

Warfare State

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World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government

JAMES T. SPARROW

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Warfare State

Introduction: War and the Mass Foundations of the Modern State

On January 11, 1944, Americans gathered around the radio hearth to hear their president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, deliver a fireside chat. “There is only one front,” he told his listeners. “There is one line of unity which extends from the hearts of the people at home to the men of our attacking forces in our farthest outposts.”¹ It was a message Americans had heard often, repeated in one form or another by agencies concerned with their war-mindedness. After years of repetition it had begun to sink in. By conflating the actions of civilians “fighting” on the “home front” with the real battles fought by GIs overseas, wartime rhetoric reinforced rising expectations fostered by a buoyant war economy, and attached them firmly, if vaguely, to the government as a guarantor of basic fairness wherever it touched daily life—which was nearly everywhere during the war.

The fireside chat of January 1944 stuck in the minds of so many Americans because it was the one in which Roosevelt made his case for an “economic bill of rights” that would guarantee a genuine national citizenship to all Americans who had struggled together in war. Making the case for a definition of citizenship modernized to include a comprehensive range of social rights, without which the “true individual freedom” promised by political and civil rights “cannot exist,” Roosevelt set the liberal agenda for the postwar period. His words resonated so widely because they articulated the fictive social contract on which so much of the war effort depended in order to justify the exertions of mass participation in the mobilization for total war. He further bolstered the universalistic implications of his promises by portraying the national project as an epochal moment in world history. “The nation,” he said at the opening of his address, was “an active partner in the world’s greatest war against slavery. We have joined with like-minded people in order to defend ourselves in a world that has been gravely threatened with gangster rule.”

The rising expectations unleashed by the war did not amount simply to demands for entitlements. Citizens had “an individual stake in the preservation of democratic life in America,” as Roosevelt put it, that stake could be claimed only through obligation and sacrifice. With each fireside chat, it seemed, the president made a point of reinforcing the direct moral obligation that bound ordinary citizens to the heroic soldiers who gave their lives for their country. It began as early as his “Four Freedoms” address before the war, in January 1941—a speech remembered less for its invocation of obligation than for its pledge to secure freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. In that landmark statement, which would shape wartime rights rhetoric, Roosevelt also asserted that the interests of individuals and groups “must give way to the national need,” as must anything else that stood “in the way of speed and efficiency in defense preparations.” It was the sovereign people who held the highest claim: “a free nation has the right to expect full cooperation from all groups.” And that sovereignty was embodied by the federal government, empowered to place the collective good above all else.²

From the very beginning, then, the liberal ideals of freedom and rights championed by Roosevelt and his war administrators were predicated on the greater obligation to meet the requirements of national belonging. Contributing to the war effort might foster visions of national citizenship and even provide new guarantees of federal protection, but such claims were always to remain subordinated—

practically, to the requirements of the war government, and symbolically, to the demands of the combat soldier. Americanism provided the language, imagery, and cultural logic by which clashing claims on the government could be made. In the end, Americanism went hand in hand with entitlement, policing as well as authorizing it.

The Americans who lived through the Second World War partook of a sweeping transformation in the foundations of national government. Internationally, American power leapt far beyond territorial bounds, inaugurating an era of globalism. Domestically, warfare replaced welfare as the central purpose of the national state. More than in any other period since the Civil War, changes in government politicized everyday life, touching nearly every American. For soldiers and civilians alike, the war instilled a sense of entitlement to full citizenship that the federal government increasingly would have to placate, if not always fulfill, in subsequent years. At the same time, and for related reasons, the integrity of the state and the loyalty of its employees and citizens became paramount concerns, subject to the increasingly stringent criteria of a normative and bureaucratized Americanism.

The obligations of national belonging that exponents of Americanism asserted, together with the rights of national citizenship to which ordinary Americans increasingly claimed entitlement, legitimized the federal leviathan erected during the war. Nationalism and social democratic egalitarianism had been contending impulses in American political life for decades, much as they had been for the other powers participating in the war. It took the ideological threat of a European continent ruled by German National Socialism, combined with the racial specter of an entire hemisphere of Asians united by imperial Japan, to fuse the two impulses into a new mode of American statism.

Total war changed the stakes of national government—even in the United States, where it brought full employment and economic mobilization rather than shelled-out cities and masses of refugees. Within the span of half a decade the United States departed from some of its longest and most dearly held political traditions. The first of these departures was the permanent peacetime draft, inaugurated in late 1940, which violated an aversion to conscription and large standing armies dating back to the Revolution. It shaped the most basic requirements of male citizenship for more than a generation, while providing a ready source of manpower for the vast military establishment erected in these years.

The United States' wartime alliance, the second major departure, represented a historic break with more than a century of international aloofness predating the Monroe Doctrine. Starting in the spring of 1941, Lend-Lease inaugurated a massive program of aid to Britain and, eventually, to other Allied nations fighting against the Axis powers. These provisional measures eventually pulled the United States into a constellation of long-term alliances whose entanglements persisted decades into the postwar period.

War finance, another dramatic policy departure, embedded the federal government more deeply within American society than had the regressive fiscal regime of the New Deal, whose attacks on the wealthy had never transcended purely symbolic gestures. Mass income taxation and vast structural deficits, both undertaken for the first time during the war, produced a revolution in public finance that fostered the affluent society at home and funded the American Century abroad. Eight generations after the Boston Tea Party, Americans not only taxed themselves—directly, substantially, and broadly—but also sent a large chunk of the resulting revenues back across the Atlantic to sustain the British Empire.

