

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 447

“Don’t You Know There’s a War On?”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,
Remember?*

American journalist Walter Winchell.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 447. Don’t You Know There’s a War On?

In the United States of 1941, the population was about 134,000,000. That’s 40% of today’s number. Employment was around 56,000,000, and the major industries in the US were manufacturing, mining, and agriculture.

America was already a “nation of machines,” as Joseph Stalin put it. The American GDP stood at about \$125 billion per year, double the number from the darkest days of the Great Depression. Median income was around \$2,000 per year.

The American diet had gotten pretty lean during the Great Depression, but by 1941, the standard of living had improved for most people. Americans generally felt that you had to serve some form of meat at every meal, though that might mean only bacon or chicken soup or a sandwich, and might not include breakfast. Americans considered meat to be health food and also a sign that you and your family were living well. Only poor people went without meat. On the other hand, going out to eat in a restaurant was a luxury. Most families only did that on special occasions.

The magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* did a survey of what Americans served each other at mealtime, and here is what they thought was a typical middle-class American menu:

For breakfast: toast and coffee or milk, perhaps with orange juice or oatmeal. Bacon and eggs a couple of times per week.

For lunch: A sandwich, or soup with bread and butter, perhaps with celery sticks, carrot sticks, or a piece of fruit on the side.

For dinner: usually an economical main course, like franks and beans or macaroni and cheese or scalloped potatoes with bacon. Cooked vegetables on the side, generally peas, corn, or carrots, or a mix of these. Dessert might be fruit salad or Jell-O, with cake or pie as an occasional treat. Sunday and holiday dinners might be built around a chicken or a pot roast.

Supermarkets were not yet common; most Americans bought their groceries at a grocery store that operated under the older retail model, in which you went up to a clerk behind a counter and told him—it was always a him—what you wanted, and he would take your items from stock shelves behind the counter, put them in a bag, and tell you how much you had to pay.

In our time, an American supermarket carries more than 30,000 different items, but in 1941, the grocery stores where most Americans shopped might carry a mere hundred or so. Bigger stores might stock as many as a thousand. There wasn't much variety. But keep in mind that these stores didn't carry fresh meat; you bought that at a butcher shop. You bought fish and other sea food from a fishmonger. You bought bread and other baked goods at a bakery. Dairy products were delivered to your home early in the morning by a milkman, because they were so perishable. Besides milk, the milkman might also bring you cream, butter, cheese, or eggs. The milkman typically put your order into a box outside your door, where you could collect it at breakfast time.

It wasn't the most efficient of food distribution systems, and the American diet was by today's standards bland and monotonous, but Americans were at least accustomed to having all their staple foods available to them, even if they couldn't always afford everything they wanted. What if they suddenly weren't available? How would Americans react?

The last war had created global food shortages, as we saw. Drafting soldiers takes them out of the civilian economy, but they still have to eat, and wartime demand for transport and supply ships make imported foods hard to get. The food shortage Americans remembered most vividly from the last war was sugar. Americans stocked up on sugar almost immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack, with purchases of 100-pound bags not uncommon. Grocers began limiting sales of sugar to ten pounds per customer.

This level of hoarding created shortages even before the Japanese cut off shipments of sugar from the Philippines, though in fact the Philippines supplied less than 20% of America's sugar. Far more came from Cuba and Puerto Rico, but there was a shipping shortage, remember.

During the last war, food shortages led to inflation and to food riots. Three months before Pearl Harbor, the US government established the Office of Price Administration, OPA for short, to impose price controls and prevent wartime inflation. In January 1942, Congress passed the Emergency Price Control Act, which empowered OPA to set prices on virtually everything and to ration goods in short supply.

Sugar was the first commodity to be rationed, and the last to be released from rationing, in 1947. As with sugar, the public got a warning of what was to be rationed next when it began to disappear from the stores because of hoarding. A common excuse was that "I'm stocking up on it before the hoarders get it all." A joke went around about a man who bought a 100-pound bag of sugar and took it upstairs to stash away, but tripped over some large bulky object in the attic that he couldn't see in the darkness. It proved to be the 100-pound bag of sugar he'd stashed away during the last war.

