

1940's

Major Themes:

World War II
The Home Front
The Cold War Begins

Presidencies:

FDR (D) – 1932 – 45
Harry S. Truman (D) – 1945 – 53

Overview:

When the 1940's begin, the US has been aiding our ally Britain with all the guns she can carry, but we haven't formally entered the war yet. FDR authorizes a peacetime draft in 1940, gets re-elected, and we start to finally witness the Depression easing as new factory jobs in weapons industries help the stock market, the middle class, and most everyone else fund their way out of economic disaster.

On Dec. 7, 1941, Japan attacked the US Navy at Pearl Harbor. Germany declared war on us as well, and by the 11th, we had a war in the Pacific and the Atlantic. We weren't completely unprepared, but it took us a while to get up to speed. The "Big Three", FDR, Churchill (Britain), and Stalin (Soviet Union) met several times during the war, and these are important to remember for the AP exam. At Casablanca, the Big Three agreed that they would only accept an unconditional surrender of Germany to end the war, and that the three would concentrate on fighting Hitler first, and Japan second. In 1944, with the war nearing an end, they met again at Yalta in the Soviet Union, this time to discuss how to handle the occupation of Europe when the war was over. Unfortunately, this was what would lead to the "iron curtain" dividing Europe between communist and non-communist countries for the next 50 years. When Germany had been conquered, President Truman was the new President, FDR having died in office in March 1945. The Big Three now agreed to divide Germany into zones of occupation and the capital of Berlin as well.

But to get us to that point of victory, the Home Front played a crucial role. We went from massive unemployment during the Depression to nearly full employment during the war. Women and blacks filled the factories as a mostly white army went off to war in the millions. Completely protected by two oceans from any bombing attacks, American production of ships, tanks, planes and war materiel was unparalleled in history. Our country basically supplied the Allies during the war, and brought it to a quicker end.

While people were finally earning money again, many consumer goods were rationed, like sugar, gasoline, rubber for tires, and dozens more. So rather than spend their earnings, Americans just saved it for when the war was over. It was the highest personal savings rate our country has ever had. Women played a crucial role in manufacturing, and American propaganda reflected this with "Rosie the Riveter" plastered on posters all over the country. African-Americans also made gains in both the public eye and with government. Philip Randolph won an important concession from FDR when he won equal pay for blacks working in defense industries. Some historians even argue that the modern civil rights movement started with him in WWII as opposed to later with Martin Luther King.

American society changed in other ways too. Mostly, we became more accepting of women in the workplace. We became more united by the war. We became more optimistic. But mostly, we became much more mobile. Millions of Americans moved into California for factory work, into the South from the Northeast, into the Northeast from the Midwest. Take the entire US

population and shuffle it – and you also shuffle all of those ethnicities, religions, backgrounds and beliefs. This would have long term effects.

A dark chapter in our history involved our reaction to Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor. Born out of an unreasonable fear that English-speaking, American-born citizens of Japanese ancestry would be disloyal and attack our factories, FDR ordered 120,000 of them rounded up and sent to internment camps. Many of them lost their property as well, being forced to sell homes, farms and businesses at a fraction of their value to Americans looking to take advantage of their predicament. Fred Korematsu, a US citizen, decided to challenge the constitutionality of denying citizens their freedoms and property. In the Supreme Court case *Korematsu vs. United States*, he lost. Once again, the court said that in a national emergency, even citizens legal rights could be denied simply based on who you were. Over 40 years later, we officially apologized and paid damages to the Americans we interned.

In the Pacific, we adopted a strategy of island hopping, only invading every other Japanese-held island, in order to limit casualties but still win the war. It was very effective, and by early 1945, we were ready to invade the Japanese home islands. Of course, something else was brewing – on July 16, 1945, America successfully tested the world's first atomic bomb. Now that we knew it was possible and effective, we quickly constructed two more, and decided what, if anything to do with them in the war. Truman didn't hesitate to order their use against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing a Japanese surrender in September of 1945. With the attitude of most Americans towards Japan, and the desire not to have to physically invade the islands, there wasn't any real debate about whether to use them or not.

Having won the war against Hitler, the alliance we had with the Soviets dissolved. The Cold War was set to begin. The Soviet Union formed the COMINTERN or Communist International, with the goal of exporting communist rebellions wherever possible on Earth. Turkey and Greece were poor and struggling after the war, perfect targets. Rebellions started in both nations, and the United States decided to counter them with \$900 million in military aid to both countries. It worked, and the beginnings of a decades-long containment policy were in place. The Truman Doctrine was adopted, offering US help to any country that faced a communist threat.

To prevent something similar from happening in equally struggling Western Europe, America came up with the Marshall Plan, extending \$12 billion in military and economic aid to non-communist countries west of the Iron Curtain. We did the same thing for Asia with \$9 billion more. Not only did this work at strengthening democracies and allies around the globe, but it helped our economy as well by hiring American companies to do the construction work.

By 1948, when Truman was re-elected, the Cold War was heating up. The Berlin Blockade and Airlift took place in 1948, as the Soviets began testing ways to expand their territory and power without starting World War III. That same year the West formed the NATO alliance, collective security with the motto "An attack on one is an attack against all." The Soviets answered the following year with the Warsaw Pact, who of course had the same motto. 1949 was a bad year for America in the Cold War. The Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb, and we no longer had a monopoly on nuclear technology. To make matters worse, China had a full fledged communist revolution under Mao-Tse-Tung (Mow – say – Tongue). The world's largest population had joined the communist side of the Cold War. Because of all of these things, Americans feared communism spreading closer to home, and even to the United States. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), under Representative Richard Nixon, started hearings on communist activities in the U.S. On top of all this, the Korean War was about to begin.