

The American West transformed :  
the impact of the Second World War

Gerald D. Nash.

GERALD D. NASH

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American West  
Transformed:

*The Impact of the Second World War*

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## Preface

This book has a simple theme: that the Second World War transformed the American West. No other single influence on the region—not the Mexican War, not the Civil War, not World War I, nor even the Great Depression—brought such great and cataclysmic changes to the West. It transformed a colonial economy based on the exploitation of raw materials into a diversified economy that included industrial and technological components. It spawned another significant population boom and brought unprecedented expansion to most western cities. It greatly diversified the ethnic and racial composition of the West, particularly by encouraging the influx of large numbers of black Americans and of Spanish-speaking people. It opened up new opportunities for Native Americans at the same time that it created new problems for them. In addition, it unveiled new directions for science in the West and served to quicken and deepen the cultural life of the region. In four short years the war brought a maturation to the West that in peacetime might have taken generations to accomplish. It transformed an area with a self-image that emphasized colonialism into one boasting self-sufficiency and innovation.

Such a transformation should be viewed not as an isolated event but as one of the crucial turning points in the broad sweep of western history. In the development of the region during the last four hundred years only a few major events have had such an extraordinary impact. One such turning point was the arrival of the first European explorers and settlers to the region beginning in the sixteenth century. Another was the California Gold Rush of 1849 and related land and mining rushes in the trans-Mississippi West in the ensuing two decades. These promoted a major population movement into the area, followed by intensive settlement and development. The lure of

gold drew the Spaniards and other Europeans to the West as explorers who introduced European culture and institutions. The search for minerals and land induced Americans to become developers who undertook the first large-scale settlement of the region. In World War II Americans transformed the West to a more mature stage, one in which it began to shed its colonial status. It constituted another major watershed in the region's history.

In evaluating the impact of the Second World War on the West I have attempted to place the subject within the broader context of the major influences that have shaped the lives of westerners in the twentieth century. Since 1890 several generations of historians obsessed with the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner have emphasized the dominant influence of the frontier and of free land as a determining force in the development of the West. Whatever merit such theories may have had to explain growth patterns during the nineteenth century, consideration of the environmental factor alone cannot be conducive to an understanding of twentieth-century developments. By this time, influences such as technological changes, demographic movements, federal government policies, the changing values of Americans, and also wars and depressions and a growing concern for national security were becoming far more significant than they had been a hundred years earlier in determining the parameters of western history. The total impact of these major influences on the West in the twentieth century still awaits scholarly studies in the future. The present work seeks to make an initial contribution to this broader problem by demonstrating how wartime experiences changed the nature of western life.

A brief note on the organization of this book is in order. Its main focus is on the social and cultural impact of the war, since I expect to analyze economic influences in greater depth in a separate volume. In the present work I include a brief sketch of economic changes only as these provide a context for social and cultural developments. When the war transformed the western economy, it set another population boom into motion. The opening up of new job opportunities drew millions of Americans westward, most of them settling in urban areas. Ethnic and racial diversity was characteristic of the wartime migration, and succeeding chapters deal with the particular experiences of minorities. The rapid peopling of the West in wartime also stimulated cultural development. As one haven for refugees who constituted the cream of European intelligentsia, the region profited from their presence as they contributed significantly to a flowering of cultural life and institutions. And the war also hastened the unprecedented expansion of scientific research which made the region one of the sci-

ence centers of the nation. Cumulatively, the war wrought a social and cultural transformation.

But it should be emphasized that this work is designed to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. Many aspects of life in the West during the Second World War remain to be explored and are barely touched upon in this study. This is true of the experiences of women in the West during this period, a major subject not yet treated with the depth it deserves. Nor have I delved deeply into particular subregions in the West, or into the history of Texas, subjects that in themselves require major books. My hope is that the present work will stimulate the completion of detailed studies about these and other topics.

The West discussed in this work mainly encompasses eleven states: California, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Montana, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico. Other states in the trans-Mississippi West, such as Kansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota on the Plains, Texas and Oklahoma in the Southwest, and Alaska and Hawaii share many characteristics with the other eleven, but they receive less emphasis because of the vastness of the subject. My own purpose is to provide a suggestive overview with appropriate illustrations to chart the broad dimensions of the impact of the Second World War on the West.

In the preparation of this book I have incurred many debts and obligations. A grant from the University of New Mexico Research Allocations Committee enabled me to inaugurate the project. A Fellowship from the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, made it possible for me to exploit the riches of that great institution. In 1981 I was fortunate to receive a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Without this generous support it would not have been possible for me to visit libraries and archives in fourteen western states to gather materials for this study. Special thanks are due to archivists and librarians who made materials available at the Colorado Historical Society, Special Collections at Arizona State University, the Oregon State Historical Society, the Bancroft Library at the University of California, the Federal Records Center in South San Francisco, the Nevada State Archives, Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles, the Federal Records Center at Laguna Beach, the Library of the Psychoanalytic Institute in Los Angeles, Special Collections at the University of Montana, the University of New Mexico and the Eugene C. Barker Library at the University of Texas. No adequate appreciation can express the debt I owe to the efficient staff at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., especially Richard Crawford and Jerry Hess, and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Con-

gress. Essential materials were also provided by the staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, and the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. Without the cooperation of the professionals in the archives the work of historians of twentieth century America would be more difficult. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my wife and family for their patience and indulgence during the course of my preoccupation with this project. I alone am responsible for the final product.

