

History
UNFOLDING

AMERICA'S WORLD WAR II THE HOME FRONT



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

Contents

Introduction	2
Lesson 1	The Industrial Powerhouse.....	4
Lesson 2	Pulling Together: Mobilizing the Population.....	8
Lesson 3	Wartime Jitters and Deep-Seated Fears	12
Lesson 4	Holding Things Together at Home	16
Appendix	Image Close-ups	21

America's World War II—The Home Front

Introduction

Americans at Home in World War II

World War II left entire societies in ruins in many parts of Europe and Asia. Death, destruction, social and cultural upheaval were everywhere. Moral codes seemed to have collapsed. Spiritual grief and desolation left people bewildered and in despair.

American soldiers experienced a good deal of this also—and witnessed much of the rest. But at home, most Americans knew World War II in a very different way. They lived through the battles vicariously, from news reports, newsreels, and the letters and stories of GIs overseas.

Otherwise, they experienced the war mainly through its enormous impact on economic growth and through a variety of wartime economic controls. These controls were restrictive, but not unbearable. Fears and anxieties did intensify, adding to the tensions of daily life. But in spite of this, many Americans pulled together in order to maintain their normal way of life. Compared with the rest of the world, they succeeded. And yet the war changed life at home in many ways. A different America emerged from World War II.

It is impossible to tell the entire story of World War II with just twelve illustrations. But the twelve we have chosen focus on many of the key ways in which the war affected citizens here at home. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Industrial Powerhouse

In this lesson, the focus is on the U.S. as the great “arsenal of democracy” for the Allies. With millions of men off to war, it took the labor of millions of women in factories and on farms to put America’s mighty industrial machine to full use. This mobilization of all our resources proved decisive.

Pulling Together: Mobilizing the Population

In order to shift production to wartime needs, Americans at home had to give up all kinds of consumer goods. And they were called on in many other ways as well to pull together and contribute to the war effort. Their sacrifices meant that this was a total war, one requiring the efforts of the entire population. The illustrations in this lesson make this clear.

Wartime Jitters and Deep-Seated Fears

The war created tensions of all sorts. Fears of sabotage or subversion by enemy agents were one kind of tension. Older social fears, especially racial and ethnic hatreds, seemed to intensify during the war. This was especially so with respect to Japanese-American citizens living on the West Coast—as two of the three illustrations here make clear.

Holding Things Together at Home

In spite of tensions of the sort discussed in Lesson 3, most Americans tried hard to maintain a normal and civil way of life. The illustrations here suggest that, in many ways, they succeeded.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*America's World War II—The Home Front***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better appreciate how important the enormous productive capacity of the U.S. was to the war effort.
2. Students will discuss the impact of wartime production on U.S. society and culture.

The Industrial Powerhouse

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

Unlike most other industrial nations, the United States was never a battleground during World War II. Nevertheless, the war had a huge impact here at home. Perhaps its biggest impact was economic. Even before entering the war, the U.S. had become what President Roosevelt called a great “arsenal of democracy.” And when the U.S. did go to war, every area of the economy was “mobilized.” Converting from consumer to wartime production was overseen by the War Production Board, or WPB, which supervised industries as they changed over to producing the weapons and supplies of war. This photo shows a line of new tanks, of which more than 100,000 were built in America during the war.

Illustration 2

America’s technological genius was vital during the war. From penicillin to more effective radar systems, from aircraft carriers to the jeep, and from bigger and faster bombers to the atomic bomb, American know-how was put to the task of fighting the war. All of this prowess not only helped win the war, but it also had lasting significance for peacetime life after the war. The government’s Office of Scientific Research and Development coordinated scientific and technological research for military purposes. That research paid off in many new and improved systems and devices. Aircraft carriers and submarines—one of which is shown in this photo—were two key military weapons in World War II that had a major influence on its outcome.

Illustration 3

The war put an end to the Great Depression. High unemployment was replaced by huge labor shortages, as working men entered the armed forces. Their jobs were often taken by women who had never worked outside the home. More than six million women joined the workforce during the war. As this photo shows, these female workers did all kinds of industrial work in defense plants and elsewhere. They also volunteered in countless ways. This massive move into the workplace had a social and cultural as well as an economic impact. When the war ended, most women gave up their jobs to men returning from overseas. But attitudes and relationships had shifted, and working outside the home had become more acceptable for women as a result of the war.

Lesson 1 – The Industrial Powerhouse

Illustration 1



The National Archives

Discussing the Illustration

1. Even before the United States entered World War II, FDR wanted to help the “Allies,” the nations on whose side we fought in the war. Who was “FDR,” and who were our key allies in World War II?
2. FDR called on the U.S. to become a great “arsenal of democracy.” How does this photo help to explain what he meant by that phrase?
3. Becoming an “arsenal of democracy” would have meant a big change at any time in the nation’s history. This was especially true at the end of the 1930s. Can you explain why?
4. Despite the Depression, the U.S. was uniquely qualified to be the “arsenal of democracy” for the Allied nations fighting in the war. Can you explain why? Had the U.S. not existed, what other nation or nations might have played this role? Would the Allies have succeeded by relying on these other nations instead of the U.S.? Why or why not?

Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** Converting industry from consumer to wartime production was directed by the War Production Board, or WPB. Read more about the WPB and the conversion of auto industries to war production. Pretend your group is the board of directors of a big car company. The WPB has just told your company to produce tanks instead of private cars and trucks. What changes do you and your fellow directors think will be needed? Come up with a plan describing the problems you think your company will face and how you hope to solve those problems. Report to the class (perhaps treating them as the shareholders of your company).
2. War production helped the nation get to know Harry Truman, the man who would eventually become President after FDR died in 1945. Why was this so? What did Truman have to do with war production? Research the answers to these questions and write an essay describing Harry Truman’s role in this area during the early years of World War II.