

A Period of Emotion:  
The United States During the 1930's and World War II

The United States experienced many different situations during the fifteen years that encompassed the 1930's and the Second World War. The period contained numerous highs and lows for the country. The era brought about a great president and a nation that could handle trials and hardship. America's hope was barely hanging on during the early 1930's but could not get any brighter at the end of World War II. Great government policies and actions allowed the nation to evolve and come together. The political leadership was nearly flawless and the United States proved its unity and determination could not be matched, even by the world's worst enemy. The spirits of America had been dampened in the late twenties. The Great Depression had set in and the front in Europe was becoming heated as the reconstruction plans for Germany were falling apart. Stocks that were once considered gold were now considered ashes and over ten thousand banks were gone.<sup>1</sup> Questions began to loom as the European conflicts escalated.

A major player in the turn around of America was newly elected president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt came into office with great confidence in America promising a rebound from the Depression. Roosevelt guaranteed change and America was willing to listen. Unlike former presidents, such as Andrew Jackson, Roosevelt genuinely cared for his country and desired to provide the best possible relief. His first step was to bring fresh faces into Washington in order to achieve the change the nation needed. He appointed fellow Democrats who would impact the nation and overcome any obstacles they stumbled upon. One key player in Franklin's

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Kallen, *World War II: The War at Home* (San Diego: Lucent Books, Inc., 2000), 10-11.

success was his wife, Eleanor. She was very socially active and desired change in every aspect of the socioeconomic sector.<sup>2</sup>

As Roosevelt and his administration entered office, he proposed a metaphorical “deal” to the American public. The first part of his plan took aim at reestablishing trust in the American banking system. On March 5, 1933, Roosevelt issued an order for all banks to shut down immediately. In the time that banks were closed, the Emergency Banking Act was passed which stated that only financially secure banks could reopen for business, giving exhausted and empty financial institutions a much needed break.<sup>3</sup> The swift actions by the new president seemed to revamp the banking industry and get it headed in the right direction. Because of Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” and fresh government leaders, Americans began to once again trust their banking system.

The president continued his restoration of America by establishing many organizations and passing bills, even though at times he was met with opposition from the American public. Roosevelt provided jobs for nearly 500,000 youth by enacting the Civil Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration. The CCC and PWA allowed for many families to begin the process of obtaining an income once more.<sup>4</sup> Harry Hopkins, a long time advisor of Roosevelt, was given the job of coming up with a bill that would give relief to state and local governments. Hopkins created the Federal Emergency Relief Act which provided millions of dollars for state and local relief.<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt suffered intense scrutiny from the public when putting his agricultural relief program into motion. The administration’s goal was to cut production in order to improve farm income. The first step was to destroy crops and slaughter millions of pigs. The

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<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision Volume II: Since 1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 735.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 726.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 737.

<sup>5</sup> University of Washington, “Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA),” University of Washington Digital Collections, <http://content.lib.washington.edu/feraweb/essay.html>.

public expressed their views by saying this action was only hurting the society more – why destroy food during a hunger crisis? However, the public cooperated. Later, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) was put into place to control the agricultural rebuilding process.<sup>6</sup> The National Recovery Administration (NRA) called for businesses to create codes which enabled competition among various organizations, thus providing higher wages. The nation was recovering from the Great Depression but not all eyes looked favorably upon Roosevelt's plans.

Various public relief organizations began to falter and the Roosevelt administration continued to receive scrutiny. The NRA was not under proper leadership and was becoming a bit ridiculous with various codes and laws it intended to enforce. The NRA was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court since it regulated commerce and gave power to the president that should have been given to Congress. The AAA helped raise the value of farms, but took away farm jobs because of the reduction of animals and crops. The work of the AAA caused huge dust bowls across the nation. Midwesterners could hardly live because of the huge clouds of dust that were always present due to the reduced number of crops in the ground. Plowing had kicked up clouds of dust that migrated from coast to coast and residents of the Midwest decided to follow the clouds in order to start their lives again.<sup>7</sup>

America was beginning to prosper again but more had to be done. FDR continued his fireside chats to keep the nation confident that much was being done to help the country. The conflict in Europe continued to make Americans feel uneasy, but Roosevelt squelched claims of the nation getting involved in war. He was criticized by everyone and anyone, ranging from newspaper columnists to physicians. Senator Huey Long, who may have been the next

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<sup>6</sup> Boyer, 737.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 739-740.

president, seemed to be Roosevelt's most legitimate challenger, gathering over six million supporters under his "Share Our Wealth" campaign.<sup>8</sup> Long was assassinated in late 1935, leaving an open door for FDR to continue his revitalized "new deal."

