1 The Republic in Transition

Demobilization and Reconversion

As World War II came to a close, Americans were exhausted, numbed by four long years of war, but at the same time most were optimistic, and the country was remarkably united. A general agreement prevailed that the struggle against the Axis had been just. Germany, Japan, Italy, and their allies represented the forces of evil, and the United States had to intervene to save itself and mankind in general. As a result of this consensus, America was spared the isolationist backlash that had overwhelmed the Treaty of Versailles following World War I; nor was there a Red Scare similar to that which had swept the United States in 1919. Except for treatment of the nisei, Japanese Americans, and some 11,000 German aliens – unjustly interned by a government that confused ethnicity and nationality with treachery – violations of civil liberties did not compare with those committed during previous conflicts. Convinced that the struggle for democracy abroad would translate into equity under the law and nondiscrimination, African Americans experienced a rising level of expectations. Similar expectations arose among American women who had entered the workplace in droves during the war and who wanted the freedom to choose between a career inside and a career outside the home (although most, like returning male veterans, dreamed of marriage and children). The dawn of the atomic age created widespread anxiety, but for the time being, only the United States possessed the bomb. Clearly, the world was a dangerous place, but American hegemony seemed an adequate safeguard against another major war. In short, Americans no less than Britons were convinced that World War II had indeed been "a people's war" and that a new age of social justice and peace was in the offing.

The Heritage of War

As was true of the Civil War, World War II served as a great stimulus to the national economy. America truly became the "arsenal of democracy." By 1943, U.S. industrial output exceeded that for all of the Axis powers

combined. Massive government spending produced a steady stream of guns, planes, tanks, and ships; stimulated the private sector; and laid the basis for postwar prosperity. So large were wartime expenditures that they twice exceeded all federal appropriations prior to 1941. Indeed, historians would later conclude that World War II rather than the New Deal pulled the United States out of the Great Depression. During the New Deal, the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt experimented with Keynesian economics (government spending to stimulate the private sector), but the president's innate fiscal conservatism had kept government expenditures to a minimum. As a result, unemployment persisted. In forcing billions in federal expenditures, World War II had the effect of converting Roosevelt into a Keynesian. The war, moreover, contributed to consolidation in industry and labor: fewer corporations produced more goods more efficiently and employed more people. One hundred companies received $160 billion of the $240 billion spent on war contracts, and 10 companies received 30% of the total. New industries, such as those manufacturing synthetic rubber and, later in the war, jet aircraft engines, sprang up, and American chemical and electronics enterprises led the world in productivity and technological innovation.

Although the rich grew richer during World War II, working-class Americans prospered as well. In 1941, 53% of all families lived on less than $2,000 per year, while 24% lived on less than $1,000. During the war, average weekly incomes increased by 70%, more than enough to offset a 47% inflation rate. For the first and only time in the twentieth century, the United States experienced a downward redistribution of income. The share of the nation's wealth taken by the top 5% of the population declined from 22% to 17%, with most of the difference going to the bottom 40% of the population. Not coincidentally, trade unions flourished during the war. Encouraged by the prolabor stance of the Roosevelt administration and led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), American workers in the 1930s had staged sit-down strikes and successfully organized the automobile, steel, and textile industries. Ordinary citizens appreciated the benevolent neutrality of the White House. One blue-collar citizen put it simply: "Mr. Roosevelt is the only man we ever had in the White House who is not a son of a bitch." During the war, the War Labor Board, committed to maintaining industrial peace, encouraged new workers to join unions where they immediately were eligible for benefits, including higher wages, better fringe benefits, and increased job security. From 1941 to 1945, union membership increased from 10.5 to 14.8 million.

Another enduring legacy of World War II was the growth of the federal government. Although free enterprise and civil liberties survived during the war, the government intervened into every walk of life, setting prices, allocating manpower, rationing tires and gasoline, and taxing on a massive scale. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected to an unprecedented

fourth term in 1944, symbolized the presence and grudging acceptance of this leviathan. Federal bureaucracies, already swollen by the New Deal, expanded still further under the impact of war. The War Production Board told industries what to manufacture and set quotas for them to meet. The Office of Price Administration set prices for virtually every commodity produced in America. The federal government determined the distribution of strategic raw materials – aluminum, rubber, and food – and classified jobs according to their contribution to the national defense.

