

1 Weapons of Mass Disorder

Impediments to Mobilization



If, as historian Richard Tedlow asserts, “business conflict with the New Deal [was] a central theme of the 1930s,”¹ such friction did not automatically vanish when the United States officially began preparing for democracy’s defense in 1941. Since reorganizing for war demanded large and swift measures, it naturally involved an expansion of what many business leaders perceived as an already too bloated federal regulatory bureaucracy. Executive branch powers needed control over production, allocation of materials, the financing of new factories, the rationing of food and resources, labor policies, and price setting.² R. Elberton Smith, historian of the U.S. Army’s economic mobilization, relates that many in business and industry were reluctant to convert their factories in preparation for democracy’s defense. Mobilization was hampered by a long-standing suspicion of the New Deal’s economic and social recovery agenda and a belief “that the Roosevelt administration was bent on ‘socializing’ the nation’s economy and that it would use the defense program to further this objective.”³ During the 1930s, Roosevelt’s recovery and reforming impulse had already assumed too radical a role in the affairs of free enterprise, according to business leaders, by attempting to implement “production quotas, fair prices, marketing codes, and fair labor practices.”⁴ Organizing “state capitalism” through the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the New Deal had sought to halt “deflation and declining profits”

by consolidating “American industry into a cooperative [rather than a competitive] commonwealth.”⁵ Old quarrels and mistrust between big business and the New Deal had to be faced if the United States was going to successfully mobilize for defense—and after Pearl Harbor, prepare for total war.

Before manufacturers of sewing machines or automobiles could begin making “shells and pistols and tanks,” private industry had to relinquish being 100 percent private, and laissez-faire capitalism had to be content with daily dosages of invasive state “regimentation” and a veritable “nationalizing of industry.”⁶ Financial underwriting of new munitions plants would make the government an industrial proprietor, curtailing managerial and corporate authority even further. Such a possible limitation *could* make business subservient to its military clientele and the state.⁷ And what about profits? How much would an expanded federal presence restrict capitalists’ share of wartime wealth? Any hint at a civilian- or federally led “program of national economic planning” that could interfere now or in a postwar future with corporate autonomy stirred antagonisms that caused mobilization to struggle in the face of bureaucratic inertia.⁸

But lack of trust in government planning was not the only impediment to industrial preparedness. Prior to Pearl Harbor, leaders of several large-scale operations exhibited resistance to mobilizing their factories for military output because, quite simply, new growth in the civilian consumer market seemed a safer route out of the current economic slump.⁹ A paradoxical upsurge in production to supply Britain and France’s fight with the Nazis had increased employment in some sectors of the country. Employed workers embarked on shopping sprees, creating a refreshing demand for goods, and manufacturers would rather oblige that demand than retool for defense.¹⁰ What guarantees did a company have that it wouldn’t lose its shirt if it hastily converted to defense production? Fearing risks of heavy debts and empty factories, some business leaders dragged their feet. Businessmen required not only reassurances but also incentives to convert.¹¹

If American businessmen needed a financial carrot to coax them willingly (and successfully) into mobilization, it would help if they were led by their own kind. Roosevelt turned to corporate executives’ knowledge of the country’s industrial and material resources. Such leaders, who were known as “dollar-a-year men,” temporarily left their corporations and came to Washington to staff the various mobilization agencies.¹² Roosevelt’s National Defense Advisory Commission (NDAC), for example, was run by William Knudsen, president of General Motors, Edward Stettinius of U.S. Steel, and Ralph Budd of Burlington Railroad.¹³ Corporate management’s distrust of liberal, New Deal Washington, coupled with the liberals’ animosity toward big business, was bound to exacerbate tensions and hamper the efficiency of mobilization, not to mention the actual orchestration of the war. In some ways, Roosevelt’s need for the logic and expertise of these dollar-a-year men worked against his administration’s authority during the war. Final mobilization decisions, as well as reconversion plans, eventually evolved from the interests of corporate leaders rather than Roosevelt.¹⁴

Wartime business projections about the outcome of a more powerful New Deal shaped the administrative decisions made by the dollar-a-year men and their

counterparts among the armed forces' top brass. Historian Brian Waddell states that given a choice between the New Deal or military control over industrial mobilization, "corporate advisors who dominated the top posts of the civilian and military agencies preferred military stewardship of mobilization because the military plan called for extensive reliance on the *private* capacities of corporate America."¹⁵ The War Department had been interacting with major U.S. corporations, business organizations, and corporate executives throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as if anticipating the current political arguments that threatened a successful mobilization.¹⁶ This affinity ran contrary to the New Deal's emphasis on civilian control and an egalitarian contracting system that would have spread wartime production opportunities among several firms, especially small operations. To business leaders, the New Deal's inclusiveness smelled like reform, while the military's procurement practices seemed a safer, more businesslike bet.

The military was apt to give preference to the larger firms with which its officers had established personal ties before the war. This favoritism, though logical to the military and its business contacts, created conflicts throughout the war and, despite military leaders' *prewar* foresight, added to mobilization difficulties. Army and navy procurement officials, many of whom were fresh recruits from corporate America, also tended to award contracts to firms with which they had conducted business or had been intimately connected prior to the war. Other problems emerged when military procurement officials bypassed the authority of Donald Nelson (chairman of the War Production Board), as they usually did, by granting contracts "with little regard for available facilities and the supply of labor and materials, resulting in snarls of priorities, raw materials, and production."¹⁷ Despite the pains it took to plan during the 1920s and 1930s, and despite drawing procurement leaders from corporate America, the military's implementation of its defense needs lacked cohesion. Paul Koistinen, who provides a detailed study of military planning during the interwar years, cites the military's "major flaw" as its "internal operations," rather than its prewar relations with civilian industry and business leaders.¹⁸

The Roosevelt administration's "internal operations" also diminished the effectiveness of mobilization plans. As shown by accounts of wartime Washington insiders, such as Donald Nelson and Bruce Catton, it seems that frustration abounded everywhere.¹⁹ But irritation was compounded by the limited authority granted to the various mobilization agencies. Roosevelt's defense and wartime offices were accorded mainly advisory roles. However, they were not endowed with sufficient power to execute a swift and efficient mobilization.²⁰ Roosevelt conducted mobilization with the same experimental zeal behind his administration of the 1930s, tending to scrap existing bureaucratic agencies and establish new ones rather than expand authority or restructure what was already in place. Agency overlap and contradictions (well-established flaws of Roosevelt's 1930s administration) were repeated again throughout the war years.²¹

Manufacturing realities also gravely affected mobilization. Logistical preparations on the factory floor took more grinding effort, sweat, and time than the miraculous assembly-line changeovers described in mobilization narratives.

Conversion did not proceed smoothly even when it was pursued cooperatively, as the *Merlin's* manufacture illustrates. The contract to mass-produce the British plane engine, the *Merlin*, had been granted to the Packard automobile company of Detroit, Michigan. But before production could begin, specifications in the *Merlin's* drawings had to be converted from the metric system to U.S. inches. Measurements on twenty thousand drawings had to be recalculated painstakingly—without the aid of an electronic calculator or high-speed computer.²² The job of mobilization was hardly instantaneous. Donald Nelson puts the dilemma in perspective: “The chief handicap to [mobilization] was possibly the airy belief that any automobile plant or tractor factory could close up shop on Friday and, presto chango! start making the world’s best tanks [for instance] on Monday morning.”²³ To make matters worse, modeling current mobilization plans on World War I experience was of no help. Nelson observes that America was basically starting the new war from scratch. New battle techniques for the new world war made weapons and equipment just coming off the assembly lines obsolete before they could reach the soldiers.²⁴ This dilemma was intensified because the U.S. military and its allies contributed to a variety of entanglements and production line inefficiencies, as Nelson further laments:

The buyer (our Armed Services and the British and French purchasing commissions) knew nothing about mass production or how to adapt manufacture of war equipment to mass production. The seller (American industry) knew all about mass production, but nothing about war or the instruments of war. There should have been a meeting of minds at this point to dovetail the skills and data of the buyer with those of the seller, but unhappily, there wasn't.²⁵

Some mobilization hurdles involved manpower. Hiring and training provided their own set of predicaments, but work stoppages by laborers created others. Because conversion entailed construction of new plants or the expansion of existing ones, workers—like their managers—wanted a share of the wartime profits. Organizing strikes on defense production lines, they demanded better pay and improved conditions.²⁶ Strikes also arose at times from white workers' opposition to the hiring of African Americans.²⁷ As demands on industry increased, and as more young men were drafted into service, manufacturers were compelled to hire all available manpower, which meant engaging blacks (and women) in jobs traditionally accorded to white males.²⁸

Despite the intense need to fully utilize the country's manpower resources, some employers were reluctant to hire blacks outside their customary occupational slots as servants, janitors, and other low-skilled or unskilled laborers.²⁹ Giving them the same pay as whites was, to many laborers and managers, simply out of the question. Some employers actually argued that the racial status quo was justified because it would keep white workers content and thus ensure that the engines of war moved forward.³⁰ Long-standing prejudice worked against efficient mobilization and severely hampered American industry's ability to effectively produce.

As the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) labor union's Committee on Racial Discrimination explained, "discrimination against Negroes and other minorities is not only a continuing blot on American democracy, but even more seriously a drag on the total mobilization of all our people needed to win the war against Axis slavery."³¹ Although reformers voiced the obvious—that banning blacks from war industry jobs was a "definite help to [the] Axis"—the same racial biases dominated the armed forces.³² In a war that was being waged to save democratic freedoms from totalitarian despots, American citizens were being denied the opportunity to participate in wartime production and service. Congressman John M. Coffee (D-WA) summed up the paradox in 1942: "Future historians may well ascribe partial blame for British and American defeats and blunders, as at Pearl Harbor, to intellectual deficiencies of our admirals and generals and to their race prejudice. . . . We denounce the racial bigotry of nazism, but permit our industrialists, officers, and officials to discriminate against 13,000,000 loyal colored Americans."³³

The Roosevelt administration recognized the discrepancy but did little to alter the situation until pressed against the wall—not only by the demands of the war but also by African American activists.³⁴ Roosevelt finally issued an anti-bias order for any employer with a defense contract and established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate allegations of discrimination. Like many other New Deal wartime agencies with a reforming edge, the FEPC was understaffed and had little power to implement policies and changes. Nonetheless, it at least showed that the administration recognized how racial prejudice was incompatible with full production to total war.³⁵ The *Pittsburgh Courier* astutely raised this issue in an editorial cartoon titled "If that boy dies, it may be your fault!" In the cartoon, a Washington official labeled FEPC points an accusatory finger at a manager labeled "biased employers and unions," while below him sits "the boy" in jeopardy—a white soldier hidden in the tall grasses of an Asian jungle behind a loaded machine gun.³⁶

