

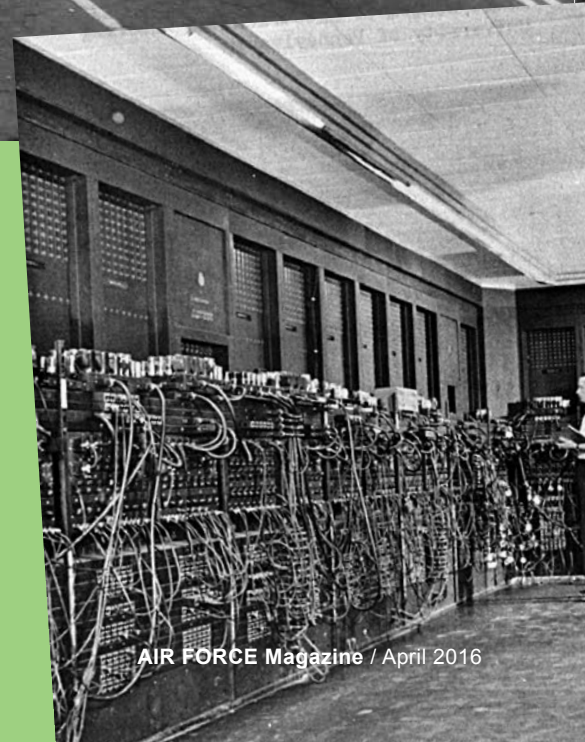
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1946:

The Year After the War

By John T. Correll

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, THE NATION, THE ARMED FORCES, AND VETERANS MADE A TURBULENT TRANSITION TO PEACETIME.



As 1946 began, the United States was winding down from World War II. It had been only four months since the war ended with the surrender of Japan, but demobilization was in full progress. By January 1946, the armed forces had released more than five million men with another 300,000 arriving home from overseas each month.

US industry was reconverting as fast as it could from wartime production to output of consumer goods, including automobiles. Defense plants were closing and armament contracts were canceled. Disposal of the huge surpluses—everything from airplanes and tanks to medical supplies, clothing, and toothpaste—was an enormous task.

Rationing of gasoline and most other things ended in the United States in 1945, but shortages continued for meat, sugar, butter, and other commodities. The government struggled to deal with the shortages while holding prices down.

These problems, however, were essentially about the adjustment to peacetime. Overseas, the situation was radically worse, with devastation and famine rampant in the bombed-out cities and millions of refugees and “displaced persons” to be resettled. Relief efforts helped somewhat, with the United States providing most of the funding and food.

The United Nations was in its first year. The UN General Assembly held its first meeting in London in January 1946 before moving to New York later in the year.

It was a shock for the United States to learn that its wartime ally, the Soviet Union, had turned into an adversary. When former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned that

an “iron curtain” had descended on Europe, many Americans refused to believe it.

In the atomic age, the United States relied increasingly on the Army Air Forces, already moving toward new status as a separate military service. In January 1946, the AAF was down to 30 percent of its wartime strength. By summer, the inventory of aircraft had been reduced by half, most of them cut up for scrap.

Changes were afoot that would reshape the world. This was the year that the Baby Boom began, when television started to emerge, and when the first general-purpose electronic computer, ENIAC, was introduced.

DEMobilIZATION

When the war ended, the armed forces had 12.2 million members in uniform, 7.6 million of them stationed abroad. The new defense budget called for an 85 percent reduction, with an Active Duty strength target of 1.7 million for 1947.

Most of the troops, especially those who had been drafted, expected that they would come home and be discharged right away. So did their families and their representatives in Congress.

Demobilization could not be done that rapidly. Forces were still needed for occupation duty in Europe and Japan and for manning of the peacetime military. The number of volunteers staying in service was not enough. The draft continued to provide replacements, but by January 1946, the draft boards were not keeping pace with the massive rate of discharges. The Army announced a slowdown of demobilization.

The political uproar and angry demonstrations by soldiers overseas generated more heat than the Army could bear. Rapid separations resumed and discharges reached seven million in late April. Every available ship was packed with returning veterans, but throngs of others still awaited transport.