The "Conservative Coalition"

Not surprisingly, the growth of the federal government during the New Deal and World War II, Roosevelt's election to four terms as president, and the return of prosperity produced a conservative reaction during and after the war. Indeed, sensing this trend, Roosevelt had rejected the notion of countercyclical deficit spending and promised to balance the budget before the war ended. Rationing and wartime controls generated resentment against big government, while a widespread desire to get back to "normal" life militated against social reform. Wartime prosperity had elevated millions of working-class Americans to the middle class, and in the process, dissipated much of the energy that had been responsible for the New Deal. President of the National Association of Manufacturers, anti–New Dealer, and anti-unionist Frederick Crawford argued for "jobs, freedom and opportunity" and "enterprise [that] must be free of restraint and government regulation." Congress fell under the sway of a "conservative coalition," consisting of Republicans and southern Democrats who championed the causes of states' rights and free enterprise and believed the federal government had no business interfering with the relationship between races and sexes, no matter how exploitive or oppressive. The midterm congressional elections in 1942 had produced marked Republican gains, and the conservative coalition had attacked hallowed New Deal programs such as the Works Progress Administration, the National Youth Administration, and the Farm Security Administration. The latter agency was virtually the only arm of government committed to defending the interests of poor farmers and sharecroppers.

The Melding of Isolationism and Internationalism

World War II had converted many former isolationists into aggressive nationalists. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had destroyed the myth of impregnability that the America First movement had worked so assiduously to disseminate. The Atlantic and Pacific were not great barriers protecting "Fortress America" from attack as the isolationists had argued, but rather were highways across which hostile ships and airplanes could rain down destruction on the Western Hemisphere. Led by *Time-Life* publisher Henry Luce, old America Firsters decided that if America could not hide from the rest of the world, it must control it. The United States emerged

from World War II as the most powerful nation in the world, both economically and militarily. It controlled most of the former Japanese islands in the Pacific, took an active role in the occupation of Germany and Japan, and by virtue of its massive gold reserves and industrial plants was in a position to act both as the world's banker and its chief supplier of manufactured goods.

Joining the neo-imperialists in pushing for an activist American role in world affairs were Wilsonian internationalists who believed that, if only the United States had joined the League of Nations and acted in concert with the western democracies, fascist aggression could have been nipped in the bud. In the spring of 1945, the United States led the way in establishing a new collective security organization, the United Nations, whose stated goals were the prevention of armed aggression and the promotion of prosperity and democracy throughout the world. Most Americans believed that the lessons of the past had been learned and that the world would never again have to confront a Hitler, Mussolini, or Tojo.

The Changing American Woman

The war changed the face of American society in numerous ways. Perhaps women were the group most affected by the global conflict. The Great Depression had erased many of the gains made by American women in the 1920s. Federal agencies, the popular print media, religious organizations, and even women's groups urged females to return to the home to make room in the workforce for men, still perceived to be the traditional heads of household. Federal legislation prohibited more than one member of the same family from working in the civil service.

All that changed with the coming of the war. The outbreak of hostilities created a huge labor shortage. In response, 6 million women entered the workforce, dramatically increasing the number of females employed outside the home. In 1940, 14.2 million women made up 25.2% of the workforce. Five years later, the 19.3 million employed females constituted 29.2% of employed Americans. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, the federal government and the mass media launched a campaign to convince women that their place was in the factory as well as in the kitchen. Women maintained roadbeds, operated giant cranes, and replaced lumberjacks in the forests of the great Northwest. But the most conspicuous workplace for the new woman was the defense industry. The head of the War Manpower Commission acknowledged that "getting women into industry is a tremendous sales proposition" and encouraged the defense industries to hire women workers. In 1941, a total of 36 women were employed in the ship construction business. By 1942, more than 160,000 were at work laying keels, welding hatches, and installing conning towers. Rosie the Riveter, the fictional defense plant worker created by government public relations experts, became a national heroine. However, the most important change wrought by the

war on the working woman was demographic. From the beginning of the industrial era in America, the typical working female was single, young, and poor. But during World War II, almost 75% of those who took jobs for the first time were married, and 60% were older than 35. Two thirds of the women who joined the labor force during the war listed their previous occupation as housewife, and many had preschool-age children. Margaret Hickey, head of the Women's Advisory Committee to the War Manpower Commission, declared that "employers, like other individuals, are finding it necessary to weigh old values, old institutions, in terms of a world at war."