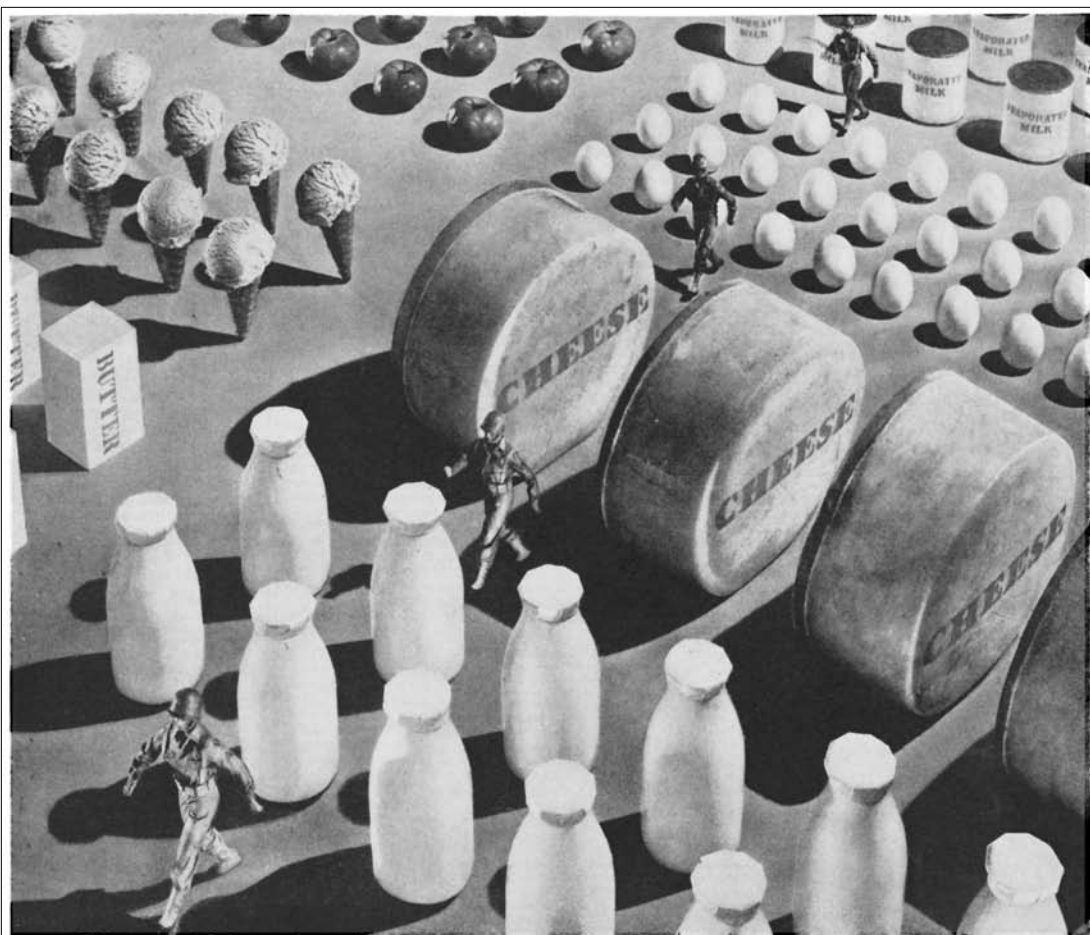
Marjorie McKenzie, in her *Pittsburgh Courier* column "Pursuit of Democracy," spelled out yet another "fiction of equality."³⁷ Speaking out against the internment of Japanese Americans in camps for the duration of the war, she said: "We who are so sensitive to an impairment of our own rights have been singularly dispassionate about the war-time fate of Japanese-Americans."³⁸ Taking a different and surprising view, an earlier article in the *People's Voice* suggested that "Barring Japs in California May Be [a] Boon" for African American workers. With Japanese aliens and naturalized or American-born Japanese being restricted from "vital sections in all the Western states, discrimination of a race more hated than blacks (at least for the duration) may become a land of opportunity for the 90,000 Negroes already living there."³⁹

If industrialists balked at the demands of mobilization and the perceived infringements on their free enterprise rights, it is easy to imagine how the average consumer reacted, whether white or black.⁴⁰ Mobilization required that almost all of the raw materials used in the peacetime manufacture of civilian consumer goods would be channeled into war production for military use, leaving the public in a lurch. Donald Nelson explained that in 1940, the United States expected to have

on hand a greater pool of resources than it actually had. “Raw materials were not quite as encouraging as we had been led to believe. . . . In most of the major raw materials necessary for fighting a modern war we were better supplied than any other nation. . . . [But] there were disquieting lacks. . . . Rubber, of course, led the list. . . . We needed more . . . aluminum, asbestos, cork, graphite, hides, iodine, kapok, optical glass, toluol, vanadium, wool.”⁴¹