The order in which soldiers were released was determined by complex rules. Each enlisted member was given an

Left: In Fullerton, Calif., Oct. 2, 1946, World War II veterans march with veterans from the Spanish-American War and World War I to celebrate the end of World War II. Below left: ENIAC, the first general-purpose electronic computer, had 18,000 vacuum tubes and took up most of a large room. Below right: B-29s scrapped on Tinian. By June 1946, the inventory of AAF aircraft had been reduced by half. Some went into storage but most were cut up for scrap.



Adjusted Service Rating score with points for months of service, months overseas, battle stars and decorations, and number of dependent children. Those with the highest ASRs were discharged first. Eventually, officers got ASRs as well, but the rules were more stringent.

Until peacetime requirements could be figured out, the AAF stopped procurement of aircraft. Modification work was also suspended to be sure, as commanding Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold put it, the AAF was not “shoeing any more dead horses.”

The government scrambled to dispose of surpluses that included buildings, real estate, lumber, tractors and trucks, soap, and socks and shoes. Surplus machine tools were sold for 56 cents on the dollar. Airplanes that had cost \$215,000 went for \$37,000. France bought 75 surplus Liberty ships for a third of what it cost the United States to build them. Hosiery manufacturers, long unable to meet the demand for stockings, were pleased to obtain 3,300 bales of surplus raw silk.

BACK ON THE ROAD

Large parts of US industry that had converted to defense work between 1942 and 1945 were in the process of reconverting. Automobile production resumed in July 1945 but did not reach full speed until 1946.

Ford’s output of 468,000 cars in 1946 led the industry, 21 percent of the total manufactured. The most popular model was Ford’s Super DeLuxe Tudor sedan, almost identical to a 1942 Ford except for a new stainless steel grille. It sold for \$1,262 initially, but the price rose to \$1,348 in September. A big backlog of orders continued.

By December 1946, US industry was declared to be “virtually out of the reconversion mode” and retail sales had gained 25 percent over 1945. The unemployment rate for the year was 3.9 percent, not as low as the wartime years when workers were scarce, but far below the jobless rates of the Great Depression before the war.

Rosie the Riveter was out of the job market. Between VE Day and May 1946, about a million women left jobs in aircraft plants, shipyards, and defense industries. The main reason

was closure or cutback of such plants at the end of the war, although increased competition with men for jobs was a factor as well.

An unexpected spinoff from reconversion was a series of labor strikes by autoworkers, steelworkers, railroad unions, and coal miners in 1946. The unions were trying to make up for the drop in take-home pay as defense work ended and overtime was reduced. President Truman wanted to draft the

Photo by Mail Banker



railroad strikers into the Army and court-martial those who refused to work but Congress would not agree to it.

GI TRANSITION

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the “GI Bill,” bestowed three big benefits on veterans: unemployment pay, guaranty of loans for homes, farms, or businesses, and education and training.

Veterans were sometimes depicted as idle and enjoying their membership in the “52-20 Club.” Indeed, the GI Bill did provide for unemployment pay of \$20 a week for up to 52 weeks, but relatively few veterans remained long on the unemployment rolls and

less than 20 percent of the funding set aside for this benefit was ever used.

Millions took advantage of the home loans backed by the Veterans Administration and over the years to come, GI loans contributed substantially to a transition from renting to home ownership in the United States.

What former servicemen did—in enormous numbers—was go to college. VA paid up to \$500 a year for tuition and other fees. There was also

The 1946 Ford Super DeLuxe Sedan was almost identical to the 1942 model, with an added heavy front grill and a widened hood.

a subsistence allowance, \$65 a month for single veterans, more for those with dependents.

The Census Bureau reported that in October 1946, veterans accounted for 75 percent of all men attending school. Some were in training courses, but most had gone to college under the GI Bill. In December, 1.1 million war veterans were in school.

Colleges and universities expanded their facilities to accommodate those who wanted to enroll. A big limitation was housing for married students. Some lived in surplus Quonset huts and

trailers, others in refurbished government buildings close to the campus.

One benefit—not part of the GI Bill—that was *not* popular was GI life insurance. Four out of five veterans let it lapse, partly because of “tedious delays” in dealing with VA on coverage, the *New York Times* said.

Many servicemen married overseas. During 1946, nearly 43,000 “war brides” and 14,000 children arrived in the United States. The numbers

home. Births in 1946 set an all-time record. The Baby Boom was underway.

