

## ★ ★ ★ Introduction

In May 1941, the first month of the U.S. Treasury's defense savings program, Adelard Courtemanche of Windsor Locks, Connecticut, brought the 11,250 nickels he had been saving for a new car to the local post office and purchased thirty defense bonds. In September 1943 Donato De Grossa, a sixty-three-year-old Italian-born shoe shiner in Philadelphia, celebrated the surrender of Italy by buying a \$1,000 war bond. In 1944 an elderly African American woman in Los Angeles, with no sons or daughters to enlist in the armed forces, sold her \$15,000 home and used the entire proceeds to buy war bonds.<sup>1</sup>

What motivated these and millions of other Americans to such extreme support for the war effort? How did first- and second-generation Americans view their ethnic identity in relation to such a patriotic cause? Why did the federal government aggressively pursue the African American market, and why did blacks eagerly respond? These and many other important questions arise within the intersection of the federal government's bond drives and Americans' experience during World War II. The cultural history of bonds reveals the paradigmatic change in American nationalism that occurred during the war. War bonds both reflected and helped shape a new version of Americanism, steeped in the enduring paradox of "e pluribus unum," out of many, one. As a rare example of consumerism within the civic sphere, the buying and selling of bonds during

World War II helps us better understand national identity, that is, what it meant and means to be an American.

As any surviving home-front American could testify, government bonds and stamps were an indelible presence on the country's collective psyche throughout the war. Soon after the war ended, many in the media began to call the Treasury's bond program "the greatest sales operation in history." Eighty-five million Americans had purchased \$185.7 billion in bonds, the largest amount of money ever raised for a war. Although the selling of war bonds was intended to serve economic purposes, specifically to slow inflation and help finance the war, the Roosevelt administration considered the campaign equally important from a psychological standpoint: it helped sell "the idea of the war" to a divided American people. The program was one of various avenues employed by the administration to create a more unified and harmonic nation, as displaying outward strength to foreign enemies relied upon lessening the domestic tensions among Americans along socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial lines. Grounded in public or private patriotic support for one's country, bond campaigns were viewed by government officials as an opportunity to bring together Americans from all walks of life. The Treasury's program was conceived, in President Roosevelt's term, as "one great partnership," offering all Americans a personal stake in the war.<sup>2</sup>

Backed by an unprecedented marketing effort, the bond program reached into virtually every aspect of American society throughout the war. World War II bonds represented the most tangible evidence of Americans' financial and moral stake in the war, the principal means by which those on the home front could take part in the war effort. Bond drives infiltrated everyday life, blurring the lines between the public and private arenas. The full power of the state was deployed to persuade all Americans—including potentially oppositional groups such as labor and African Americans—to literally and figuratively buy into the war through bonds. As Americans rallied together to win the war, prompted by bond drives and other forms of propaganda, a consensus, or what Alan Brinkley has called a "stable concert of interests among the state, business, and labor," emerged. Articulated in populist terms as the "American Way of Life," the consensus took on the form of a secular religion, fusing personal aspirations, nationalism, and consumerism. With the war positioned as a defense of the American Way of Life, a domestic ideology of nationhood was clearly defined and easily understood. The war was assigned the transcendent objectives of "the Good War": an opportunity to defeat fascism, defend and renew the faith

in American democracy, restore the American economy, and reap the benefits of a new and improved consumer ethic. Although centered on defense, the wartime consensus was ultimately predicated on defending and preserving the ideals of the American Enlightenment and promised a prosperous and abundant postwar society.<sup>3</sup>

Due in large part to the coming and passing of the fiftieth anniversary of the war, revisionist historians are increasingly debunking the notion of World War II as the Good War and the idea that the war and postwar consensus represented blanket homogeneity. Much more attention is being devoted to the contradictions between America's claims of national unity and the racial, ethnic, and religious divisions on the home front. John Morton Blum was one of the earliest historians to recognize the tensions associated with these divisions, suggesting that "World War II posed a special test of the ability of American culture to accommodate to its inherent pluralism." America's awareness as a pluralistic nation had advanced immeasurably between the wars, largely a function of the Great Migration to northern cities by southern blacks and the New Deal bringing African Americans and other ethnic groups into power via the Democratic Party. As Depression-era populism raised the cultural status of "folk" peoples and traditions, the New Deal years provided a social climate in which pluralism could germinate.<sup>4</sup>

