CHAPTER 27

AMERICA AND THE WORLD, 1921-1945

SUMMARY
Refusing to assume an important role in world affairs after the end of World War I, the United States became more and more isolationist throughout the 1920s. In the 1930s, as conflict brewed in Europe and Asia, the United States’ commitment to isolationism grew deeper until 1941 when Nazism and Japanese imperialism forced a foreign policy reversal and entrance into the second World War. At the conclusion of World War II, the United States remained highly involved in world affairs and took a leading role in maintaining world order.

Retreat, Reversal, and Rivalry
In the 1920s, the United States followed a foreign policy that was narrow, cautious, and self-centered.

Retreat in Europe
Regarding Europe, American policymakers insisted on payment of war debts without allowing access to American markets and, thus, the dollars necessary to pay those debts. Politically, the United States never joined the League of Nations, spurned English and French attempts to negotiate European security treaties, and largely ignored the new Bolshevik regime in Russia.

Cooperation in Latin America
By contrast, in Latin America the United States was much more active, continuing to seek economic advantages. It did so, however, with more friendly tactics—the good neighbor policy—than had administrations before World War I. Dollar diplomacy slowly replaced gunboat diplomacy.

Rivalry in Asia
In Asia, the United States continued on a confrontational course with Japan. Despite the American Open Door Policy, Japan wanted to expand in China and soon into other areas of Asia. Though the decades of the 1920s and 1930s were filled with compromises such as the Nine Power Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, these efforts only forestalled the eventual conflict.

Isolationism
Because of the Great Depression and the fear of involvement in another European war, the United States followed an isolationist policy in the 1930s despite the increasing militarism of Japan and the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. In 1937, when these three powers allied themselves as the Axis Powers, thereby posing a threat not only to Europe but to the entire world, the United States continued its isolationist policies until it was almost too late.
The Lure of Pacifism and Neutrality
Looking back at World War I as a meaningless effort, many Americans sought security in pacifism and legal neutrality. They wanted a way to ensure that the United States would not be drawn into another European conflict. Young people especially wanted to avoid war as peace movements swept across college campuses. After a Senate investigation into unsavory business practices in the munitions industry, a series of neutrality laws were passed that tried to limit the ways that Americans could be drawn into a conflict. Though publicly committed to neutrality, Roosevelt tried to limit the nation’s retreat into isolationism.

War in Europe
Events in Europe made American neutrality increasingly unrealistic and difficult to maintain, making the neutrality acts harder to support.

The Road to War
From 1939 to 1941, the United States moved ever closer to war as the nation’s sympathy and support went to England and France.

From Neutrality to Undeclared War
As the war worsened in Europe, President Roosevelt pushed the country closer to participation. He clearly favored the Allied cause and convinced Congress to relax the strict neutrality acts in order to aid the British. After the success of the German blitzkrieg put England at risk, Roosevelt asked for a peace-time draft and began the Lend-Lease program to get war supplies to the British. Although there was some opposition to Roosevelt’s actions, the American populace became more and more convinced of the need for some kind of intervention. This stance only intensified as Germany and the United States engaged in an undeclared naval war.

Showdown in the Pacific
While war raged in Europe, Japan continued to expand in Asia, especially into British and French colonies. When the United States responded with economic sanctions, Japan sent diplomats to Washington to discuss peace proposals. At the same time they readied for a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, plunging the United States into war.

Turning the Tide Against the Axis
In both Europe and Asia, the early days of the war were discouraging for Americans. It took two years for the Allies to halt the advance of the Axis powers. They then faced the daunting task of driving them back and liberating the conquered territories.

Wartime Partnerships
Most importantly, the alliance of the United States and Britain was a genuine coalition with unified command and strategy. Relations with other members of the United Nations coalition were more strained. China objected to the decision to defeat Germany first, having been at war with Japan since 1937. And relations with the Soviet Union were also uneasy as they took the worst fury of the German blitzkrieg alone while Britain and the United States could do little more than promise future help.
Halting the German Blitz
The United States and Britain invaded first North Africa and then Italy, while the Soviet Union stopped the Germans at Stalingrad.

Checking Japan in the Pacific
In Asia, the United States Navy gained control of the central Pacific by July of 1942.

The Home Front
The war wrought vast changes in American society and ended the decade of depression. The need for war materials was met by American industries working at full capacity. Women and minorities moved into jobs previously closed to them as men went to war. The nation’s economic recovery led to FDR’s reelection to a fourth term in 1940.