THE POSTWAR AIR FORCE

At the time of the Japanese surrender, the AAF had 218 operational groups. The War Department’s postwar planning called for a “bedrock minimum” air force of 70 groups and a personnel strength of 400,000. In January 1946, the AAF was down to 734,000 people and dropping steadily.

by \$2.2 billion, with 75 percent of that to come from the armed forces. At the end of 1946, the Air Force had 55 groups, only two of which could be counted as combat ready.

“We are not ready to fight a war if one came today—and we won’t be for quite a long time,” Spaatz said. The Air Force had not yet reached bottom. It would sink to 48 groups and a strength of 304,000 before the buildup for the Korean War began.



Above: Workers at the Separations Control Room at Bolling Field, D.C., expedited the return to civilian life. **Above right:** Gen. Carl Spaatz attended a welcome home ceremony in Pottstown, Pa., in 1946. **Right:** The Northrop XB-35 flying wing made its first flight June 25, 1946.

increased after December when the nonfraternization rules were relaxed, ending the ban on marriages between American soldiers and German women.

It was a boom year for marriages in general, although there was one divorce for every three marriages. The leading causes for divorce were hasty wartime marriages and the breakup of others after long separations.

The big increase in marriages was attributed mainly to GIs returning

In February, Arnold retired and Gen. Carl A. “Tooney” Spaatz took over as Chief of Staff. He held to the objective of 70 air groups and was supported in that position by the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

One of Spaatz’s first actions was to reorganize the force, creating Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command, and Air Defense Command. That structure would endure until the end of the Cold War almost 60 years later. Eisenhower declared his “unequivocal” support for an autonomous Air Force.

The 70-group plan evaporated in August when Truman ordered “economy commitments” to reduce the budget



Several important aircraft made their first flights in 1946: the F-84, the Air Force’s first postwar fighter, in February; the XB-35 flying wing in June; and the B-36 intercontinental bomber in August.

In February 1946, the Air Force Association was incorporated and took over publication of the AAF’s monthly journal, *Air Force Magazine*.

FOOD AND POLITICS

The federal price controls set up for

THE AMERICAN SCENE

■ Television arrives. In 1946, two TV networks were operating, NBC and Dumont, although CBS and ABC were preparing to begin. Only 44,000 American homes had TV sets. The meager viewing choices included boxing on “Gillette Cavalcade of Sports,” a soap opera, “Faraway Hill,” and the first TV game show, “Cash and Carry.” Radio was still predominant. The most popular show in 1946 was “Fibber Magee and Molly.”

■ Baseball returns. Major League Baseball players—who had not been exempted from military service—were back for the 1946 season, including Chief Petty Officer Bob Feller of the Cleveland Indians and AAF Sgt. Joe DiMaggio of the New York Yankees. Lt. Ted Williams, discharged from the Marine Corps, rejoined the Boston Red Sox, hit .348 with 123 RBI, and was the American League MVP. Former Army Lt. Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the minor leagues, hit .349 with the Montreal Royals to lead the International League, stole 40 bases, and moved up to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

■ ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator), the first general-purpose computer, was introduced at the University of Pennsylvania. It had 18,000 vacuum tubes and, fed a problem on a punched card, could do 5,000 additions a second.

■ The Movie of the Year was “The Best Years of Their Lives,” about the return home and readjustment difficulties of three veterans: an AAF captain, an infantry platoon sergeant, and a sailor who lost his hands in battle. It went on to win nine Academy Awards and was a massive box-office success.

■ New products in 1946 included radial tires, car phones, filament tape, bikini swimsuits, Reddi-wip, bank-issued credit cards, and artificial snow.

■ Two future Presidents were born in 1946: Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Two more were elected to Congress for the first time: Rep. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass) and Rep. Richard Nixon (R-Calif.).

■ Born in 1946: Reggie Jackson, Dolly Parton, Steven Spielberg, F. Whitten Peters, Sylvester Stallone, Cher, Donald Trump.



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the mid-term elections, he abandoned price controls and said the marketplace would be better served by the law of supply and demand.

Shortages were a problem but in the United States, there was enough to eat. That was not the case everywhere. In addition to food production lost by the ravages of war, the wheat and rice crops abroad were the worst in years. Consumption in the US was about 3,300 calories per person a day. In some parts of Europe and Asia, people subsisted on 1,500 calories or less.

