

“The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II” (1991)¹

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In 1941, the United States embarked on its largest military struggle since the Civil War. By the end of World War II, 16 million men and women had served in the armed forces and 405,000 had given their lives in defeating the Axis powers. On the home front, Americans donated blood; recycled paper and scrap metal; planted “victory gardens” to help feed the nation; limited their purchases through rationing; and invested their savings in government “Liberty Bonds.” Reinforced by government propaganda that emphasized the need for national sacrifice, Americans at home were urged to feel a sense of shared sacrifice and commitment with the men and women who risked their lives serving in the European and Pacific theaters.

In most wars, however, the initial *rage militaire* is not universal and wears thin as the military struggle lengthens. In this essay, Mark H. Leff challenges what he calls “the mystique of home front sacrifice” by focusing on two case studies: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s unsuccessful attempt to limit wage and salary increases during the war and the advertising industry’s more successful effort to profit from the production of wartime propaganda. Looking at the political meaning of sacrifice during World War II and focusing on the ways in which wartime cooperation was achieved, he finds that the theme of sacrifice had distinctly political overtones. Who sacrificed and how much, and whether sacrifices were equally borne by all segments of society, became questions argued out and resolved by the political process. Americans on the home front made many personal sacrifices, to be sure, but Leff demonstrates that there were limits to what could be achieved even in wartime and that the entire idea of sacrifice, meant to bind the country together, could generate controversy and division.

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War is hell. But for millions of Americans on the booming home front, World War II was also a hell of a war. Both then and today, the mystique of home front sacrifice suffused visions of that wartime experience. The politics set in motion by a peculiar blend of profits and patriotism, of sacrifice amid unprecedented prosperity, gave a distinctive cast to American wartime life.

In subsequent American civic mythology, the public-spirited wartime community of World War II holds a cherished place. It is nostalgically recalled as *our* “finest hour,” when Americans freely sacrificed selfish desires, did without, went all out, and “pulled together” in common purpose and spirit with “only one thing on their minds—winning the war.” The allure of this golden age of home front sacrifice is not merely retrospective.

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During World War II, Americans gloried in the feeling that they were participating in a noble and successful cause by making “sacrifices.” In common parlance sacrifice did not require the suffering of terrible loss. It instead comprehended a range of activities—running the gamut from donating waste paper to donating lives—in which narrow, immediate self-interest was subordinated to the needs of the war effort.

Despite, or even because of, its variegated usage, *sacrifice* decisively shaped the discourse of wartime politics. But polychromatic concepts can raise unsettling questions. Most Americans conceded that they had not made any “*real* sacrifices,” a freighted expression largely reserved for our boys at the front. While it was more apparent in the war years than it is in retrospect that not everyone was going all out, the consecration of sacrifice inspired declarations of willingness to shoulder new burdens. Admittedly no specific additional sacrifice jumped readily to mind, but Americans in public opinion polls pledged their support—at least in principle—to an imposing list of wartime activities and restrictions, including wage and price freezes, no-strike pledges, rationing, and higher taxes. Amid these affirmations of unstinting patriotism, one contemporary commentator on wartime morale explained that the war had “subordinated or shelved” the precious “aims and values of individual citizens and special groups,” as Americans “generally respond whole-heartedly to a major demand made of them when its essential necessity to the winning of the war is made clear.”

The mystique of unconditional sacrifice, forged in the war itself and celebrated in collective memory, has not fared well as an interpretive guide to wartime politics and mobilization. Even at the time, staffers of American mobilization agencies commonly despaired of the difficulties of transforming “willingness into action” and cracking “the shell of public apathy,” given “desultory, half-hearted” citizen involvement and “reluctance to forego the ordinary pleasures and comforts of ‘life as usual.’” Americans, they noted, were often able to compartmentalize their advocacy of the principle of sacrifice, to excuse failures of civic responsibility by claiming that their sacrifices would not really have helped the war anyway, that someone else was receiving favored treatment, or that some blockheaded bureaucrat was bungling the whole thing. In the quest for alibis, standards of proof could be conveniently low. “Each of us,” a top mobilization official conceded, “is likely to be slightly more eager to hold down the other fellow’s prices, wages or profits, and to raise the other fellow’s taxes.... Each of us will be looking for the moat in the other fellow’s eye.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, despite warnings from pollsters that his “scolding approach” toward the shortcomings of American sacrifice might only impede cooperation, voiced his disgust at “the whining demands of selfish pressure groups who seek to feather their nests while young Americans are dying.”

As recent historians who expand upon this indictment remind us, what Americans called sacrifice often involved limits on substantial gains rather than the horrific deprivations and destruction suffered by the citizens of other belligerents. Such reassessments can lead to a Manichaean dialogue as to whether Americans on the home front in World War II were saints or sinners—a singularly unpromising question in which assessments of virtue depend on the assessors’ original inclinations and selectively applied standards. More productive challenges await: not to gauge the extent of American cooperation in the war effort, but to examine how that cooperation was achieved, to clarify the principles by which policy makers decided that certain groups would have to

give up something or forgo gains for the good of the whole, and to understand how the ubiquitous ethos of wartime sacrifice set the terms of wartime political discourse, shaping the public actions and manipulatory strategies of potentially affected groups.