Even the mixed economy, on which the war effort's decisive "miracle of production" relied, represented a departure from New Deal regulation. The War Production Board's controls over vital materials, combined with the explosion of war contracts directed by procurement officials within the

army and navy, directed the energies of entire industries toward public purposes with more vigor, success, and permanent impact than the short-lived National Recovery Administration (NRA) ever could have. Price and wage controls, rationing and manpower priorities, consumer protection and labor arbitration—these lasted longer and shaped the economy more profoundly than had the NRA's codes of fair competition. They involved the federal government more intensively in the affairs of management and labor than had been the case during the golden age of Wagner Act militancy in the last half of the 1930s.

The agencies that conducted the mobilization for the Second World War quickly dwarfed the New Deal programs that had seemed gargantuan only a few years earlier. They touched the lives of more than 85 million war bond holders (in a total population of 130 million); 42 million new income-tax payers; nearly all of the nation's 17 million industrial workers employed by war industry, and further millions who worked in supporting white-collar jobs; and more than 16 million servicemen and -women. Rationing was so widespread that registrations for ration books were used as a proxy for census information on population size and distribution in 1943.³ By way of contrast, the Works Progress Administration employed just under 15 million people during its eight-year tenure; all of the New Deal emergency welfare projects combined reached a total of 28.6 million recipients between 1933 and 1943. Just one of the war programs, Lend-Lease, spent more in six years—\$50 billion between 1941 and 1946—than all of the New Deal emergency programs had in a decade (\$40 billion between 1933 and 1943).⁴ As the larger trajectory of federal spending, revenue, debt, employment, and military deployment in the twentieth century makes clear, the Second World War, building on but also superseding the New Deal, was a critical turning point for the growth of the federal government within American society. (See [Charts A.1–A.8.](#))

Not only did the federal government expand in sheer size during the war but, just as important, it dramatically extended the scope and nature of its authority. War agencies were far less beholden to state and local political interests than had been the case in the 1930s. This was due to the authority granted to the president by the Second War Powers Act of 1942—one of the biggest grants of executive discretion in U.S. history—which made for a state of emergency that did not officially end until 1952.⁵

The war also rehabilitated big business, returning corporate figures to the public service that had burnished the preeminence of market values in national life before the crash of 1929 shook their hold. Prior to the coming of war, the Roosevelt administration had sought to resuscitate and then discipline the marketplace through recovery measures, antitrust enforcement, and labor relations that many business leaders resented. With the coming of war the nature of the emergency shifted, redirecting energies from preserving national welfare to mobilizing for national defense.⁶ Consequently, the nature of “mixed government” altered decisively.

The new compact with big business extended well beyond the offices of military purchasing agents and civilian mobilization officials, although that is where it began. “Dollar-a-year” men retained their corporate salaries and rushed into Washington to work for a nominal fee, setting the government into a new relationship with business. Within war plants, management regained the discretion and authority that had been challenged by years of sit-down strikes and shop floor militancy. In the cultural industries admen and copywriters, radio and film producers, newsmen, and commercial illustrators all devoted their time and skill to public productions that sold the “Fifth Freedom” of private enterprise as much as they did the other four. Businessmen volunteered to run the war effort at all levels, from local car dealers selling war bonds all the way up to national figures such as Sears, Roebuck president Donald Nelson heading the War Production Board to guide the entire mobilization.

In this new iteration of the “associational state” that had been growing since the nineteenth century,

the government was not simply “captured” by corporate liberals, as critics would claim at the time and for decades afterward. If federal power became critically dependent on business in the war the reverse was also true, making those business figures who entered public service at least as much creatures of the state as they were servants of capital. Neither was the government captured by conspiratorial warhawks bent on institutionalizing militarism.⁷ Military contracts would come and go over the years according to congressional whim and cautious military priorities. The economy born in the war did produce a coherent network of defense-related businesses, but it did not lock in a triumvirate of businessmen, generals, and politicians bent on converting the United States into a “garrison state.”⁸ The leaders of the armed forces mobilization—men such as Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Assistant Secretary of War Robert Patterson, and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox—were as skeptical of protracted military buildup as they were of civilian administrators’ judgment.

Even if war was not simply the handmaiden of capitalist growth or the product of warhawks’ dreams, these years did nonetheless establish a kind of “warfare state” rooted both in society and government. Over years of emergency that did not end in 1945 militarism took on its own life, providing “memories, models, and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life” from the late 1930s onward.⁹ The mixed economy proved exceptionally dynamic once militarized. Although business leaders then and now have bemoaned the ways in which state planning might foreclose market innovation, in fact war brought opportunities for “creative destruction” on a scale that has yet to be matched.¹⁰ Furthermore, this furious innovation reordered social relationships and cultural meanings as much as it did market share or capital investment, requiring consumers and industrial workers, drafted soldiers and home-front families to reorient their productive energies toward reworking the nation. In the process they remade themselves through everyday exertions. It was this fluid environment, as much as the crusade against fascism, that permanently bent private lives and capital to public purposes and fostered a fusion of corporate and New Deal liberalism with exceptionalist nationalism. America entered into a warfare state that would last for decades, thanks to the continued emergency of the Cold War.

How was it that this massive new warfare state, with its global mission, attracted so little of the dissent that had marked the Great War and the debate over the League of Nations, even while it eluded the more recent quarrels that had hobbled the late New Deal and the debate over intervention? Given the traditions of individualism and decentralized governance that had long conspired to thwart a centralized national state in the United States, the triumphal and unimpeded ascent of “big government” in the 1940s requires explanation.