The Arsenal of Democracy
Though American soldiers were certainly important to the Allied victory, American industry was the single most important contribution of the nation to the war effort. The rapid increase in production led to many problems including shortages of critical materials like aluminum, steel, and copper. In 1942 the War Production Board was formed to answer such complex logistical concerns. One result of the wartime economic expansion was increased incomes for both workers and farmers.

A Nation on the Move
The war motivated millions to migrate, young men to training camps and then overseas and defense workers to booming industrial cities. Such movement created problems in housing and family life, but also offered opportunities, especially to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women. Though African Americans experienced some social and economic gains, their progress was limited by continued and even inflamed racial prejudices. The internment of Japanese Americans into concentration camps was another sad counterpoint to the economic progress of the war years.

Win-the-War Politics
Politically, Roosevelt and the Democrats maintained power and won wartime elections. The nation’s economic success along with victories on the battlefield contributed to their consolidation of power, despite aggressive campaigns by the Republicans.

Victory
After the offensives of the Axis powers had been stopped, the war ended quickly. The Germans were thoroughly defeated and forced to surrender unconditionally.

War Aims and Wartime Diplomacy
With the end of the war came the end of the alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Tensions between the two nations emerged from a mutual distrust, the Soviet Union’s perception of an Allied delay in opening a second front, and vastly different goals concerning the rebuilding of postwar Europe.
Triumph and Tragedy in the Pacific
Though the war in Europe was over, the war in the Pacific continued until President Harry S. Truman ordered the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan.

Conclusion: The Transforming Power of War
World War II had a significant impact on American life. It was the first time the United States reached its full military potential. The United States emerged from the war the strongest nation in the world and fully committed to a global role. The war also brought about economic recovery and unprecedented prosperity while establishing political and demographic trends.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After mastering this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the foreign policy of the United States in the 1920s.
2. Explain the causes and effects of the isolationism of the 1930s.
3. Trace the background of war in Europe in the 1930s.
4. Discuss the factors that led to conflict in Asia.
5. Analyze the goals of the Allies in forming the wartime coalition.
6. Discuss the military strategy that stopped the advance of the Germans.
7. Describe how the United States took control of the central Pacific in 1942.
8. Discuss the changes the war brought about in domestic economic development.
9. Describe the impact of the war on minorities, women, and labor unions.
10. Explain the impact of war on American politics.
11. Evaluate the performance of the United States in wartime diplomacy.
12. Discuss the Allied strategy of the last days of World War II.
13. Discuss the seeds of Soviet-American tension fostered by the war.
GLOSSARY

To build your social science vocabulary, familiarize yourself with the following terms:

1. pacifists those who oppose war or the unrestricted use of the military. “. . . especially among pacifists who had advocated the outlawing of war . . .”

2. bilateral in diplomacy, pertaining to an action or treaty involving two nations. “An unhappy Briand, who had wanted a bilateral treaty with the United States . . .”

3. reparations payment or indemnification for loss after a war. “. . . they were forced to scale down their demands for German reparations . . .”

4. repudiate discard; disavow; reject. “. . . the ungrateful Allies were trying to repudiate their sacred obligations.”

5. estrangement the act of alienating or avoiding friendly relations. “. . . Roosevelt finally ended the long estrangement . . .”

6. subversive tending to ruin, destroy, or overthrow. “The Soviets soon went back on promises to stop all subversive activity . . .”

7. charismatic having a magnetic personality or attraction. “A shrewd and charismatic leader . . .”

8. Reich German word for rule, kingdom, or reign. “. . . uniting all Germans into a Greater Third Reich . . .”

9. belligerents nations engaged in war. “. . . ban arms sales and loans to belligerents . . .”

10. coup a sudden and decisive forcible change in the government of a nation. “. . . he seized Austria in a bloodless coup.”

11. Anglophiles those who favor or have an affinity for the people and institutions of Britain. “Eastern Anglophiles, moderate New Dealers, and liberal Republicans made up the bulk of the membership . . .”

12. depreciation (in taxation) a tax break based on the fact that machinery wears out or loses value. “The WPB allowed business rapid depreciation, and thus huge tax credits . . .”

13. detention restraint or confinement. “Herded into hastily built detention centers . . .”

14. Balkan an area of south central Europe, a peninsula bounded by the Aegean and Adriatic seas. “As his armies overran Poland and the Balkan countries . . .”
15. **capitulation** a surrender with stated conditions. “... Japan signed a formal capitulation agreement...”