Most relief was channeled through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which got about 75 percent of its funding from the United States. Between July 1945 and 1946, the US shipped 16.5 million tons of food, primarily wheat—about a sixth of the US supply—to Europe and Japan.

exceeding the supply, shortages continued. Truman held that price controls were still necessary. The Office of Price Administration went out of business briefly in June, but new controls, including a cap on meat prices, were instituted in July.

Stockmen refused to send their cattle to market, and the meat shortage intensified. The public blamed Truman, and his opponents called him “Horsemeat Harry.” Truman lashed out at those who deserted principle for “a mess of pottage,” but after his party lost its majority in Congress in



Samuel Goldwyn Co. photo

wartime were still in effect in January 1946, but some producers and retailers were no longer willing to sell at the artificial ceilings.

The *New York Times* said that most choice cuts of beef and lamb were selling above the legal price. Milk producers told the Senate agricultural committee that 60 to 80 percent of the butter was going to black markets.

With demand for consumer goods

Hundreds of thousands of CARE packages were sent from American donors to Europe and Asia. Packages weighed 30 pounds and contained mostly food but also such commodities as soap and cigarettes. A new package introduced in December included two wool blankets and sewing utensils.

HARD TIMES ABROAD

Shortages of food and fuel were widespread abroad but Germany and Japan had the additional problem of infrastructure and industry destroyed by the bombing. Even so, some of the industrial facilities survived and those not deemed essential to peacetime

territories, and that figure did not totally reflect the enormity of the problem. At one time or another, some 12 million individuals had been refugees or displaced persons but many of them had been resettled, although not necessarily under favorable conditions.

Many of these people were Jews who survived the concentration camps. Others were former slave laborers the Nazis had brought to Germany from Russia and Eastern Europe. Still others were Germans or ethnic Germans expelled from lands in the east when the Nazi conquest was rolled back.

It took years to resettle all of the displaced persons. The nation accept-

C. Marshall, the former Army Chief of Staff who became Secretary of State and was the program's foremost advocate.

ADVENT OF THE COLD WAR

As soon as the war was over, the Soviet Union consolidated its control in the east and pressed for new advantages in Central Europe. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin redefined his adversary to be the United States and Western Europe.

In February, diplomat George F. Kennan at the US Embassy in Moscow sent his famous "Long Telegram" (19 pages) to the State Department warning that the USSR did not want peaceful coexistence and was committed to a "patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power."

In a speech at Fulton, Mo., in March 1946, Churchill declared that, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent." It was political dynamite. Truman, who was present for the speech, refused to comment on Churchill's proposal for a British-American alliance. He denied that he had seen a copy of the speech in advance.

"The speech has its critics and defenders, the former apparently in the majority," the *New York Times* said. Among the critics was Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace who denounced it as "an attack on a former ally."

As time went by, the true face of the Soviet Union became easier to see.

Elsewhere, especially in Asia, the old European colonial empires, weakened during the war, were breaking up. In Hanoi in March 1946, Ho Chi Minh became President of the Vietnam Republic of Annam, reluctantly recognized by France as "a free state within the Indochinese federation and French Union." In December Ho's military forces attacked the French in Hanoi and surrounding areas. The long Vietnam War had begun. ★

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German Federal Archives photo

needs were subject to confiscation for wartime reparations.

The Russians stripped sections of Germany almost bare, dismantling hundreds of factories and shipping them to the Soviet Union. Trains laden with machinery and equipment moved east.

The black market and barter often supplanted the regular economy. Farmers and others with goods to offer did not want currency, which they distrusted, and insisted on trade instead. In Germany, where the reichsmark had become virtually worthless, the preferred medium of exchange was American cigarettes.

In February 1946, there were about five million refugees and displaced persons in Europe and adjacent ter-

Civilians clean debris in Berlin. Food was scarce in many parts of Europe and Japan, and in 1946 the US shipped 16.5 million tons of food to the war-ravaged areas.

ing the greatest number was Israel (652,000), followed by the United States (more than 400,000). Australia took 182,000 and Canada 157,000.

There was still some unfinished business. The International Military Tribunal to try Japanese accused of war crimes convened in Tokyo in May 1946. The Nuremberg trials in Germany, which had begun in 1945, sentenced 12 Nazis to death in October.

Eventually, Europe was rebuilt between 1948 and 1952 with massive aid from the European Recovery Program, called the "Marshall Plan" after George