One part of the answer has to do with the ways in which the American mobilizers of the Second World War enlisted nationalism. Well into the twentieth century, Americans still had much to resolve on the question of national identification. In part the problem was structural. Due to the federalism and division of powers that have defined the American state since 1789, there historically have been multiple centers of community and power within which a citizen might realize his or her patriotic membership: militias, patriotic societies, veterans’ organizations, civic and other voluntary associations, and similar institutions organized in local communities or within the several states. The federal government was only one among many competing centers of nationalistic affiliation.¹¹

Traditions of regionalism, localism, and religious pluralism compounded the obstacles to a genuinely national polity. In the South and West, where memories of the Civil War lingered and populist resentments of metropolitan leverage over government and economy continued to fester, antistatism was such a vernacular indulgence that patriots easily looked askance at the national government, particularly when it challenged local or regional prerogatives regarding race relations,

class conflict, or land use. Evangelical and dissenting religious denominations—often flourishing in the countryside and in regional hinterlands alongside sectional and local jealousies—continued to defend the First Amendment’s check on government authority, managing to defy even the most basic oath of national fealty, the Pledge of Allegiance, in a time of war.¹²

Equally venerable traditions of individualism and private property further constrained the extension of federal authority. Until the twentieth century, few public institutions reached into everyday life and oriented ordinary Americans toward the nation in ways that could habituate them to the authority of the federal government. The most visible national institutions were private enterprises such as railroads, mass media, or vertically integrated industries, all of which fostered national connectedness in economic and cultural life, but also considered the prospect of a powerful federal government with indifference or open hostility. The War Industries Board and other corporatist improvisations of World War I had placed business “czars” in harness for eighteen months, although U.S. involvement had not lasted long enough, nor marshaled sufficient popular support, to buy the federal government the time and resources it needed to truly dominate and manage the national economy. Throughout the 1920s, it had remained unclear who wielded the whip hand of this associational state.¹³

The American political tradition thus militated against popular acceptance of the European-style statism that menaced large swaths of the globe at the dawn of the 1940s. Americans had adopted an approach to government that obscured or hid the greatest sources of its power, while abetting a liberal ideology predicated on the myth of a timeless “weak state.”¹⁴ Thinking themselves exceptional in the annals of world history—a habit only reinforced by the war, with its contrast between Allied freedom and Axis tyranny—Americans of nearly every political stripe chafed at the extension of government power when it did not seem somehow to extend their own freedom. This was true even of liberals devoted to the welfare state, which they viewed as a necessary means to secure a greater sphere of liberty within the modern economy.

Despite the precedent of federal growth in earlier decades, the project of building a state powerful enough to win a global war on two fronts was no foregone conclusion, as the protracted debate over intervention demonstrated. The leviathan that Americans rapidly erected to meet the challenges of the global cataclysm required *legitimacy*, accorded by citizens who were invested somehow—materially or ideologically—in the power of the national government.

How did citizens come to accept or reject the newfound authority the federal government exercised over their lives, and how did that cultural process of legitimation inform their sense of national citizenship? At heart this is a question of political culture—the set of customs, values, assumptions, attitudes, and images that together define what was politically meaningful and thus possible within the polity. For no democratic regime could have persisted (much less expanded) without widely shared perceptions of legitimacy to motivate continued political engagement among leaders and ensure popular compliance with the pragmatic requirements of ordinary governance. This question has largely been neglected by historians, who share with political scientists and most theorists a blind spot when it comes to the cultural foundations of the nonviolent coercions and collective political actions that are so central to modern political life.¹⁵

By focusing on the interplay between state formation and political culture at the grassroots—rather than restricting analysis to ideology or to the presumptive interests of pressure groups—it is possible to uncover the shared assumptions that ordered both cooperation and conflict within the polity. Such an approach is attuned to the unique problems raised by the simultaneous dispersion and concentration of power within mass society. It unveils the ways in which ordinary Americans came to terms with massive structures of national power, adapting and appropriating language, imagery, symbols, and ideas in order to orient themselves and their ideological commitments toward politicized social

arrangements.¹⁶ As government expanded and demanded more of its citizens, they had to be habituated to new forms of authority and new social arrangements resulting from its growing power. This requirement held doubly true for the American involvement in World War II, when churning social changes and raw tensions constantly threatened military morale, industrial production, and the authority of new war agencies.

The broad patterns of political culture during World War II have received considerable scholarly attention. Scholars focused on liberalism as the central tradition in American political life have suggested that even during the “good war” the very nature of the liberal polity precluded any genuine sense of collective obligation. Propagandists invoked self-interest by casting war aims in images of domesticity and postwar affluence. Interest groups such as labor, business, and farmers wrapped their agendas within a “politics of sacrifice” that engendered flag-waving opportunism. The takings required to safeguard the public welfare were thus justified as simple extensions of private self-interest, down payments on liberties such as the “freedom from want” depicted in Norman Rockwell’s bounteous Thanksgiving. When they were contested, wartime sacrifices were denounced as violation of the maxim that all interests be safeguarded by an “equality of sacrifice.”¹⁷

Because scholars have focused so heavily on the limitations imposed by American political culture on reform and political obligation during the war and early postwar years, we have little sense of how the extraordinary state-building of the period was accomplished with so little opposition. No tax revolts, no draft riots, no postwar isolationism—the quiescence attending the dramatic policy departures of these years requires explanation. The answers that millions of Americans gave to the question of “why we fight” mattered deeply—for the personal and social meanings they attributed to the patriotism and national citizenship the war effort cultivated in them, and for the emerging structures of a national state that could not win the war without their compliance.