**IDENTIFICATION**

Briefly identify the meaning and significance of the following terms:

1. Lend Lease Program ________________________________

2. Washington Conference ________________________________

3. Good Neighbor Policy ________________________________

4. Nye Committee ________________________________

5. America First Committee ________________________________

6. War Production Board ________________________________

7. Fair Employment Practices Committee ________________________________

8. “Zoot Suit” Riots ________________________________

9. Yalta Conference ________________________________
MATCHING

A. Match the following world leaders with the appropriate description:

_____ 1. Haile Selassie  
   a. dictator of Italy before and during World War II

_____ 2. Chiang Kai-shek  
   b. emperor of Ethiopia during the Italian invasion

_____ 3. Hideki Tojo  
   c. leader of the Soviet Union during World War II

_____ 4. Charles de Gaulle  
   d. leader of the Nationalist Chinese during World War II

_____ 5. Joseph Stalin  
   e. Japanese army militant who became premier in 1941
   f. leader of exile government known as the Free French
B. Match the following leaders with the appropriate description:

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Cordell Hull</td>
<td>a. head of the Committee to Defend America by aiding the Allies</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Gerald Nye</td>
<td>b. aviator-hero and member of the America First Committee</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>William Allen White</td>
<td>c. Secretary of State under President Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Donald Nelson</td>
<td>d. African-American labor leader who demanded equal employment opportunities during World War II</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>A. Philip Randolph</td>
<td>e. Sears, Roebuck executive and head of the War Production Board</td>
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<td>f. senator who sponsored the neutrality acts of 1935, 1936, and 1937</td>
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**COMPLETION**

Answer the question or complete the statement by filling in the blanks with the correct word or words.

1. The 1928 treaty intended to outlaw war was the __________________________.

2. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was repudiated by the __________________________.

3. A 1921 attempt to achieve naval disarmament was called the __________________________.

4. To avoid a two-front war, Hitler signed the __________________________ with Russia.

5. The __________________________ was the result of Nazi racial policies of genocide.

6. The German Afrika Korps was led by __________________________.

7. The American leader of the naval attack on key Japanese islands in the Pacific was __________________________.
8. President Roosevelt dropped his liberal vice president Henry Wallace in 1944 and chose the moderate __________________________.

9. A developing split between the Soviet Union and the United States became apparent at the July 1945 meeting at __________________________.

10. A committee headed by ____________________________ suggested dropping an atomic bomb on a Japanese city.

TRUE/FALSE

Mark the following statements either T (True) or F (False):

1. United States tariff policy of the 1920s welcomed European products and thus helped the Allies pay their war debts.  
   ____ 1. T  
   ____ 2. F

2. The United States remained aloof from the problems of Europe between the wars.  
   ____ 3. F  
   ____ 4. T

3. The United States achieved some foreign policy successes in Latin America between the wars.  
   ____ 5. T  
   ____ 6. F

4. Economic depression and the threat of war made the United States more isolationist in the 1930s.  
   ____ 7. F  
   ____ 8. T

5. Americans were eager to oppose the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s.  
   ____ 9. F  
   ____ 10. T

6. American neutrality was inconsequential in the affairs of Europe in the 1920s.  
   ____

7. President Roosevelt believed that a German victory threatened American security.  
   ____

8. Because of Pearl Harbor, the United States decided to defeat the Japanese first before attacking Germany.  
   ____

9. The Soviet Union suffered more losses of life and property than did the other Allies fighting the Nazi threat.  
   ____

10. President Truman considered for several months the decision to drop the atomic bomb.  
    ____
MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the one alternative that best completes the statement or answers the question.

1. After World War I the United States
   a. lowered tariffs to encourage trade.
   b. was the richest nation on Earth.
   c. canceled its allies' war debts.
   d. aggressively sought collective security.

2. Regarding Latin America, President Roosevelt
   a. succeeded in improving relations and renounced the imperialism of the past.
   b. followed a combination of the “big stick” and “dollar diplomacy.”
   c. sent marines into several nations.
   d. reestablished the “Roosevelt Corollary.”

3. The treaties of the Washington Conference
   a. reduced the level of all naval construction.
   b. was one of the important accomplishments of the League of Nations.
   c. closed the “Open Door” in China.
   d. failed to maintain the status quo in the Pacific.

