**American Industry During World War II**

The American home front during World War II is essentially a lesson in basic economics: As demand for war material skyrocketed, supply congruously followed

suit—fueled by a workforce that had previously seen unemployment figures to the

tune of 24.9 percent just eight years earlier. In the words of President Franklin D.

Roosevelt: “Dr. New Deal was replaced by Dr. Win the War.”

The aircraft industry is prime example of this surge in national production: In May 1940, during the same week The Netherlands’ government surrendered to German forces and France was buckling under the threat of invasion, President Roosevelt went before Congress and requested an exponential increase in aircraft production. Just 18 months earlier Roosevelt had asked that 3,000 additional aircrafts be produced on the government’s dime. This time, he asked Congress to authorize funding for 50,000 new warplanes.

The numbers are staggering. In 1939, 2,141 aircrafts were built in the United States. Just five years later, the aircraft industry reached its production peak at 96,318 aircrafts in a single year, more than the USSR and Britain’s aircraft production combined. No amount of government-sponsored social programs could have instigated an economic surge of this magnitude. Yet the irony remained that, while businessmen like Joe Keller prospered with the advent of government war contacts, hundreds of thousands of young American men were perishing on the European and Pacific fronts. It was a dichotomy that was unconscionable and unavoidable, given the desperate need for materiel and the inevitable profits that materiel produced.

By the end of the war, the U.S. had produced 88,410 tanks, 257,390 artillery weapons, 2,679,840 machine guns, 2,382,311 military trucks and 324,750 warplanes. The United States Steel Corp. made 31.4 million kegs of nails, and enough steel fencing to stretch from New York City to San Francisco. Spending on military preparedness reached a stunning $75 million a day by December 1941, and, by 1944, war profits after taxes reached $10.8 billion.

Not only were factories asked to churn out materiel at this alarming rate—and it was considered the ultimate patriotic duty to do so—most also were switching from the products they’d previously produced and knew well (air conditioners, washer/dryers, etc.) to complex tank and aircraft parts.

The automobile industry, for example, produced roughly 3 million cars in 1941. In the years following Pearl Harbor, fewer than 400 new vehicles were manufactured as factories were retooled to produce tanks, aircrafts and military trucks. The demand was so high that pilots were known to sleep on cots outside the major plants, waiting to fly the planes away as they came off the production lines. There is, however, an important distinction between a family-run business like Joe Keller’s and mega-corporations like U.S. Steel and General Motors. Given their massive production capabilities, government contracts disproportionally favored these large corporations: Ten companies received 30 percent of the total $240 billion spent on defense contracts during the war.

**Curtailing War Profits**

The United States’ government was acutely aware of the massive demands it was making on American industry. As early as 1940 the government already had doled

out $10 billion in defense contracts. President Roosevelt, a staunch opponent of war

profiteering, was caught between the nation’s critical need for materiel and his aversion to the acquisition of extreme wealth in wartime. “The American people will not relish the idea of any American citizen growing rich and fat in an emergency of blood and slaughter and human suffering,” he said in 1938.

The initial tactic employed to simultaneously restrain war profits and garner much needed federal revenue was the Excess Profits Tax, which is levied on companies

flourishing during a war. Anything above a 10 percent return of invested capital

would be considered excess profit attributed to the war effort and therefore subject

to increased taxation (up to 90 percent in 1942). Though morally sound, it is ironic

that the tax seemed to reward inefficiency and discourage mass production at a

time when the country most needed efficiency and increased production.

Despite pressure from his government to compromise with big business, FDR was

still committed to his moral instinct that companies should not rake in cash while

soldiers gave their lives across the ocean. There had to be some way to legalize

profiteering, or at least ensure that no company was succeeding in spite of

inefficiency, mismanagement or internal corruption. If the government could not

directly control war profits, the least it could do was make certain that the

prospering companies were clean, honorable businesses that were just as venerable

as the soldiers to whom they supplied materiel.

**The Truman Committee**

The Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program

(nicknamed The Truman Committee in honor of its no-nonsense chairman, Harry S.

Truman) is a study in governmental efficiency and productivity. Its aim was not so

much to sniff out war profiteers as it was to uncover incompetence, waste and

corruption in war-contracted businesses. Truman believed the war effort was

essentially being strangled by America’s inability to produce materiel on a large

scale, that the Axis powers would only be defeated by an overwhelming arsenal of

ships in the water, tanks on the ground and planes in the air.

In 1941, Truman and his team embarked on a legendary road trip, traveling more

than 10,000 miles to visit military bases, plants, small-town factories and

corporation headquarters, with the aim of stamping out bad business and perfecting

the American war machine. Between the years of 1941 and 1948, the Truman

Committee called almost 1,800 witnesses to hundreds of hearings and issued more

than 50 reports. The committee’s findings indicted hundreds of companies and undoubtedly saved the lives of thousands of soldiers who might have otherwise

perished from defective materiel—as well as millions of taxpayer dollars.

The committee was hailed as a grand success and its chairman universally praised

for his determination and meticulous management skills. The committee catapulted

Truman, then a Missouri senator (D), to political stardom and primed him for his

future role as president.

**Miller’s Inspiration for *All My Sons***

“Everybody knew a lot of illicit fortunes were being made,

a lot of junk was being sold to the armed services, we all

knew that. All the rules were being violated every day,

but you didn’t want to mention it.” *— Arthur Miller*

In 1944, Arthur Miller’s then mother-in-law offhandedly mentioned an article she

had read in an Ohio newspaper about a war profiteer whose daughter had turned

him into federal officials for selling faulty machinery to the Army before running

away from home. “By the time she had finished the tale, I had transformed the

daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind,”

Miller wrote in the 1957 introduction to his latest play collection.

