. Most jobs were defined as either “men’s work” or “women’s work,” and wage scales, despite government promises to the contrary, discriminated against women.

In addition, even with women’s important contributions to the war effort, most women were forced out of the workforce at the end of the war. While millions of women wanted to keep their jobs, most were pushed aside to make room for returning GIs. A wartime survey showed that over 75 percent of women working in two of the largest cities in the country—New York and Detroit—wanted to keep their jobs after the war. However, as one woman said, “After the war it was completely different. I went around and applied to different factories, but there were no jobs for me. So I had to fall back on the only other work I knew, and that was doing domestic work. And it was a very defeating feeling, very.”

Women’s contributions to the military were similarly ignored. It was not until 1979 that those who served in World War II were recognized as war veterans who were entitled to benefits.