

Chapter 24

The Home Front

How did Americans on the home front support or oppose World War I?

24.1 Introduction

As “doughboys” left for France, Americans at home **mobilized**—organized the nation’s resources—for war. Years after the war ended, popular stage and film star Elsie Janis recalled this time as the most exciting of her life. “The war,” said Janis, “was my high spot, and I think there is only one real peak in each life.”

Along with many other movie stars, Janis eagerly volunteered for war work. She had a beautiful singing voice and a gift for impersonating other actors. She used both talents to raise money for the war. Janis later went overseas to become one of the first American performers to entertain U.S. troops. She gave more than 600 performances over 15 months, sometimes performing as many as nine shows a day. Before her arrival in Europe, no other woman entertainer had been permitted to work so close to the front lines.

While only a few women like Janis helped the war effort publicly, thousands found more prosaic but just as useful ways to do their part. Many women joined the workforce. With so many men overseas, a serious labor shortage developed. Eager for workers, employers across the nation put large-print “Women Wanted” notices in newspapers. In the final months of the war, a Connecticut ammunition factory was so frantic for workers that its owners hired airplanes to drop leaflets over the city of Bridgeport listing their openings.

Although the number of women in the workforce stayed about the same throughout the war, the number of occupations in which they worked rose sharply. Many who were already in the workforce took new jobs in offices, shops, and factories. They became typists, cashiers, salesclerks, and telephone operators. Women worked in plants, assembling explosives, electrical appliances, airplanes, and cars. Many took jobs in the iron and steel industry—jobs once open only to men. Most had to give up these jobs when the war ended, but they had shown the public just how capable they were.



The Granger Collection, New York

Entertainer Elsie Janis became a tireless supporter of the war effort and used her talents to work as a fund-raiser. Janis also took her act on the road, entertaining troops stationed near the front lines.



The most popular song of World War I was George M. Cohan's "Over There." Its upbeat refrain announced "the Yanks are coming" and promised "we won't come back 'til it's over over there." The song was an instant hit, selling 2 million copies by war's end. The U.S. government used "Over There" to inspire patriotic spirit at fund-raisers and recruitment drives. Cohan was later awarded the congressional Medal of Honor for his contribution to the war effort.

A number of peace groups formed after 1914, many headed by women. Wanting a greater say in matters of war, women quite naturally linked the issues of suffrage and peace. Some even hoped that once all American women won the right to vote, they would use that power to end war.

24.2 Mobilizing Public Opinion in Favor of War

When President Woodrow Wilson called the nation to war, he knew that not all Americans would respond with enthusiasm. Opposition to the war had surfaced almost as soon as the first shots were fired. In the fall of 1914, automaker Henry Ford had financed the sailing of a "peace ship" to Europe. The passengers were pacifists, people who for political, moral, or religious reasons oppose all wars. They hoped to get leaders of neutral countries like Sweden to act as peacemakers. Although their trip did little good, Ford and his fellow passengers came back determined to let the American public know their views.

Peace Groups and Pacifists Oppose Entry into the War As the war raged in Europe, pacifists, progressives, and other activists joined forces to keep the United States out of the conflict. Some were simply opposed to all wars. This was true of Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin of Montana, the first woman to serve as a member of Congress. A lifelong pacifist, Rankin wanted the United States to set an example by refusing to fight. Other opponents claimed they were willing to fight to defend the United States but were opposed to getting involved in what they saw as a European conflict.

In January 1915, a group of women led by Jane Addams held a peace conference in Washington, D.C. They called for limitation of arms and mediation of the European conflict rather than combat. They believed that progressive social reforms would help eliminate the economic causes of war, and they feared that U.S. entry into the war would diminish support for their reform efforts. Conference leaders formed the **Woman's Peace Party**, which grew quickly but broke into smaller factions after the United States entered the war.

Pacifists also protested the war in other ways. Some young men acted on their beliefs by declaring themselves **conscientious objectors**. A conscientious objector is someone who opposes war for religious or moral reasons and therefore refuses to serve in the armed forces. Despite the objections of these men, military officials drafted many pacifists into the armed forces. Those who refused to serve risked going to prison.



