World War II Part 2 - The Homefront: Crash Course US History #36

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=HofnGQwPgqs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/HofnGQwPgqs

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course U.S. History and today we're going to discuss how World War II played out at home and also the meaning of the war.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green, so is this going to be, like, one of the boring philosophical ones then?

Oh, me from the past, I remember when you were idealistic. I remember a time when all you cared about was the deep inner meaning of-- mostly girls. But you've changed, me from the past, and not in a good way.

=====Theme Song=====

So anyway World War II brought about tremendous changes in the United States, in many ways shaping how Americans would come to see themselves and how they would want to be seen by the rest of the world. Some of these ideological changes were a continuation of the New Deal. Others were direct results of the war. But one thing we can say is that by the end of the war, the country was very different.

For starters, World War II strengthened the Federal Government of the United States. This always happens when a country goes to war, but World War II brought about even more governmental intervention and control than we had seen in WWI. It was like the New Deal on steroids, like federal agencies like the War Production Board, War Manpower Commission, and Office of Price Administration took unprecedented control of the economy.

There was massive rationing of food, and supplies, entire industries were completely taken over by the government, the federal government fixed wages, rents, prices, and especially production quotas. Like, if you're looking to buy a 1942 Model Ford or Chrysler, good luck, because there weren't any. The government told those car makers not to create new models that year.

So basically FDR was president for life and controlled all the industries I mean HOW DID THIS COMMUNIST END UP ON THE DIME? Well, the answer is that while it might have sucked not to have a 1942 Ford, most people were happy just to be working after the Great Depression. Unemployment dropped form 14% in 1940 to 2% in 1943. Of course 13 million Americans were serving in the military in some capacity so that helped employment.

But in general the war kicked the American economy into overdrive, like, by 1944 American factories were producing an airplane every five minutes and a ship every day. US gross national product went from 91 billion to 214 billion during the war.

Why did this happen? Well that's controversial, but primarily because of federal spending. Government expenditures during the war were twice the amount they had been in the previous 250 years. Combined. Although a lot of this was financed with debt, much of the war was paid for with taxes. Like the federal government began the practice of withholding taxes from paychecks, for instance, a practice that I became familiar with when working at Steak N Shake discovering that instead of being paid like I don't know a hundred dollars a week I was being paid -30 dollars a week because I had to declare my tips. Because my dad made me.

Before WWII only 4 million Americans even paid federal income taxes, but after the war, 40 million did. Also big business got even bigger during the war because of government contracts. Cost-plus contracts guaranteed that companies would make a profit and the lion's share of contracts went to the biggest businesses. So by the war's end the 200 biggest American corporations controlled half of America's corporate assets.

And all of this government spending also spurred development. Like, defense spending basically created the West Coast as an industrial center. Seattle became a shipping and aircraft-manufacturing hub, and California got 10% of all federal spending. And Los Angeles became the second largest manufacturing center in the country, meaning that it was not in fact built by Hollywood, it was built by WWII.

All of this was pretty bad for the South, by the way, because most of this industrialization happened in cities, and the South only ha two cities with more than half a million people.

And organized labor continued to grow as well, with union membership soaring from around 9 million in 1940 to almost 15 million in 1945. besides union-friendly New Deal policies, the government forced employers to recognize unions in order to prevent labor strife and keep the factories humming so that war production would not decrease.

And, from a human history standpoint, one of the biggest changes is that many of the workers in those factories were women. You've probably seen this picture of Rosie the Riveter and while there wasn't actually a riveter named Rosie, or maybe there was, but-SHE'S AN AMALGAM. But my 1944 women made up 1/3 of the civilian labor force in addition to the 350 thousand who were serving in the military. And the type of women who were working changed as well. Married women in their 30s outnumbered single women in the workforce.

But the government and the employers both saw this phenomenon as temporary, so when the war was over, most women workers, especially those in high paying industrial jobs, were let go. This was especially hard on working class women who needed to work to survive and had to return to lower paid work as domestics or in food services or, God forbid, as teachers.

=====Mystery Document=====

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document?