What were the boundaries of sacrifice in a global war that disrupted customary patterns of limited government? What could be required and of whom? Sacrifice was clearly a subject for negotiation across a broad range of issues encompassing both public and private choices. In public forums—in the speeches and press conferences of political leaders, in the public opinion polls commissioned by government departments, in the internal correspondence of mobilization officials—concern centered on what might be termed the calculus of political obligation. This article examines the public choices made there, the politics.

The wartime recasting of political obligation touched many facets of American political life, but this article focuses on two case studies. The first treats a celebrated but surprisingly insubstantial and ultimately abortive effort: Franklin Roosevelt's executive order capping all wartime salaries. This startling assault on the ethos of boundless individual achievement demonstrates both the apparently open-ended possibility for renegotiating symbolic values (was the ethic of sacrifice powerful enough to neutralize the American Dream?) and, in its quick and crushing repeal by Congress, the actual limits to the wartime revaluation of values. Interwoven in the seeming challenge to traditional marketplace values was a politics in which the level of comparative sacrifice—the degree of sacrifice relative to other groups—became a standard of justice.

The second case study offers a marked contrast: the successful merchandising of sacrifice through the formation of the War Advertising Council to coordinate a vast private advertising campaign supporting wartime programs and propaganda themes. The unique and consequential American arrangement whereby privately donated advertising carried the brunt of the domestic propaganda effort not only shows the adaptability of the imagery of sacrifice; it also raises provocative questions about the interplay of political forces in the United States that allowed certain groups to domesticate and delimit the meaning of sacrifice—to define it in terms that reinforced the validity of their own political interests and claims. What ultimately stands out in the calculus of home front obligation in World War II is a political process in which claimed sacrifices and contributions could be parlayed into political advantage or into efforts to shift war burdens to others. That process, which I have labeled the politics of sacrifice, established a dynamic that mobilizers and interest groups alike took into account. Since the process stands out most clearly in a comparative framework, I conclude by considering the starkly different political context of sacrifice in Great Britain.

Though sounding radical by current standards, President Roosevelt's salary limitation proposal emerged in stages throughout 1942, rather prosaically, as part of a coordinated effort to control inflationary pressures. In April FDR announced that price stabilization could only be effective if pursued on all fronts; thus he supplemented proposals for across-the-board price ceilings, wage controls, and rationing with a proposed 100 percent "super-tax" that would draw off any "excess" income over \$25,000 (\$50,000 for families) once the federal income tax had been paid. This income limitation proposal garnered popular approval as "a symbol of the idea of equality of sacrifice," but editorialists soon buried it as a "Rooseveltian pleasantry." Just as deadly was the congressional response: utter dismissal—one contemporary comparison was to "a burp in

church, something to be overlooked and forgotten as quickly as possible.” But in October Roosevelt used a broadly phrased authorization for price stabilization that he had just forced through Congress as the pretext for an executive order clamping an after-tax limit of \$25,000 (equivalent to \$200,000 in 1990 dollars) on all salaries. The order did not apply to total incomes or profits, partly because no interpretation of existing law sanctioned such use of independent executive action.

From today’s vantage point, one can easily predict the ferocious response from some quarters to this apparently daring initiative. Labeling it a product of communistic philosophy and class hatred, attackers called it an un-American assault on free enterprise that threatened the production necessary for an effective war effort. When the 1942 elections the next month buoyed the congressional conservative bloc with substantial Republican gains, the salary ceiling was doomed, despite FDR’s efforts to save it. In March 1943 most House Democrats joined the Republicans to repeal it by attaching a rider to a veto-proof debt limit bill; the bill then passed the Senate by a 74-to-3 vote. Less than six months after FDR released his executive order and before it had really gone into effect, salary limitation had been beaten back.

Why did the administration open itself to damagingly reproachful defenses of private property and free enterprise? Did the logic of sacrifice extend so quickly to the core of capitalism? A number of less extreme answers come to mind. Scape-goating campaigns against the abuses of “economic royalists” had long been a staple of Rooseveltian politics. In part, they can be traced to the president’s patrician distaste for ostentatious wealth. Before the war, lessons embedded in the political culture about profiteering “merchants of death”—the unresolved public resentment over issues of sacrifice in World War I—spurred Roosevelt to proclaim that the “burdens of possible war” should be equalized to prevent “war millionaires” from enriching themselves from the sufferings of others. Once World War II began, Roosevelt’s acute awareness of the privileged position of the United States also made him indignant at what he saw as selfish bickering and maneuvering for partisan or monetary gain at home. His sense of equitable and active war participation as a paramount moral obligation also shaped such politically divergent Rooseveltian lost causes as his national war service “labor draft” proposal and his veto of a loophole-ridden tax bill as “not for the needy but for the greedy.”

This ideological component had a firm practical political base. In 1940 and 1941, Roosevelt repeatedly fretted that the economic concessions needed to entice businesses into war contracts could clash with the public’s antiprofitteering sentiments. His fears were well founded. Despite the bad press and the congressional criticism that FDR’s proposals received, commentaries on the \$25,000 salary order commonly assumed that the public would be receptive to limiting incomes. Public opinion polls, including surveys solicited by the administration itself, bore out those assumptions, registering majorities of more than two to one—and well above that among farmers and industrial workers—for a \$25,000 ceiling.

