RSAJournal
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/12250
rsa.aisna.net

World War II and US Global Power

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Keywords

United States, Globalism, Franklin Roosevelt, Pacific, Henry R. Luce

World War II was the making of American hegemony. The United States became a global great power in 1898, with its victory over Spain in the Caribbean and the Philippines, and it was clearly the world's preeminent power by 1919, when Woodrow Wilson set about reordering the international system in an American image; only internal opposition from the US Senate was able to stop Wilson's momentum. The United States had also been the major economic player long before World War II: its explosive growth made it the world's preeminent industrial nation by 1900 (if not before), and Wall Street supplanted the City of London as the world's key financial hub in 1916-17. But World War II created the conditions for the United States to become not just a genuinely global superpower, but also the most powerful state the world had not seen in a long time, certainly not since the peak of British imperial power in the late nineteenth century and perhaps not even since the days of the Roman Empire.

World War II had such a transformative effect on American power not simply because the United States led the Allies to victory, although victory was of course a necessary condition for hegemony. It was because, alone among the major contestants of the war, the United States emerged in a far stronger position in virtually every possible way.

The war (and not the New Deal) pulled the United States out of the Great Depression, and made the country once again very wealthy. Even before the US entered the war in 1941, it was acting as the "arsenal of democracy," supplying the British, Chinese, and Soviet militaries with weapons, foodstuffs, and other war materiel to keep their war moving forward. Once World War II became an attritional war on a global scale – as it was in China since the summer of 1938, in the Pacific since late 1942, and in Europe since the winter of 1943 – it was only a matter of time before America's preeminence in resources and economic output tipped the overall balance in the Allies' favor. This also led to the revival of the US economy.

Not coincidentally, the United States managed to remain apart from the fighting even as it fought the war. Until World War II, Americans benefitted from a geopolitical condition scholars have termed "free security." Security meant almost total freedom from foreign attack or invasion, and it was free in two senses: it was presumed, since Americans did not have to work hard to attain it, and it was remarkably cheap, indeed virtually free, in that the US military remained small except in exceptional times of war. During World War II, Americans, including historians and international relations specialists, assumed that free security was a relic of the past. The bombing of Pearl Harbor had revealed that it was an anachronism from a bygone age. But the strange thing was, a kind of free security endured, providing space for all sorts of other developments.

By 1945, Germany, Japan, and Italy lay in ruins, but even America's major wartime partners – Britain, France, China, and the Soviet Union – were physically devastated, their industries largely incapacitated, their treasuries bankrupt, their budgets in serious deficit, and their workforces severely depleted since they had either been mobilized to fight the war or rendered incapacitated as a result of it. The situation in America was very different. This was because, uniquely, the contiguous United States was never a battlefront in the war, which meant that, again uniquely,

there were virtually no American civilian deaths. Worldwide, the frequency of ground invasion and aerial bombing in World War II meant that anywhere from 70 to 80 percent of the sixty million fatalities were civilians, but the contiguous United States was never invaded and only lightly, sporadically bombed. The most serious incident occurred when an incendiary balloon launched from Japan drifted across the Pacific and detonated in Oregon in 1945, killing six people at a church picnic – tragic, certainly, but minor compared to the kind of warfare every other major belligerent experienced. The wartime boom saw record-breaking levels of Depression-era unemployment drop to virtually zero. Just as importantly, the sophisticated technological innovations catalyzed by the exigencies of war, and the skilled workers and military personnel needed to apply them in the post war world, created a dynamic, agile economy that was perfectly suited to being adapted into a thriving peacetime economy. The consumer capitalism that defined American prosperity in the Cold War and beyond, and made the United States attractive to people around the world, was a result not only of its victory in World War II, but its unique geopolitical position in a world torn apart by war.

The American globalism that endures today – even Donald Trump's supposedly "isolationist," America First administration remains engaged around the world – was created by World War II. The war began as a regional Asian conflict in July 1937, when Japan attacked the walled fortress of Wanping that guarded the southwestern approach to Beijing. The European theatre then erupted with the joint German and Soviet invasions of Poland in September 1939. It then only became a *world* war in December 1941, when Japan attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and Germany declared war on the United States, thus uniting the two hitherto regional theatres of war into one gigantic, interrelated, global conflict. Because the Axis offensives made the war a global conflict, the defeat of the Axis countries had the potential to make the Allied victors truly global powers, an opportunity which only the United States was uniquely capable of seizing.

What made the United States a truly global power was that it was dominant in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. But it was America's Pacific power that was novel, and it was mastery of the vast Pacific that made the United States truly hegemonic. The war started at Wanping, went global

at Pearl Harbor, and came to an end at Nagasaki. President Franklin D. Roosevelt grasped the importance of Asia and the Pacific to the future of American power. In 1940, he and US military officials had decided on a Europe-first strategy, and they reiterated that commitment to Europe after the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor in 1941. But FDR himself undid it in November 1942 when, facing mounting losses in the Solomon Islands campaign in the southern Pacific, he ordered the joint chiefs of staff to give equal weight to both theatres of war. This meant that the United States and Britain were the only nations fighting a genuinely world war – tellingly, none of the Axis powers did – but the declining British were eclipsed by the Americans in both regions, and by the end of the war Great Britain was no longer in command of even its own destiny.

A United States that was paramount worldwide was already on the cards before the United States joined the war. In February 1941, the publishing baron Henry R. Luce urged his fellow Americans to enter the war not simply to destroy German Nazism and Japanese imperialism, but to create "the American Century." The war, Luce saw, offered Americans an opportunity to recreate world order in their own image: liberal, capitalist, prosperous, open. An American Century emerging from the ruins of war would ensure an enduring international peace.

Luce's vision was uncannily accurate, but only partially so. The other power to emerge stronger from the war was the Soviet Union, despite the utter devastation it had suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany. Europe was divided, and would remain so until 1989. The Chinese Revolution in 1949 meant that the Asian-American Century would also only be partial, with Korea, Vietnam, and China itself partitioned along with Germany and Berlin. And while Vietnam and Germany were eventually reunited, Korea and China remain divided to this day. Luce's vision of a peaceful, consumerist American Century was partial in another sense too: the Cold War may have avoided another great-power war, but it was hardly peaceful, and prosperity only extended into certain corners of the globe. More recently, the People's Republic of China has posed a challenge to American global power in ways the Soviet Union couldn't even imagine.

The main question facing Americans and the world today, then, is whether the effects of World War II are starting to wear off. If they are, could another global conflict be its final undoing – or its renewal?

Author's bionote

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