The rules here are simple. We use primary sources for learning as this is a serious show about history and then if I guess the author wrong, I get shocked. Okay, what do we got today? Let's take a look.

"Certainly this is no time for any of us to stop thinking about the social and economic problems which are the root cause of the social revolution which is today a supreme factor in the world. For there is nothing mysterious about the foundations of a healthy and strong democracy. The basic things expected by our people of their political and economic systems are simple.

They are: equality of opportunity for youth and for others, jobs for those who can work, security for those who need it, the ending of special privilege for the few, the preservation of civil liberties for all."

I mean, that's some pretty hardcore New Deal stuff right there. And, uh, the biggest New Deal-er of all was FDR, BUT I remember last time when I guessed FDR and it was actually Eleanor Roosevelt... So... You wouldn't do Eleanor Roosevelt twice. Or would you? Hm. no. It sounds more like a speech. FDR. (dinging noise) YES!

=====End of Mystery Document=====

So I mentioned at the beginning of this video that WWII was an ideological war, and nothing better encapsulates that idea than FDR's 'Four Freedoms,' which were: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

During the war the National Resources Planning Board offered a plan for a peacetime economy based on full employment, an expanded welfare state, and a higher standard of living for all. In 1944 FDR even called for a new Economic Bill of Rights that would expand governmental power in order to create full employment and guarantee an adequate income, medical care, education, and housing to all Americans.

As FDR put it, 'True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.' But that didn't happen, largely because Southern Democrats in the House and Senate didn't want it to because it would have meant a larger role for unions and also extending greater equality to African Americans, and they weren't about to let that happen. I mean, their jobs were literally dependent upon African Americans not being able to vote.

But, Congress did pass the GI Bill of Rights, officially the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, to attempt to prevent widespread unemployment for returning soldiers. It worked amazingly well, and by 1946 more than 1 million former soldiers were enrolled in college and almost 4 million got assistance with mortgages, spurring a post-war housing boom. Levittown and all the towns since that look like it came after the war.

So, we talked about FDR's Four Freedoms, but big business added a fifth freedom- free enterprise. Advertisers helped on this front, trying to make the war about consumption, telling Americans that they were fighting to "hasten the day when you... can once more walk into any store in the land and buy anything you want," according to an ad for Royal Typewriters.

And FDR's vision of extending freedom wasn't limited to the US, like Henry Luce, the publisher of Time Magazine, published a book called the American Century claiming that the war had thrust upon the US the opportunity to share with all people their "magnificent industrial products";that's a quote, and American ideas like 'love of freedom' and 'free economic enterprise.'

The struggle against Nazism also helped re-shape the way that Americans thought of themselves. Like, because the Nazis were racists, Americanism would mean diversity, and tolerance, and equality for all people. The federal government supported this version of America. FDR claimed that to be an American was a 'matter of mind and heart,' not 'a matter of race and ancestry.'

Of course it wasn't a matter of race and ancestry; we'd already killed 95% of the indigenous population.

This was also, not coincidentally, the period where American intellectuals began publishing books debunking the supposed 'scientific' basis of racism.

Now this didn't mean that Americans suddenly embraced equality of all people. Anti-Semitism still existed and contributed to the government's not doing more to help the Jews who perished in the Holocaust. In fact, only 21,000 Jewish people were allowed to come to the US during the course of the war.

And white people's fear over minority groups contributed to race riots in Detroit and the Zoot Suit Riots against Mexicans in Los Angeles in 1943. Not just a song by the Cherry Poppin' Daddies, also a tragic moment in American history.

The war years saw a dramatic increase in immigration from Mexico under the Bracero program, which lasted until 1964. And about 500 thousand Mexican American men and women served in the armed forced during the war, as did 25 thousand American Indians although Indian reservations being largely rural, didn't really share in the wartime prosperity.

Asian Americans are probably the most glaring example of the failure to be adequately pluralistic. Although things did improve for Chinese Americans because America couldn't keep restricting the immigration of its ally in the war, Japanese Americans suffered horrible racism and one of the worst violations of civil liberties in America's history.

