A Cultural History of the United States Through the Decades

The 1940s

Michael V. Uschan

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To my niece, Megan Turner, with all my love

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Europe; within a month a million soldiers stormed ashore. With Germany besieged from the east by Russia, the Allies were now assured of victory.

By August the Allies liberated Paris. The following March American troops finally crossed the Rhine River into Germany. As Russian troops closed in on his underground bunker in Berlin, Hitler committed suicide on April 30. A day earlier, Mussolini had been executed by his own countrymen. Germany surrendered on May 7.

The Death of FDR

By presidential proclamation May 8 was declared V-E Day—Victory in Europe Day. But the signature on the proclamation was that of Harry S Truman, not Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The man who was president longer than any other—twelve years, one month, and eight days—died April 12, 1945, at the presidential retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia. He had won election to an unprecedented fourth term just months before his death.

In the last year of the war FDR had been in failing health. Pictures from that period show a frail, weary chief executive who looked much older than his sixty-three years. Roosevelt died of circulatory and respiratory failure and other medical problems.

In May the nation, which had sadly mourned his passing a month earlier, joyously celebrated its victory over Germany. But the festivities were restrained. Americans knew they still had to defeat Japan.

The Atomic Bomb

The Allies had been steadily winning back territory in the South Pacific since early 1943, when they conquered Japanese forces at Guadalcanal. But the victories had come at a terrible human cost because the Japanese samurai (warrior) tradition led soldiers to continue to fight ferociously and to the death, even when they were outnumbered and cut off from help. In the battle for the island of Okinawa, which ended June 21, 1945, after two and a half months of fighting, 13,000 Americans and more than 100,000 Japanese were killed. In battles toward the end of the war, many more Japanese were killed because of American superiority in weapons and supplies. Naval bombardments before island invasions killed tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers. Denied supplies because the Allies controlled the seas, Japanese soldiers were often near starvation and sometimes nearly out of ammunition. Thousands of Japanese soldiers also committed suicide rather than be captured.
The Birth of the Atomic Age

A letter in August 1939 to President Franklin D. Roosevelt from Albert Einstein and several other scientists was the catalyst for development of the atomic bomb.

They told Roosevelt that scientists would soon be able to split the atom, which would make possible "extremely powerful bombs of a new type." They also warned the president that Germany was trying to discover the secret to this terrible new weapon.

Einstein was a brilliant nuclear physicist who had fled Germany because of Jewish persecution. In the late 1930s Einstein, Leo Szilard, Enrico Fermi, and other scientists investigated the secrets of the atom in laboratories at Columbia, Princeton, and the University of Chicago. The government at first took only a casual interest in this hypothetical weapon, but it did grant Fermi $6,000 to continue his work.

On December 2, 1942, Fermi achieved a chain reaction at the University of Chicago, splitting uranium atoms into a new form of matter called plutonium. He had found the key to unleashing the power of atomic energy, including the destructive potential of the atomic bomb.

The federal government then established the ultrasecret Manhattan Project, which brought together America's top scientists to perfect the atomic bomb. It was so secret that Vice President Truman did not learn about the bomb until more than a week after he became president.

On July 16, 1945, the work of tens of thousands of people and $2 billion in spending culminated in the first atomic bomb explosion in a desolate stretch of desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. Within a month this new device had ended World War II and ushered in the atomic age.

Since their first victory in 1942, the Allies had worked their way north in the Pacific, capturing Tarawa, the Marianas, Saipan, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and other territory as they advanced on Japan. In late 1944, from bases in China the Allies began bombing runs that leveled areas of Japan and weakened its ability to fight back.

Although it would have taken many more months of bloody fighting, the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt in August 1945. And thanks to a terrifying new weapon, victory in the Pacific came just three months after V-E Day.

It started August 6, 1945 in the shape of a huge, billowing cloud of smoke and radioactive dust that rose dark and ominous, from the atomic bomb the United States dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima.

"First there was a ball of fire changing in a few seconds to purple clouds and flames boiling and swirling upward," reported military
observers flying in a second B-29 that accompanied the Enola Gay, which carried the bomb.

A flash was observed. . . . all agreed the light was intensely bright and the white cloud rose faster than the New Mexico [bomb] test, reaching thirty thousand feet in minutes. . . . It mushroomed at the top, broke away from the column and mushroomed again. The cloud was not turbulent. It went at least to forty thousand feet, flattening across its top at this level. 20

The hellish scene at the base of the monstrous mushroom cloud was one of total devastation. The bomb struck with the force of 20,000 tons of TNT. It vaporized homes, flattened a 5-square-mile section of the city, and killed between 70,000 and 100,000 people.

When Japan still refused to surrender three days later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, killing 40,000. Tens of thousands of people in the two cities would die later of radiation sickness.
Truman, only a few months after becoming president, had made the difficult decision to use the weapon. No one was really sure how great the devastation would be. But the test explosion of the first atomic bomb in history July 16 in Alamogordo, New Mexico, had proven the bomb's devastating capability.

A key factor in his decision, Truman said, was that he believed the bomb would save American and Japanese lives by shortening the war. It was estimated that both nations could have suffered as many as 1 million casualties had the conflict been brought to an end by conventional means. The massive firebomb raid on Tokyo on March 9–10, for example, had killed 80,000 people, destroyed more than 250,000 buildings, and gutted a quarter of the city.

In the weeks before the first atomic bomb was dropped, the United States had warned Japan to surrender or suffer the consequences of a powerful new weapon. But military and political leaders had refused. Once they realized the cataclysmic power of the atomic bomb, however, they had no other choice. Japan surrendered August 14.

The Price of Victory

Even though the atomic bomb shortened the war, America paid a terrible price for victory. During the war, silken banners decorated with blue stars hung from the windows of countless homes. Each blue star represented a son or daughter who was in the service. When their loved ones died, families sadly replaced blue stars with gold stars.

In World War II, 292,131 U.S. soldiers were killed in combat, 675,000 were wounded, and 139,709 became prisoners of war or were listed as missing in action (MIA). Many MIAs were never found and could only be presumed dead, and many prisoners died in captivity. Tens of thousands were disabled by war injuries and an estimated 6,000 American civilians died, almost all overseas.

The Sullivan family of Waterloo, Iowa, has been singled out for the loss it suffered. After a childhood friend was killed at Pearl Harbor five Sullivan brothers—Joseph, Francis, Albert, Madison, and George—enlisted together in the navy. All five died November 14, 1942, when the USS Juneau was sunk in the Pacific. The tragedy led to a ruling that family members were prohibited from serving on the same ship.

Victory never comes cheaply in war.