Awakening a Sleeping Giant
By Jenn Zellers

At 7 a.m. on December 7 1941, the radar site at Opana Point, Hawaii detected two large blips of approaching aircraft heading towards Pearl Harbor. By 8 a.m., 2,402 American servicemen lost their lives and the United States suffered a serious and devastating blow to her Pacific fleet. The United States officially entered the war on December 8 with a formal declaration of war toward Japan. The United States declared war on Germany three days later, but the involvement began nearly three years earlier when the country started to expand the military and self-reliance case of a shortage of essential materials purchased from overseas. The defense program kick started the stagnant economy and tens of thousands of displaced workers found work within the defense industry. From the moment of the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938, Roosevelt felt that the United States needed to play a more active role in world politics, and the agreement only meant there was imminent threat of war. From 1938 to 1941, Roosevelt outlined a clear defense strategy to provide for an adequate defense of the United States and to provide aid to the Allies in Europe. Implementing strategies used in World War I, Roosevelt called for national unity and for industry to begin a conversion from a peacetime economy to a war economy in 1939. Despite early public opinion that stood against intervention in the late 1936’s, Roosevelt worked to convince the American people of the threat posed by the Axis and called for the unity of the American people to work together to promote an united front against oppression. The mobilization of civilian and the military industry led to the United States ability to provide the necessary tools for the Allies to defeat the Axis powers in 1945.

The position of neutrality began when President Woodrow Wilson in 1914 10, 20 I 0). I 0, 20 I 0). I 0, 20 I 0). I 0, 20 I 0). President Wilson invoked Washington's message when war broke out in Europe in 1914. The United States opted not to play favorites with the Entente and Central Powers in Europe. Congress declared that the newly formed United States must not meddle in foreign affairs. In a message to the citizens of the United States concerning the French Revolution, Washington asked that people refrain from divided loyalties: "[...] to exhort and warn citizens of the United States carefully to avoid all acts and proceedings whatsoever, which may in any manner tend to contravene such disposition." Washington opted to be friendly to nations at war and warned citizens against conducting business or saying things that may provoke confrontation with fellow citizens. While his 1793 statement had little effect throughout the next century on staying out of foreign wars, Roosevelt's words in his 1914 speech have been inferred leading to the United States becoming a player on the world stage upon entering the war and her industrial might helped to pave the way for victory in 1918. The strong relationship between industry and government gave legitimacy to the United States who wanted to stay out of the situation in Europe in the mid-1930s.

The threat of an invasion on homeland presented a problem for the Roosevelt administration. An increase in the production of military vehicles and armament lead many isolationists to believe that Roosevelt was edging the country closer to becoming involved in international politics. During his 1938 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt called for an increase in military spending to help deter the threat of a homeland invasion—a home defense would deter aggressor nations from trying to launch an attack on the United States. Increasing the size of the military and call for increases in production of war goods was part of his goal to increase United States security policy in 1934. Roosevelt recommended that Congress fund a nearly $1 billion program to expand the national defense program. The program added additional battleships, anti-aircraft guns, and other military equipment and materials. Other increases would come in the additional training of officers and men. Some politicians resisted the President’s call for increased defense spending citing that the Neutrality Acts forbade any intervention by the United States into foreign affairs. The American public opinion at home, harbored by the memories of World War I kept most Americans from supporting any nation at war.

With the navy getting new ships and the army getting better weapons and the increasing ranks of the armed officers, the United States seemed prepared to defend against attack and neutrality remained the key policy of the government. The signing of the Munich Agreement revealed how unprepared the United States was in case of war in Europe. President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined a major defense policy shift in his 1939 State of the Union Address to improve American defense and industrial output and to prevent shortages of key raw materials. In his message, Roosevelt called upon Congress and the American citizens to do more to aid those who are in a struggle for freedom. At 7 a.m. on December 7 1941, the radar site at Opana Point, Hawaii detected two large blips of approaching aircraft heading towards Pearl Harbor. By 8 a.m., 2,402 American servicemen lost their lives and the United States suffered a serious and devastating blow to her Pacific fleet. The United States officially entered the war on December 8 with a formal declaration of war toward Japan. The United States declared war on Germany three days later, but the involvement began nearly three years earlier when the country started to expand the military and self-reliance case of a shortage of essential materials purchased from overseas. The defense program kick started the stagnant economy and tens of thousands of displaced workers found work within the defense industry. From the moment of the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938, Roosevelt felt that the United States needed to play a more active role in world politics, and the agreement only meant there was imminent threat of war. From 1938 to 1941, Roosevelt outlined a clear defense strategy to provide for an adequate defense of the United States and to provide aid to the Allies in Europe. Implementing strategies used in World War I, Roosevelt called for national unity and for industry to begin a conversion from a peacetime economy to a war economy in 1939. Despite early public opinion that stood against intervention in the late 1936’s, Roosevelt worked to convince the American people of the threat posed by the Axis and called for the unity of the American people to work together to promote an united front against oppression. The mobilization of civilian and the military industry led to the United States ability to provide the necessary tools for the Allies to defeat the Axis powers in 1945.