Of all the years of the twentieth century, federal legitimacy grew most dramatically during World War II, just when expanding state capacity most burdened the nation’s citizenry. Even where war administrators were most constrained, as with matters of race, they held at least nominal authority over social arrangements that had been considered beyond the purview of the federal government since the collapse of Reconstruction more than three generations earlier. While this greatly expanded state presence did produce significant conflict, the resulting divisiveness did not so much threaten the federal government’s authority as heighten the claims that citizens felt they could make upon it. The “good war” may not have been the uniformly noble crusade portrayed in the war movies of midcentury, but it was a period in which the basic goals of the government were widely accepted as valid and necessary.¹⁸ Unlike earlier periods of dramatic government expansion, the basic legitimacy of the federal government’s efforts in World War II were not successfully challenged within the political mainstream. Critics from the left and right generally chose to embrace federal power during World War II and afterward, seeking to bend it to their will (whether for reform or reaction) rather than protest or dismantle it.

In Max Weber’s classic formulation, there are three kinds of legitimate authority on which states can draw to exercise power securely: charismatic, traditional, and rational.¹⁹ During the Second World War, the federal government drew on all three as it consolidated unprecedented control over society. Franklin Delano Roosevelt concentrated all the force of his extraordinary charisma to become the only president in U.S. history to win four terms, earning the title of the “Great Communicator” with his rousing public oratory. At the same time, his patrician pedigree and constant invocation of liberal democratic tradition cloaked this charismatic authority in a traditional mantle. He presided over the creation of the New Deal state, which inserted the “rational” requirements of expertise and planning

into national politics. Although Roosevelt's charismatic gifts, patrician aura, and bureaucratic empiricism could all become liabilities on the wrong occasion, when wielded together they were awesome to behold. As a war president, Roosevelt did not hesitate to use any of the tools available to him.

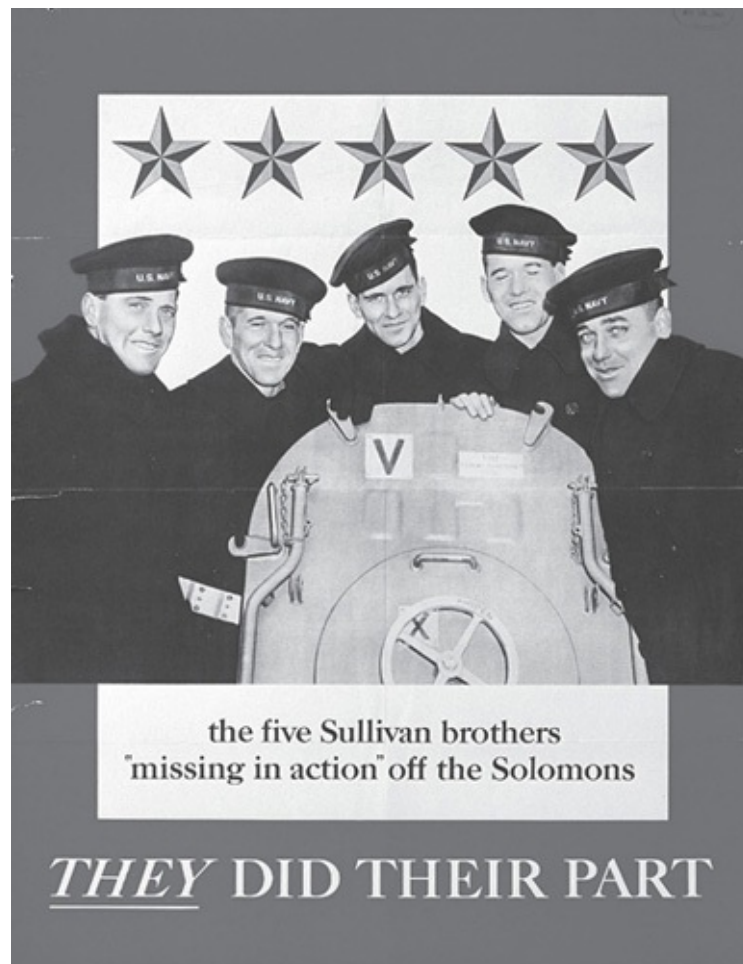
Many studies of the 1930s and 1940s have noted Roosevelt's exceptional qualities as a leader—indeed, the man still overshadows the age that bears his name—but few have explored the social, cultural, and institutional aspects of the authority that allowed his government to redirect the course of history.²⁰ In focusing on legitimacy, this study seeks to understand a dimension of politics and society that is often overlooked: the social politics of the state, where the great structures of the nation touch everyday life.²¹ Formal politics is ordinarily the domain of organized elites: politicians, interest groups, policy makers, journalists, and their ilk. Occasionally the machinations of these political actors are constrained or overturned by large-scale developments in economy, society, or mass politics. Catastrophic events crystallize public opinion in ways that force new habits and commitments.²²