The Government Uses Propaganda to "Sell" the War Although pacifists and peace groups represented a minority of Americans, government officials feared those groups could become a serious obstacle to a united war effort. "It is not an army that we must shape and train for the war," said Wilson. "It is a nation."

To help the government "sell" the war to the public, the president created a government propaganda agency known as the **Committee on Public Information (CPI)**. He chose reporter George Creel to head the CPI. Creel saw the CPI's work as a way of fighting war critics and preserving "American ideals."

Creel hired reporters, artists, movie directors, writers, and historians to create a massive propaganda campaign. The CPI churned out press releases supporting the war effort. It also produced films with such titles as *The Kaiser, Beast of Berlin*, and *Claws of the Hun*. These movies showed Germans as evil savages out to take over the world. Posters urged Americans to join the army and buy bonds. CPI printing presses also produced leaflets and books on topics such as German war practices. Many CPI books were printed in foreign languages, so immigrants could read *How the War Came to America* in Polish, German, Swedish, or Spanish, for example.

One of the CPI's most successful propaganda campaigns was carried out by its "Four-Minute Men." In cities and towns across the country, CPI officials recruited 75,000 men to make short, four-minute speeches at civic and social clubs, movie theaters, churches, farmhouses, and country stores. Written by CPI writers in Washington, these patriotic speeches addressed such topics as why the United States was fighting or the need to conserve fuel. About every 10 days, new speeches arrived. In places with large numbers of immigrants, speakers gave their talks in Italian, Yiddish, Serbian, and other languages.

Patriotic Fervor Sweeps the Country In small towns and large, people of all ages found ways to show their support for the war effort. At loyalty parades, families waved flags and wore patriotic costumes. Marchers shouted slogans like "Keep the flag flying" and "Down with the Kaiser."

In schools, children saved tin cans, paper, and old toothpaste tubes for recycling into war materials. Families collected peach and apricot pits for use in making gas masks. Women met in homes or at churches to knit blankets and socks for soldiers. Many people joined local Red Cross chapters, where they rolled bandages and packed supplies to send overseas.

Propaganda and patriotism sometimes had the unfortunate effect of stirring up anti-German hysteria. Almost all German American communities supported the war effort once the United States entered the conflict. However, they often suffered as the result of the suspicions of others. Employers in war industries fired German American workers, fearing they might sabotage machinery or report plans to the enemy. Karl Muck, the German-born conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was arrested as an enemy alien after refusing to conduct the "Star Spangled Banner" and protesting the wartime ban on German music.

For many Americans, all things German became associated with disloyalty. Symphonies stopped playing music by German composers. Libraries removed books by German authors. Many schools proscribed the teaching of German as a foreign language. German foods were given more patriotic names—sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage" and liverwurst, "liberty sausage."



Four-Minute Men made short speeches to build support for the war wherever they could find an audience. George Creel, head of the Committee on Public Information, claimed that his 75,000 orators delivered more than 7.5 million speeches to more than 314 million people.

During the war, women took over many jobs traditionally done by men. A Seattle newspaper reported "a sudden influx of women into such unusual occupations as bank clerk, ticket seller, elevator operator, chauffeur, street car conductor," as well as factory worker and farmer.



24.3 Transforming the Economy for the War Effort

Like Elsie Janis, movie idol Douglas Fairbanks was a top fund-raiser for the war effort. At a New York rally, thousands cheered as he fought a mock boxing match against the German Kaiser. Fairbanks wore boxing gloves labeled "Victory" on one hand and "Liberty Bonds" on the other. He followed his knockout punch to the Kaiser with a rousing speech, urging the crowd to back the war effort.