Prior to World War II, women had served in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps, but they had received neither military rank nor pay in return for their services. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, however, the War Department, at the prodding of Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers, backed legislation creating the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, later changed to Women's Auxiliary Corps (WACS). Subsequent measures in 1942 and 1943 created a women's naval corps (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, and expanded versions of the nurses corps. The 350,000 women who served in the armed services during World War II were barred from combat but not immune to danger. The vast majority of those in uniform remained in the United States working primarily as communications, clerical, or health care experts. In France, Italy, and North Africa, however, Army and Navy nurses performed their duties close to the front lines, and more than 1,000 women flew planes in a noncombat capacity.

Ironically but not surprisingly, the new woman continued to encounter stereotyping and discriminatory treatment even in service to their country. Virtually without exception, females were excluded from top policy-making bodies charged with running the wartime economy. Although the National War Labor Board endorsed the principle of equal work for equal pay in 1942, it was never enforced. In 1945 as in 1940, women workers in the manufacturing sector made only 65% of what men earned. Although an estimated 2 million children were in need of child care services, federal and state governments proved extremely reluctant to provide them. The private sector was equally recalcitrant. The notion that "a mother's primary duty is to her home and children" and fears over the breakup of the nuclear family proved to be powerful inhibiting factors. Overall, the American woman's mass participation in the workforce did not significantly affect popular attitudes toward sexual equality. "Legal equality . . . between the sexes is not possible," declared Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, "because men and women are not identical in physical structure or social function."

African Americans on the Move

The period from 1941 to 1945 produced an acceleration of the great internal migration of African Americans that had begun during World War I. Conditions in the South made life well-nigh unbearable for the descendents

of slaves. One black man recalled being "born in poverty" in Georgia where "white people virtually owned black people." White farmers would not allow black farmers to raise tobacco, he said, "cause there's a lot of money in it." Two million blacks moved out of the former Confederacy, mostly to urban areas in the Midwest and Northeast. They were prodded by the persistence of lynching, disfranchisement, and discrimination in their native region and lured by the prospect of government and defense industry jobs. Overall, the number of African Americans employed in industry grew from 500,000 to 1.2 million.

In 1941, black activist and labor leader A. Philip Randolph called for "ten thousand Negroes [to] march on Washington" and "demand the right to work and fight for our country." He then founded the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Prompted by the MOWM, his wife Eleanor, and other liberals, President Roosevelt at least paid lip service to equal rights. In 1941, he established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) and encouraged African Americans to seek redress of their grievances in court. But as was true of women and other groups, the black experience was a case of small progress in the midst of mass discrimination. Most national trade unions excluded blacks from membership. The FEPC had only "persuasive" powers, and these were generally ignored. Despite some improvement in job opportunities, most openings were at low levels, with blacks hired primarily as laborers, janitors, and cleaning women. Although African Americans enlisted at a rate 60% higher than their proportion of the population, they encountered discrimination at every turn in the military. Segregation was still the official policy in the armed forces, and blacks had to struggle to persuade the Army and Air Force to allow them entry into combat units.

Yet, the war unquestionably brought about new opportunities and new freedoms for African Americans. The Army agreed to train black pilots, and some integration took place on an experimental basis. Thousands of African American servicemen experienced life without prejudice during their overseas tours of duty. Despite the fact that the multitudes of southern blacks who moved north to find positions in munitions industries found themselves living in squalid ghettos, they also enjoyed greater psychological and political freedom than they had in the South. Northern political machines sought their votes and granted favors in return. The very acts of physical mobility and enlistment contributed to a sense of control and generated a rising level of expectation. In the face of continuing oppression and even violence – the worst example of which was the Detroit race riot of 1943 – black protest mounted. During the war, membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) increased nine-fold to more than 450,000 individuals. Black newspapers took up the cry for a "Double V" campaign – victory at home as well as victory abroad. But the growing activism among African Americans, coupled with