This book is about just such an event—World War II—and its influence on the national political culture that set the boundaries of policy and normal politics. It reveals how the warfare state obtained its purchase on everyday lives of the American people, and what the consequences of that development were for the social power, political legitimacy, and institutional profile of the leviathan that ruled the postwar United States and led the “free world” for more than a generation. Focusing on legitimacy as a cultural process of political accommodation worked out within the social spaces and economic transactions of everyday life opens up the empirical middle ground within which the ideologies, state structures, and political interests of national life were lived, negotiated, and appropriated. The everyday, idealized messages that government authorities wished to impart—particularly liberal messages that they were fighting a war for freedom, democracy, pluralism, and the American way—were shaped at least as powerfully by the claims of nationalism as by the logic of liberal “obligation.”²³ At the grassroots, ordinary Americans produced a fusion of nationalism and liberalism, Americanism and entitlement, that defined the political culture of the war and shaped the contours of what could be imagined politically for more than a generation thereafter. Ideologically this fusion was paradoxical, verging on contradictory. But lived as a social politics flowing from the governmentality required by the war, it was compelling enough. By cloaking new obligations to the state in this fusion of liberalism (with its valorization of freedom and equality) and nationalism (with its demand for unity, order, and loyalty), the federal government could expand its power radically without triggering opposition.²⁴

Citizens expressed their acceptance of federal legitimacy in terms that reflected the sensibilities of the time. They incorporated certain aspects of the speeches and propaganda that the government and private industry sent into their homes and workplaces to make them “war-minded.” These messages encouraged all citizens to think of themselves as personally connected to the battlefield and to imagine the repercussions of their every action for the combat soldier—a figure always idealized in the political culture of the war. In keeping with the values of individualism, virtuous independence, and jealousy of centralized sources of power that had shaped American political culture since colonial times, most Americans did not articulate their morally charged connections to the government as obligations to the state or even to the nation (although they did sing along heartily with Kate Smith when she belted out “God Bless America”). Rather, they embraced an idealized figure of masculine virtue and patriotic sacrifice—the combat soldier—as a proxy for both the nation and the government protecting it.

Given the extreme diversity of the 130 million people who resided within the continental United States when the war began, it is not surprising that citizens' interpretations of what, precisely, they

owed the GI and the government varied significantly. The government found it necessary to “educate its citizenry in the specific details of their obligation.” “The best way of dealing with the few slackers or trouble makers in our midst,” the president claimed in his “Four Freedoms” speech, was “first, to shame them by patriotic example, and, if that fails, to use the sovereignty of Government to save Government.” During the war the federal government would ultimately rely more on patriotism and shame than on its sovereign power to coerce citizens into compliance with the war effort. Prosecution for draft dodging, tax evasion, and black market activity were all strikingly low, given the scope and newness of government authority in these areas. In a country at war, the idealized figure of the combat soldier—and the millions of real servicemen for whom it stood—provided a unifying symbol through which diverse groups of civilians could be exhorted to meet their obligation to state and nation.²⁵



In November 1942, the light cruiser USS *Juneau* sank during the battle of Guadalcanal, taking the lives of all five sons of Tom and Alleta Sullivan: George, Frank, Joe, Matt, and Al. They were soon widely memorialized, putting a human face on the combat soldier who became a culture hero of the home front. (Courtesy of Northwestern University Library, <http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/wwii-posters/img/ww1645-25.jpg>)

The GI was a democratized update of the oldest model of citizenship, the warrior. Although more than 200,000 women served in the armed forces during the war, their contributions were eclipsed in public life by the masculine ideal of the “citizen-soldiers” who defended the nation. The masculine character of this new culture hero had enduring consequences. On one hand, it reinforced the claims black and other nonwhite soldiers could make on citizenship, allowing their manhood to be seen as a marker of patriotic virtue—not just the liability it traditionally had been in the eyes of whites. On the other hand, this claim by itself was insufficient to trump the racial privileges that continued to

structure American society long after the war had ended—although it did provide openings for challenging them in a wave of civil rights action during the war and afterward. Elevating the GI to the status of first-class citizen also served to reinforce gendered hierarchies that had long shaped basic patterns of inequality in American society. Not only did white male World War II veterans enjoy guarantees of a fuller citizenship than everyone else, but the legal framing of those benefits reinforced the ideals and practices of the family wage that had kept women dependent and unequal for generations. The GIs' idealization in popular culture further reinforced traditional gender roles that would abet the resurgence of domesticity later in the decade. In light of the explosion of opportunities the war provided for women to enter public life and the workplace, this resuscitation of masculine citizenship came at a pivotal moment.²⁶

The American soldier thus embodied national citizenship and legitimized government power in momentous ways. When citizens from various walks of life made increased claims on the federal government to guarantee what they saw as "fair" and "patriotic" solutions to problems raised by the war mobilization, they found their claims evaluated by way of comparison to the absolute sacrifice of the soldier who gave his life for his country. Whether the "sacrifice" in question was military service, war work, rationing, or income taxation, the legitimacy of the government's power to set the terms of the obligation was evaluated according to how it kept civilians in line with their reciprocal duty to the soldier.

This successful collective endeavor to build a national "imagined community" around the soldier had unintended consequences.²⁷ Government leaders who encouraged citizens to identify with the soldier did not anticipate that the cultural equation could work in reverse, as Americans visualized themselves as comrades of the soldier, patriotic members of a nation whose government owed them a diffuse but powerful right to full national citizenship. Despite this critical extension of public largesse, nationalism would set the terms of success for those who sought to claim its rights in the 1940s and beyond. As Americans rewarded the GIs with a Bill of Rights and applauded themselves for the triumph of freedom over fascist tyranny, they neglected to consider the foundations of government power on which their victory rested. In the end, the warfare state would prove less contentious and more durable than the liberties it ostensibly protected.