Americans Buy Liberty Bonds to Fund the War World War I cost the United States about \$35.5 billion. About one fourth of that cost came from taxes, which increased drastically during the war. In October 1917, Congress passed the War Revenue Act, which raised income tax rates and taxes on excess profits. It also reduced the level of taxable income to \$1,000. As a result, the number of Americans paying income tax increased from 437,000 in 1916 to 4.4 million in 1918.

The government raised the rest of the money through the sale of **bonds**. A bond is a certificate issued by a government or company that promises to pay back the money borrowed at a fixed rate of interest on a specific date. Throughout the war, the government held rallies to promote the sale of **Liberty Bonds**. In big cities, movie stars and sports heroes urged people to buy bonds, quoting slogans such as "Come across or the Kaiser will!" and "A bond slacker is a Kaiser backer." Composer John Philip Sousa even wrote the "Liberty Bond March."

Thousands of ordinary citizens worked tirelessly selling war bonds in their hometowns. Employers gave workers time off to attend local bond rallies. In some places, those who were reluctant to buy bonds faced pressure from self-appointed patriot groups. Many foreign-born citizens felt they had to buy bonds—even if they were poor—or risk being thought un-American.

New Government Agencies Organize Industry for War As the nation geared up for war, industries began to shift from consumer goods to war production. In the past, the government had left businesses alone to make this transition. World War I was different. For the first time, government officials worked closely with industries to make sure they met the military's needs.

In July 1917, Woodrow Wilson created the War Industries Board (WIB) to direct industrial production. The WIB, headed by stockbroker Bernard Baruch, coordinated the work of government agencies and industry groups to make sure supplies and equipment were produced and delivered to the military. Baruch had the authority to tell factories what goods to produce and how much to make.

Some WIB decisions affected women's fashion. After being told to use less material in clothes, fashion designers began making shorter skirts. Women's corsets, with their metal hooks and stays, also came under scrutiny. To reduce the use of metal, women were urged to give up wearing corsets. Many were glad to comply, donating these tight-fitting undergarments to scrap drives.

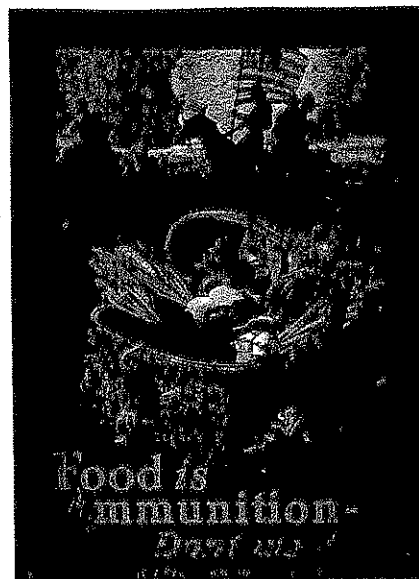
The government also worked to ensure the cooperation of unions in the war effort, and labor leaders readily agreed. The National War Labor Board worked to settle any labor disputes. The War Policies Board set standards for wages, hours, and working conditions in war industries. As a result, labor unrest subsided for the duration of the war. The booming wartime economy created many jobs, and union membership rose rapidly.

Food and Fuel Help Win the War The United States faced the huge responsibility of feeding the armed forces, as well as Allied troops and civilians. To meet the challenge, Wilson set up the Food Administration to oversee production and distribution of food and fuel. To head the effort, Wilson chose Herbert Hoover, an engineer who had led relief efforts in Belgium. Hoover raised crop prices to encourage farmers to produce more food and began a campaign that urged Americans to conserve food and reduce waste.

Although he could punish people for hoarding food, Hoover relied on Americans' voluntary "spirit of self-sacrifice." Using the slogan "Food will win the war," he urged families to participate in Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Wednesdays. Hoover also called on Americans to increase the food supply by planting "victory gardens." Across the country, schoolyards, vacant lots, and public parks sprouted seeds. The Wilsons set an example by having a victory garden planted on the White House lawn.

The Fuel Administration met the nation's energy needs through a combination of increased production and conservation. To conserve energy, Americans turned down their heaters and wore sweaters on "heatless Mondays." On "gasless Sundays," they went for walks instead of driving their cars. The Fuel Administration also introduced daylight savings time. By adding an extra hour of daylight at day's end, households used less electricity for lighting.