In May 1942, Americans were instructed to go to their local public schools and pick up their war ration book. These were books that contained small ration coupons. Rationed foods were priced in dollars and cents and in ration points. The prices were limited by the OPA, but the amount you could buy was limited by your ration points. The books contained whole series of coupons in different point denominations, valid at different times. The newspapers would help with public reminders of what coupons were good when. For example, "Tomorrow: Coffee coupon no. 25 expires. Last day to use No. 4 A coupon, good for four gallons of gasoline."

In late 1942, coffee was rationed. In early 1943, canned foods. The metal from the can was needed for war production and consumers were urged to clean and return used cans. On March 29, 1943, meat rationing went into effect, and this was the sorest of sore spots. The OPA regulated the size of the cuts in the butcher's shop. The government encouraged producers of hot dogs to stretch them with potato or soybean filling. Butchers began offering horsemeat.

The public often accused butchers of holding back their choicest cuts for friends and other favored customers, whether it was true or not. One butcher shop put up a sign that read: Please be nice to our employees! They are harder to get than customers, and meat is harder to get than either one.

Americans love their red meats, and when meat rationing was introduced, *The New York Times* speculated there would be food riots by year end. That didn't happen. In fact, the per person meat ration was more than the recommended maximum consumption of red meat nutritionists set in our time. Similarly, the sugar ration worked out to six teaspoons per person per day, which in our time is equal to the maximum recommended daily intake set by the American Heart Association.

At the peak, 90% of the foods America ate were rationed. Fish, poultry, and fresh fruit and vegetables were never rationed, although this didn't mean they were always available. Women did most of the grocery shopping and most of the cooking in those days. They were bombarded with suggestions on how to stretch their rations. Families were encouraged to grow their own

vegetables in the back yard. Women were also encouraged to report to the OPA stores that exceeded maximum prices or sold “under the table” in violation of the rules, and they certainly did. Rationing was popular with African Americans because it eliminated the common practice of charging higher prices to Black customers.

Many nonfoods were rationed because they were needed for war production. Rubber was in short supply, since 97% of prewar rubber imports came from places now under Japanese occupation. Automobile tires were impossible to get, and elastic disappeared from clothing. Nylon and silk were needed to make parachutes. In the 1945 cartoon short, *Hare Conditioned*, Bugs Bunny, posing as an elevator operator in a department store, announces the products available on the sixth floor this way: “Rubber tires, girdles, nylon hosiery, bobby pins, alarm clocks, bourbon, butter, and other picture postcards.”

There is nothing Americans treasure more dearly than their cars. Gasoline rationing was imposed on the eastern US in spring of 1942, because virtually all of the petroleum products consumed in the East were shipped by tanker from Texas, and German U-boat crews were diligently sinking them. The petroleum industry accused the Roosevelt Administration of deliberately imposing draconian limits on gasoline consumption for no reason other than to accustom the public to wartime sacrifice.

In fact, Americans in the East were well aware of the U-boat threat and accepted limits on consumption of gasoline, but the Roosevelt Administration could not bring itself to impose nationwide gas rationing until December 1942, a year into the war. The government also imposed a nationwide speed limit of 35 miles per hour and banned driving for pleasure altogether.

Gasoline rationing was based on stickers placed inside the car’s windshield. An A sticker meant you could buy four gallons per week, later reduced to three, and then two. Those who hosted carpools and drove their coworkers to work could get a B sticker. To get a C sticker, you had to be using your car for essential activities: a minister or a doctor, for example. Stores were discouraged from offering deliveries; the public was encouraged to carry away their purchases themselves. City buses were soon packed with people carrying bulky packages.

Clearly, drivers with A stickers were at the bottom of the totem pole, with three gallons per week, at a time when the average American car got about 15 miles to the gallon. Even then, all driving the government deemed nonessential was banned altogether. No one resented this more than holders of those A stickers. They felt they had already done their bit for the war by limiting themselves to three gallons a week. A ubiquitous, and much mocked, publicity campaign repeatedly asked the driving public “Is This Trip Necessary?”

Enforcing this rule was not easy, but the OPA did its best. OPA investigators hung out at racetracks and theatres and stadiums and nightclubs, taking down license plate numbers on the

theory that driving to a ball park or a nightclub was *ipso facto* unnecessary. The penalty was loss of your entire gas ration.

You couldn't drive to a vacation spot. Passenger shipping had been requisitioned by the military. You couldn't buy a ticket for an airplane without government approval, and intercity busing was banned. If you wanted to go to the beach and get away from it all, your only option was by train. The trains were packed with vacationers, jammed alongside uniformed soldiers on furlough. Scalpers resold train tickets for exorbitant markups: as much as \$50. Hotel prices soared and you needed to make your reservation months in advance. Most people didn't mind. War production was booming and salaries were following suit. What else was there to do with your money? Buy a car? Ha, ha; they don't make them anymore. Henry Ford is too busy turning out tanks and planes.