PART ONE

IDEOLOGY, POLITICAL CULTURE, AND STATE FORMATION

War Displaces Its Analog

In the late fall of 1939, with Europe descending into war after the Nazi invasion of Poland that September, the Magna Carta traveled to the United States for safe harbor and public display. In a carefully publicized ceremony, the poet laureate, dedicated antifascist, and recently appointed librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, met with Lord Lothian, the British ambassador, to receive the Riverside copy of the Magna Carta. MacLeish pointed out the significance of “the turn of time which brings the Great Charter of the English to stand across this gallery from the two great charters of American freedom”:

The deposit of the Magna Charta in the library of the people’s representatives in Congress is a plain and intelligible statement of a plain intelligible fact.... For generations we have taught our children in this Republic that our institutions of representative government were dependent on our constitutional charter for their existence. We have more recently learned, and now believe, that the opposite is also true: that without the institutions of representative government the charters of the people’s rights cannot be saved.¹

No matter that it had been a conspiracy of barons, not an uprising of the people, that had forced King John to protect their privileges at Runnymede in 1215; “the liberties of the people have often been established by those who had no interest in the people,” MacLeish observed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was more mindful of the barons and their prerogatives. “Dear Archie,” the president wrote earlier that November to approve this deft exercise in public relations:

I think that in your remarks you can make the happy suggestion that there could properly be criticism if the Magna Carta had been turned over to the executive branch of government, i.e., the King John of modern days; but that as the library is the Library of Congress the precious document has been retained in the safe hands of the barons and the commoners.²

With this strained metaphor, Roosevelt sought to portray the symbolic aid extended to Britain as an innocuous gesture steeped in the venerable Anglo-American tradition of liberty.³ He was caught in the midst of a political firestorm over the question of aid to Britain and the other European nations fighting against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. This battle over intervention was part of a larger struggle over the expansion of executive power that had begun in earnest after his reelection in 1936 and would continue to rage between New Dealers and conservatives through the war years and beyond.



Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, left, thanks British Ambassador Lord Lothian after accepting the Riverside copy of the Magna Carta for deposit on November 28, 1939. The Magna Carta was publicly displayed in a spot opposite the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a gesture intended to underscore the historical and ideological ties between the United States and Great Britain as Americans contemplated entry into the war. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-27724)

The language of rights and freedom enjoyed a thoroughgoing revival during the Second World War, given flight by the brutalities inflicted by the Axis powers, sanctified by the sesquicentennial celebration of the Constitution, and hammered home to the majority of American households who regularly listened to Roosevelt's radio addresses.⁴ The ruthlessness and speed displayed by the Axis lent a new urgency, and offered a qualitatively different conception of public welfare and national interest, to the meanings of statecraft in the late New Deal. As the Roosevelt administration shifted its political energies and institutional initiatives from welfare to warfare, it undertook a process of ideological transposition. It adapted the imagery and meanings of activist government to suit the requirements of a national interest defined by military security and international relations, rather than economic stability and social justice. As the purposes of government shifted from welfare to warfare, the foundations for its legitimacy shifted as well.

The New Deal on the Brink

By the autumn of 1938, it had begun to look as if "fear itself" might make a comeback. There were many signs, large and small, that the juggernaut of confidence, activism, and bluff that was the New Deal had run into dangerous territory. Ominous events threatened not only to undermine the reform program advanced by the Roosevelt administration over the course of the previous half-decade but also to strike at the very foundations of civilization itself.⁵

One such portent, oblique but telling, took place sometime after eight o'clock Eastern time on the

night before Halloween. Frantic calls flooded the telephone lines in northern New Jersey and southern New York State as panicked radio listeners contacted family and friends about the Martians whose invasion they had heard “reported” with convincing if entirely fictional realism from the safety of their living rooms, courtesy of Orson Welles’s Mercury Theater and the Columbia Broadcasting System.

The radio play to which they responded was a parable of social disintegration in which every authority figure misunderstood and quickly lost command of the situation, starting with the main character, an astronomer named Pierson who dismissed the mounting signs of alien invasion as innocent natural phenomena. Not long after Pierson finally began to confront the limits of his understanding, the head of the New Jersey militia announced martial law and an orderly evacuation, followed by a confident declaration by Captain Lansing of the Signal Corps that the situation was “now under complete control.” Within moments, the seven thousand militia troops surrounding the Martian vehicle were incinerated. Soon thereafter, the secretary of the interior took to the air, urging listeners in unmistakably Rooseveltian tones to remain calm, place their “faith in the military forces” to deal with the invaders, and “confront this destructive adversary” as a “nation united.” As more Martian cylinders were spotted landing throughout the United States, the air force dispatched waves of bombers only to see them incinerated by heat rays, while the invincible Martian war machines unleashed poisonous gas on urban centers and systematically destroyed power lines and other strategic infrastructure. “Their apparent objective,” the announcer speculated, was “to crush resistance, paralyze communication, and disorganize human society.” Two-thirds of the way into the hour-long broadcast, every last trace of government had been defeated summarily and the announcer had begun to send his last words from the roof of a building in New York City.