4. The United States followed an isolationist policy in the 1930s because
   a. World War I had made the world safe for democracy.
   b. our European allies had defaulted on American loans.
   c. of the Depression and the threat of war.
   d. of opposition to the rise of Hitler.

5. In the 1930s, Japan, Germany, and Italy were
   a. strongly anticommunist.
   b. no threat to their neighbors.
   c. supporters of the League of Nations.
   d. satisfied with the world status quo.

6. Which of the following was not an element of the pacifist movement of the 1930s?
   a. the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*
   b. the efforts of rich families such as the Krupps and the DuPonts
   c. American youth on college campuses
   d. the “merchants-of-death” thesis

7. The neutrality acts
   a. tried to insulate the United States from European problems.
   b. had no impact on European affairs.
   b. received the strong support of President Roosevelt.
   d. limited the war to Europe and Asia.
8. Increasing defense expenditures, the peacetime draft, and lend-lease indicated that Americans
   a. wanted to declare war on Germany.
   b. feared the results of German victory.
   c. wanted to respond to Pearl Harbor.
   d. desired to dominate Latin America.

9. The effect of the attack on Pearl Harbor was to
   a. divide the country politically on foreign policy.
   b. bring about war with Japan but not Germany.
   c. shock Americans into an awareness of the Axis threat.
   d. all of the above

10. The wartime Allied coalition was
    a. especially close and effective between the United States and Britain.
    b. based on American and Free French cooperation.
    c. no more effective than the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis.
    d. difficult because the United States had not recognized the Soviet Union.

11. At the meeting of the Western Allies at Casablanca it was decided that
    a. the war in Europe was successful enough to avoid a beachhead assault.
    b. use of the atomic bomb would be restricted to Asia.
    c. Russia would create a “second front” with Germany.
    d. they would fight the Axis powers until they achieved an unconditional surrender.

12. Americans who stayed at home during World War II
    a. had to make major adjustments in their lives.
    b. found that society changed little.
    c. seldom moved.
    d. could at least enjoy the abundance of consumer goods.

13. Which of the following was not a U.S. problem of the war years?
    a. a housing shortage
    b. racial problems in integrated combat units
    c. racial discrimination in industry
    d. an increased divorce rate

14. Japanese Americans were
    a. treated as badly as Germany treated Jews.
    b. often denied their liberty and their property.
    c. allowed to fight but only in the Pacific.
    d. treated differently depending on whether they were first- or second-generation immigrants.
15. The 1944 Republican presidential nominee, Thomas E. Dewey,
a. ran as a peace candidate.
b. ran as an opponent of the New Deal.
c. focused on the issue of international organization.
d. argued that Roosevelt was in bad health and the Democrats were “soft on communism.”

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

To check your understanding of the key issues of this period, solve the following problems:

1. To what extent did the American retreat from responsibility in foreign affairs aid the rise of dictators in the 1930s?

2. Comment on the allegation that in the 1920s and 1930s there was no change in U.S.-Latin American policy goals; that is, economic dominance of the Western Hemisphere. Was the “Good Neighbor” policy merely a change in tactics?

3. Considering the reasons for conflict in Asia, how surprising was the attack on Pearl Harbor?

4. What were the long-range effects of World War II on American society?

5. What was the role of historical interpretation in the foreign policy of the 1930s, specifically the neutrality acts?

6. What were the various goals of the Allied powers? How did these different goals affect the coalition, the strategy, and the outcome of the war?

7. Do you think that President Roosevelt “sold us out” at the Yalta Conference? What was the Soviet perspective on Eastern Europe?

8. What is the significance of the Holocaust to American and world history?
CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE

After reading Albert Einstein, *Letter to President Roosevelt* (1939), Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The Four Freedoms” (1941), and “A Woman Remembers the War” (1984), answer the following:

**Albert Einstein, Letter to President Roosevelt (1939)**

August 2nd, 1939

F. D. Roosevelt,
President of the United States,
White House
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations:

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable-through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America-that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amount of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable-though much less certain-that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

The United States has only very poor ores of uranium in moderate quantities. There is some good ore in Canada and the former Czechoslovakia, while the most important source of uranium is the Belgian Congo.