As the legend goes, a few minutes later his mother-in-law asked her playwright sonin-

law where he usually got the ideas for his stories. “I just pick them up,” he

replied, “here and there.” In an interview with BBC-TV a half-century later, Miller

said the young woman in the story became a man simply because “I didn’t know

much about girls then.”

While the specific case to which Miller’s mother-in-law was referring is in question,

there were numerous companies indicted by the Truman Committee that could have

sparked the story. The most highly publicized was the indictment of Wright

Aeronautical Corp. in Lockland, Ohio, a subsidiary of the giant Curtiss-Wright

Corp. In 1943, the plant, which produced airplane engines, was accused of

manufacturing leaky, defective engines, falsifying inspections and destroying

records to cover up its wrongdoing**.** Until the scandal, Curtiss-Wright had been

among the most prosperous companies of the wartime era, boasting the second

highest number of government war contracts in the country. Accused of overstating

the corruption at the Lockland plant, Truman responded, “The facts are that they

were turning out phony engines and I have no doubt a lot of kids in training planes

have been killed as a result.”

**Other Scandals**

On Jan. 17, 1943—more than a year after Pearl Harbor—the S.S. Schenectady

snapped in two and sank off the West Coast, only a few hours after it had been

delivered to the Maritime Commission. The American Bureau of Shipping reported

the sinking was due to the steel plate on the ship, which was “brittle” and “more

like cast iron than steel.” The Truman Committee took over the case and at a

hearing on March 23, 1943, the truth came out: The defective steel had been

supplied by the Carnegie-Illinois Corp., a subsidiary of U.S. Steel, whose officials

had willfully and consciously delivered faulty material to the Navy, Maritime

Commission and Lend-Lease Administration and had falsified the steel test records

to cover their tracks.

Testimony before the committee showed that the faking of tests had covered at least

28,000 tons of substandard plate; that minor officials and employees who had

complained to their superiors about the faking of tests had had their “ears pinned

back”; that high corporation officials “instead of cooperating (with the Truman

Committee) ... attempted to delay and obstruct the investigation.” U.S. Steel

officials naturally “deplored” the situation, and tried to put the blame on “a few

individuals” with good intentions who had grown “lax.” This alibi, however, was

decisively rejected by a federal grand jury in Pittsburgh in May, which refused to

indict four individual employees offered as scapegoats and indicted the Carnegie-

Illinois Corp. itself.

Another company nabbed by the committee was Anaconda Wire and Cable Co.,

whose Marion, Ind., plant (financed by the government) was indicted Dec. 21, 1942,

for conspiring to sell the government defective communication and other combat

wire, although its officials “well knew at all times” that use of such wire would

“endanger the lives of men in the military service of the USA.”

**Survivor’s Guilt**

To a certain degree, Chris Keller suffers from what would later be diagnosed as

“Survivor’s Guilt,” a psychological term originally coined in the 1960s to describe

survivors of the Holocaust who felt they weren’t entitled to happiness or wealth

after the trauma of the concentration camps. The arbitrary nature of war—the

sheer incomprehensibility of why certain people die and others live—provides an

unstable entry point back into society of most survivors.

In his introduction to *All My Sons*, British scholar Christopher Bigsby writes,

“Chris feels guilty about his new happiness. In the war he led his men to their

death. He is a survivor who feels the guilt of the survivor, a theme that Miller would

return to in *After the Fall* (1964). Beyond that, he can see no connection between the

sacrifices of war and the way of life it was supposedly fought to preserve.”

Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who studied psychological disorders in WWII

veterans, described Survivor’s Guilt this way: “It is the soldier-survivor sense of

having betrayed his buddies by letting them die while he stayed alive—at the same

time feeling relieved and even joyous that it was *he* who survived … his pleasure in

surviving becoming a further source of guilt. Essentially, the survivor is plagued by

the question: how I can be thankful and guilty at the same time?” This syndrome is

only accentuated in Chris’s case, as it was his brother who died in addition to his

entire company. When we meet Chris at the beginning of Act I, he is making his

first move since the war toward owning his much-tainted happiness—by asking

Annie to visit.

**Survivor’s Guild in Literature and History**

In Kurt Vonnegut’s 1987 novel *Bluebeard*, the protagonist Rabo Karabekian’s father

has survivor syndrome after witnessing the Armenian genocide. Ironically, he only

witnessed a small part of the event; simply hiding in an outhouse and then coming

back to a deserted village after the massacre.

Waylon Jennings, a guitarist for Buddy Holly’s band, had a seat on the plane

chartered to take Holly and some of the performers to their next concert. But he

gave up his seat to the sick J. P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson. The plane crashed

Feb. 3, 1959, killing Richardson, Holly, Richie Valens and the pilot, Roger Peterson.

When Holly found out Jennings wasn’t going with him, he joked, “Well, I hope your

old bus freezes up.” Jennings’ response was, “Well, I hope your plane crashes.” His

banter with Holly would haunt Jennings for years.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Rick Rescorla, chief security administrator of Morgan Stanley at

the World Trade Center, is said to have acted upon survivor’s guilt as a result of

traumatic experiences during the Vietnam War. He saved most of Morgan Stanley’s

2,700 employees and countless others before heading back into Tower 2 of the WTC

shortly before it collapsed.