America was (and is) a country that took pride in the large, diverse, and relatively inexpensive range of consumer products available to the average person. The American standard of living remained relatively constant over the course of the war, but even so, wartime rationing was often a touchy subject and a major source of public frustration. Complainers were everywhere, but anyone who voiced their complaints too loudly ran a high risk of getting confronted with the oft-asked question, "Don't you know there's a war on?"

[music: Silver and Cohn, "Yes! We Have No Bananas."]

At its peak, the United States was devoting more than half of its gross domestic product to the war effort. This number is not an outlier. The other major powers, both Axis and Allied, were doing the same or more. The twentieth century is the era of total war, in which most everyone, soldier or civilian, is contributing to the fight.

What makes the United States different is the enormous size of its GDP. At the moment it entered the war, US GDP was greater than those of Germany, Italy, and Japan combined. And US GDP rose substantially during the war, increasing by around 80%. Compare that to the three principal Axis nations or the United Kingdom: all four of those countries saw little or no growth in their GDP. The Soviet Union experienced a substantial decline in GDP in 1941 and 1942; this was of course because of the German invasion and occupation of some of the USSR's most productive farms and factories.

Half of the US GDP works out to around \$200 million per day early in the war, with that number steadily increasing. Of this amount, the US government is spending roughly half of it directly on its military; that is, recruiting, paying, training, and deploying its armed forces. The other half went to wartime production: civilians working in factories to produce military equipment, from items as simple as bullets or uniforms or canteens to the truly big-ticket items. These would be mostly vehicles, ranging from jeeps up to tanks, plus warplanes, and the most expensive of all, naval vessels.

American factories were turning out quantities of military equipment so vast that no other nation's production comes close. The US alone was producing 40% of the total military production of all nations on both sides of the war.

Military production in the United States was governed by the War Production Board, or WPB; yes, another three-letter agency created by the Roosevelt Administration. The WPB oversaw the distribution of materials, commodities, and services needed for wartime production, and decided how much could be spared for the civilian economy. It organized scrap metal drives to collect materials that could be turned into weapons. It hired teams of mathematicians to calculate the optimum distribution of raw materials to factories in order to produce as much as possible in the least amount of time.

The WPB also supervised the conversion of civilian factories to wartime production. It had many tools to work with. It could deny strategic materials to a business, which would force it to suspend production of nonessential civilian products, but then it could offer military contracts to those businesses to make up for it. Here's an example: the famous Steinway and Sons piano company of New York. When America entered the war, the WPB denied Steinway the iron, brass, and wire necessary to build a piano. That left the company with only its expertise in producing quality pieces of shaped wood, but the WPB had a use for that: Steinway could make parts for the wooden gliders used by paratroopers. Steinway also had the knowhow to make coffins, which alas are also a wartime necessity.

A few months later, the WPB came to Steinway with another idea: a small, lightweight piano suitable for use by soldiers in remote parts of the world and starved for entertainment. Steinway designed and built a short, chunky spinet piano for the United States military. It contained only a fraction of the metal normally used in a piano, making it light enough to be carried by four soldiers, or drawn in a cart behind a jeep, or even airdropped by parachute, and was designed to resist the heat and humidity of the South Pacific. They came in your choice of olive drab or Navy gray and were inevitably dubbed "Victory Pianos." Steinway sold thousands of them to the military.

Besides existing factories, the US government was funding the construction of military bases and new factories all over the country, creating plenty of new jobs and attracting the unemployed and the down-and-out from across the country. Okies in California, rural folk in the Appalachian Mountains, African Americans in the South, and struggling farmers in the Plains pulled up stakes and moved to places where they could work for Uncle Sam. The US Census Bureau estimated that 8,000,000 American civilians moved to another state during the war. That's about 6% of the population, in addition to the millions who were drafted.

Where did they go? The fastest-growing communities in percentage terms were Mobile, Alabama, Norfolk, Virginia, San Diego, California, and Charleston, South Carolina. These communities sit at the top of the list in percentage terms because they were small to begin with,

but even if the numbers were not all that big in absolute terms—in Mobile it was just 90,000 people—they had a big impact on these smaller cities.