Executive Order 9066 in February 1942 expelled all persons of Japanese descent from the west coast. 70% of Japanese Americans lived in California and as a result of this order more than 110 thousand people, almost 2/3 of whom were American citizens, were sent to internment camps where they lived in makeshift barracks under the eyes and searchlights of guards.

A man named Fred Korematsu appealed his conviction for failing to show up for internment all the way to the Supreme Court, where he lost in yet another horrendous Supreme Court decision.

=====Thought Bubble =====

Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The group that experienced the greatest change during WWII was probably African Americans. They still served in segregated regiments in the armed forces, but more than 1 million of them answered the call to fight. And just as important, continuing the Great Migration that had begun in the 1920s, 700 thousand African Americans left the south, moving to northern and especially western cities where they could find jobs, even though these mass migrations often led to tensions between blacks and whites and sometimes these tensions exploded into violence.

WWII also saw the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Angered by discrimination in defense employment, black laborer A. Phillip Randolph threatened a march on Washington demanding access to defense jobs, an end to segregation, and a federal anti-lynching law. He didn't get all of those things, be he did get Executive Order 8802 which banned discrimination in defense hiring and created the Fair Employment Practices Commission. The FEPC couldn't enforce anti-discrimination but as a compliance agency it helped African American workers obtain jobs in arms factories and shipyards. By 1944 more than a million black people were working in manufacturing, and 300 thousand of them were women.

The rhetoric of fighting a war for freedom against a racist dictatorship wasn't lost on African Americans, and many saw themselves as engaged in the double-V campaign, victory over the Axis powers abroad and over racism in the US.

The war saw ending segregation and black equality become cornerstones of American liberalism, along with full employment and the expansion of civil liberties. Eventually even the army and navy began to integrate, although the full end to discrimination in the military would have to wait until well after the war.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

=====End of Thought Bubble =====

So if America was isolationist before the war- and I've argued that it actually wasn't really- after the war it certainly wasn't. FDR took a very active role in planning for a more peaceful and prosperous post-war world. And conferences at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam clarified war aims, and established the idea that Germany would be divided and Nazis tried for war crimes.

These conferences also laid the foundation for the Cold War in allowing Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, so that wasn't such a good thing.

But, the 1944 conference Bretton Woods in beautiful, freedom loving New Hampshire, established America's economic dominance as the dollar, which again would be backed by gold, replaced the pound as the main currency in international transactions. It also created the World Bank to help rebuild Europe and also to help developing countries and the IMF to stabilize currencies.

How well that's worked is debatable, but this isn't- the US became the financial leader of a global capitalist order. the US also took the leading role in establishing the United Nations at the Dumbarton Oaks in 1944. Why do we not have a UN commission on improving the names of historical events?

The goal of the UN was to ensure peace, and the US's position as one of the 5 permanent members of the Security Council signaled that it intended to take an active and leading role in international affairs. And we had to, because by the end of the war only the US and the USSR were powerful enough to have any influence.

So WWII ended the Depression and transformed American economy. It cemented the new definition of liberalism defined by the New Deal and opened up opportunities for diverse groups of Americans. It also transformed definitions of freedom both at home and abroad. I mean, even before the US entered the war it issued the Atlantic Charter along with Britain affirming the freedom of all people to choose their own government and declaring that the defeat of Nazi Germany would help to bring about a world of "improved labor standards, economic advancement, and social security".

At home and abroad WWII became a war that was about freedom, but was also about what Gunnar Myrdal called the American Creed- a belief in equality, justice, equal opportunity, and freedom.

I want to be clear that we have done a terrible job of living up to the American Creed, but the story of American history is in many ways the story of ideas pulling policy, not the other way around. American history is an economic and political and social history, but it is also a story about the power of ideas. and WWII helped clarify those ideas for America and for the world.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits=====

Crash Course US History is made by all of these nice people [John Green, Stan Muller, Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Halse Rojas, Stan Muller, Meredith Danko] and it exists because of you and your support through Subbable.

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[in captions on video only:] Boom. Oh god. That went worse than I expected.