The salary limitation proposal had one other attraction: its potential victims were few and far between. The proposed ceiling applied to *after-tax* salaries. Given unprecedentedly high wartime tax rates, a salary earner needed to receive at least \$67,200 (well over half a million in 1990 dollars) to fall under its provisions—a fate confined to roughly one in fifty thousand Americans. It is no wonder that one congressman was unsure if the salary order applied to any of his constituents. Roosevelt must have been

aware of the advantages of his order's delimited impact in narrowing the potential base of opposition and in sidestepping any truly systemic challenge to economics as usual. In 1941, when batting around the idea of applying a 99½ percent tax rate to income above \$100,000, he jokingly dismissed doubts by asking, "Why not? None of us is ever going to make \$100,000 a year. How many people report on that much income?"

So why bother? The salary order would have had no significant direct effect either in slowing inflation or in narrowing the budget deficit. The key lies in the order's symbolic value, in the messages it was intended to send, particularly to the labor movement. As Nelson Lichtenstein reports in *Labor's War at Home*, leaders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and CIO-affiliated United Automobile Workers (UAW) in 1942 urged a \$25,000 income limit. In March 1942 CIO leaders capitulated to corporate and government demands to extend factory schedules and thus speed production by relinquishing a major union objective and achievement: "premium pay" for weekend and holiday work. To forestall a revolt and to show that its weekend pay concession should not be read as a sign that it had gone soft, the UAW executive board simultaneously publicized a broad "Victory through Equality of Sacrifice Program" that included a call for a \$25,000 limit on incomes. The logic was clear: By prescribing "what other groups in the nation should give up to correspond to labor's sacrifice," UAW leaders sought to anticipate and quiet rank-and-file resentment about shouldering a disproportionate share of the war's burdens.

FDR's ill-fated plan to impose a "super-tax" on individual incomes above \$25,000 represented a direct response to the challenge from labor. In accounting for the income limitation proposal, the undersecretary of the treasury explained that it "clarified the whole situation as far as labor was concerned in the Detroit area." The secretary of the treasury himself, referring to the antiprofitteering proposals of other mobilization officials, put it less kindly: "These stupid asses...in order to satisfy labor...want to go after the rich people."

The stupid asses had a point. Fighting a losing battle against inflation in the first three-quarters of 1942, they felt it necessary to clamp down hard on wage increases. One analyst after another recognized that wage earners could most readily be swayed, not by a simple appeal to patriotism, but by a politics of comparative sacrifice in which others too could be shown as "sacrificing," rather than gaining at the wage earners' expense.

War sharpens and reframes domestic internal conflict by disrupting customary standards of comparison. Peacetime inequalities are often taken for granted as "neutral" results of an impersonal market. But in wartime these same inequalities could rank—and rankle—as inequities, both because of a common code of modern wartime societies that delegitimized "profiteering" from a collective effort in which many would give their lives, and because a planned wartime economy lends an element of purpose to every economic exchange, making it easy to blame inequities on conscious government decisions or on lobbyists' maneuverings. It is not coincidental that the term "relative deprivation" was coined during World War II, for war forges a sense of common aspirations and responsibilities. That sense broadens the range of others that individuals and groups consider in gauging their position and demanding equal treatment. As John Kenneth Galbraith recollected, "no feature of World War II or more recent mobilization experience has been more striking than the scrutiny which each of the several economic groups brings to bear upon what the others are getting."

The importance of this comparative framework did not escape the Roosevelt administration. As early as 1940, “labor trouble” was very much on the president’s mind. It is “a damn sight simpler,” he explained, “for all of us to appeal to [worker] patriotism if we say we are using exactly the same principle for the owners of industry as we are with the workers in industry.” In a closed-door meeting with his Business Advisory Council, Roosevelt urged a measure of restraint: “I can hold labor to the present level if I can say to them, ‘You [industry] won’t profiteer.’” The Treasury Department highlighted the strategy, noting that “if we are to expect all classes of society, including laborers and farmers, to accept the sacrifices of the emergency period and not to press for every possible dollar of advantage, they must be convinced that sacrifices are being distributed according to ability and that no one is making unreasonably large profits.”

Such statements betokened no special insight; they merely mirrored the conventional wisdom. In public speeches and internal memoranda, Roosevelt’s advisers highlighted this notion of contingent sacrifice. Americans, they noted, not only worried that more might be asked of them than of other groups but also demanded proof that their sacrifices would further the war effort and not fatten someone else’s wallet. Field reports by the Office of War Information isolated such concerns as the critical barrier to mobilization. “Each group,” the reports explained, “thinks the others are using the emergency to win selfish advantage. At the same time, each fears that it, alone, will be slighted.” Interest group leaders in particular, the reports warned, simultaneously insisted “that there must be no favored group” while expecting “special recognition for their own particular interests.” Each jockeyed “for the best bargaining position” and “tended to claim unequal sacrifices” as an excuse for postponing “the program most directly affecting his group.” The final report of FDR’s interdepartmental anti-inflation committee in April 1942 thus endorsed an income ceiling as a way of “dramatizing the equality of sacrifice implicit in the proposed over-all [price stabilization] program.” The chairman of the National War Labor Board, speaking of the difficulty of gaining labor acquiescence to concessions on overtime pay, graphically made this point:

If you say to the boys, “Why don’t you make a sacrifice for your country?” they are going to say, “That is fine. I am making a sacrifice for my country, but I am not going to make it to increase the profits of General Motors.” Well, that profit thing comes in all the time.