In view of this situation you may think it desirable to have some permanent contact maintained between the Administration and the group of physicists working on chain reactions in America. One possible way of achieving this might be for you to entrust with this task a person who has your confidence and who could perhaps serve in an unofficial capacity. His task might comprise the following:

a) to approach Government Departments, keep them informed of the further development, and put forward recommendations for Government action, giving particular attention to the problem of securing a supply of uranium ore for the United States:

b) to speed up the experimental work, which is at present being carried on within the limits of the budgets of University laboratories, by providing funds, if such funds be required, through his contacts with private persons who are willing to make contributions for this cause, and perhaps also by obtaining the co-operation of industrial laboratories which have the necessary equipment.

I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such early action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the
German Under-Secretary of State, von Weizsacker, is attached to the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut in Berlin where some of the American work on uranium is now being repeated.

Yours very truly,

[signed] Albert Einstein

Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Four Freedoms (1941)

Armed defense of democratic existence is now being gallantly waged in four continents. If that defense fails, all the population and all the resources of Europe, Asia, Africa and Australasia will be dominated by the conquerors. The total of those populations and their resources . . . greatly exceeds the sum total of the population and the resources of the whole of the Western Hemisphere-many times over.

In times like these it is immature-and incidentally untrue-for anybody to brag that an unprepared America, single-handed, and with one hand tied behind its back, can hold off the whole world.

No realistic American can expect from a dictator's peace international generosity, or return of true independence, or world disarmament, or freedom of expression, or freedom of religion—or even good business. . . .

The need of the moment is that our actions and our policy should be devoted primarily-almost exclusively-to meeting this foreign peril. For all our domestic problems are now a part of the great emergency.

Just as our national policy in internal affairs has been based upon a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all our fellow men within our gates, so our national policy in foreign affairs has been based on a decent respect for the rights and dignity of all nations, large and small. And the justice of morality must and will win in the end.

Our national policy is this:

First, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship, we are committed to all-inclusive national defense.

Second, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship, we are committed to full support of all those resolute peoples, everywhere, who are resisting aggression and are thereby keeping war away from our hemisphere. By this support, we express our determination that the democratic cause shall prevail, and we strengthen the defense and security of our own nation.

Third, by an impressive expression of the public will and without regard to partisanship, we are committed to the proposition that principles of morality and considerations for our own security will never permit us to acquiesce in a peace dictated by aggressors and sponsored by appeasers. We know that enduring peace cannot be bought at the cost of other people's freedom. . . .

I also ask this Congress for authority and for funds sufficient to manufacture additional munitions and war supplies of many kinds, to be turned over to those nations which are now in actual war with aggressor nations.

Our most useful and immediate role is to act as an arsenal for them as well as for ourselves. They do not need man power. They do need billions of dollars' worth of the weapons of defense. . . .

Let us say to the democracies, "We Americans are vitally concerned in your defense of freedom. We are putting forth our energies, our resources, and our organizing powers to give you the strength to regain and maintain a free world. We shall send you, in ever-increasing numbers, ships, planes, tanks, guns. This is our purpose and our pledge." . . .

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.
- The enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living.

These are the simple and basic things that must never be lost sight of in the turmoil and unbelievable complexity of our modern world. The inner and abiding strength of our economic and political systems is dependent upon the degree to which they fulfill these expectations. . . .

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants everywhere in the world.
The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.

To that new order we oppose the greater conception—the moral order. A good society is able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear.

Since the beginning of our American history we have been engaged in change—in a perpetual peaceful revolution—a revolution which goes on steadily, quietly adjusting itself to changing conditions—without the concentration camp or the quicklime in the ditch. The world order which we seek is the cooperation of free countries, working together in a friendly, civilized society.

A Woman Remembers the War (1984)

When the war started I was twenty-six, unmarried, and working as a cosmetics clerk in a drugstore in Los Angeles. I was running the whole department, handling the inventory and all that. It seemed asinine, though, to be selling lipstick when the country was at war. I felt that I was capable of doing something more than that toward the war effort.

There was also a big difference between my salary and those in defense work. I was making something like twenty-two, twenty-four dollars a week in the drugstore. You could earn a much greater amount of money for your labor in defense plants. Also it interested me. There was a certain curiosity about meeting that kind of challenge, and here was an opportunity to do that, for there were more and more openings for women.

So I went to two or three plants and took their tests. And they all told me I had absolutely no mechanical ability. I said, “I don’t believe that.” So I went to another plant, A.D.E.I. I was interviewed and got the job. This particular plant made the hydraulic-valve system for the B-17. And where did they put women? In the burr room.