*Albuquerque, N.M.*

# The American West Transformed

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Part I

Before the Transformation,

1939–1941

# The West on the Eve of War, 1939–1941

In an impassioned plea, the well-known historian and publicist Walter P. Webb sought in 1937 to arouse the consciousness of his fellow westerners to their colonial status in relation to the East (or the North, as he termed it). "I believe," wrote Webb, "that there have developed in this country three fairly distinct cultures . . . each with its own mores, ways of life, and culture complexes." Extending his argument further, he continued: "Back of the North's present [1937] might and behind its increasing control of . . . the West is its undisputed command of the mighty forces of the industrial revolution in America. . . . At the present time the North owns 80 or 90 per cent of the wealth of the United States. . . . The economic imperial control by the North over the . . . West . . . grew stronger as the political imperialism grew weaker."<sup>1</sup> Webb was only stating what many westerners felt in their hearts, namely that as America's youngest region the West still occupied a subordinate or colonial status in relation to the older states of the American commonwealth. That status implied a significant economic dependence on the industrial East, a minority position in the American political arena, and on the importation of almost every aspect of culture from the East.<sup>2</sup> As a colony the West was also closely tied to federal largesse emanating from the nation's capital. On the eve of World War II, therefore, when the national mood was still largely shaped by the Great Depression, the West too, like a barometer, reflected the cautious and hesitant outlook about the future that swept America as a result of the economic crisis.

This cautious mood pervaded most aspects of life in the West during this period. The 1930s had been truly an era of limited expectations. That was reflected in the western economy, in the decline of population growth, and in its cultural life. The nation's leading



economists—particularly those of the stagnation school—belabored the myth that the disappearance of the western frontier had greatly restricted further economic growth in the United States. “It is not possible, I think,” wrote Professor Alvin H. Hansen of Harvard University, a leading economist of the period, “to make even an approximate estimate of the proportion of the new capital created in the nineteenth century which was a direct consequence of the opening of new territory. . . . What proportion of new capital formation in the United States went each year into the Western frontier we do not know, but it must have been very considerable. . . . The opening of new territory and the growth of population were together responsible for a very large fraction—possibly somewhere near one-half—of new capital formation in the nineteenth century.” And then he added, reflecting the pessimism of his day: “These outlets for new investments are rapidly being closed. . . . This movement ended in the Great Depression.”<sup>3</sup> The same assumption, merely stated in a different context, had been articulated by Webb in his indictment of western colonialism: “If the frontier was a dominant force until 1890, the *absence* of the frontier has just been as dominant *since* 1890. . . . The frontier was a powerful stimulant injected into the veins of democracy to raise its spirit and speed its growth. Now that the effects are dying out, democracy cannot escape a hangover. . . . The closing of the frontier brought fundamental changes and compelled the government . . . to substitute another form.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, while an economist like Hansen rationalized federal deficit spending policies and Keynesianism on the basis of restricted economic growth due to the alleged closing of the frontier, a historian like Webb arrived at similar conclusions through historical analysis. Both were perpetuating the myth of the closing of the frontier in 1890 to bolster their analysis of contemporary depression problems.

Within four years this analysis was to be shattered by wartime experiences which transformed the erstwhile mood of pessimism into an undaunted optimism. Writing in 1946, Wendell Berge, a prominent corporation lawyer who was then Assistant Solicitor in the Department of Justice in charge of anti-trust problems, noted that “before 1941 it was assumed that the passing of a geographic frontier also meant the disappearance of economic opportunities. The realities of war compelled a reorientation of our economic potentials and our attitudes. The economy was not mature or senile, but asleep, unaware of its own powers in technological progress and in terms of new fields waiting to be explored.”<sup>5</sup> But who could foresee such portentous changes in 1941?

For on the eve of World War II the West still occupied a colonial status. In the classical mold of the relation between a colony and the

mother country the region was shipping its raw materials out to be processed in the East—which also retained a major portion of the profits derived from their fabrication. Agricultural and mining industries still provided the major income for the West. Manufactures were extremely restricted, accounting for less than 5 percent of the region’s income in 1940. That was in part due to decisions made by Wall Street bankers and the Interstate Commerce Commission in Washington who imposed discriminatory freight rates and the basing point system on the West.<sup>6</sup> Just how restrictive such policies were in retarding western economic growth was reflected in the award of federal war contracts in the incipient stages of mobilization during 1940 and early 1941. Of the major defense contracts awarded by the Army and Navy Departments from June 1, 1940, to February 28, 1941, the thirteen states receiving the smallest amounts were all located in the West. On the other hand, of the thirteen states receiving the largest amounts of war orders California and Washington were the only western states to be included—and that was largely related to their aircraft production.<sup>7</sup> The situation was similar in the award of defense installations financed by the federal government. Of the twelve states which received no such funds during this period only two were east of the Mississippi River. As Chester C. Davis, a prominent member of the National Defense Advisory Commission, said in an address to the Southern Governors’ Conference in New Orleans on March 15, 1941:

I was somewhat shocked a few days ago to see a tabulation of the distribution of defense orders to date. . . . Included in the tabulation were \$ eleven and a half billions of prime contracts awarded between June 15 of last year and February 15 of this year. . . . Of this vast total . . . 80 per cent has gone to 62 companies (mostly in the East). There is rich food for thought in these figures. I believe they are closely related to the mediocre success we have had in apportioning . . . this new defense industry to the states.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the West in 1941 was mainly a raw materials producer, with few manufactures of its own—with a prime dependence on the East.

It is true, of course, that throughout the 1930s dependence on the East was being lessened as the federal government assumed an increasingly important role in the western economy and poured increasing amounts of capital into the region. New Deal programs had a pervasive impact on the West. Between 1933 and 1939 the federal investment there totaled more than \$7,582,434,000, according to one careful estimate.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, public funds were replacing private capital in fostering development of the trans-Mississippi area. That shifted some attention of westerners from Wall Street to Washington, D.C., although it did little to change the colonial mentality.

The mood of restricted expectations in 1939 and 1940 was intensified by continued hard times for western farmers. On the Great Plains, farmers had just lived through one of the most trying times within memory. In North Dakota in 1933 per capita income dropped to \$145 (compared to the U.S. average of \$375). One-third of that state's farmers had faced the agony of living through the foreclosure of their farms and homes. The number of farms declined, farm population dropped by 17 percent, and more than 120,000 people were forced to leave the state to look for a livelihood elsewhere. One-half of the population was on relief. Neighboring states such as South Dakota and Montana found themselves in a similar position—although they were to reach unprecedented production records just a few years later.<sup>10</sup> In the Rocky Mountain area the impact of the agricultural depression was not quite so severe, but in states like Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico farm income in 1939 was considerably below levels a decade earlier. West Coast farmers had recovered from some of the most severe effects of the depression but had hardly made a full recovery on the eve of war.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, by 1939 some of the terrible weather conditions of the past decade which had plagued farmers on the Plains were becoming memories. In that year a significant improvement in weather conditions began which was to extend for more than another decade.<sup>12</sup>

Like farmers, western cattlemen had just lived through a difficult decade. In fact, between 1936 and 1939 per capita meat consumption in the United States continued to decline as Americans faced continuing unemployment and depression, from 68.9 pounds of beef and veal annually in 1936 to 62.3 pounds by the end of 1939. Although prices for beef improved slightly between 1936 and 1939 this was not sufficient to lift most cattle growers out of the depression. Their net incomes continued to remain low. In 1938, one survey revealed, two-thirds of the cattlemen on the Great Plains earned less than \$1,000 annually, an amount which contemporary economists considered to be a bare subsistence income.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, in 1938 and in 1939 hordes of grasshoppers destroyed significant stretches of rangelands, further adding to the woes of western cattlemen. Small operators were the most vulnerable victims of economic crisis and were forced out in increasing numbers. That was also reflected in the increasing size of family-owned ranches on the Plains.<sup>14</sup> The mood of the cattlemen and women on the Plains in the years just before Pearl Harbor was therefore somber and cautious.

Similarly, western miners saw few bright spots on the horizon in the late 1930s. Revenues from mining operations steadily declined during the decade and made only a limited recovery. Arizona's copper industry—providing fully one-half of the nation's needs—

reflected the sluggishness of the national economy. Between 1930 and 1940 its production steadily declined.<sup>15</sup> In 1939 the immediate outlook was still bleak. A hopeful sign in that year was Congressional enactment of the Strategic Minerals Act—a measure which westerners had advocated with great enthusiasm. The act authorized the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the U.S. Geological Survey to engage in accelerated prospecting for new minerals sources and to provide scientific information for prospectors, particularly small operators. Led by Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada, Congressional delegations from western states rallied to support this early phase of the national mobilization program.<sup>16</sup>

Western oil producers were also still chafing under the hardships of the depression. Between 1936 and 1939 the production of motor fuels and fuel oil barely increased. Sales continued to be dull; the retail price of gasoline actually declined during that three year period. Meanwhile, the consumption of gasoline by passenger cars remained on a plateau in the decade after 1929. At the same time, exports of American petroleum products declined. In 1939 crude oil exports from the United States were lower than in the preceding year. And this was true of total petroleum exports from the United States as well.<sup>17</sup> On the eve of war the western oil industry had been mired in stagnation and depression for a decade, hampered by shrinking market demands both at home and abroad. No wonder that the mood of the industry, as reflected in its trade journals, was gloomy.