In 1935, Roosevelt helped the unemployed by setting up the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to assist in remodeling and revamping various public usage facilities. Assistance went to artists of all types with the enactment of various federal projects. Performers gave free concerts or shows, writers penned the history of the nation, and artists created murals on public buildings. Overall, the WPA helped assist over eight million Americans who were once jobless.<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt also passed the Social Security Act of 1935. This act removed taxes from paychecks that would assist the retired, disabled, and widowed. At first, the nation did not favor the idea of the Social Security Act, but became supportive once realizing they would receive money after retirement.

Also in 1935, Roosevelt began to sign the Neutrality Acts, banning the sale of weapons to hostile nations. These acts were formed to keep the United States from getting involved into another world war, a practice called isolationism. Americans believed that World War I had caused the Great Depression, so they wanted nothing to do with the conflict in Europe. By the time Italy invaded Ethiopia, the acts had caused more harm than good to U.S. foreign policy. Hostile nations, such as Italy, took offense to the Neutrality Acts. These acts were temporarily lifted in order to assist China when it was invaded by Japan in 1937.<sup>10</sup> This may have been the nation's first step in becoming involved in war.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 740.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 741.

<sup>10</sup> Henry S. Sage, "U.S. Foreign Policy 1920-1941," Henry S. Sage, <http://www.sagehistory.net/worldwar2/topics/1920WWII1940.htm>

In August of 1937, the “Roosevelt recession” began. Unemployment rose once more but Roosevelt waited to take action and received harsh criticism. In turn, he increased funding for various employment agencies and the recession eased in 1938. This recession marked the end of the New Deal. America had been bruised during the thirties. The nation had overcome unemployment and strikes only to be placed in that position again. Although Roosevelt had put a lot into recovering from the Great Depression, the nation was left tired; worrying about the pending conflict across the Atlantic.

Two significant events took place in 1940, bringing the U.S. closer to becoming a favorable ally in the war. In May, Winston Churchill asked FDR for naval ships to assist the war in Europe and Roosevelt granted him those resources. The second event occurred in June, when the Japanese were days away from obtaining complete control over Asia. The Chinese were losing ground and their fight was almost over. Realizing the U.S. was the only hope in saving China, Roosevelt issued the command to move all Pacific naval ships off the coast of Hawaii to prepare for battle if needed.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt also issued a partial embargo on items sent to Japan as an adverse effect to their actions. Still, the U.S. wanted nothing to do with either war. Roosevelt began to lose favor in the eyes of American citizens. As the presidential elections were underway, Roosevelt stated, “your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign war.” Somehow, his promise gave peace to the nation.<sup>12</sup>

The Lend-Lease Bill in 1941 provided full arms support for the Allied troops. The United States was fully committed to ending German terror in Europe. Roosevelt gave permission to British and American military personnel to discuss strategies if the United States

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<sup>11</sup> Henry J. Brajkovic, “The Foreign Policy of Franklin D. Roosevelt To The Entry Into World War II,” Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1978/3/78.03.05.x.html#c>.