The Statue of Liberty was first recognized as an icon of American pluralism in the 1930s, an apt symbol of the elevation of the nation's multicultural identity during the decade. It was also in the 1930s that pluralism gained official status within academic and government circles. Although the concept of "cultural pluralism" was first suggested in 1915 and the term first used in 1924, it was not until the late 1930s that the idea achieved broad acceptance among intellectuals. Events in Europe had a direct effect on the views of social scientists and other "experts," reviving Horace Kallen's vague but compelling theory of cultural pluralism. Kallen envisioned the United States as a "federation of nationalities" united by voluntary participation within a set of "common institutions," a utopian synergy of difference and harmony. Shaped by Kallen's and many others' views, the idea of cultural pluralism gained broad circulation in American discourse. Prejudice became widely seen as a pathological condition contrary to the American creed, and a more liberal and tolerant attitude toward Euro-American immigrants and African Americans was espoused in popular rhetoric. Forced assimilation to an Anglo-Saxon identity became associated with theories of inherent racial superiority, an obstacle to positive

intergroup relations or “brotherhood.” America’s uniqueness was that its citizens were bound together not by ancestral background but by belief in a common set of values.<sup>5</sup>

More important, cultural pluralism advanced beyond ideology and theory in the 1930s, shaping American politics and, in turn, community life. Ethnicity and race became linked to issues of class within the competitive dialogue of the New Deal, elevating the idea of pluralism to the center of American politics. For the first time the working class, composed largely of first- and second-generation Americans, emerged as a major coalition within the political arena of the 1930s. Through a combination of class-based rhetoric, economic programs, and support of labor, the Democratic Party successfully drew upon the loyalty of these Americans. The Roosevelt administration strengthened the autonomy of working-class, ethnic communities, providing a climate in which to seat a “hyphenated Americanism.” Pluralism operated most dynamically at the local level, as thriving Euro- and African American communities redefined the culture of work and neighborhoods across the country.<sup>6</sup>

With American cultural pluralism cast in stark opposition to Nazi totalitarianism in prewar and wartime propaganda, the idea of democracy was raised to the status of a civil religion, invested with what Philip Gleason has called “the aura of the sacred.” This change in American identity can be measured by comparing the country’s tolerance for diversity in the two world wars. The “100% Americanism” programs of World War I demanded that white ethnic groups minimize any signs of foreign origin, whereas the country’s ideological stance during World War II had to acknowledge that both ethnicity and race were integral parts of the American idea and experience. As demonstrated by the vivid cinematic image of the multicultural platoon, America’s collective strength was a function of the diversity of its individual members. Pluralism emerged as the central character of American identity, in contrast to what Gary Gerstle called the dominant “class-based construction of Americanism” of the 1930s. The elevation of pluralistic democracy during World War II produced, according to Richard Polenberg, “a sharpened sense of ethnic self-awareness,” as national loyalty was juxtaposed against ancestral ties. The ideological shift that occurred between the wars was reflected in World War II propaganda, which employed both a broad pluralistic tone and direct appeals to Euro- and African Americans. The war would exponentially advance the strides made by ethnics and blacks during the 1930s, raising their status as legitimate members of the national family tree. “Cultural pluralism in all its ambiguities and complexities,” as Gleason

claimed, emerged as “the crucial legacy of World War II in respect to American identity.”<sup>7</sup>

As one of the cornerstones of the American home front, bonds played a key role in advancing the wartime pluralistic consensus society. Grounded in the ideals of “the voluntary way” and “democracy in action,” the Treasury’s program differed from other wartime avenues of state building, such as the Office of Price Administration (OPA) and the Red Cross, in that it was dedicated to nonpartisanship and nonelitism, intentionally designed to symbolize the country’s democratic ideals. And unlike other forms of wartime sacrifice, purchasing bonds offered Americans a future, tangible return on their investment. War bonds were thus ideally aligned with the American creed of free enterprise, confirming one Treasury official’s observation that “national defense seemed to combine in almost perfect measure the twin blessings of patriotism and economic prosperity.” The blending of public and private interests that characterized the Treasury’s bond campaign provides the opportunity to combine intellectual history—the *modus operandi* of propaganda studies—with a ground-level view. The arm of the state made an impact on everyday life at the individual, community, and institutional levels, with public policy translated into action among children, women, union members, ethnic Americans, and blacks. Because of this public-private dualism, many of the contradictions and limitations of the new Americanism—how society can be both unified and autonomous, how ethnic and racial identity can be expressed without the dimension of class, and how African Americans can be simultaneously included within and excluded from the consensus—became fully evident.<sup>8</sup>

Via war bonds and other forms of propaganda, the Roosevelt administration promoted a pluralistic brand of nationalism that inherited and leveraged the salient themes of the New Deal. The dynamics of bonds offers a means of directly understanding how the “bottom-up” nationalism of the 1930s was transformed into an official, “top-down” form of pluralism. Driven by the guiding principle of democracy, Euro- and African Americans became key parts of the wartime pluralistic equation. As authority shifted to the state through demands for national unity, the administration played a greater role in determining what was “acceptable” pluralism and what was not. Pluralism’s roots in local, communal activities and institutions were transplanted to the consumption-oriented consensus of the American Way of Life. Depression-era class consciousness was significantly undercut and increasingly associated with un-American and potentially dangerous ideologies. War bonds acted as a catalyst in the shift from New Deal populism to a nationalism predicated on the common



pursuit of affluence, linking pluralism to the universally shared desire for the good life.