Just before World War II, manufacturing in the West was extremely limited, contributing no more than 8 percent to the value added by manufactures in the United States, as Table 1 indicates (see Appendix). California was the most important manufacturing state in the West. Its production of petroleum products, leisure clothes, automobile assembly, and small machinery made it eighth in national ranking of manufacturing states. But elsewhere in the West manufacturing activities were insignificant. South Dakota's contribution to the nation's manufacturing income in 1939 was but a mere \$19.9 million, and that outpaced New Mexico's contribution of \$8.7 million.<sup>18</sup> Nor did westerners profit from expansion inspired by slow mobilization during 1939 and 1940. Almost all of the new defense contracts awarded by Washington went to large business enterprises. But in the West almost all manufacturing was performed by small scale operations. Thus, the West seemed to be losing out again as new economic opportunities beckoned.

Some cities—such as Los Angeles—became so alarmed over this development that in the spring of 1940 the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce established a special office in Washington, D.C. with the specific purpose of soliciting government business for its clients. As

James Ingrebretsen, manager of this office, explained, 4,000 firms in the Los Angeles area employed fewer than 25,000 employees, and 850 other businesses fewer than 50 people each.<sup>19</sup> Just as small businesses during the depression suffered more than large firms, so they experienced greater difficulties in securing their share of federal contracts. Delegations of chamber of commerce representatives from Montana and North Dakota who journeyed to the nation's capital in search of federal contracts dejectedly returned empty-handed.<sup>20</sup> In the rush toward mobilization these small western businesses seemed to pale in the competition with bidders from larger corporations.

Many westerners felt that, apart from the Great Depression, institutional barriers erected by easterners were a major stumbling block to economic expansion. In particular, discriminatory freight rates charged by railroads and the basing point system commonly used by some eastern industries were real impediments to western economic growth. This had been true since the early 1880s when railroads controlled by eastern financiers first established a system of freight rates that discriminated against western manufactures. Over the years the Interstate Commerce Commission enshrined these schedules in administrative regulations. At the same time many major industries—steel and cement provided notable examples—adopted the basing point system.<sup>21</sup> Under this scheme they calculated delivery costs from base cities in the East, whether or not in fact their products were shipped from these base points. The net effect of this system—created in the late nineteenth century when most of the trans-Mississippi West was still a sparsely populated region—was to discourage local manufactures in the West since manufacturers there could reap no competitive advantage over their eastern competitors by being close to the local markets.

This increasingly anomalous situation prompted a chorus of western (and southern) protests which grew louder during the Great Depression. Governors of various southern states met formally in 1934, 1935, and 1937 to press their case with the Interstate Commerce Commission. In 1938 they also secured the open support of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>22</sup> In the following year Representative Robert Ramspeck (Georgia) announced that he planned to organize a western-southern bloc in Congress to assure remedial legislation. Appropriate committees dealing with interstate commerce in both the House and in the Senate held hearings in February and March, 1939 during which a broad spectrum of westerners and southerners presented their complaints.<sup>23</sup>

Although Congress did not enact desired legislation in that year, the anger of those who had testified and the determination of Congressmen and Senators from the South and West had a decided im-

pact on the members of the Interstate Commerce Commission. They not only stepped up their activities concerning regional freight rate discrimination but disposed of pending cases in favor of western and southern interests.<sup>24</sup> Before the year was out Congress enacted a resolution directing the ICC also to begin an inquiry into regional freight rate differentials. Meanwhile, on July 29, 1939, the ICC inaugurated the most far-reaching investigation in its history—an inquiry into all class rates east of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>25</sup> At the same time Senator Harry S. Truman—together with his colleague, Burton Wheeler of Montana—introduced a bill in the Senate on March 30, 1939, which amended the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 by prohibiting discrimination by railroads against regions, districts, or territories. Known as the Transportation Act of 1940, the measure received President Roosevelt's signature on September 18, 1940.<sup>26</sup> These were the first hopeful signs in over half a century for westerners hoping to throw off the bonds of eastern corporate and financial domination.

The sluggishness of the western colonial economy during the 1930s was clearly reflected in a notable slowing of the population influx into the region during that decade. In 1940 California could look back on ten years that saw the slowest rate of population increase since the Gold Rush, no more than about 21 percent.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere in the West, the population growth was proportionately small, with significant losses due to outmigration experienced by states on the Great Plains. North and South Dakota each lost about 15 percent of their citizens during the period, while a similar outflow of people occurred in Montana and Nebraska. Rocky Mountain states like Wyoming lost one-third of their inhabitants during the decade.<sup>28</sup> To a considerable extent these losses were due to the movement of individuals from such distressed areas further west. The Dust Bowl states of the Southwest contributed to this stream of emigrants on their way to the Pacific Coast. This was clearly a distress migration, prompted not so much by economic opportunities on the West Coast as by the severity of the depression and a rather futile search for jobs. Since the majority of newcomers arrived by automobile, their geographical background was more varied than in previous years. Most came from towns and cities, not from rural areas. The fictional account of the Joad family from Oklahoma described by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* notwithstanding, a majority of the migrants were not farmers but small shopkeepers, tradesmen, and people employed in service industries.<sup>29</sup> That was to be significant once the national war mobilization program increased its momentum after Pearl Harbor because the resident population of the West was well geared not only to urban living but to jobs and occupations familiar in an urban setting.