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to give the appearance of mass coordination of millions of unemployed Americans in industry producing weapons. As the production orders increased because of the war in Europe, plans expanded to meet the demands.

Roosevelt could no longer ignore the difficulties that lay before him about the need to increase armaments production for home defense. Most Americans refused to accept any increase in the production of armaments out of fear that it might result in another involvement in the war. A few short months after the signing of the Munich Agreement left Roosevelt with little choice. In his 1939 State of the Union Address, he told Congress that while the Agreement averted war, world peace remained questionable. He warned, "There comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone [...] their governments, and their very civilizations are founded."12 While American industry ramped up production for the Allies, it also helped bolster the American defenses at home. Roosevelt actively campaigned for more help for the Allies. Despite his active campaigning to do more, Congress and the public remained hesitant to Roosevelt’s calls for more direct involvement.

Roosevelt challenged his critics by framing mobilization as a need to strengthen home defense. He was able to please those internationalists who saw a defense program as a way to end the Great Depression, and was able to quiet those who feared U.S. involvement. This was clear in Roosevelt’s “Arsenal of Democracy” speech where he explained, “We are planning our own defense with the utmost urgency, and in its vast scale we must integrate the war needs of Britain and the other free nations which are resisting aggression.” He appealed to the internationalists who felt the country should be in another European conflict. There was no intent on Roosevelt’s part to draw the United States into the war with his speech, but many of his critics remained alarmed that he continued to push the country towards war. Roosevelt’s increased political role in the national life became a necessity in the time of war. The American public accepted this as a temporary solution. The majority of Americans were against any idea of getting involved in a European war; however, he proceeded carefully when trying to implement his policies for national defense.

Roosevelt’s programs to plan for modernizing defense and coordinate with private industry started with the creation of the short-lived War Resources Board (WRB) in August 1939. The New York Times reported that duties of the board included the mobilization of the economic resources and perfecting plans already made or in the making to prepare the country for war.14 The appointment of civilians to the board meant that the best men for leading the country into preparing for war came from the companies that would provide the industrial and financial support. A New York Times editorial called the War Resources Board “one of the most important steps” in preparing the country for a war emergency.15 However, after submitting its first report in November 1939, the president disbanded the board. In a letter issued to the board, the president expressed gratitude and felt that they had accomplished their mission in developing a plan for mobilizing industry for war. Roosevelt told the board, “So long as the United States is not engaged in war, such a board has no power and no executive responsibility.”16 The political pressure of the board from all political sides put Roosevelt in a precarious position. Roosevelt faced political and public pressure to keep America out of the war.

The fall of France in 1940 cleared up any confusion about the United States’ role in the European war. Despite continued opposition to any military involvement, the president continued with his defense initiatives to bring American industry and military to compete with a strong Nazi Germany military. But the mobilization was slow. Opponents of the president’s defense program tried to limit the funding to the military, add restrictions to the funding, or in some cases try to stop it all together. Even by the end of 1941 when the United States formally declared war on Japan and Germany, the defense program struggled to meet demands. The bombing of Pearl Harbor motivated the public into action, but many still felt that the oceans that separated the country from the conflicts in the east and west isolated them from any invasion. By the end of 1942, the United States surpassed the Axis powers in terms of production. The dramatic change into a full-scale wartime economy all but assured an Allied victory. It was far from automatic. Troubles of production and supply problems hampered production, but the coordination allowing the larger manufacturer of armaments to subcontract work to smaller plants boosted the production. Roosevelt’s call for unity mobilized millions of displaced women and minority workers to enter the workforce, many for the first time. The effects of the wartime economy reduced the unemployment to pre-1929 averages, and ended the Great Depression in 1940. Standards of living rose and the wartime controls on consumer goods allowed workers to establish savings, which helped to reduce the effects of a post-war economy slowdown as the war, ended in 1945.

Bibliography

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12 Ibid.