Apart from the cities I just mentioned, most civilian workers moved to one of two places. One was Michigan, where was the beating heart of the American automotive industry, an industry that was now making tanks, jeeps, trucks, and other military vehicles, and the factories were running around the clock.

The other location was the West Coast of the United States, including Seattle, Washington, where Boeing made those B-17s, Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco and Los Angeles, in California.

More than half the warships built in America during the war were built in the three Pacific Coast states. That's understandable, given the war in the Pacific, but in addition, nearly half of all the aircraft built during the war were built in these three states, as much of America's prewar aircraft production was already located there.

The population of California increased by 2,000,000 over the course of the war, and by 1945, the state had the highest per capita income in the US. Over the course of the twentieth century, California went from being at best a second-tier state within the Union to becoming America's richest, most populated, and most culturally influential state and a center for scientific research and technological development. That process began with the motion picture industry moving to Hollywood, and continued with this influx of wartime workers and money. Later will come television and integrated circuits, but those stories will have to wait for future episodes.

Trains carried these workers to these places, where the word was that good jobs were available. Jobs were indeed easy to get; housing, on the other hand, was not. These workers' new communities were happy to take their money, but the workers themselves, and their families, were another story. Municipal services such as law enforcement and schools were stretched to the breaking point. And if the workers weren't white, or even if they didn't speak English with the right dialect, locals looked down on them and felt no obligation to make them feel comfortable or welcome. The new arrivals slept in trailers, garages, tents, or even their own cars, at least in the early part of the war. Those lucky enough to find rooms to rent paid exorbitant prices for them. Others lived in shacks, banged together by hand and clustered on the outskirts of the city. These shantytowns were sometimes called "New Hoovervilles."

Federal agencies stepped in to provide money to these strapped municipalities to bolster their services. Public agencies and private contractors paid by the government put up billions of dollars' worth of new housing, though most of it was temporary housing, a short-sighted strategy that failed to consider what would happen after the war.

A substantial portion of these wartime workers were women, and many of them had children in tow. In this era, there was significant hostility to the idea of working mothers, who were seen as

greedy and selfish, sacrificing the welfare of their children for the sake of a few extra bucks in their wallets. This attitude ignored the reality that many of these women were working for patriotic reasons or because their husbands were away fighting the war and they needed some extra money to make up for military pay.

A total of six million women held jobs in war production during the war, and a survey of the time revealed that 40% of them had children under sixteen; 20% had children under five. You know that “baby boom” you so often hear about? It’s usually thought of as a post-war phenomenon, but young men drafted for the war often chose to enter into quick weddings with their girlfriends before shipping out. The marriage rate in America had already been rebounding from its low point during the Great Depression, when marriage was unaffordable for many. When the peacetime draft was introduced in 1940, there were generous deferments for married men, so no small number of weddings in 1940 and 1941 were the result of draft jitters, but even after America entered the war and those deferments disappeared, the marriages kept on coming. In fact, there were more of them.

Some young men married before going off to war out of a desire to seal the deal, so to speak, and insure they didn’t lose their ladyloves to some other guy while they were off fighting fascism. Others wanted to insure there was someone back home eligible to collect their military benefits while they were gone; wives got an allotment of \$50 per month, in addition to their husband’s pay. There were also death benefits to think about. If worst came to worst, at least the girl they loved would have some security.

These wartime weddings started in 1942, which is why the earliest “baby boom” babies started arriving in 1943. By 1945, America had 2.7 million households headed by a married woman.

Some communities experiencing this influx of working mothers made a community effort to organize day care and nursery schools for their children. In other cases, their employers or their union stepped in to offer support. Later the Federal government authorized funds for day care. At the peak, the government was funding nearly 3,000 day care centers serving more than 100,000 children. Often the most vocal opponents to these day care centers were local church leaders, who objected to day care on principle.

When child care was not available, desperate mothers parked their children at the movie theater. Beside their usual responsibilities, frazzled ushers had to serve as nannies and police, breaking up groups of little boys who’d decided to race each other down the aisle. Some joked that the town might as well close the schools and assign their teachers to the movie house, but the reality was that often child care was most desperately needed at night. Some movie theaters ran all night long, but most, especially in smaller communities, closed late at night. The ushers in these theaters would find dozens of kids still waiting for mom; they’d have to usher them outside and make them sit on the sidewalk.