From minutia to major durables, consumers were compelled to do without or make creative substitutions.⁴² The *Journal of Home Economics* outlined the bad news of mobilization to housewives and domestic engineers. It seemed the only hope was that the war would not threaten a hygienic appearance: “Your next loaf of bread may be delivered in waxed paper instead of Cellophane. . . . The shortage of metal will be most apparent in the kitchen. Metal table tops, drainboards, cabinets [*sic*], and vegetable bins will soon be unattainable. . . . New laundry equipment will not be produced. . . . Floor waxes and polishes will be out of production, but there will be no decline in the output of other cleaning and polishing supplies.”⁴³ A 1943 ad by the National Dairy Products Corporation is a succinct reminder that mobilization meant accounting for even the most seemingly mundane resources (fig. 1.1). Titled “This army was raised to ATTACK!” the ad shows a parade of foods, led by miniature drill sergeants, marching off to the battlefield. Not only were human resources disciplined and drafted for the war effort—but so were apples, eggs, milk, butter, ice cream, and cheese.

Indeed, purchases of basics like dairy products were regulated through the rationing system. Cigarettes were also a scarce commodity, as were meat, sugar, tires, home heating oil, and gasoline—all of which were strictly rationed according to federal guidelines. Changes in eating habits and lifestyle forced by shortages were accompanied by constricted choices and rationing in apparel and accessories. New shoe purchases were regulated through coupon rationing. The use of extra cloth for pleats, gussets, or yoked collars in coats was forbidden; trouser cuffs and patch pockets were outlawed; and no vest could accompany a double-breasted suit. Skirts were not to be fashioned too long or too full. Bone or piano wire had to be used as a substitute for rubber in girdles. Color choices were limited as certain dyes were deemed critical for military uniforms and equipment. Tinfoil, cellophane, elastic thread, metal buttons, zippers, and hook-and-eye sets vanished, too; bobby pins became extinct, though a woman could still do her hair with wooden toothpicks and string. Giving up domestic help and putting up with crowded trains, long lines, and reductions in medical services added to the consumer’s new burdens. Packaging also came under government control. Toothpaste tubes were treated almost like money; they had to be returned to the store in order to acquire a fresh tube.⁴⁴ Cooking fats from “frying bacon . . . table scraps, [and] meat trimmings” were also collected and turned in for rationing points and pennies: “Remember, you get 2 red points and 4c for every pound of used fat you turn in.”⁴⁵ Wartime regulations allowed government bureaucracy to intrude into consumers’ pantries, compelling Americans to “declare the number of cans and jars of rationed foods—in excess of a certain maximum per person—that they had on hand at home.”⁴⁶ These and other rationing measures were intended to give all Americans fair access to life’s necessities.



BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS

This army was raised to **ATTACK!**

Maybe you've never thought of food as an aggressive weapon of war — *but that's what it is today.*

Food fuels the workers who are making tanks, planes and ships to attack the Axis. Food reinforces the soldiers who launch those attacks. *And food will turn neutrals into friends, friends into fighters, as each new front opens up!*

What's more, service men eat 50% more than they did in civil life. Civilians eat more as they work harder for Victory. And that adds up to a huge order for the folks who raise, process, and distribute food — *folks*

whose war work is as vital as any welder's. Last year, America's farmers and food processors set new records for production. This year, the need is greater — and the difficulties under which they work are greater, too.

Every patriotic family will have to pitch in and help — by buying wisely and avoiding waste—by gardening and canning—by making the most of basic, balanced foods.