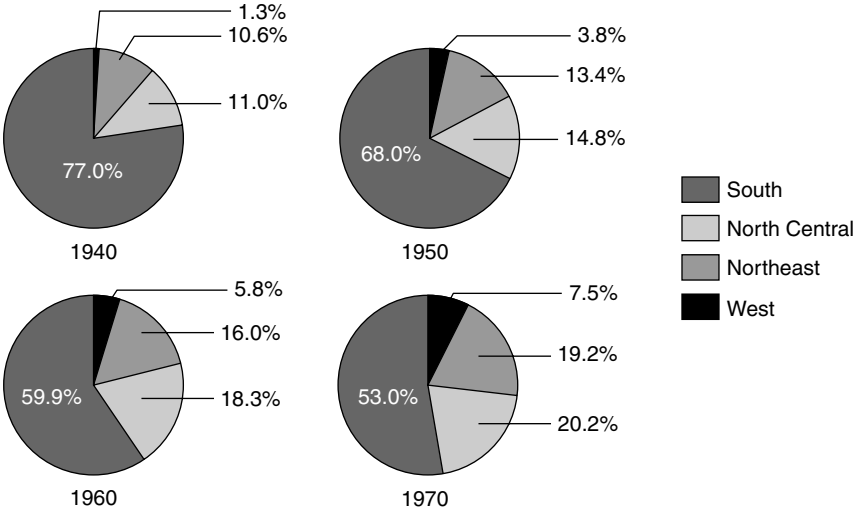

Figure 1–1. Regional distribution of the black population, 1940–1970.

the resurgence of conservatism among the white majority, foreshadowed an era of racial progress amid great conflict.

Truman, Demobilization, and Reconversion

It was one of history's great ironies that Franklin D. Roosevelt did not live to see the end of World War II. Ravaged by the effects of polio, which had left him partially paralyzed since 1921, and by 13 years in the most stressful job in America, he died suddenly at his retreat at Warm Springs, Georgia, on April 12, 1945. "Who the hell is Harry Truman?" Admiral William D. Leahy asked upon hearing that Roosevelt's moderately obscure vice president had taken over. It was an important question, one asked frequently, if less profanely, by many other Americans.

Harry S. Truman was born in Lamar, Missouri, in 1884, the child of a family of farmers that had migrated from Kentucky. A typical son of the middle border, Truman grew up in and around Kansas City. Following his graduation from high school, Truman worked alternately on the family farm and as a bank clerk in town. Upon the outbreak of the Great War, his National Guard unit elected him an officer. The artillery unit in which Truman served saw a good deal of action in France, and through courage and perseverance, Truman worked his way up to the rank of captain. He returned to Kansas City in 1919, and opened a haberdashery with one of his Army friends. Caught up in a postwar depression that crippled the economy, Truman was bankrupt within one year. One business failure followed another, and in desperation he turned to politics in 1922. With the help

of the Pendergast political machine, which dominated Kansas City and its environs, Truman was elected a county judge, rising to the post of presiding judge in 1926.

Again with machine support, Truman captured the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1934 and won easily in the Democratic landslide of that year. He was, however, received coldly by the nation's political elite. The Washington, D.C., press referred to Harry Truman derisively as "the gentleman from Pendergast." He was, according to one Roosevelt aide, a "small-bore politician of county courthouse caliber." It seemed that Truman's career had come to an end when, in 1939, Big Tom Pendergast was sentenced to federal prison for income tax evasion. Valuing personal loyalty above all else, Truman refused to distance himself from his discredited benefactor. In 1940, the Roosevelt administration threw its support behind one of Truman's rivals in the senatorial primary. Incredibly, without either White House or machine support, Truman won reelection in 1940. Stumping in every city and village in Missouri, he put together a coalition of farmers, blue-collar workers, and ethnic voters, including African Americans. Because of Truman's toughness, his unwavering support for the New Deal, and his work during World War II as chair of a Senate Committee supervising the awarding of government contracts, President Roosevelt selected the Missourian to be his running mate in 1944.

As he readily admitted, Harry Truman came to the highest office in the land ill equipped for his new job. The vice presidency, he declared, had turned him into a "political eunuch." He was somewhat undereducated and had no experience in foreign affairs. Roosevelt had compounded the problem by shutting his vice president out of crucial policy deliberations during the first months of 1945. Uninitiated at the outset, Truman tended toward the view that great power relationships were analogous to Kansas City politics. Dean Acheson complained that the new president favored action over contemplation and wanted to simplify the complex. He sometimes seemed "to think only in primary colors," as Fred Siegel has written. In fact, Truman deliberately cultivated the image of a no-nonsense, tough-minded man of action. Aphorisms such as "The Buck Stops Here" and "If You Can't Stand the Heat, Get Out of the Kitchen" adorned his office. That aura of decisiveness masked a deep-seated insecurity. One part of Harry Truman was convinced that in education, experience, and intelligence he was unprepared to be president. Another part believed that if a man of the people could not do the job there was something fundamentally wrong with the system. Unfortunately, the new president's overvaluation of personal loyalty made him prone to cronyism. Indeed, Truman replaced much of Roosevelt's cabinet with personal friends, a practice that infuriated many members of the old administration. After his resignation as secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes retorted, "I am against government by crony."