<sup>12</sup> Henry S. Sage.

were drawn into the war. Upon Germany's attack of Russia, the United States began to disperse troops in various European regions while also lending support to the Soviet nation.<sup>13</sup>

By late July of 1941, a full embargo had been placed on all exports to Japan, crippling them into forfeiting the empire they had recently built. Such action would be detrimental to the United States as it was the final straw in the eyes of the Japanese. General Hideki Tojo began forming war strategy to conquer all of Asia at whatever cost. After further negotiations failed, the Japanese government chose to declare war with the United States. Tojo ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor which launched America into war. On December 7, the United States declared war with Japan. A war involving Germany and Italy was only four days behind.<sup>14</sup> The nation was shocked and angered by the attack on Pearl Harbor, yet a sense of national pride surfaced and guided war efforts.<sup>15</sup>

The government educated the nation by issuing gas masks and giving air raid instructions to American citizens in case of an attack. In response, vast amounts of men and women answered the call to join the military to serve their country, including many baseball players and movie stars. Although women were unable to go overseas and fight, they helped by making planes, guns, and ammunition. By 1943, over 7.7 million men and women had joined the military and the numbers continued to grow.<sup>16</sup>

War efforts at home united the nation, bringing about a sense of patriotism. The government enacted various programs and agencies to help war-time causes. These programs put rations on food, general merchandise, and cars. The government urged Americans to plant

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<sup>13</sup> Henry J. Brajkovic.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Henry S. Sage.

<sup>16</sup> Kallen, 19-27.

“Victory Gardens” to produce vegetables so that canned food could be sent to soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

Housewives were also urged to donate their leftover cooking fat to make glycerin, a substance vital for making explosives. Some members of the American public reacted in haste towards the limitations on goods, but most thought it was part of their civic duty during the war.<sup>18</sup>

As the war progressed, casualties increased. Many families lost fathers and sons to the war. Still, America continued to persevere. Defense bonds were sold to raise money for the war, and massive ad campaigns urged citizens to contribute to the war funding. Millions of American families relocated, especially to port cities, to fill job positions and help their country.<sup>19</sup>

Not all was cheerful in America during the war. Many Jewish citizens were distrusted during the war because propaganda spread, stating they started the conflict. As the movie industry began to show the effects of genocide in Europe, Jewish tensions were relieved. World War II led to many immigrant citizens being labeled and investigated by the FBI for spying. The government went so far as to making internment camps for Japanese-Americans, which produced negative public reactions. Many race riots occurred across the U.S. for the civil liberties of African-Americans. Blacks were permitted to serve in war and make war materials, but they were segregated from their fellow white soldiers and workers. President Roosevelt backed such segregation claiming that it would “produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparation for national defense.”<sup>20</sup>

As the war began to come to a close in April of 1945, President Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage and vice-president, Harry S. Truman, was sworn into office. The nation wept and grieved as their long-time leader was now gone, but knew their fighting was not done.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 55-68.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 69-80.

After victory in Europe, Truman faced a tough decision in ending the war in the Pacific. Experts estimated that an invasion of the main Japanese islands could result in over one million U.S. casualties. Truman went with the alternative, the atomic bomb. The first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, killing and injuring over 100,000 people. With Japan's refusal to surrender, another bomb was dropped on Nagasaki three days later. Japan surrendered, ending the Second World War.

The thirties and World War II had a wide range of effects on the American people. The beginning of the thirties had the nation feeling hopeless because of Hoover's ineffective policies and actions. Upon Roosevelt's election as president, the nation began to feel the hope once lost because of the Depression. Robert Bendiner, a writer, described the Depression upon Roosevelt's arrival in office as "exhilarating" because of the actions he took to remedy the situation.<sup>21</sup> Despite the negative effects of "The New Deal," America recovered, pulling together to embrace another World War.

World War II garnished many unique and positive effects for the nation. The isolationism theory worked well for the mid-to-late thirties, because it united the country. The state of mind shifted as Pearl Harbor was attacked and America was full of hatred for the Axis powers. Upon Roosevelt's death, the nation grieved but knew they had a mission to fulfill and refused to disappoint their former president. Once the war ended, it was amazing to see how far the United States had come in just 15 years. America's unity can be credited to Roosevelt and his administration, but would not have been possible without the help of every citizen: male and female, black and white, children and adults. America had redeemed itself in confidence, diligence, and community, taking great strides towards a promising future.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Bendiner, *Just Around the Corner: A Highly Selective History of the Thirties* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1967), 28-30.

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