The slowing of the westward population movement was reflected in conditions that prevailed in many western towns and cities. Just before the outbreak of World War II municipal officials looked back on a decade during which they were preoccupied with economic crisis and unemployment rather than with growth and expansion. Colorado's cities, for example, had grown little. Population in such cities as Denver and Colorado Springs remained constant and the outlook of their businessmen for the future was gloomy. Young people were leaving the state in search of better opportunities elsewhere. By 1940 the Chamber of Commerce of Colorado Springs was particularly desperate as the flow of tourist traffic registered a sharp decline. In Arizona, Phoenix had profited from slow growth of the past three decades, but its population of 65,000 in 1940 hardly made it a major population center. It was a lethargic retirement community as was Tucson, its southern neighbor, which had 37,000 inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Las Vegas, Nevada, was a sleepy little town of 8,422 souls just before Pearl Harbor. Its chamber of commerce was hoping at the time that the recent completion of Lake Mead near Boulder Dam would bring in a modest influx of families and tourists. Reno's population of 21,000 remained stable during the 1930s as that city enjoyed the distinction of being the largest urban area in the state.<sup>31</sup> If coastal cities had larger populations, they were hardly bustling. San Diego counted 190,000 people, and Los Angeles and San Francisco had increased little since the Great Crash.<sup>32</sup> Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, remained remarkably stable during that period, reflecting the condition of many smaller towns in the Pacific Northwest's interior. On a national scale, few urban communities in the West ranked as major cities. In fact, in the census of 1940 the only western cities to rank among the largest twenty-five urban areas in the United States were San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Denver. Although the West contained one-half of the area of the United States, it had as yet only 14 percent of its population.<sup>33</sup>

Western towns and cities had a diverse population in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds, yet minority groups tended to be acquiescent and often almost invisible. Most lived in self-contained neighborhoods and rarely ventured into the mainstream of American life. They were generally not accepted in the dominant business elites of their community, were largely excluded from the social life around them, and lived in a cultural milieu of their own. This was true of the very small black population in western urban enclaves, of the more numerous Spanish-speaking peoples in the barrios, and of the isolated Chinese- and Japanese-Americans living their lives in tightly knit islands amidst their more numerous American neighbors. Even more isolated was the American Indian population of the West, con-

centrated on remote reservations usually far removed from large towns and cities.

In 1940 few black Americans lived in the West. According to the census of that year they comprised less than 5 percent of the population. The Watts area of Los Angeles was typical of black communities in the West. The inhabitants lived quietly and unobtrusively, eager not to call special attention to themselves. Except for those who worked as sleeping car porters on the Santa Fe or Southern Pacific Railroads they were largely restricted to menial or unskilled jobs. Irrespective of their training, discrimination kept blacks out of white collar jobs or those requiring special training and skilled trades. Social integration of blacks with whites was extremely rare, and schools were segregated in fact if not in law. Segregation was a common pattern. As a minuscule minority in the community, they exercised little political influence. Despite variations, similar conditions prevailed in other western cities such as Portland, Denver, and Tucson.<sup>34</sup>

Spanish-speaking people were the most numerous minority in the Southwest. California, like Texas, had a large Spanish-speaking population, numbering nearly 1 million, only a small number of whom were descendants of the original Spanish or Mexican settlers of California. The majority were either descendants of Mexican immigrants or immigrants themselves. By 1940 more than 600,000 lived in the barrio of East Los Angeles, with substantial concentrations also in Denver, Tucson, El Paso, San Antonio, and smaller towns along the Texas-Mexican border. In New Mexico they lived clustered in small, rural communities, many in the northern part of the state. Most were poor, engaged as they were in marginal farming. The minority who lived in towns and cities were largely unskilled or semi-skilled workers. If the median income for the state of New Mexico in 1940 was less than that for the United States as a whole, it was largely due to the 40 percent of its population that was of Hispanic origins.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1930s smaller Spanish-speaking communities also sprang up in towns throughout Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Montana, as migratory field workers drifted there during off-peak seasons. Most Spanish-speaking Americans worked at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, providing labor for the sugar beet growers of the West, railroad track maintenance on the Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and other railroads, or in service occupations. Mexican-Americans occupied the bottom rungs on the economic ladder of income scales in the West. Suspended between their native Mexican cultural tradition and dominant American cultural values, they lived within their own unique ethnic enclaves in the barrios. Most experienced discrimination in employment—and in the use of public facilities such as housing, swimming pools, restaurants, and movie theaters, and places of

entertainment. Although Mexican-Americans as individuals may have chafed under such restrictions, nevertheless they had little political consciousness or influence as a group. Anxious not to displease, they bore their burdens in silence.<sup>36</sup>

Within the Spanish-speaking communities social cohesion was tight. Language, cultural values, and an emphasis on family provided Hispanic-Americans in the Southwest with a life style that differed from that of their Anglo neighbors. That close-knit society was just beginning to foster a sense of political solidarity. It was reflected in the growth of LULAC (League of United Latin-American Citizens) to represent their interests. This organization gave strong support to U.S. Senator Dennis Chavez (N.M.), the only member of the U.S. Senate who was of Hispanic-American background. Elected in 1936 as an ardent New Dealer, he was by 1940 in the process of making himself a national spokesman for Spanish-speaking westerners.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, a strong political consciousness was still in the future. Just before the war Hispanic-Americans were still an economically disadvantaged minority with their own distinct cultural traditions.

Western Indians were similarly outside the mainstream of American life. Isolated on their reservations, they were mired in poverty more grinding than that experienced by most other Americans at the time. Even those who were fortunate enough to own herds of sheep or cattle were fearful in 1939 and 1940 because the Office of Indian Affairs under Commissioner John S. Collier was then engaged in a forceful reduction of their herds to prevent overgrazing of the western ranges. With different language and cultural backgrounds than most Americans, Indians frequently failed to understand the purpose of many federal policies to which they often were vehemently opposed. But as they were painfully aware, their political power was minimal, for most even lacked the right to vote. The gulf between their life styles and that of the majority of Americans was so wide that assimilation seemed farfetched. Before the war, the American Indian was America's outsider, its most isolated minority with its own distinct cultural traditions.<sup>38</sup>

The more than 120,000 Japanese who lived in western cities tended to be concentrated in isolated racial enclaves that were dominated by leaders emphasizing traditional values and customs. Although most had been born in the United States, they remained largely unassimilated in American society and lived outside the mainstream of American life. That was true of the large Japanese-American colony in Los Angeles, which numbered 80,000, representing a majority of the Japanese in the United States.<sup>39</sup> It was also true of the Japanese-American community in San Francisco and of the smaller Japanese settlements in Sacramento, Portland, Oregon, and

Seattle. Their economic pursuits were largely limited to agriculture and landscaping, and to trade within the Japanese ethnic neighborhoods. Other occupations in the mainstream of American life were largely closed to them. Their social life centered around their own ethnic and cultural institutions within their mostly segregated communities. And as a political force in local or state governments their influence was minimal.<sup>40</sup> Maintaining a low profile, fearful of antagonizing their white neighbors, the Japanese lived quietly and unobtrusively, dependent on the sufferance of the majority.

The cultural life of the American West on the eve of World War II was still largely colonial, despite the invigorating effect of many of the New Deal's cultural programs during the Great Depression. Since the beginning of the twentieth century and the appearance of writers like Charles Lummis, westerners had been seeking to forge a distinct cultural life that would not only be independent of the East but would also reflect the unique elements of the western environment and the values which it engendered among the people. That effort took the form of regionalism during the 1920's which saw notable accomplishments in literature, folklore, art, architecture, music, and other cultural endeavors. These forms of cultural expression were strengthened by the various programs of the Works Progress Administration. Its writers program produced the famous guidebooks for individual states and encouraged the collection and publication of local and native folklore. The WPA theatre program provided an outlet for local dramatists and stimulated the production of plays with local motifs. The music program not only stimulated local musicians, but encouraged the collection of hitherto unpublished native folk-songs in the Southwest. The arts program resulted in innumerable murals in public buildings executed around local or regional themes. These varied federal programs during the 1930s did much to improve the quality as well as the quantity of western cultural activities.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted, however, that with few exceptions these were of a regional nature, and as yet received little national or international acclaim.

And Hollywood, the West's most visible dispenser of popular culture, was ending the decade with an emphasis on mass entertainment. Between 1935 and 1940 the films produced by Hollywood studios emphasized light, frothy entertainment and escapism. Driven by perceptions of what the American public would reward at the box office, Hollywood producers created a dream world in a variety of vehicles, including musicals, gangster films, and flimsy romances.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps a generation wracked by the depression needed escape from stark reality. The late 1930s were not a great age of filmmaking in Hollywood. Contemporary intellectuals were wont to sneer not only at the films

Hollywood produced, but also at what the film colony represented symbolically as an expression of culture—in the United States as a whole as well as the West.

On the eve of war, therefore, the American West was still very much an underdeveloped region, a colony dependent on the older East for much of its economic well being, for its population growth, and for its cultural sustenance. An economy based primarily on the exploitation of raw materials made the West dependent on eastern manufactures. The further development of sparsely populated areas of the West as well as the expansion of its towns and cities waited upon the return of prosperity to the industrial East. And the growth of cultural activities was largely dependent on the importation of eastern talent and ideas. It was hardly surprising that the mood of many westerners about the future in 1939 was somber and cautious, a mood of limited expectations.

But within four short years the West underwent a metamorphosis. Under the impact of war the horizons of westerners were transformed as they came to embrace an unbounded optimism about their future based on the expectation of unlimited possibilities for the region. The war transformed the erstwhile colonial economy. It prompted a vast new surge of population and triggered the dynamic growth of western cities. And it made Hollywood the propaganda capital of the free world and an increasingly distinguished cultural center. By 1945 the war had transformed the West and made it the pace-setting region of the nation. Just how this transformation was accomplished and how it changed so many aspects of western life is a story that will be detailed in the pages to follow.

## Part II

# The Transformation, 1941–1945

## The New West: War and Economic Transformation

Between Pearl Harbor and V-J Day the economy of many portions of the West underwent a profound transformation. The colonial economy of the region, heavily dependent on raw materials production before 1941, now became increasingly diversified and self-sufficient. Changes that would have taken more than a generation in peacetime were accelerated by war mobilization in a four-year period. Mobilization speeded up the activities of the extractive industries such as mining, accelerated industrial development, and ushered in what Daniel Bell has described as the post-industrial era.<sup>1</sup> As a region rich in natural resources the West profited from the nationwide demand for its raw materials as it had not for more than a decade during the depression. At the same time military demands stimulated the establishment and expansion of manufacturing and industrial assembly plants. Somewhat unexpectedly, the war crisis greatly spurred new aerospace and electronics industries in the West and, in their wake, a host of profitable new service industries so characteristic of the post-industrial society.<sup>2</sup> In short, as no other single event in the history of the West, the war stimulated economic growth. The erstwhile colony emerged from the war as an economic pace-setter for the nation.

How was this transformation accomplished? A major influence was the dynamism of the federal government, which invested at least \$40 billion in the West during wartime. More than ever, the West became a federal province. Federal monies poured in through the establishment of new factories and award of vast contracts for war materiel. At the same time the large-scale expansion of military installations—air and naval bases, supply depots and training camps—provided an extraordinary stimulus to the regional economy. It would be inaccurate to say that the federal government was solely responsi-

ble for the spurt in the area's economic growth. But the federal presence provided the spark that set a pattern of other economic activities into motion. The influx of federal monies created hundreds of thousands of new jobs; these openings attracted men and women from all over the nation (not unlike the Gold Rush of 1849) and set off a population boom, increased population, particularly in towns and cities, proved a boon to service industries of all kinds, and created demands for new social and cultural services.

Of course, the ingredients for the realization of this vast economic potential had long been present. As Walter P. Webb bemoaned in 1937, eastern industrial interests had been consciously seeking to inhibit western economic growth. Webb pointed to the discriminatory freight rate system then sanctioned by the Interstate Commerce Commission as one important reason for western subservience to the East. The concentration of investment capital in eastern financial centers was undoubtedly another contributory factor. As one admirer of Webb, John Crowe Ransom, himself a distinguished spokesman, said:

We all know about the inequalities of the economic structure. . . . Within the Northern states you have your masters of capital on the one hand, and against them your farmers and employees. . . . But . . . [in] the West you have almost your whole population in this latter status. . . . The North owns and operates the national economy; the South and West work under its direction. . . . The West bears a colonial relation to the North because the North actually colonized the West.<sup>3</sup>

Webb's arguments had a ring of truth, of course, although they oversimplified a somewhat more complex situation. As a relatively young and underdeveloped section, the West reflected many of the characteristics of third-world underdeveloped nations in the twentieth century. Before the Second World War its population in many areas was still too sparse to sustain local manufactures; its internal transportation arteries were not as well developed as those in eastern states; it lacked well-developed financial institutions that could provide the capital necessary for further growth; and in a national and international economy wracked by depression, as in the 1930s, westerners could hardly expect to find markets for their goods.

But in 1941 the potential seemed limitless. The West still had open spaces to harbor a vast new population; changing transportation patterns, particularly the growth of the motor truck industry and the emergence of expanding air traffic, lessened the importance of rail transport and freed the region from the shackles of the basing point system; remoteness became a positive virtue with the development of new scientific and technological processes which required vast open

spaces for testing and development; and the balmy climates of many portions of the West became a positive attraction with the growth of more affluent life styles. The development of air conditioning and climatic control further enhanced the economic potential of the desert areas which in previous years had been considered by many easterners to be uninhabitable.<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, then, the boom triggered by World War II was not entirely unexpected. Wartime mobilization stimulated an expansion in which the West cast off some of the constraints which had hampered its growth in the preceding decade and at the same time acquired vast sums of new capital investments which made expansion possible. How this process took form constitutes a fascinating chapter in the annals of western history.

The exigencies of war prompted a massive influx of federal monies into the West. Certainly such an investment was not a totally new departure for the federal government. To bolster the first American settlements in the trans-Mississippi West during the early nineteenth century Congress had poured large sums into the region—through military installations, transportation development, and river and harbor appropriations. During the 1930s New Deal programs accelerated the flow of public expenditures into the West. But beginning in 1941 the scale of federal investment reached unprecedented levels. Congress authorized the expenditure of approximately \$70 billion in the West from 1941 to 1945, with almost half of that sum earmarked for California. In fact, that state secured one-tenth of all federal monies expended during World War II.<sup>5</sup>