Food is life — food is hope — and America is trustee for much of the world's supply. That's a big responsibility. A share of it falls on us, as processors of nature's most nutritious food — milk — as well as other dairy

and food products. We're glad that our experience and organization equip us to make a real contribution.

Dedicated to the wider use and better understanding of dairy products as human food . . . as a base for the development of new products and materials . . . as a source of health and enduring progress on the farms and in the towns and cities of America.

**NATIONAL DAIRY
PRODUCTS CORPORATION**
AND AFFILIATED COMPANIES

Originators of the Sealtest System of Laboratory Protection

1.1. Advertisement for the National Dairy Products Corporation (and affiliated companies), *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1943, 39. Photograph courtesy of The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Although price controls were initiated to curb inflation, the cost of everyday goods steadily rose until inflation was finally stabilized in 1943.⁴⁷ Inconveniences, regulations, higher prices, and material deprivations were part of the sacrifices made by home front consumers who, for the most part, had not had it so great the previous decade and were looking forward to “the good life” thanks to promises of wartime employment. Wartime consumer limitations, collective cooperation, and the sacrifice of an individual’s immediate gratification seemed antithetical to the American Way. Such restrictions on purchasing and ownership were traditionally socialist. Wasn’t “consumer choice” a main tenet of American democracy? When they finally had money to spend, home front consumers were denied what seemed a natural American right: “to make and spend money without limit.”⁴⁸ Conservation and thrift—concepts that were anathema to a Machine Age consumer lifestyle predicated on planned obsolescence—were promoted as patriotic and necessary steps toward victory.

The necessities of total war, combined with engrained attitudes and practices, acted as major impediments to mobilization. But these handicaps to victory were avoided by commercial propagandists who authored mobilization narratives. Although retooling industry for war production would prove monumental in itself, a more cumbersome hurdle involved habituating American consumers to the business of war as battles against the Great Depression were still under way. All-out war following on the heels of a depressed economy called for an intensive ideological conversion. Precise, systematic persuasions were needed to boost American confidence in a lackluster economy and moribund industry and to shape public acceptance of global war in a climate of stern isolationism.⁴⁹ Winning such a large-scale war thus called for seducing the public mind—especially because the previous “war to end all wars” had not accomplished the job. Mobilization experts, from government bureaucrats to corporate leaders, advertisers, and PR specialists, tackled this challenge by shaping wartime public perception through symbol management.⁵⁰ They sought to cleanse public opinion of any doubt that American industry could swiftly expedite an efficient victory.

Given such a tangled dilemma, which symbols were key to mobilizing public morale and support for the war? How were such symbols conveyed and what arguments were used to counter the ideological remnants of the Great Depression? Oddly enough, the commonplace comforts and conveniences of modern civilization offered an expedient propagandistic solution. Mobilization narratives drew upon the iconic value ascribed to Machine Age civilization. Thus, mass-produced, labor-saving devices played an instrumental role in serving wartime propagandistic needs. “Rational” kitchens, electric toasters, refrigerators, irons, vacuum cleaners, automobiles, radios, and telephones (to name just a few new mechanical gadgets) had increased levels of mechanization in the average middle-class household after World War I.⁵¹ Brand-name processed foods and cleansers, ready-made clothes, and store-bought personal hygiene products, as well as motion picture entertainment, had added to the feel of a lifestyle heavily dependent on machines. Even for the working class before the war, Machine Age mass production had lowered prices on certain comforts and conveniences, putting the tools of mod-

ern civilization within the average person's reach. Clearly, as many advertisers had claimed during the 1920s and 1930s, the Machine Age had helped Americans of all classes take a great evolutionary leap forward.⁵² Ironically, those comforts and conveniences of the Machine Age, which consumers were asked to sacrifice for war, would provide the propaganda motifs for asserting the logic behind mobilization. The following chapter examines the historical contours of the Machine Age ethos and the role it, and the Depression, played in shaping mobilization messages.