At least one million Americans reported being seriously frightened or “excited” by the broadcast, according to Hadley Cantril, the pioneering young Princeton psychologist whose study of the panic soon became a classic text. Many called their neighbors, local police, newspapers, or any other authority they could think of. That night, more than a third of the radio stations carrying the broadcast saw telephone call-ins jump by 500 percent over ordinary levels. In the area around Grover’s Mill, New Jersey, where the first Martians “landed,” some people became even more unhinged, speeding away in cars or seeking out neighbors in a frantic scramble.⁶

Experts in mass psychology such as Cantril worried that the *War of the Worlds* broadcast demonstrated Americans’ vulnerability to manipulation by fear and uncertainty—precisely the sort of susceptibility that had already facilitated the seizure of power by the fascists in Italy, by the war government in Japan, and, above all, by the Nazis in Germany.⁷ But not everyone who panicked resembled the man of the masses whose social insecurity, emotional lability, and authoritarian predilections social scientists in the late 1930s and 1940s would identify as the social dynamite waiting to explode within modern society.⁸ A young white man privileged enough to attend college—senior, no less—later admitted the broadcast had spurred him to a foolish sort of heroism. On hearing of the invasion, he tried to call his girlfriend in Poughkeepsie, New York, but was unable to reach her because of the jammed lines. He screeched off in his car and

started driving back to Poughkeepsie. We had heard that Princeton was wiped out and gas was spreading over New Jersey and fire, so I figured there wasn’t anything to do—we figured our friends and family were all dead. I made 45 miles in 35 minutes and didn’t even realize it.... My roommate was crying and praying.... The speed was never under 70.... The gas was supposed to be spreading up north. I didn’t have any idea exactly what I was fleeing from, and that made me all the more afraid. All I could think of was being

burned alive or being gassed.... I remember thinking distinctly how easy it would be to get shot cleanly in a war.

In Newark, New Jersey, a black housewife heard her neighbors yelling “Get gas masks!” and drew a somewhat different conclusion. She dashed out of her house and ran up to passing cars, saying: “Don you know New Jersey is destroyed by the Germans—it’s on the radio.” She assumed they had landed by zeppelin under cover of night, employing blitzkrieg tactics.⁹

The uncertainty and despair that revealed itself on that now infamous October night indicated just how brittle the structures of legitimate authority had become in the New Deal’s darkest hour. The tumult of world politics cast a new pall over the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, which stubbornly refused to end and indeed had deepened in recent months. By October 1938, Americans had been inundated by radio news bulletins and photographic images that made many of the scenes of *War of the Worlds* sound entirely plausible. In Manchuria, Abyssinia, and most recently the Chinese mainland, peaceful cities and villages had been invaded and mercilessly conquered in days, even hours, by columns of war machines employing the most advanced war technologies on land, at sea, and, most dramatically, from the air.

Even a country racked by the cruelties of civil war, as Spain was, discovered new horrors. In the spring of 1937, hundreds of civilians in the Basque town of Guernica, a Republican redoubt, had been incinerated in a few hours’ time by the “thermite rain” hailed down by the German Condor Legion, which aimed its incendiary bombs at marketplaces and residential districts, and followed up with strafing runs on fleeing women, children, and clergy. The pilots demonstrated an “utter ferocity and scientific thoroughness” that had the calculated intent to sow terror and disorganize opposition in a fashion mimicked by Welles’s fictional Martian war machines. By the time of the *War of the Worlds* broadcast almost a year and a half later, Guernica had become an international cause célèbre and Welles’s listeners had encountered lurid depictions of the massacre in breaking stories, in editorials with headings such as “Death Rides the Wind,” and in photos of the rubble-strewn city that reminded readers that “not one building escaped.”¹⁰

Small wonder, then, that the college boy speeding to his girlfriend at Vassar College should have thought that gas and fire attacks might already have killed his college buddies, or that the Newark housewife believed Germany might be launching a blitzkrieg in the swamps of central New Jersey only six months after the *Hindenburg* had reached the blazing terminus to its transatlantic flight there. Even after the immediate excitement of the broadcast died down and embarrassed shock over the gullibility of certain radio listeners began to set in, some remained sufficiently unabashed to insist on preparations for invasions of a more terrestrial sort. On election day—which ushered in a cohort of conservative Democrats and Republicans whose studied opposition to Roosevelt would significantly limit the New Deal’s last years—the *New York Times* reported that the War Department had recently been inundated with “countrywide requests for anti-aircraft protection, renewed demands for coastal defenses, inquiries about the modernization of wartime cantonments,” and other particulars of military preparedness. The “radio panic” prompted by Welles’s broadcast was only the most dramatic manifestation of a mounting alarmism over the prospect of war.¹¹

In the face of mounting recession and global catastrophe, Americans turned to a New Deal government that seemed inexplicably to be faltering at every turn, as if the magic decisiveness of its early successes had been inverted. Where government action previously had acted as a tonic on the body politic, restoring faith and inducing the first phase of an electoral realignment, now it sowed doubts and eroded confidence among the Democratic faithful while sparking opposition among conservatives determined to thwart Roosevelt at every step and roll back the New Deal.

When confronted with the geopolitical appetites of the fascist powers, the Roosevelt administration could respond only with a “policy of pinpricks and righteous protest,” stymied as it was by domestic isolationist currents.¹² The political capital available to internationalist liberals by that time had been squandered in a disastrous sequence of missteps that followed on the heels of Roosevelt’s landslide victory in 1936. Bitter fights over executive power battered the New Deal coalition in Congress—the proposal to “pack” the Supreme Court and plans to centralize power in the White House by “reorganizing” the executive were only the most galvanizing—shearing off conservative southerners, populists from the West and South, and sympathetic progressives within the Republican Party. The administration had relied on all of these camps to pass landmark legislation between 1933 and 1935. But now it faced a global crisis that required even more political unity, and far vaster executive discretion, than the New Deal had ever asked of the coalition. To redress the situation, Roosevelt campaigned that very October against conservative Democrats whose “purge” from the party he hoped would transform it into a genuine party of reform. This move backfired, lending superficial credence to critics who accused FDR of dictatorial ambitions. Compounding the administration’s woes was the self-inflicted wound of the “Roosevelt recession,” widely understood to have been caused by FDR’s decision to move toward balancing the budget in 1937. After dropping by half over the first four years of the New Deal, unemployment had spiked by a third in the year after FDR’s budget cuts were announced, idling somewhere between 13 and 19 percent of those dogged Americans who were still looking for work.¹⁴

