



**CLASSROOM LESSONS:
U.S. MILITARY HISTORY**

WWII: A War of Systems

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Grade Level: 9-10 American or World History

Objective: Highlight the role played by the U.S. economy in war production for WWII and the advantage that it provided for the Allied Powers.

Standards (Ohio Academic Content Standards):

9th Grade Economics: Explain how changing methods of production and a country's productive resources affect how it answers the fundamental economic questions of what to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce.

10th Grade History: Analyze the impact of U.S. participation in World War II, with emphasis on the change from isolationism to international involvement including the reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

10th Grade Economics: Analyze the impact of the Great Depression and World War II on the economy of the United States and the resulting expansion of the role of the federal government.

Background:

Popular culture has revered the German military in WWII and assigned the Germans an almost mythical status. Germany's commanders (especially Rommel) have achieved significant fame and an aura of superiority, as have German tactics, arms and soldiers.

This perceived German military superiority was reinforced by the poor early performance of the U.S. military, especially with respect to leadership, tactics and equipment. The performance of German units, especially early in the war, was superior to U.S. (and allied) forces when they met in equal numbers.

How did the Allies win? Key is that the U.S. and Allies rarely fought in equal numbers. (Rick Atkinson: *An Army at Dawn/Day of Battle*). Atkinson calls WWII a war of systems in which the best team won. The U.S. "system" was superior to the German system for war. Systems include not only the military, but also economy, government and culture/values. The U.S. system was able to project power throughout the world, whereas the German system was not even able to project power across the English Channel.

The key system component this lesson will focus on is U.S. (and allied) economic production during WWII as compared to the German (and Axis) war economy.

Procedure:

1. Descriptive analysis of U.S./German economies. The students would have already received background reading (Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World* has an excellent section on German four-year plans and raw material deficiencies). Ask students to describe the U.S. and German economies based on the assignment and previous class material.

US: Capitalism, Entrepreneurship, Great Depression, Government Intervention (New Deal), Industrialized Economy, Natural Resource Rich, Agricultural Producer (Land)
Germany: Command, Industrialized, Great Depression, Resource Poor, Low Agricultural Land (as compared with population), Expansionary - Need for more Land, *Lebensraum* ("Living Space")

If students have trouble discussing some of these issues without cues, a list of the above descriptions could be placed on the board, and then moved to the Germany or US headings. The depth of this part of the lesson will depend largely on previous familiarity with the relevant concepts.

This comparison should highlight some of the long-term advantages that the US economic system and situation would provide for a war economy. In addition, the lesson could be expanded to discuss Japan, which faced many of the same economic constraints as Germany.

2. Use U.S. propaganda posters to highlight the degree to which the U.S. embraced its role as the "Arsenal of Democracy."

Students will be exposed to a variety of WWII propaganda posters to highlight the degree to which the U.S. placed an emphasis on war production for US and Allied use. These posters highlight issues such as employing women, financing the war through bonds, and attempting to operate an economy at "full" employment. The goal with these posters is to demonstrate the government's objective of out-producing the Axis to achieve a significant material advantage on the battlefield.

All of the following posters can be found at the National Archives website at the following web address:
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_intro.html





It wouldn't be necessary to choose all posters, as a cross section of a few will do.

Key questions will include:

1. Who is shown in the poster/what specific groups?
2. What symbols or imagery is used?
3. How is production/economic system highlighted in the poster?
4. What is the poster specifically asking people to do?
5. What emotional qualities does the poster appeal to? (fear, patriotism...)

3. The Results of the U.S. economic system's emphasis on war production.

The final phase of this lesson is the view the results of the U.S. economic system and the U.S. government's emphasis on war production by comparing Allied and Axis war production. There are two excellent sources for comparing total Allied and Axis production numbers as well as country by country (for a focus on US production). Wikipedia has a web article titled "Military production during WWII" in which it reprints GDP numbers from Mark Harrison's *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison*. The other source is Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which provides production tables for manufacturing output, relative war potential, tank production, aircraft production and total armaments production. The numbers from these two sources show the overwhelming material advantage that the US and Allies were able to produce over the Axis powers. Students can then be able to understand why early faults in equipment and leadership did not prove to be disastrous for the allied cause. Even if the Germans had superior tanks, that hardly mattered if the US enjoyed a 4 to 1 (or greater) tank advantage.

4. Highlight: Normandy

To further demonstrate the results of the victory of the US economic system over the German/Axis systems, a perfect example is the force that was created to carry out Operation Overlord. The following website brochure provides the statistics for the US Overlord force:

<http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/normandy/nor-pam.htm>

- 1,537,000 soldiers
- More than 16 million tons of supplies would be needed to feed and supply those men and their allies: six and one-quarter pounds of rations per day per man
- 137,000 jeeps, trucks, and half-tracks
- 4,217 tanks and fully tracked vehicles
- 3,500 artillery pieces
- 12,000 aircraft

Two important notes need to be explained to students about these statistics.

1. These are statistics for only the U.S. forces. There were almost equal allied forces with equipment, and a portion of the equipment was also produced by the U.S.
2. This force was only one of several for the U.S. military. There were also Allied forces in Italy, preparing for an invasion of Southern France, and the entire Pacific Theatre, which the U.S. was fighting largely alone versus the Japanese. Despite these global commitments, the U.S. economic system was able to produce an overwhelming force for the invasion of France.

Conclusion:

The preceding sources should provide students with an overview of the victory of the US economic system in World War II. Given that WWII was a war of systems, the US system of production emerged as a leading advantage for the Allies, and directly led to their victory. Rick Atkinson pointed out the in this war of systems, the best team won. The US economic system ensured that the US team was always more numerous and well supplied. As Winston Churchill was quoted following the US entry into the war, an Allied victory simply rested on "the proper application of overwhelming force."¹

References:

- Atkinson, Rick, "Ten Things Every Student Should Know About Our Army in WWII," at <http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1415.200905.atkinson.usarmywwii.html>
- Ferguson, Niall. *The War of the World*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006.
- "Introduction." *Normandy*. US Army Center of Military History. Oct. 3, 2003.
<http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/normandy/nor-pam.htm>
- Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. New York, Vintage Books: 1987.
- "Military Production During WWII." Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_production_during_World_War_II
- "Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from WWII." The National Archives.
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_intro.html

¹ This quote can be found in Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* at the beginning of Chapter 7