With unity through pluralism the defining character of the Treasury's bond program, selling and buying war bonds were presented and perceived as opportunities to express national loyalty through the customs and codes defined by class, ethnicity, and race. Unlike in World War I bond drives, patriotism could be articulated in a variety of terms, not dictated by prescribed assimilation to an Anglo-American ideal. As a symbol of American democracy, war bonds helped to broaden the parameters of patriotism and national identity, accommodating the loyalties of the working class, Euro-Americans, and to some extent, African Americans. Within the nexus of bonds, virtually any form of group ritual or symbol was allowed to coexist when framed within the context of national loyalty, a dramatic difference from the Liberty Bond drives of World War I. Bond rallies were held at union meetings, Euro-American rituals, and African American civic celebrations. Only those practices which were believed to threaten the country's ability to win the war, that is, supporting the enemy or attacking the ideological principals of the consensus, were considered illegitimate. Although the wartime pluralistic consensus had some corrosive effect on the integrity of affiliation groups, as suggested by the decline of ethnic newspapers between 1940 and 1950, assimilation to mainstream American culture by the working class, Euro-Americans, and African Americans was voluntary, unlike in World War I.

Despite the greater pluralistic climate of World War II, the issues circulating around race were particularly complex. The "separate and unequal" treatment of African Americans during the war was clear evidence of the "official racism" endorsed by the Roosevelt administration. A government tolerant of, even subscribing to, discrimination toward a particular group of people was, of course, in direct contrast with American democratic ideals, which were serving as the backbone for the country's ideological war against Nazism. Unlike World War I, which was fought essentially as an Anglo-Saxon war, World War II was being fought on the grounds of defending New World democracy and liberty against Old World totalitarianism, fascism, and racism. Given the mission of the war to protect the inalienable rights of individual freedoms, exceptions of race were becoming increasingly difficult to defend. With Nazism cast in government propaganda as the antithesis to the Enlightenment-inspired principle of democracy, blacks leaders saw an opportunity to convincingly demonstrate the contradictions between popular rhetoric and African Americans' actual experience.<sup>9</sup>

As race relations—what Gunnar Myrdal would call in 1944 “the American dilemma”—came to the forefront of the national consciousness, black leaders vowed not to slow their fight for equality as their predecessors had done a generation earlier. During World War I, blacks had demonstrated strong support for the war effort, but for the sake of national unity had postponed what W. E. B. Du Bois called their “special grievances.” Expectedly, there was hope the Roosevelt administration and whites as a whole would see the parallels between Nazi racism and America’s own oppression directed to fellow citizens based on skin color, and move toward a truly democratic society.<sup>10</sup>

Given their special interest in an Allied victory, a function of Nazi’s overt racism, blacks’ broad support of the war was, like that of most Americans, a demonstration of patriotism and loyalty to their country. However, although African Americans were indeed displaying a mainstream version of patriotism in their support for the war, this represented only half of their loyalties. Evidence of blacks’ dual identity, what Du Bois termed “twoness” or a “double self,” suggests that World War II’s underpinnings—that of a unified and harmonious society joined to fight a common enemy—are faulty or, at least, only part of the foundation. Attitudes and behavior related to the other half of the Double V, victory over enemies at home, demand further attention in the continuing effort to redefine “the Good War” and recover important narratives of the present’s past. As an articulation of the Double V, bond drives among African Americans illustrated that patriotism is not unidimensional but multivalent, accommodating an infinite number and variety of interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the cultural history of World War II bonds helps us chart the trajectory of two defining themes of the postwar era. Widespread holdings of government securities were instrumental in linking wartime patriotism to the promise of postwar consumerism, most dramatically suggested by the image of a bountiful Thanksgiving dinner in Norman Rockwell’s “Freedom from Want” war bond poster. As Frank Fox observed in his encompassing study of wartime propaganda, the right to both personal and national abundance was an integral part of the American creed the country was fighting to preserve. The idea that consumption could be a socially beneficial, even patriotic, act thus emerged not in the postwar years but during the war, spurred to a great degree by the consumer dynamics of bonds. As the clearest example of “investing in the future while the present was out of stock,” war bonds purchased in the early 1940s were seeds of consumerism reaped in the early 1950s, when the securities reached full maturity and were redeemed. In addition, as recent scholarship is increas-

ingly showing, the civil rights movement emerged not after but during the war. As the country prospered from defense production, blacks' demand for equal rights in jobs, housing, and recreation resulted in limited but important gains, laying the foundation for the full protest movement of the postwar era. The selling of bonds to and purchasing by African Americans were key to the fight for full equality during the war. The administration invited blacks into the consensus society through appeals for bonds, and African Americans obtained real economic power by investing in them. The World War II bond program helps us locate the beginnings of both the postwar consumption ethic and the civil rights movement, each an integral chapter of American social history.<sup>12</sup>