Those who tuned in to the *War of the Worlds* broadcast were sitting near the bottom of that second economic trough when they heard about the Martian invasion. They had reason to fear the worst, and to fret about the government’s ability to save them from it. Global war was returning after a generation’s respite. The nation remained impoverished, divided, and weakened, even after years of bold, nationalistic reform. Yet Roosevelt would emerge from this new, bellicose phase of world-historic crisis with his authority and popular support intact. One union loyalist wrote from San Francisco in April 1938, when the recession had been deepening for over a year, “You have not let us down. We know that.... But it’s now become obvious that the fight wasn’t over with our 27 million votes in 1936.... We have gained a better life—we mean to maintain this better life and extend it to others.”¹⁵

The liberal crusade to bring the “American way of life” to more people, both within the United States and beyond its borders, would be propelled as much by the war that many on the left feared as by the Democratic votes they anticipated. Waging war shifted the foundations of government activism onto new social, economic, and institutional grounds, which in turn fundamentally altered the practices of national citizenship and the programs of national government on which the administration could draw. Geopolitics also split a New Deal coalition that had barely had time to form by 1938, when all three fascist powers began their expansive designs. As global war brought foreign affairs onto front pages and into living rooms, it placed further strain on the electoral pillars of the New Deal state—white and black working-class voters, nativist farmers in the South and German farmers in the Midwest, middle-class Democrats of varying ethnicities. The war pushed antifascists and interventionists in one direction—often for diverse reasons, as with Poles, Czechs, African Americans, and southern whites—pulled Axis sympathizers among Italians and Germans in another, and alienated dogged neutrals such as Irish Americans. The question of intervention was more than a wedge issue. It reframed the nature of government activism, redirecting interest and institutional innovation into an international realm that could just as easily obscure as energize domestic concerns. The internationalization of political energies and electoral orientation was most evident in the 1940 election, which Roosevelt won by reassuring voters that his record of government activism, though

controversial, offered some kind of bulwark against the looming crisis in Europe. The voters chose Roosevelt largely because this argument was persuasive to them. Without the coming of war, he very well might have lost the election.¹⁶

It is ironic that the second coming of global war should have marked the end of reform, considering the extent to which the New Deal was beholden to the “analog” of World War I in establishing its bona fides and surrounding its reform program with a nationalistic aura in the 1930s. In its personnel policy ideas, class politics, and foreign relations, the Roosevelt administration had been shaped by the legacy of the Great War. Nearly all the legislation passed in the initial burst of activity known as the “First Hundred Days,” the first incarnation of the New Deal aimed mostly at economic recovery, enacted policies that either were lifted directly from the war or had been refined in the 1920s by policy makers building on the wartime government’s foundations. Crop subsidies had their roots in Herbert Hoover’s Food Administration; the industrial cooperation of the National Recovery Administration modeled itself on the War Industries Board and had as its director the World War I holdover General Hugh Johnson; the Civilian Conservation Corps echoed the values of the preparedness movement; even the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)—the poster child of the New Deal—had its origins in the nitrate plant established at Muddy Flats in the Great War.¹⁷

The approach of another global conflict brought the reminder that no moral equivalent could lay claim to national obligation more effectively than war itself. Men of Roosevelt’s generation recalled vividly how the drums of war could drown out gentler hymns of reform. This lesson had been seared into FDR’s memory during a critical episode in his political education. As the Democratic candidate for vice president in 1920, he had seen the harrowing defeat of the League of Nations guarantee his ticket’s crushing loss. This time would have to be different, even though the makeshift alliances that had thwarted the League had grown into an organized coalition over the course of a generation, centered on “isolationist” opponents who found political capital and institutional momentum in the passage of neutrality legislation between 1935 and 1939.¹⁸

Treading carefully, Roosevelt built the case that chaos in international relations was analogous to the economic chaos the New Deal had partially vanquished. After Japan invaded the Chinese mainland in the summer of 1937, Roosevelt responded with his proposal to “quarantine the aggressors” in order to end “the present reign of terror and international lawlessness”—proposing “positive endeavors to preserve peace,” although he did not specify precisely how the “contagion of war” would be stopped. Addressing an audience in Chicago, the capital of midwestern isolationism, Roosevelt did not refer to the aggressors by name. But his audience recognized that he referred not only to events in Shanghai but also to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and the involvement of Germany and the Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War.¹⁹

Despite Roosevelt’s caution the speech backfired, alarming the advocates of neutrality. Senator Hiram Johnson, who had campaigned for FDR against the orders of his own party in 1932 and gone on to support many of the early initiatives of the New Deal but had turned decisively against him in the court-packing episode, telegraphed presidential advisor Raymond Moley with a blunt assessment: “Levying sanctions means their enforcement ... at once then you have war.”²⁰ A firestorm of criticism fell upon Roosevelt. The implications of his speech made even some of his supporters quail. Brownie Dressler of New York City, an admitted “admirer,” opened her letter to the president with this: “Shades of Woodrow Wilson! The poor fellow must have stirred in his grave in efforts to warn you not to make the same mistake he did. *He* wanted to ‘make the world safe for Democracy’—*you* want to make the world safe for ‘civilization.’ Heaven preserve us from our heroes!” Dressler felt the United States should first attend to its own problems (“numerous enough, you know”). “I’m sorry,” she wrote, “for the first time since your election, that you are at the head of the government of this

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