Maybe I should be calling it “night care.” Lots of working women got stuck with the swing shift; in many factories, union rules gave workers with seniority first claim to day shift jobs. The workers with seniority were the ones who’d been working at the plant since before the war; in other words, men.

Large numbers of unsupervised kids, especially older kids not eligible for daycare (or night care) is a recipe for trouble. The term *teenager*, first coined in the Twenties, became much more common during the war, because there was so much to say about them, which brings me to another neologism that grew widespread during this time: *juvenile delinquent*.

Arrests of juveniles increased 20% nationwide in 1943. San Diego reported a 50% increase in arrests of boys, and a 350% increase in arrests of girls, at a time when the adult crime rate was dropping. This was because most crimes are committed by young men, and most of the young men were in uniform.

Among the juvenile arrests, boys were most commonly arrested for vandalism that in many cases could be interpreted as acting out war fantasies. As for the girls, they were most frequently charged with “promiscuity.” Unattended and bored teenage girls quickly figured out that young men in uniform offered them many ways to pass the time: dinner, a movie, a dance, while what the young man wanted in return was easy enough to provide.

Soldiers and sailors on leave sometimes found themselves swarmed by mobs of teenage girls, heavily made up to look older than they were. They were known as “V-girls,” as in “V for victory.” A popular wartime joke went like this: A sailor tells his buddy, “I’m going into town to meet a girl.” His buddy asks, “What’s her name?” “How the hell should I know?”

V-girls were in truth amateur prostitutes. They were lively, fun, and offered soldiers and sailors a good time. They were more attractive than the pros, who treated their clients with a weary indifference. On the other hand, the professional women knew more about venereal disease and how to avoid it; sexually transmitted diseases were much more common among the V-girls.

Don’t judge these men too harshly. A common complaint from those who resisted the temptation to hire a girlfriend for the price of a movie and a Coke was that the good girls avoided uniforms like the plague. As one soldier put it, most families “live[d] in mortal fear that one of their ‘innocent’ daughters might be contaminated by a date with one of the boys in uniform.” Many American families opened their homes to lonely soldiers far from their own homes and would gladly share their table and their hearth, but drew the line at sharing their daughters.

On the other hand, when you consider the rising marriage rate of the period, you could just as easily conclude that traditional moral values—when you marry, have sex, and have children, and do it in that order—those values were alive and well.

But marriage in wartime is hard. The real tribute to the values of 1940s America is that so many marriages survived it. Some war wives cracked under the stress; others succumbed to the temptation of some cute guy with a 4-F draft classification, but others soldiered on, so to speak. For many of them, the opportunity to do factory work gave them something to do, a community to be a part of, and most important, a sense that they too were part of the noble cause for which their husbands fought: that their children might enjoy the good life that the war had robbed from them.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank George for his kind donation, and thank you to Eric for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like George and Eric help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. You know the drill. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*; as we take a look at wartime life in Britain. Keep Calm and Carry On, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Working women were unusual but hardly unheard of in America before the war. What was unheard of was the idea of women working in heavy manufacturing jobs, such as operating a drill press, or welding, or riveting. That sort of work was thought to be the exclusive domain of men.

But once the draft took away so many men, manufacturers had no choice but to adapt, and soon discovered women were perfectly capable of heavy manufacturing. From this emerged the classic wartime icon, Rosie the Riveter, an image that played on the seeming incongruity of a woman doing heavy industrial work. Government campaigns encouraged women to enter this field; other government campaigns tried to reassure their boyfriends and husbands that it was perfectly all right.

The specific phrase "Rosie the Riveter" comes from a popular song composed in 1942, extolling a hard-working woman on an assembly line. In our time, the image most associated with Rosie is on a wartime poster which declares, "We can do it!" I posted a copy on the podcast website. In truth, this image was only used within the Westinghouse Company and did not become familiar to the general public until the 1970s.

The image of Rosie the Riveter that would have been most familiar to Americans during the war was a 1943 cover illustration of *The Saturday Evening Post*, painted by America's most popular illustrator of the time, Norman Rockwell. Rockwell's painting was based on the image of the prophet Isaiah as painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1509. A muscular red-haired woman in work clothes is depicted seated on her lunch break, rivet gun resting in her lap and safety goggles pushed up on her forehead as she eats a sandwich. The lunchbox under her arm has "Rosie" painted on it, and she rests her feet on a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

[music: Closing War Theme]