Finally, he was given to intemperance in public statement. When columnist Drew Pearson dared denigrate his daughter Margaret's singing, he publicly threatened to punch "the son of a bitch" in the nose.

However, Harry Truman did have positive aspects. For example, he was a man of immense personal integrity. He readily accepted responsibility for all aspects of his administration and was absolutely committed to the interests of the United States as he perceived them. He had not sought the presidency, but events having thrust the office upon him, he would not shirk his duty. Truman was a man of great compassion who believed that the government had a responsibility to care for those who were unable to care for themselves. He was a lifelong crusader against legal and social discrimination based on race and religion. Above all, the diminutive midwesterner was tough. Although he sometimes privately broke down in tears under the weight of the office during the early days of his administration, he had no intention of quitting or knuckling under to antireformists at home or would-be aggressors abroad.

The Baby Boomers

The American people wanted to return to normality, variously defined, as quickly as possible following V-J (Victory over Japan) Day. Above all, they wanted to forget about war and things military and return to making love and money. The president and Congress were besieged by demands that they "bring the boys home." In one of the most rapid demobilizations in history, America's military force shrank from 12 million in 1945 to 1.6 million in 1947. Rapid demobilization brought dislocations but not the return of the Great Depression that many feared. The economic impact of the reflux of so many workers on the economy was cushioned by unemployment pay and other Social Security benefits, but particularly by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the "GI Bill of Rights." Under its provisions, the federal government spent $13 billion for various veterans' benefits, including unemployment payments, housing subsidies, education both formal and vocational, and small business loans. By 1947, more than 1 million former servicemen were among some 2.5 million Americans attending college. Most importantly, the pent-up demand created by wartime rationing and billions of dollars of forced savings were unleashed on the economy, stimulating the private sector and creating thousands of jobs.

Thus did veterans return to schools, new jobs, wives, and babies. During the postwar years, Americans experienced a population explosion. The birth rate grew from 19.4 per 1,000 in 1940 to 24 in 1946, and did not decline again until the 1960s. The affluence of the postwar period coupled with the cult of the family, which was such a prominent feature of the 1950s, served to make the four-child family rather than the two-child family the norm.

Future social analysts would give the name "baby-boom generation" to this bubble in the demographic curve.

Matured by the war, young Americans in the latter part of the 1940s were serious and focused beyond their years. Veterans returning to college under the GI Bill of Rights were in a hurry; they rushed through the curriculum to begin raising families and making livings. They were more security conscious than the previous generation, a tendency that had as much to do with the Great Depression as World War II. These young men and women shunned risk and preferred to work for large corporations rather than opening their own businesses. "Security had become the big goal," declared *Fortune* magazine. "[They] want to work for somebody else . . . preferably somebody big." The pessimism and quest for security bred by depression and war were partially counterbalanced by optimism spawned by technology. In a brief five-year span from 1945 to 1950, American engineers and scientists gave consumers the automatic car transmission, the long-playing record, the electric clothes dryer, and the automatic garbage-disposal unit. With the lifting of controls, families were able to buy refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, electric ranges, and freezers stocked with frozen foods at unprecedented rates. One of the most important, but least noticed, breakthroughs came in 1945 when the American Gas Association persuaded manufacturers to standardize the size of kitchen cabinets and appliances. The counter workspace would extend 36 inches from the floor and 25 1/4 inches from the wall with a "toe cove" to prevent stubbing. No longer would housewives have to cope with unsightly gaps and bumps, and they could buy new items without having to remodel their entire kitchens.

Crisis in Housing

The preoccupation of returning veterans and the Truman administration was the massive housing shortage. The crisis began in December of 1945, when the first of thousands of returning veterans reached the United States. Because of the depression and the war, there had not been a good year for new housing starts since 1929. Pollster Elmo Roper estimated that almost 19% of all American families were doubled up and 19% were looking for housing. Another 13% would have been in the hunt, he estimated, if prospects had not been so dim. Over the next decade, Americans would require 16 million new homes, *Life* magazine estimated. To deal with the problem, Truman named former Louisville mayor Wilson Wyatt to be federal housing expediter. Wyatt set a production target of 1.2 million units for 1947, but starts fell well below that number. Building materials continued to be in short supply, and the housing industry, burdened by outdated building codes, archaic technology, and lack of capital, could not keep up with demand. For a time, industry leaders even opposed federal subsidies on the grounds that they would lead to "socialized housing." Those units