You sat at a workbench, which was essentially like a picnic table, with a bunch of other women, and you worked grinding and sanding machine parts to make them smooth. That’s what you did all day long. It was very mechanical and it was very boring. There were about thirty women in the burr room, and it was like being in a beauty shop every day. I couldn’t stand the inane talk. So when they asked me if I would like to work someplace else in the shop, I said I very much would.

They started training me. I went to a blueprint class and learned how to use a micrometer and how to draw tools out of the tool crib and everything else. Then one day they said, “Okay, how would you like to go into the machine shop?”

I said, “Terrific.”

And they said, “Now, Adele, it’s going to be a real challenge, because you’ll be the only women in the machine shop.” I thought to myself, well, that’s going to be fun, all those guys and Adele in the machine shop. So the foreman took me over there. It was a big room, with a high ceiling and fluorescent lights, and it was very noisy. I walked in there, in my overalls, and suddenly all the machines stopped and every guy in the shop just turned around and looked at me. It took, I think, two weeks before anyone even talked to me. The discrimination was indescribable. They wanted to kill me.

My attitude was, “Okay, you bastards, I’m going to prove to you I can do anything you can do, and may be better than some of you.” And that’s exactly the way it turned out. I used to do the rework on the pieces that the guy on the shift before me had screwed up. I finally got assigned to nothing but rework.

Later they taught me to run an automatic screwing machine. It’s a big mother, and it took a lot of strength just to throw that thing into gear. They probably thought I wasn’t going to be able to do it. But I was determined to succeed. As a matter of fact, I developed the most fantastic biceps from throwing that machine into gear. Even today I still have a little of that muscle left.

Anyway, eventually some of the men became very friendly, particularly the older ones, the ones in their late forties or fifties. They were journeymen tool and die makers and were so skilled that they could work anywhere at very high salaries. They were sort of fatherly, protective. They weren’t threatened by me. The younger men, I think, were.

Our plant was an open shop, and the International Association of Machinists was trying to unionize the workers. I joined them and worked to try to get the union in the plant. I proselytized for the union during lunch hour, and I had a big altercation with the management over that. The employers and my lead man and foreman called me in the office and said, “We have a right to fire you.”

I said, “On what basis? I work as well or better than anybody else in the shop except the journeymen.”

They said, “No, not because of that. Because you’re talking for the union on company property. You’re not allowed to do that.”

I said, “Well, that’s just too bad, because I can’t get off the grounds here. You won’t allow us to leave the grounds during lunch hour. And you don’t pay me for my lunch hour, so that time doesn’t belong to you, so you can’t tell me what to do.” And they backed down.

I had one experience at the plant that really made me work for the union. One day while I was burring I had an accident and ripped some cartilage out of my hand. It wasn’t serious, but it looked kind of messy. They had to take
me over to the industrial hospital to get my hand sutured. I cam back and couldn’t work for a day or two because my hand was all bandaged. It wasn’t serious, but it was awkward. When I got my paycheck, I saw that they had docked me for the times I was in the industrial hospital. When I saw that I was really mad.

It’s ironic that when the union finally got into the plant, they had me transferred out. They were anxious to get rid of me because after we got them in I went to a few meetings and complained about it being a Jim Crow union. So they arranged for me to have a higher rating instead of a worker’s rating. This allowed me to make twenty-five cents an hour more, and I got transferred to another plant. By this time I was married. When I became pregnant I worked for about three months more, then I quit.

For me defense work was the beginning of my emancipation as a woman. For the first time in my life I found out that I could do something with my hands besides bake a pie. I found out that I had manual dexterity and the mentality to read blueprints and gauges, and to be inquisitive enough about things to develop skills other than the conventional roles that women had at that time. I had the consciousness-raising experience of being the only woman in this machine shop and having the mantle of challenge laid down by the men, which stimulated my competitiveness and forced me to prove myself. This, plus working in the union, gave me a lot of self-confidence.

1. What element of Albert Einstein’s argument for a better-funded atomic research effort was most effective? Why?

2. Later Albert Einstein wished that he had not sent this letter. Why?

3. Is Roosevelt’s speech “The Four Freedoms” effective? Compare this argument for involvement with President Wilson’s case for preparedness and war in 1915-1917.

4. What was the impact of the woman working in a defense plant on her self-esteem?

5. Looking back from the 1980s to the early 1940s, the woman views that older time through the filter of the women’s rights movement. Can you cite examples from the memoir that indicate possible subsequent influence on her memory of the war years?