With all of these new boards and agencies, the size of the federal government grew rapidly during the war years. The number of federal employees more than doubled between 1916 and 1918.



The Granger Collection, New York

Conserving food was part of the war effort. In 1917, the secretary of agriculture issued an appeal to housewives: "Every woman can render important service to the nation . . . She can help to feed and clothe our armies and help to supply food to those beyond the seas by practicing effective thrift in her own household."



In 1917, the American Red Cross put out an urgent call for knitted wristlets, mufflers, sweaters, and pairs of socks. The greatest need was for socks. Soldiers stuck in wet trenches desperately needed dry socks to ward off a condition known as trench foot. Americans of all ages answered the call.



On July 28, 1917, thousands of African Americans marched peacefully down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest mistreatment of blacks. One carried a sign that asked, "Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?"

24.4 Fighting for Democracy on the Home Front

President Wilson asked Americans to help make the world "safe for democracy," but many African Americans wondered more about democracy at home. With lynchings, Jim Crow laws, and segregated army units, some were not sure what they should be fighting for.

African American Leaders Have a Mixed Response to the War Although most African Americans supported the war, black leaders disagreed about how they should respond to the war effort. W. E. B. Du Bois urged blacks to serve in the military to show their loyalty and help gain greater equality. In the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) journal *The Crisis*, Du Bois wrote, "Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy."

The outspoken black newspaper editor William Monroe Trotter disagreed. He argued that the federal government should be working to end discrimination at home before fighting for democracy overseas. Trotter did not believe serving in the armed forces would lead to better treatment for African Americans.

African Americans Migrate North for New Opportunities On the home front, the war had a major impact on African Americans in the South. As production of war materials rose, thousands of new jobs opened up in the North at the nation's steel and auto factories. The mining and meatpacking industries also needed more workers. At the same time, the flood of new immigrants from Europe had stopped, contributing to a growing labor shortage. Employers in northern cities desperately needed workers.

Black newspapers urged southern blacks to leave home and take advantage of these opportunities in the North. Many southern blacks packed up and headed north. Once settled, they wrote letters home filled with glowing reports of their new lives:

I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege. My children are going to the same school as whites and I don't have toumble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isn't any "yes sir" and "no sir."

—Author unknown, from *Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918*

What began as a trickle soon turned into a mass movement of African Americans known as the **Great Migration**. Chicago, New York City, Cleveland, and other cities saw an explosion of black residents. Whites suddenly found themselves competing with blacks for jobs and housing. In some places, racial tensions sparked riots. During the "red summer" of 1919, blood flowed in many cities, including the nation's capital. One of the worst race riots broke out in East St. Louis, Illinois, after a factory owner brought in black workers to break a strike. At least 39 African Americans and 9 whites died before peace could be restored. Unlike in the past, blacks surprised their attackers by fighting back. "The Washington riot gave me the thrill that comes once in a life time," wrote a black woman. "At last our men had stood like men, [and] struck back."

What Push Factors and Pull Factors Fueled the Great Migration?

Before World War I, nine out of ten African Americans lived in the South, mostly in rural regions. During the Great Migration, up to a million blacks left the South, traveling north and west along three migration corridors. The migrants were motivated both by push factors driving them out of the South and by pull factors drawing them to northern cities.

Pull Factors Drawing African Americans North

Voting was a right, not risky behavior, for blacks in cities like Harlem, New York.

Colleges like Boston University welcomed talented blacks who came North.



The Great Migration, 1916-1930

- Southern States
- Destination cities

Migration Corridors

- ← West of the Mississippi
- ← Midwestern
- ← Eastern

0 250 500 mi.
0 250 500 km

Push Factors Driving African Americans Out of the South

Boll weevil infestations and drought drove black sharecroppers off the land.

Lynchings of African Americans, such as those being mourned here, made southern blacks fear for their own lives.

