

THE UNITED STATES MOBILIZES FOR WORLD WAR II

Mobilizing the Economy

America's economy performed astonishing feats during World War II. Manufacturers retooled their plants to produce war goods. But this alone was not enough. Soon huge new factories, built with government and private funds, appeared around the nation. Millions of new jobs were created and millions of Americans moved to new communities to fill them. Annual economic production, as measured by the Gross National Product (GNP), more than doubled, rising from \$99.7 billion in 1940 to nearly \$212 billion in 1945.

Production Miracles In industry after industry Americans performed production miracles. One story helps capture the scale of the defense effort. In 1940 President Roosevelt shocked Congress when he proposed building 50,000 aircraft a year. In 1944 the nation made almost double that number. Ford's massive Willow Run bomber factory alone produced nearly one plane an hour by March 1944.

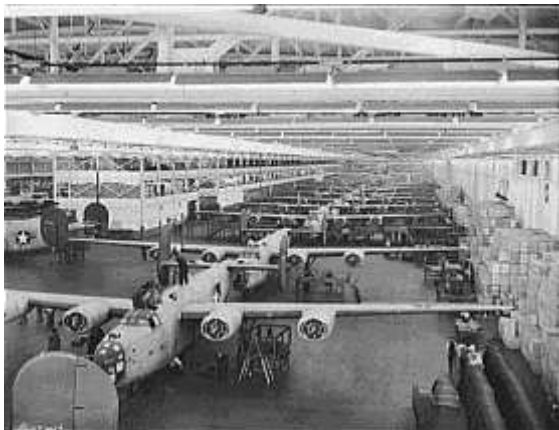


Figure 1: Ford's Willow Run Bomber Plant

To achieve increases like this, defense spending jumped from \$1.5 billion in 1940 to \$81.5 billion in 1945. By 1944 America led the world in arms production, making more than enough to fill its military needs. At the same time, the United States was providing its allies in Great Britain and the Soviet Union with critically needed supplies.

Civilian Defense

Many Americans volunteered to defend the nation from enemy bombing or invasion. They trained in first aid, aircraft spotting, bomb removal, and fire fighting. Air raid wardens led practice drills, including blackouts. By mid-1942 over 10 million Americans were civil defense volunteers.

Though America's mainland was never invaded, there were dangers offshore. Several Japanese submarines were spotted near the Pacific coast, and German U-boats patrolled the Atlantic coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. At least 10 US naval vessels were sunk or damaged by U-boats operating in American waters.

A Workforce Changed by War: Unemployment Disappears

The war virtually ended unemployment in America. The need for workers led manufacturers to hire women, teenagers, the aged, and minorities previously excluded by discrimination from sectors of the economy. Plentiful overtime work contributed to rising wages and increased savings.

Military and economic expansion created labor shortages. To fill the gap, government and industry encouraged women to enter the workforce. Though most working women continued to labor in more traditional employment like waitressing and teaching, millions took better-paid jobs in defense factories.

African Americans and other minorities also took high-paying industrial jobs previously reserved for whites. In 1941, black labor leader **A. Philip Randolph** threatened to organize a protest march on Washington, D.C. if the government didn't bar racial discrimination in defense plants with government contracts. Faced with this threat, President Roosevelt banned such discrimination and created the **Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC)** to investigate bias charges.



Figure 2: An African-American "Rosie the Riveter" in a bomber plant

Millions of women, including many mothers, entered the industrial workforce during the war. They found jobs in especially large numbers in the shipbuilding and aircraft industries. "**Rosie the Riveter**" became a popular symbol of patriotic womanhood. Though defense jobs paid far more than traditional "female" occupations, women were still often paid less than men performing comparable work. Moreover, at war's end, women were expected to leave the factories to make way for returning male veterans.

Higgins Boats

Higgins Industries designed and built two basic classes of military craft.

The first was landing craft, constructed of wood and steel and used to transport fully armed troops, light tanks, field artillery, and other mechanized equipment and supplies to shore. These boats helped make the amphibious landings of World War II possible.



Figure 3: Higgins Landing Craft

Higgins also designed and manufactured supply vessels and specialized patrol craft, including high-speed PT boats, antisubmarine boats, and dispatch boats.

LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel)

The LCVP was the most famous landing craft designed and produced by Higgins Industries. It could land soldiers, and even jeeps, on a beach. LCVPs were used in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific during the war..

"If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVPs, we never could have landed over an open beach. The whole strategy of the war would have been different."

--General Dwight D. Eisenhower

Higgins' contribution was to design and mass-produce boats that could ferry soldiers, jeeps, and even tanks from a ship at sea directly onto beaches. Such craft gave Allied planners greater flexibility. They no longer needed to attack heavily defended ports before landing an assault force. Higgins' boats were used in every major American amphibious operation of World War II. His achievements earned him many accolades. The greatest came from General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who called Higgins "the man who won the war for us."

Excerpt retrieved from: <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/america-goes-to-war.html>



Figure 4: View from a Higgins Boat on D-Day