World War II marks a watershed in American history. From a difficult and humiliating beginning, the United States emerged from this prolonged, painful, and expensive universal conflict triumphant as a superpower. It became the defender of the free world, a proud, confident nation, continuously involved in international affairs, a global economic powerhouse, and the most productive industrial country on earth.

The national cohesion amid the turmoil, the unquestionable moral superiority of the United States in opposing the aggression of fascism and Nazism in Europe and Japanese designs for a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” unleashed movements for social justice and for cultural pluralism. The stark contrast with the domestic unrest during World War I, Woodrow Wilson's internationalist failures afterward, and the divisiveness caused by U.S. involvement and defeat in the Vietnam War a generation later considerably enhanced this legacy.

The United States entered the conflict reluctantly. Following World War I Americans focused on domestic renewal and the United States adopted a policy of isolationism, refusing to join the League of Nations. The economy was still recuperating from the Great Depression, and Congress enshrined neutrality in law. Nevertheless, the legacy of U.S. participation in World War I, and its political, cultural, and commercial ties with western Europe, virtually guaranteed that the United States was entrenched on the Allied side.

The U.S. collision course with Japan began with the latter's controversial attempts to dominate parts of eastern Asia. In Europe the United States unsuccessfully tried to dissuade the Western powers from succumbing to Hitler's designs on Czechoslovakia in the 1938 Munich Conference. In 1940 German victories led to solicitation of funds for the U.S. Army and Navy and to the controversial enactment of the Selective Training and Service Act, an unprecedented peacetime military draft. In January 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his Four Freedoms Speech, which articulated a vision of hope and economic and social rights in contrast to the Axis's imperialist agenda. In March Congress easily approved the Lend-Lease Act to aid Britain, and the U.S. Navy escorted British ships, commencing an unofficial war with Germany. In July Japanese incursions into Indochina were countered by American sanctions, especially the halt of oil supplies, crucial for the Japanese war machine.

In August the United States issued with Britain the Atlantic Charter, concurred in by the Soviet Union, having been attacked by the Germans in June. Echoing the Four Freedoms this platform was multilateral, avoiding specific territorial issues, unlike the Fourteen Points proclaimed by President Wilson during World War I. The charter abridged abstract humanitarian caring with institutional recognition of human rights as an ongoing concern in American foreign policy and for a universal community. This agenda, expanded in the Dumbarton Oaks deliberations, served as the foundation for the United Nations (UN) and for international conventions. Created in 1945 the UN, the successor to the League of Nations, was the official name of the Allies, coined by Roosevelt in 1942.

Only in December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of
war by Germany, did the United States fully commit to combat. Americans participated directly for three years and eight months of the nearly six years of battles. U.S. casualties were comparatively minor. The American mainland was not attacked; there was no physical destruction; civilian losses were small.

The impact of the conflict, even at home, was overwhelming. Anti-Japanese sentiments were prevalent as exemplified in 1942 by Executive Order 9066 that detained without due process many Japanese Americans. United States participation was decisive in the Asian theater. American contributions were crucial to the survival of Great Britain, and armed forces were indispensable in western Europe. American supplies, moreover, were very helpful to the Russians in their monumental fight against the Nazis, where most casualties (counted in numbers) and the bulk of mass ground battles took place in World War II.

For Americans memorable episodes in the war began with the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the 1942 Bataan “Death March” in the Philippines following its conquest by the Japanese. Heroic battles fought by American troops in the Pacific Theater included Guadalcanal in August 1942; Iwo Jima in February—March 1945; and Okinawa in April—June 1945. The invasion of western Europe (D-Day) on June 6, 1944, is the most celebrated campaign on the Atlantic Front.

Franklin D. Roosevelt served as U.S. president through most of World War II. He became a mythical, consensus-building figure in the American collective memory. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, on the eve of triumph in Europe, before the problematic decision to deploy nuclear weapons against Japan, and before the cold war with the Soviet Union actively began. Thus, the more controversial issues were left to his inexperienced, largely unknown successor, Harry S. Truman.

Thanks to the massive production of armaments and commodities, the economy improved considerably during the war, ending in earnest the Great Depression, a task that the various projects of the New Deal did not quite complete. Unemployment practically ended. Women entered the job market in large numbers as men were mobilized. The advertising campaign extolling “Rosie the Riveter” personified this phenomenon. About 140 thousand served in the Women's Army Corps, 100 thousand in the navy, over 110 thousand as nurses and volunteers, and hundreds as active noncombat pilots.

Extensive industrial capacity; mechanization; investments in human capital and technological and physical infrastructure (especially in the training of soldiers, scientists, scholars, and workers); the development of nuclear power; and the building of houses and highways enhanced American strength. This tremendous growth allowed many laborers to enter into the ranks of the middle class through professional careers and independent home ownership.

Most of this progress was secured through the commitment, deeds, and funding by the federal government. Subsequently, the government’s authority in the nation grew as its role was recast from corrective to distributive in allocating resources and providing entitlements. This was highlighted by the 1944 GI Bill (the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act), effective until 1956. Designed to prevent the shame and anger experienced by unemployed World War I veterans, it afforded benefits to demobilized soldiers, including vocational rehabilitation, inexpensive mortgages for housing, and medical care at newly built veterans’ hospitals. The GI Bill memorably facilitated, through stipends for tuition and living allowances, higher education or professional training, especially aiding those who had no such access previously. Private enterprise, growing consumerism, and the speedy suburbanization encouraged by the spread of national television broadcasts combined to negate the deprivation of the Great

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Depression and the years of war.

The baby boom, beginning in 1946, provided a demographic boost to the market demands. It also ushered in the sexual revolution so visible in the 1960s. The initial change was within the confines of marriage, as people married earlier. The feminist movement, too, saw its roots in the combination of more material goods and greater professional independence for women.

As a result of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism was rendered publicly unacceptable. Racism in general was seen as shameful by a growing number of Americans. This frame of mind coupled with stronger federal authority facilitated the civil rights movement by African Americans in the South.

Lessons from the global economic problems led to the Bretton Woods negotiations. These created in the mid-1940s the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the predecessor to the World Trade Organization).

The United States, a recognized global power, did not retreat into isolationism as happened after World War I. The deterioration in the abilities of European countries who had been powerhouses, such as Great Britain and France, forced the United States to assume the mantle of defending Western civilization. This resulted in providing relief to European Allies through the 1946 Marshall Plan, guaranteeing their security in the cold war through establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1948, and coming to the aid of South Korea in the Korean War (1950–1953).

Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was perceived as a custodian of American valor and honor because of his leadership in the Atlantic Theater, won the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections. His 1961 farewell address warned against the excessive influence of the military-industrial complex created by the strategic circumstances that had occurred following World War II.


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Young evacuees of Japanese ancestry awaiting their turn for baggage inspection at Assembly Center. Turlock, California. 1942. Dorothea Lange, photographer. National Archives and Records Administration.


Americans arriving at Omaha Beach at Normandy, June 6, 1944. Image slightly damaged in processing. Robert Capa, photographer. Wikimedia Commons.

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