Part One of this book provides a broad overview of the Treasury's bond program of World War II, framing the campaign within the country's social, political, and economic climate. As in World War I, the administration implemented a bond program during World War II for both economic and ideological purposes. Versus the World War I campaign, which practiced Wilsonian "100% Americanism," however, the World War II program reflected the Roosevelt administration's attempt to achieve unity through pluralism. By reaching out to all segments of the population, including traditionally marginalized groups such as children, women, and farmers, the administration used bonds as a vehicle to strengthen morale and create greater domestic harmony. Offering all Americans a stake in the war via bonds was thus seen as a means to establish some common ground, a device to resolve or at least delay domestic tensions during the war emergency. The Treasury integrated bond appeals into virtually all forms of popular culture during the war, including music, literature, movies, theater, and sports. Retailers became an extension of the administration's selling program, merging privatized consumer culture with the war effort. Both the sheer volume of bonds sold and anecdotal evidence suggest that the World War II bond may indeed have been the most successful consumer product of a single time and place.

Part Two takes a close look at the bond activities of two groups considered essential to the program's success, labor and ethnic Americans. Although bond rallies occasionally functioned as opportunities to voice protest against corporate management or the government, unions and their members were responsible for a huge percentage of war bond sales. Through bond selling and buying, class tensions were largely defused (and labor power significantly weakened), important legacies for the postwar era. Rather than attempt to make ethnic Americans conform to a single definition of American identity, the Treasury took advantage of the loyalty of



foreign-origin groups to their native lands. Bond drives became part of ethnic celebrations, a reason for those of common ancestry to come together to support their adopted country. Through bond rallies, the signs and symbols of foreign nationalities became linked to those of American patriotism, a successful reconciliation of ethnic Americans' dual identities. The government's bond program thus demonstrated the resiliency of national loyalty, and how it can be combined with ethnic identity to create a form of cultural synergy.

Part Three deals with the dynamics of the bond program relative to African Americans. William Pickens of the Treasury's Inter-Racial Section sold the idea of the war to African Americans through bonds, a difficult task given the vast contradictions between the nation's democratic ideals and its caste-like restrictions and obstacles. Pickens preached a form of civil rights grounded in the Double V, victory over enemies both abroad and at home, and positioned bonds as a rare opportunity that blacks should seize in order to realize the gains they deserved. Like labor, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) strongly endorsed the program, believing that buying bonds on the home front was the best way to win the war overseas. Also like labor, however, the NAACP occasionally used bond drives as an opportunity to protest inequities and achieve greater social standing. Buying and endorsing bonds were viewed by the organization's leaders, Walter White and Roy Wilkins, as both a patriotic duty and a means to realize a more democratic society through greater African American economic power. Black government officials, academics and literati, entertainers, and sports figures also played an active part in making the bond program a success within the African American community. The endorsement of the program by a variety of notable African Americans, particularly Duke Ellington and Joe Louis, suggested that both the American dream and "democracy in action" were indeed possible. Although no records were kept according to race (a conscious decision by the government), sufficient evidence exists to know that African Americans accounted for a significant share of bond sales, perhaps higher than that of whites on a per capita basis. As in white ethnic groups, bond rallies became a source of communal celebration and pride, an opportunity to preserve an American identity that resided outside the dominant Anglo-Saxon archetype. Racial identity was expressed within the context of patriotism, again demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of national loyalty.

The case of war bonds demonstrates that pluralism is indeed the crucial legacy of World War II. The state's brand of official pluralism effectively

combined national interests with those of the working class, Euro-Americans, and African Americans, broadening the base of support for administration policy. Class tensions were dramatically eased, shifting American identity away from socioeconomic standing to a shared aspiration of middle-class materialism. While prescribing greater national unity and cohesiveness, however, the state tolerated, even encouraged, cultural diversity and difference in order to demonstrate the success of the unique American experiment. By accommodating alternative constructs of patriotism, war bonds most clearly represented the nation's motto of "*e pluribus unum*." The wide variety of ways that war bonds were bought and sold illustrated that Americanism was not necessarily assimilationist, that class, ethnic, and racial identity could augment, versus conflict with, national identity. With a newly defined, popular vision of the nation as pluralistic, the image of America as melting pot was temporarily taken off the burner during the war. Analogous to the ubiquitous multicultural platoon, war bonds symbolized that America's singular identity resided in its diversity.