

Background information

America started the Second World War as a neutral power however, they always sold weapons to the Allied powers (Britain and France), and entered the war in 1941 after Japan bombed Pearl Harbour and Hitler declared war on the United States. The war galvanised the American economy. It took the progress of the New Deal and made it sustainable and real.

Tasks

1. Read the background information. Highlight or annotate the key terms and dates in this information.
2. Read the text below. Define the following key-terms:
 - cash and carry
 - Lend-Lease
 - neutrality
 - FEPC
 - quarantine speech
 - WP
3. Using the information from the text, complete the timeline on p.3.
 - Remember to add detail to the focuses on African Americans and women.
 - Challenge: don't just describe the events - explain why these helped America.
4. Which of the following groups achieved more in the period 1935-1945:
 - women
 - African Americans?

Explain your answer with reference to both bullet points. (12 marks)

World War Two and the American economy

America started selling weapons to Britain and France in 1939; however, it was not a straight road to involvement. American had a previous policy of isolationism, and in 1935 passed the Neutrality Act - this banned America from getting involved in any conflicts, or selling weapons to any countries at war. Then, Roosevelt made a speech in 1937, arguing that all countries who valued peace should stand up together against aggressive dictators (largely, Hitler, Mussolini, and the leader of Japan). As a result of this, when the Second World War broke out in 1939, Roosevelt persuaded the government to change the Neutrality Act and started selling weapons to the Allied Powers. These weapons were some of the best in the world, and the Allied powers ordered enough to get American powers thriving again.

These sales happened in several ways - in 1939 America started with the 'cash and carry' plan. This was a straight up purchase of weapons, boats, and aeroplanes - it created significant jobs in the US, just in time as unemployment had started rising again. This was scaled up when Germany defeated France in 1940 and when Britain was struggling America gave them 50 warships for free.

Did World War Two save the American economy?

In 1941, Roosevelt stepped up the programme and launched 'Lend-Lease'. This involved lending Britain over \$7 billion (\$7,000 million) in weapons and then the same to Russia when Germany betrayed them in June of 1941. It was commonly accepted that America would not ask for the weapons back - but the 'lending' side of the deal gave America the excuse they needed to remain out of the war officially.

Then, on the 7 December 1941, Japan bombed an American naval base in Hawaii - Pearl Harbour. This changed everything and America was dragged into the war.

America further stepped up their military-industrial investment. Roosevelt set a target of making 50,000 planes in a year. This was extremely ambitious and more than any country had ever made before. The 'War Production Board' (WPB) rallied factories into producing war goods (rather than their previous white goods specialisations - ribbon companies made parachutes and typewriter factories made machine guns. By the end of the next year America had produced 86,000 planes. The army also bought large amounts of food for their soldiers in training and to send to those serving abroad.

These new industrial targets employed thousands of people - by 1941, four million Americans had been newly employed, specifically by new war factories. Millions more joined the army itself and from nearly ten million unemployed at the start of the war in 1939 this fell to 670,000 by 1944.

As men joined the army, significant gaps were left in the workforce. As a result, women were able to break out of 'traditional' roles such as nursing and teaching and go to work in the factories. From 1940 to 1945, women went from just over 10 million working in factories to nearly 20 million, and more generally women made up a third of the US workforce. This is best shown by women working in shipbuilding - in 1939 there were only 36, by 1942 there were over 200,000. There were also 350,000 women who joined the women's part of the military (these were still separate to the men). However, it is important to note that these advantages were temporary - after the war, men largely took their jobs back and women's contributions were often overlooked. Real advances in women's rights did not come until the 1960s and 1970s.

African Americans were another group who were affected by the war. Black African Americans were the main workers in the weapons factories and their working conditions were extremely poor. A significant rights activist planned a march on Washington to protest this, and a strike to go with it. The government could not afford the strike, especially in the middle of a war, so they quickly compromised. Roosevelt set up the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), which was intended to ensure that employment was fair and equal for all workers in America - especially those working in government-maintained areas. The FEPC found significant discrimination and was able to reward government contracts to those groups who had the fairest employment practices.

Furthermore, around one million African Americans fought in the war. Whilst at the start of the war, black soldiers were not allowed to fly planes and could only work as servers in the navy, by the end of the war these black soldiers were able to prove themselves through their actions. Within the armed forces, prejudice broke down faster than in society and then when black soldiers were seen defending their country, social attitudes began to change (slowly) too. The air force allowed black soldiers to become pilots. However, despite these advances, segregation remained strong, and African American staff and soldiers were kept in 'coloured' parts of the forces.

America and the Second World War



How did the Second World War affect African Americans?	How did the Second World War affect women?