Union leaders made the most of such resentments, publishing the salaries of industry executives and punctuating their speeches with reminders that “if labor is going to make these sacrifices...then labor certainly ought to ask the industrialists...to make a contribution somewhat equivalent to that contribution that you and I as workers must make.” Polls of union members showed that they shared this quid-pro-quo “fair share” mentality. As one survey of industrial workers concluded, they “are willing to work overtime, they are willing to give up the right to strike, they are ready to make sacrifices for the war effort—if the other fellow will do the same, *if* the bosses don’t reap new profits out of all proportion.” But if the government did not respond to “labor’s discontent with what it feels is an inequality of sacrifice,” an Office of War Information report cautioned in the summer of 1942, union leaders would continue to experience

“difficulty in managing the discontent of the rank and file,” and “restlessness may be expected to increase and to manifest itself as small slowdowns, delays and walk-outs.”

In a wartime economy, other groups besides labor manifested this mind-set. If the anti-inflation effort was to succeed, everyone had to shoulder new burdens: price ceilings for farmers, frustrating shortages and rationing for newly flush consumers, ballooning tax bills for the millions of Americans of average income previously exempt from income tax. Getting each group to accept its burden was no easy trick; Roosevelt’s budget director despaired of what he termed “you-go-first” arguments in which “each group tries to shift the sacrifices to others.” Roosevelt himself openly recognized the politics of sacrifice. In a fireside chat he explained that some were perfectly willing to endorse his entire anti-inflation package “except the one point which steps on their individual toes,” while others “seem very willing to approve self-denial—on the part of their neighbors.” The Roosevelt administration thus sought some sensational demonstration to show each group that it did not face economically painful restrictions alone. A proposed ceiling on incomes was an attractive vehicle for this drama: The absolute limit demonstrated the urgency of the situation, but the targeting of a relatively small number of rich salaried corporate executives (rather than, say, profits) personalized the demanded sacrifices without really threatening production. It was, as the president of the National Farmers’ Union reminded Roosevelt, “most important as a symbol and token.”

Many union leaders embraced the salary limitation effort as a way to take full advantage of the politics of comparative sacrifice. They challenged employers to “match us in corresponding sacrifices,” explaining that workers were “sore” not “because they are being asked to sacrifice” but “because they are being asked to tighten their belts when other people are outgrowing theirs because they are too damned small to go around their fat bellies.” The articles and cartoons in union newspapers and pamphlets were no less hard-hitting. “What sacrifices are these fat cats making?” the *American Federationist* asked. “Will someone tell us, please?” One much-reprinted CIO cartoon depicted a “War Sacrifice Blood Bank.” Two donors—“labor” and “farmer”—were laid out on hospital beds with their arms hooked up to a container labeled “war sacrifice.” In the foreground were two typical capitalist caricatures, complete with top hats and bulging vests upon which were emblazoned “corporate profits” and “big incomes.” As they casually waved off the idea of donating their blood, a no-nonsense Dr. FDR, with tubing in hand, pointed insistently to the empty beds. The cartoon was entitled “Labor Should Help Put These Fellows to Bed.”

On this battleground of corporate salaries and profits, defenders of business were at a clear psychological disadvantage. Some gave it their best shot, however. The *New York World-Telegram* pulled its readers’ heartstrings by reporting that a utility holding company magnate and his wife “closed four of their five homes, put eight cars in storage, reduced the number of their household servants from twenty-five to ten, and shut off all except two floors of the thirty-room pink colonial brick mansion at 1130 Fifth Avenue where they now live.” “Millionaires,” it concluded, “are on the skids.” The *Wall Street Journal* ran an eight-part series called “The New Poor” about the prospective plight of illustrious corporate executives under salary limitation. The forecast included dwindling country club memberships, imperiled vacation homes, and the forced dismissal of faithful servants. Other newspapers interviewed prominent society women about the prospective damage to their clothing budgets.

Such articles were deliciously easy to parody (the National Farmers' Union sponsored a satirical essay contest on "How to Live on \$25,000 a Year") and only played to the strength of salary limitation supporters. The issue itself, after all, was fundamentally symbolic; not only was the ceiling pegged at a stratospheric level but the salary order also specifically exempted investment income, the most important source of great wealth. Yet, to win cooperation with mobilization efforts, precisely measured equivalency—real "equality of sacrifice"—was scarcely the point. Merely targeting luxurious "excess income" promised to soothe resentments over new burdens and perceived inequalities.

The politics of sacrifice moved the explosive issue of salary limitation from the periphery to the center of political debate. Yet Congress overwhelmingly bucked public opinion polls to repeal Roosevelt's salary order in March 1943. One might be tempted to attribute the administration defeat to shady manipulations by the media or special interests, to the limited political clout of a divided union movement, or to the unrepresentativeness of Congress or the American party system. But the explanation for repeal proves more revealing of the peculiar dynamics of wartime politics. Of undeniable importance was public exasperation with war restrictions, shortages, government bureaucrats, and other tangible barriers to the much-deferred "good life"—an irritation intense enough to overwhelm pledges of allegiance to ever greater sacrifice. After the 1942 elections, this attitude fueled the rise to dominance of a congressional conservative coalition that pounced on salary limitation to attack executive power grabbing and the remnants of New Deal reform. But, just as critically, the public image of business sacrifice itself was changing by 1943, giving way to a vision of United States war aims that eased the removal of salary ceilings. When combined with public resentment at wartime government regulations, the rise of business in popular estimation signaled a growing privatization of aspirations as the war progressed.

The second case study, the formation of the War Advertising Council, illuminates and verifies this transition. Under the tutelage of this private organization, corporate executive targets of the call to sacrifice broadcast that call. Defensive recitations of "the truth about advertising" and attacks on the New Deal gave way to the merchandising of the industry's contributions to the war effort. This new politics of sacrifice, adopted with uncanny precision at the moment of Pearl Harbor, proved a brilliant strategic political shift, as advertisers seized the rhetoric and imagery of sacrifice to validate prewar goals of self-defense and expansion.

On the face of it, the saga of the War Advertising Council seems quite straightforward. According to a radio propaganda show sponsored by Wrigley's chewing gum in November 1945, it was a standard story of selfless sacrifice in which businessmen wholeheartedly lent their skills and high reputation to the war:

- Narrator:* There was advertising...winning a big place for itself in our national life...and there was American business...just as anxious as you were to use all its resources, all its knowledge and experience, to help win the war
- Businessman:* Then, our place in the effort is clear. We, who have by our advertising earned the confidence of the public, can use that advertising as a vehicle for the messages of the government to the people.
- Voices:* Right. That's the way to do it...

Businessman: ...Now—let’s prove we are worthy of the faith and trust given us. I say—ask the government to tell us *what* is needed—and *we’ll* take the information to the public—in *our own way!*

Narrator: That’s the way it happened,—that’s how the War Advertising Council Came into being.

Truth has never been the essence of the propagandist’s skill. In fact, in 1941 Madison Avenue was running scared. Mobilization demands were increasingly allowing manufacturers to sell effortlessly whatever they produced, removing the main rationale for big advertising budgets. Advertising representatives were also painfully aware that their reputation had taken a beating in the depression decade. They found it very easy to spook themselves by compiling long lists of “anti-advertising New Dealers” who had attacked “the accuracy and truth of advertising,” branded it an economic waste, or warned of its contribution to inflation. A “pessimistic miasma” descended on much of Madison Avenue at the prospect of such figures making do-or-die decisions on the fate of the advertising industry. As the “growing alarm” indicated, the war itself posed special threats that advertising was “going to be throttled.” Foremost among advertisers’ concerns was the question of whether the government would consider advertising a legitimate business expense for the purpose of corporate taxes and war contracts.

On the eve of Pearl Harbor, advertising trade journals overflowed with evidence of a siege mentality. One warned that “advertising is threatened today as it has never been threatened before.” Another concluded that “all of American industry is in a mental state like anticipating a trip to the dentist.” Sounding the alarm on the “imminence of the danger to all,” the president of the Association of National Advertisers called on the industry to create “a united front.” Rallying to the call that “the common cause ...is survival” (the pervasive martial imagery is all the more striking since the issue was not the nation’s survival, but the industry’s), the nation’s two main advertising associations summoned a joint meeting of 630 advertising, industry, and national media executives for November 1941. In that meeting one speaker after another stridently denounced the unfair and uninformed attacks on the industry. An influential group of “moderate” voices at this meeting talked of advertising’s potential social contributions in wartime. Those moderates brought in government speakers who took the edge off the meeting’s belligerent mood by announcing their desire to work with advertisers in furthering the war effort. Yet even the moderates compared advertisers to “His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition” and urged a commitment to winning “the war of business” by defending free enterprise and preparing “the Case for Advertising.”

The result of the conference was thus mixed. A consensus supported the need for advertisers to present a common front and to defend the advertising industry and the virtues of free enterprise. Yet some advertising executives feared that “a concerted campaign to preach the gospel of advertising at this juncture would fall on deaf or unfriendly ears” and advised that one essential part of the case for advertising was to “actively cooperate in solving national problems.” In the immediate aftermath of the conference, its key organizers began to plan a new “governing group of the new Advertising Council or whatever it is to be called” to make that case.

Then came Pearl Harbor. From a strategic point of view, it was a godsend, a ticket to respectability for a battered industry. As one advertising executive later recalled, “we

were losing” but “we were saved by the bell.” “Now advertising has a chance to redeem itself...to prove it has a right to exist,” a leading advertising journal rejoiced. The war provided “the greatest, the most golden, the most challenging opportunity ever to face American advertising,” adman Walter Weir proclaimed. “If we make advertising fight today, we’ll never again have to defend its place in our economy.” Government mobilization officials encouraged advertisers’ urge to serve, portraying it as a patriotic duty (though Donald Nelson, the “production czar,” rather menacingly added in an off-the-record meeting that advertisers might ultimately need to choose between closing down—in which case “your future chances of coming back are something less than doubtful”—or converting to war-related advertising, which would preserve skills and facilities for postwar survival).

Thus the advertising industry formed what became the War Advertising Council, a private organization—currently called the Ad Council—that has dominated American “public service” advertising ever since. Composed of volunteer representatives from major advertising agencies, large corporate advertisers, and the media, the War Advertising Council worked with such government agencies as the Office of War Information to plot out public information campaigns. By the war’s end, it had supervised well over a hundred campaigns, using donated space to push war bonds, blood drives, food conservation, labor recruitment, and other mobilization demands deemed worthy of advertising support—with a value in space and personnel estimated (by the advertisers themselves, admittedly no strangers to exaggeration) at over a billion dollars.

One would be ill advised to dismiss those donations as mere artifice and calculation. In urging advertisers to sponsor public service messages under the company name or to inject official war messages into their product pitches, the War Advertising Council drew upon strong strains of patriotism. Win-the-war appeals anchored the council’s efforts to gain industry cooperation.

Patriotic exhortation was of course paired with reminders that “public service advertising is shrewd business,” since hook-ins to the war enhanced the ad and the firm’s reputation. Shrewdness here was all-important; clients with no consumer goods to sell or no need to use advertising to sell their goods faced the “evaporation” of buyer and dealer loyalty. Advertising strategies shifted accordingly. One disarming solicitation for advertising explained, “Advertisers have but one thought in mind: post war ‘prestige.’ Not just ‘prestige,’—but ‘dollars and cents prestige,’ the kind that will reflect itself in actual sales in the future.” But how to maintain brand visibility without clashing with the wartime ethic of sacrifice and without creating unfulfillable product demands? Combining the company name with public service messages offered an answer, providing “momentum” to secure future sales and influence.

In the advertising industry, as in other sectors of American life, patriotism and public relations, sacrifice and self-interest intertwined. As one board member of the War Advertising Council put it, “Not for one minute is it necessary to say to an advertiser that he should try to win the war with his copy for the sake of winning the war.” Instead, the advertiser was urged “that he can best serve his own selfish interests” by sensitivity to public demands, including the demand for information on how to contribute to the war. The War Advertising Council, its leaders repeatedly boasted, had combined “sensible idealism with the profit motive” in a show of social responsibility “which brings rich returns to those who act on it.” That promise was an enduring part of the ethos of the Ad

Council. As its president explained in 1947, “True, you are casting your bread upon the waters—but it will return to you well buttered.”

With advertisers’ show of sacrifice, the feared government barriers to the growth of the advertising industry crumbled. Soon advertisers could display an honor roll of glowing commendations, emanating from Franklin Roosevelt on down, of the inspiring example advertisers had set in their support of the war effort. In May 1942 the Treasury Department, reliant on the War Advertising Council and private donations to promote its war bond campaigns, granted Madison Avenue what one trade journal later called “advertising’s Magna Charta under the tax laws.” This ruling’s generous interpretation of necessary and legitimate business expenses allowed full deduction of advertising costs from taxable incomes, even when firms had next to nothing to sell to ordinary consumers. With high excess-profits tax rates, that meant that the government was footing more than 80 percent of some companies’ advertising bills. Especially at these cut rates, goodwill advertising directed toward postwar sales, the continued allegiance of distributors, employee productivity, or political aims became a highly attractive investment.

Thus the predicted wartime freefall in advertising budgets never took place. Even in the face of vanished consumer markets and supply shortages, expenditures on advertising—especially advertising in nationwide media—rose substantially, much to the relief of the industry itself. Favorable government decisions allowing certain advertising expenses to be factored into war contract prices and protecting advertised brands by including advertising in regulators’ calculation of maximum allowable prices only bolstered the industry’s assurance that the once-feared government was “friendly,” “cooperative,” and “helpful.” “The important thing,” admen exulted, “is that people *do* give us credit for doing the job.” The council predicted all along that its show of sacrifice would reverse the antiprofitteering and antiadvertising attitudes that the industry had faced before Pearl Harbor, and the war indeed sharply raised the prestige of advertisers in particular and business in general.

One would be well advised to take with a grain of salt any inferences (some tastefully “planted” by the council in the trade and general press) of War Advertising Council credit for this shift. Broader economic and political trends virtually assured a rise in business prestige even as the war began. As a leading pollster who contributed to the wartime boom in industrial public relations proclaimed in February 1942, the “dramatic theme” of the American production miracle “calls forth the deepest and sincerest praise the people can bestow,” so that “out of this war should and can come renewed faith in individual enterprise and a lasting acclaim of the men who run the economic machine.” Given the extent to which the government actually underwrote this expansion, this arrogation of credit to business (so much in contrast to the declining public stock of union leaders, whose involvement in strikes allowed them to be cast in that most unforgivable of roles: subverters of war production) was a tribute to careful and effective wartime public relations. John Blum and others have pointed to the administration’s failure to forge a clear sense of the public purposes for which Americans were fighting and sacrificing, which left a vacuum that would be filled by private desires and conservative trends. Advertisers, newly legitimized by their “sacrifices” and empowered by their role as the chief messengers bearing government propaganda messages to the public, could thus press their own vision of war aims. As Frank Fox vividly demonstrates in his study of war advertisers, their depiction of American war aims in terms of an “American Way

of Life” that encompassed abundant consumption and an absence of labor conflict reinforced other factors that cemented the postwar reputation and influence of “free enterprise” and the advertisers who celebrated it.

The contrast to the humiliation of Roosevelt’s salary limitation order is instructive. In a political discourse in which the war came to be interpreted as a precursor of abundance and a protector of a harmonious “Americanism,” associations with rampant New Deal reformism and a class-tinged rhetoric of conflict could be deadly. Charges that salary limitation undermined economic incentive or smacked of communism and a capitulation to unions thus hit home. Despite the popularity of Roosevelt’s executive order, the ideological legitimacy of the arguments against it allowed congressmen to repeal a still-popular measure without fear of effective political retribution. The limited and discredited union influence on public opinion only clinched the defeat of salary limitation. Though workers might seek evidence that their sacrifices were matched by management’s, their power to extract this equivalency through the political process had diminished.

The importance of this broader context for the politics of sacrifice emerges clearly in the contrast between American developments and home front politics in Great Britain. One could make a persuasive logical case that a country under fire, as Britain was then, does not have the luxury of the “you first” mentality or the political positioning associated with the politics of sacrifice in the United States. In terms of sacrifice, after all, Britons made a virtue out of a necessity, while Americans could afford to make a necessity out of a virtue. Though British casualties and disruptions of life as usual paled beside those of such combatants as the Soviet Union and Germany, the war’s toll on Britain’s home front—the Victory coffee made of ground acorns, the scarcity of everything from soap to saucepans, “the dull dismal drudgery” of everyday life, on top of the bombings that killed sixty-one thousand civilians, damaged one-third of the nation’s homes, and forced mass evacuations of London—stands in emphatic contrast to American conditions. Throughout the war, many Britons defined their essential strength as a people by these mutual sacrifices; the mind-set was expressed in Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill’s pronouncement that “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” The characteristic understatement and humor in British propaganda, which seemingly took for granted an indomitable British spirit of sacrifice amid menacing peril, differs markedly from the tone of American propaganda, full of bluster, high emotion, guilt over the greater sacrifices of soldiers, and other techniques appropriate to a country virtually compelled to fight the war “on imagination alone.” Given the lesser sense of urgency in the United States (which was geographically, economically, and even psychologically an ocean away from the battlefield), it is no wonder—the argument could continue—that Americans found political maneuvering room to manipulate images of sacrifice and to bargain over mobilization demands.

That line of reasoning is consistent, but it is wrong. A more careful comparison between Britain and the United States shatters the assumption that only the United States experienced political jockeying, while casting a revealing light on the contrasting balances of forces in the two countries. One fact critical to understanding the British home front is that Churchill felt compelled to make concessions to attach the minority Labour party—which, though few would have predicted its end-of-the-war landslide victory, was clearly on the rise—to his governing coalition. The implications of that

situation for the politics of sacrifice were profound. Labour forces seized the initiative in the all-important battle that advertisers waged so well in the United States: sculpting the political agenda by defining the purposes for which people were sacrificing. While Americans fought for the “American way of life,” the British spoke of a “people’s war” for a postwar world offering expanded social programs, security, and equity.

A significant effect of the British “people’s war” mentality is that the phrase “equality of sacrifice,” which was at the core of arguments for salary limitation in the United States, cropped up more commonly in British debates, particularly in the speeches of the Labour party members. The effective use of comparative sacrifice themes emerges clearly in the debate in late May and June 1940 over the new coalition government’s imposition of a 100 percent tax rate on corporate excess profits.

As a pure economic proposition, confiscatory tax rates make little sense, since they minimize incentive to produce while maximizing the temptation to avoid tax. But as with Roosevelt’s salary ceiling proposal, the law’s rationale was political, rather than financial. Early in the war, alarming reports recorded “a feeling among certain sections of the public that ‘everything is not fair and equal and that therefore our sacrifices are not worth while’”; such sentiments placed a premium on dramatizing the equitable distribution of wartime burdens. Commenting ruefully on public sensitivity to what even he considered “unseemly” business profiteering, a leading Tory mobilization official worried that the public’s willingness to “accept hardship,” so essential to the successful prosecution of the war, would be undermined by the “social grievance” that “the only reason of it is to line the pockets of some individual.” Fearing low worker morale, many warned of an “outburst of industrial unrest” if domestic problems were ignored. If people were compelled to “suffer these reductions in their standards of living, they must be convinced that they are doing it” with a goal of economic democracy that could justify their sacrifices.

These concerns reached a fever pitch in May 1940, on the eve of the Dunkirk evacuation. Recognizing the desperate need for Labour party help in reallocating labor to weapons production, the newly appointed prime minister Churchill had enlisted Ernest Bevin, Britain’s top union leader, as his minister of labor. Bevin almost immediately received an unprecedented parliamentary authorization to direct workers to war employment. But he subordinated compulsion to a “grand design...to carry the assent of ‘labour.’” The excess-profits tax fit neatly into this strategy. By seeming to confirm that “wealth as well as labour” was being placed “at the service of the nation,” the levy on all profits in excess of 6 percent of capital was deemed “a most wholesome clearing of the air...to make labour throw itself heart and soul into the war effort.” It thus facilitated a political “compromise”: Labour party legitimization of sometimes unpalatable mobilization measures, paired with enhanced Labour influence in guiding mobilization and shaping home front goals.

The long-standing class consciousness of British workers posed a dual threat: the social and economic threat of a work force inclined to define its interest as separate from the government’s and the focused political threat of the Labour party, which could vent workers’ grievances. This challenge helps explain the British concern with social service schemes, such as the Beveridge report, that “in a sense, sanctified the nation’s wartime sacrifices” by catering to aspirations for a postwar society in which a certain “equality of sacrifice” would continue. The “rhetoric of association between war sacrifice and peace-

time reward” bolstered efforts to stave off class resentments and buck up public morale. Richard M. Titmuss went so far as to generalize from this British experience that the demands of mass cooperation, participation, and sacrifice in modern total wars necessitate social policy actions to reduce inequalities.

The pinched wartime and immediate postwar expansion of the American welfare state presents an obvious exception to this “Titmuss thesis,” an exception that impels greater attention to differing levels of “sacrifice” and to the contrasting political contexts of British and American war aims. Yet these differences should not obscure intriguing parallels in the symbolic and strategic elements of the politics of sacrifice. These parallel strategic considerations emerge, for example, in the report of a Labour party M.P. and former coal miners’ union president on a June 1940 miners’ conference. The miners’ representatives had pledged themselves to sacrifice for the war effort. But they demanded a 100 percent excess-profits tax as an essential counterpart to that commitment to assure that their efforts would not redound to the mineowners’ profit. “In the interests of the nation we have asked the miners to give everything for the nation, and they will do so,” he declared, “but if it goes out from this House that we are giving the mineowners more profits, that will undermine anything that we are doing.”

The close correspondence to American arguments for income limitation is unmistakable. There is one telling distinction, however: Such arguments won in Britain and lost in the United States. Members of Parliament fell over themselves in endorsing the principle of taxing away all excess profits and of subordinating profits to patriotism. Amendments to soften the effects of the 100 percent rate through administrative adjustments and postwar credits were challenged and temporarily withdrawn, for fear of compromising the intended message of universal sacrifice. (The adjustments and credits were reinserted in succeeding laws while leaving the “principle” of a 100 percent rate intact—underlining the tax’s symbolic function.) The results shocked some American conservatives. The financial editor of the *New York Sun* found it “difficult for many Americans to understand how Britain can expect anyone to make the tremendous extra productive effort required by war without some stimulus other than the vague one that it is necessary to save the country.”

A similar difference in political context is apparent in British advertising. The British and American cases are not strictly comparable, partly because government restrictions and shortages of newsprint forced drastic cutbacks in advertising space in Britain. The government became Britain’s largest advertiser, paying for its own ads; filtering government propaganda messages through private business sponsors seemed dubious indeed in the context of a “people’s war” (“I shouldn’t need to be told what I am fighting for...by a group of individuals who by so doing hope to line their pockets,” one scandalized Briton observed in explaining why American advertising “would not succeed over here”). Much more than admen in the United States, British advertisers felt besieged. Their ranks depleted by the war’s impact on this “most depressed of industries,” British advertisers at times found themselves locked out of positions of government influence and reduced to the status of “social ‘unfortunates’” for whom the mere mention of their occupation might “rais[e] a frown or arous[e] an exclamation of piteous surprise.” Characterized as “vested interests” from a profit-obsessed “bad old world” and faced with pressure from Parliament and government offices to curb wasteful advertising, they looked longingly at the cozy relations with government secured by their

prospering American counterparts. Feeling desperate, aggrieved, and unappreciated, British advertisers combined limited efforts to gain goodwill through public service campaigns with a dogged commitment to “carry on” with ads that maintained trade names and protected postwar markets. Yet such efforts betrayed a defensive, even apologetic, mindset. Advertising that exploited associations with the war without serving a clear war information function might well be “open to criticism” as “a public scandal.” The trade journal of the British gas industry, for example, conceded that “advertising which has no higher motive than to raise the prestige of the industry it serves certainly cannot justify its existence in time of war,” since this would constitute an “unwarranted waste of money, labour, and raw materials, all treasonable offences.”

American advertisers would have found such use of the term “treasonable” impolitic and unnecessary. They recognized the delicacy of the task of manipulating images of sacrifice and war contributions. They operated, however, in an environment where the “miracle” of production and promised consumption could take center stage, whereas in Britain the scene was set by special demands for coalitional concessions to Labour party forces and back-to-the-wall displays of solidarity to avert chaos and defeat. Hence, in the United States, the interest of the “free enterprise system” and the “American way of life” increasingly pushed aside demands for “equality of sacrifice” and a “people’s war.” American advertisers were in a better position to master the politics of sacrifice.

The mystique of home front sacrifice did indeed permeate American life and politics in World War II. But changes in the vocabulary of political obligation did not imply automatic or open-ended commitment to the exercise of civic responsibility. The central role of sacrifice in wartime political discourse might have threatened “free enterprise” values, as the push for “equality of sacrifice” through income limitation seemed to suggest. But in the struggle over the meaning of sacrifice, at least as judged from the foregoing case studies, ascendant political forces were positioned to curb its subversive potential and channel it in more established political directions, so that much of the political topography could survive in recognizable form. Sacrifice proved symbolically malleable. It could justify mobilization programs or policy positions, revitalize deep-rooted political and economic values, mask privileged status or shield it from political challenge, or project war aims that helped reshape the contours of American political culture. The long-term consequences of this manipulation of symbolic content were not negligible; the privatizing of the wartime propaganda apparatus and war aims through the advertising industry, for example, resonated in the postwar consumer culture long after the war’s end.

Recognition of the politics of sacrifice penetrates the surface of American home front conflict. Further studies—both comparative and domestic in focus—are needed to trace the shifting and contested meanings of sacrifice over the course of the war and to pinpoint the specific appeals used to solicit citizen cooperation in such intrusive mobilization programs as rationing, the mass income tax, or wage and price freezes. Broader comprehension of the political meanings of home front sacrifice should sharpen the historical definition of the American sense of obligation to community and nation, and of the standards of equity required to activate that civic responsibility. But the course of American economic mobilization, and the allocation of its blessings and burdens, depended less on underlying conceptions of civic responsibility than on continuing

negotiation and manipulation. On the home front as on the battlefield, victory came not only to the tactically sophisticated, but to those with power and vital positions that allowed them to determine the arena of conflict. In the home front war, the politics of sacrifice prevailed.