This federal largesse flowed westward through various channels. Some was expended by existing agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation; in addition, Congress created new agencies to purvey capital to the West. One major source was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation which established various subsidiaries to carry out plant expansion in the West. The challenge of creating "instant industries" in the region was met by the Defense Plant Corporation (DPC), the Rubber Reserve Corporation, and the Metals Reserve Corporation, to name three of the subsidiaries which were especially significant in the West. The experience of new manufactures had usually been accomplished by private enterprise—at times perhaps with federal aid. Even in the First World War, 90 percent of new war-induced investments (\$6 billion) came from private sources. But in the Second World War the situation was very different. The Defense Plant Corporation supplied the capital for 96 percent of new rubber plants, 58 percent of new aluminum plants, 90 percent of new magnesium plants, and 71 percent of the aircraft factories. With the exception of synthetic rubber, almost all of these



enterprises were west of the Mississippi River. Of the fifteen largest aircraft plants built in World War II fourteen were financed by the Defense Plant Corporation.<sup>6</sup> If before 1941 the federal government had been a junior partner with private business in financing new enterprises in the West, during World War II it became a dominant influence in western industrial expansion.

Established by Congress on August 22, 1940, to expedite the lagging mobilization program, the DPC came to be the largest investor in the history of the region. During the next five years it built 344 plants in the West at a cost of \$1,853,634,000. These included a wide range of manufacturing facilities. Outstanding were the vast new steel mills established in Provo, Utah, and Fontana, California, the only such complete steel fabricating facilities west of the Mississippi River. The DPC also erected the largest magnesium plant in the world near Boulder Dam, just outside the sleepy little railroad town of Las Vegas. And it constructed a whole new complex of aluminum fabricating plants in the Pacific Northwest. As noted, virtually all of the aircraft manufacturing plants on the Pacific Coast were built with DPC funds.<sup>7</sup>

Although most of the DPC's projects were designed to increase production, the Corporation also engaged in research and development. Such was the case with the plan hatched by Howard Hughes and Henry J. Kaiser for the "Spruce Goose," a giant cargo plane. With their vivid imaginations, Hughes and Kaiser in 1942 envisaged an eight-engine, 200-ton aircraft capable of carrying an entire company of soldiers with all of their equipment. At a time when German submarines were seriously impeding the flow of American supplies to England such a proposal seemed attractive to the administration and the President himself gave a green light for the program. The DPC spent \$18 million for a proposal to build three of these planes, one prototype and two for use in testing. As metals were scarce in 1942, the DPC directed that they be made of wood.<sup>8</sup>

Hughes undertook construction of one of the planes in his California plant, indulging his ever-increasing penchant for secrecy. No outsiders were permitted to watch progress in the building of this, the world's largest aircraft, not even Henry Kaiser, it was rumored. But even after the DPC had expended more than \$13 million, the prototype was still far from completion. Thus, in 1943 Donald Nelson, chairman of the War Production Board, decided to cancel the contract. Hughes hurried to Washington to plead his case. His persuasiveness led President Roosevelt to order Donald Nelson to reinstate the contract. Although the DPC agreed to pay the remaining \$5 million of the loan to Hughes, it also required him to pay additional needed costs out of his own pocket. At that point Kaiser dropped out of the project while Hughes invested at least \$10 million more, ac-

ording to the estimate of Jesse Jones, chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Not until November 2, 1947, with Hughes himself at the controls of the prototype, did the Spruce Goose lift off for a two-minute flight near his plant in California. As public confidence in the venture waned, that of Hughes increased. His faith in the project remained unshaken, but he placed the plane in storage in a huge hangar in Long Beach, California, where it languished until 1980 when the Hughes estate sold it to promoters who made it a public tourist attraction in Long Beach.<sup>9</sup>

The West was also affected by the activities of the Metals Reserve Corporation. Another major subsidiary of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, it became the federal government's principal agent for the purchase of more than \$2,750,000,000 of metals in the western states, not to speak of another \$1 billion of purchases overseas. As the major metals procurement agent for the armed services it scoured the West for copper, tin, tungsten, zinc, chrome, bauxite, and more exotic metals. It also constructed the world's largest tin smelter in Texas City, Texas, despite efforts by executives of Phelps-Dodge and American Metals Company to retain the facility in the East, near their operations in Baltimore. Through the subsidies it paid to western miners the Metals Reserve Corporation greatly stimulated metals production in California, Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, and Utah, and in most other western states. Even metals that had been imported into the United States before 1940, such as chrome, were produced domestically during wartime as miners—spurred by the Corporation's subsidies—combed unexplored reserves throughout the region. In Montana, for example, they discovered rare chrome deposits in the Custer National Forest. These finds supplemented limited quantities imported from South Africa and Rhodesia. And the western aluminum industry could not have flourished during wartime had it not been for the Metals Reserve extensive program to exploit Arkansas deposits.<sup>10</sup>

Synthetic rubber was another of the new industries fostered by the federal government in the West. Twenty-three new synthetic rubber plants built by the Rubber Reserve Corporation were erected either on the Pacific Coast or in the Texas Gulf region. Almost overnight, the Rubber Reserve Corporation created an important new industry for the West.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the Rubber Reserve Corporation undertook extensive experiments to grow natural rubber in California, Arizona, and other portions of the West. Supervision of these operations was largely by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service. Discerning the possibility of developing this new industry in the West, Senator Sheridan Downey of California early in 1942 urged his col-