

The Business of Fighting

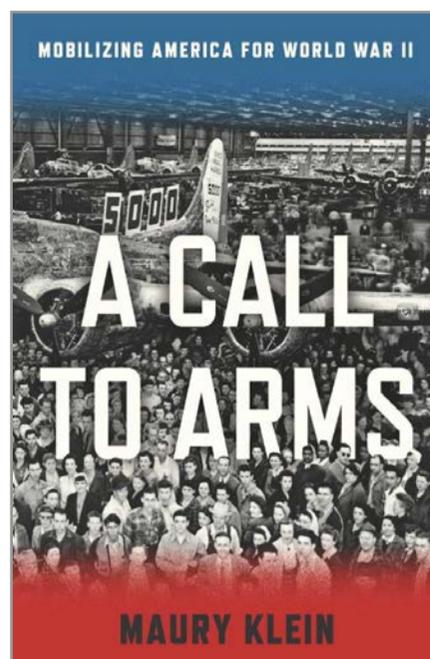
A CALL TO ARMS:

MOBILIZING AMERICA FOR WORLD WAR II

REVIEWED BY MARK REUTTER

TODAY, WHEN THE MILITARY CONSUMES nearly 60 percent of Washington's discretionary spending, it's hard to imagine that, less than a century ago, Portugal and 16 other nations fielded bigger armed forces than that of the United States. On the brink of World War II, American infantrymen were still carrying the same Springfield rifles that had been standard issue in the first great war. While the fact that America was wretchedly unprepared for World War II is embedded in nearly every account of the global conflict that started with Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, the subsequent mobilization of the American "home front" in support of the war effort has become the stuff of legend.

Having manufactured a mere 1,700 warplanes before 1939, American factories turned out 325,000 more by 1945, as well as 88,000 tanks and 2.5 million



By Maury Klein
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machine guns. While the United States didn't always produce the best equipment (German Panther tanks made mincemeat of American Shermans), it did produce the *most* weaponry, which ultimately turned the tide against Hitler and imperial Japan. This immense undertaking has been the subject of many books, most recently Arthur Herman's *Freedom's Forge* (2012) and Paul Kennedy's *Engineers of Victory*, published earlier this year. In *A Call to Arms*, Maury Klein, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Rhode Island, offers his own sweeping saga of how bureaucrats and businessmen converted a Depression-ravaged economy into what President Franklin D. Roosevelt would call "an arsenal of democracy."



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During World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "arsenal of democracy" churned out more weapons than any other nation. In 1942, workers at a Firestone Tire and Rubber plant in Akron, Ohio, assembled anti-aircraft guns.

America's initial reluctance to enter the war was compounded by the public perception that businessmen were pushing the country into the conflict to make a profit. After World War I, many munitions factories had been shuttered when they lost their government contracts and

Many Americans feared that businessmen were pushing the country into the conflict to make a profit.

in the face of public antiwar sentiment. "In their bitterness," Klein writes, "many people found a convenient scapegoat in the war industries and vowed never to repeat that mistake." But of course, eventually the nation's attitude changed. "To many a U.S. citizen," reported *Time*, "the screaming headlines of the German smash through Belgium and down into France came like an unremitting, seven-day Orson Welles broadcast of an invasion from Mars."

Foremost on Klein's radar screen is President Roosevelt. Klein credits FDR for his early attempts to awaken an

isolationist country to the threat posed by Hitler and for pushing mobilization forward through gifted oratory and “blank-check” spending. Others who stride across the book’s stage include Henry Kaiser, builder of the indispensable “ugly duckling” Liberty ships that ferried supplies to America’s far-flung troops and allies abroad, “rubber czar” William Jeffers, the squabbling New Dealers Harry Hopkins and Harold Ickes, the courtly banker Bernard Baruch, the waffling War Production Board chief Donald Nelson, and the thundering isolationist and United Mine Workers boss John L. Lewis.

Klein interweaves descriptions of his cast of characters with accounts of the challenges the American war machine came up against. Initially, Japan and Germany made headway toward hobbling American shipping and cutting off the country’s sources of important raw materials. (Silk, for example, essential to the manufacture of parachutes and bags for the powder charges in large guns—until the development of nylon—had been sourced primarily from Japan.) Conflicts flared in Washington over procurement policies, as civilian authorities demanded that the top officers in the Army and Navy speedily specify what equipment they needed, and military

leaders protested that they couldn’t know with certainty “when they did not know where or against whom they might have to fight.” Rationing had to be imposed on the public.

Klein is an agile writer and a well-respected business historian. Among his previous books are a provocative reinterpretation of Jay Gould as a corporate builder rather than stock-kiting speculator, a three-volume history of the Union Pacific Railroad, and a deft biography of the Union Pacific’s strong-willed owner, Edward H. Harriman. In *A Call to Arms*, however, he loses his way. After a breezy opening, the book sags under a morass of details, and is further burdened by “colorful vignettes” written by contemporary newsmen and the recollections of ex-officials. Relying on secondhand accounts, Klein muffs critical details about the steel industry and even shortchanges the railroads’ role in transporting troops and munitions to the two coasts.

But missing most from these pages are the men and women who built the ships, bombs, and planes that made victory possible. At the outset of the book, Klein cites a chilling statistic: “More Americans died in industrial and work-related accidents at home than in combat overseas.” But he never elaborates on this startling assertion—nor even provides a reference

for it. We get the caustic flavor of union leader Lewis's bombast ("Nobody can call John L. Lewis a liar and least of all Franklin Delano Roosevelt!" he once said), but never a feel for the sweat and camaraderie of the nearly half a million coal miners who fed the war factories.

Across 900 pages, only a score of paragraphs are devoted to the women who flocked into the workforce—"Rosie the Riveter" and her thousands of sisters. The black migration from the South to wartime jobs in Detroit and other cities is portrayed in somewhat more detail. Klein spends three pages on the social conflicts in Detroit that sparked a race riot that left 25 blacks and nine whites dead in 1943, but the book could have used much more of this kind of material.

In seeking to cut through the gauzy sentimentality of TV anchorman Tom Brokaw, who famously dubbed the war's participants "the greatest generation," Klein loses sight of the most profound lesson of World War II: Namely, that

the average Joes and Rosies believed in the fight for freedom. Ordinary Americans' investment in the war—and their willingness to make personal sacrifices to aid the country—was what made it, as Studs Terkel observed, "the good war."

In assessing Roosevelt's leadership in the 1951 book *Struggle for Survival*, FDR economic adviser Eliot Janeway noted that the president "looked to democracy and not to leaders" to win the war. "Democracy's mass reservoir of energy and faith" was the bedrock upon which those impressive material and technological accomplishments lay. Or, in Janeway's koan-like formulation, "A victory small enough to be organized" by bureaucrats and businessmen would have been "too small to be decisive" against our ferocious foes. ■

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