Welcome to the first March meeting of the
Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II His-
tory Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Maury
Klein, author of A Call to Arms, and Professor
Emeritus at the University of Rhode Island. He
will discuss the complicated transformation of
the depressed American peacetime economy into
the military Goliath that supplied the Allied
world to victory.

As Adolf Hitler rose to power and began to
slowly gain control of the European continent,
Americans looked on with horror over the events
around the world. Many leaders were determined
not to get involved in another European war.
President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 had
promised “a war to end all wars” and the Ameri-
can “doughboys” had valiantly fought for that
cause. Now, twenty years later another war was
brewing and Americans did not want to lose
another generation on European soil. Many be-
lieved that the United States became involved in
the Great War through the machinations of the
“Merchants of Death” – munitions manufactur-
ers bent on making fortunes selling their wares
to the Europeans. To prevent this from happen-
ing again, between 1935 and 1939, the Congress
passed Neutrality Acts barring the sale of arms
to engaged belligerents. New laws did not stop
the conflagration from becoming more pro-
nounced and President Franklin Delano Roo-
sevelt (FDR) knew the United States would have
to do something.

Rearmament for the Second World War oc-
curred in two distinct time periods. The first was
from the start of the war in Europe to the attack
on Pearl Harbor. FDR could see that the United
States would eventually get dragged into the war
but knew he would have to ‘nudge’ the Ameri-
can people into seeing it his way. Europe was his
focus. The Japanese were already at war with
China; he admonished them and began to with-
draw resources from their war machine. FDR
finagled as many ways as he could to get around
the “neutrality laws” imposed on him by an iso-
lationist Congress. Such programs as “cash and
carry”, where the British and French could have
all the munitions they wanted as long as they
paid cash and transported the materiel on their
own ships, and the “destroyer deal” where the
British were given old destroyers in return for
leases to their naval bases in the western hemi-
sphere, and even “lend-lease” – the fiction that
Americans were just lending the friendly Eu-
ropean nations war materiel that they would
return at war’s end. FDR was desperate to aid
the British and, after June 1941, the Soviet
Union, to keep them fighting, even if it was to
the detriment of building up America’s own
military strength.

After the United States entered the war, the
second phase of rearmament began. The
process was much more extensive because of
the re-tooling of American factories from mak-
ing consumer goods like cars, to making tanks.
The munitions factories were dismantled after
World War I and we had to begin nearly from
scratch. The auto engineers had to meet with
the military designers because they did not
even know what a tank looked like. During
these meetings the auto engineers had to take
the tank apart piece by piece and then each
piece had to have a mold made for production.
Once this process was complete, then the as-
sembly line and mass production could take
over.

In contrast, the Germans made a better tank
overall – they were and still are craftsmen, but
they production system was more “boutique”. They
made first class products but not as many
as they were going to need for mechanized
warfare. For all the historical “hoopla” about
the German Blitzkrieg, the German army still
had a huge dependency on horses. The Ameri-
can Sherman tanks may not have been as good
as the German “Tigers” but there were so many
more of them, and in an attritional war, num-
bers matter. (“Quantity has a quality all its
own.” J. Stalin) By 1943, the mass production
system was in full swing and the tide began to
turn against the Axis, and not just because of
the number of men in uniform.

As much as the vast amounts of materiel
were being turned out, there was also social
change was going on in America and a focal
point of that was in Detroit, Michigan, the
heart of war time production. African-Ameri-
cans from the southern states moved north in
search of lucrative paying jobs and a better life,
but along with them came the poor southern whites. The overt racial tensions that had been a part of the southern culture since the end of the American Civil War moved north. African-Americans were no longer willing to take a back seat and realized the hypocrisy of fighting Adolf Hitler’s racial policies while enduring segregation at home. A. Phillip Randolph, a black labor union and civil rights leader, proposed a March on Washington in 1943 to highlight the injustices of the times, but FDR was able to placate him with the beginnings of desegregation policies in federal work places. But these small steps would be just beginning.

The effects of military logistics and domestic economic mass production have never been the center of the stories of World War II, but the symbiotic relationship between the soldiers on the battlefield and the materiel produced were a winning combination.

FURTHER READINGS:

Announcements:
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 27 Mar. 2017 – Hughes of Hudsons in 4th Wisconsin - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net
Cannon Valley CWRT - 18 Mar. 2017 – Oliver Winchester in CW – dnl1.peterson@gmail.com
Fort Snelling Civil War Symposium - 8 April 2017 - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnang-museum.org 612-713-2523

See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt