

DETROIT: THE “ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY”

FACT SHEET

HOW AND WHY DID DETROIT BECOME THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY?

1. Detroit, with the booming auto industry, had the manufacturing base to easily convert to war production. The car companies – including Chrysler, GM, Ford and Packard – as well as hundreds of machine shops and parts suppliers produced war products.
2. Detroit’s strategic location on the Great Lakes gave it access to natural resources – iron, coal, etc – needed for production.
3. Detroit had know-how. Several of Detroit’s top automobile executives, including William Knudsen, took positions with the government during the war.

WHAT ROLE DID DETROIT PLAY IN WORLD WAR II?

1. Detroit’s ability to produce superior products with great speed and efficiency made significant contributions to the Allied victory in World War II.
2. Detroit manufacturers made approximately 25% of the materials used during World War II.
3. Detroit and Michigan produced a wide array of products for the war. In addition to vehicles, guns and ammunition, factories produced chemicals, pharmaceuticals, gas masks, radios, air raid sirens, camp stoves, tents and binoculars.

HOW DID “EVERYDAY” PEOPLE LIVE, WORK AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY?

1. Work shortages arose because of the number of men who joined the Armed Forces. New opportunities arose for women in minorities, who enjoyed good wages and an increased quality of life during the war.
2. All Detroiters contributed to the war effort by engaging in activities such as scrap drives, rationing, and planting victory gardens. The U.S. government engaged in a large propaganda campaign to encourage all Americans to buy war bonds and keep war secrets.
3. The influx of workers into Detroit strained resources. Housing shortages arose, and workers lived in cramp and crowded circumstances. Racial tensions were inflamed when African American workers moved into traditionally white neighborhoods.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE PRODUCTS OF THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY?

1. Detroit auto manufacturers retooled to build war trucks, tanks, aircraft and anti-aircraft guns, as well as hundreds of other products from ammunition to engines.
2. Detroit marine companies built landing craft that were used at the battle of Normandy as well as in the Pacific Theater.
3. The McCord Radiator Company made 90% of all helmets used during the war.

HOW DID THE WAR EFFORT AFFECT AND CHANGE DETROIT?

1. After the war, automotive companies returned to building cars. Despite the post-war economic boom, many of these companies – including Hudson and Packard – failed. The “Big 3” – GM, Chrysler and Ford – emerged triumphant.
2. The Big 3 continued to build products for the war department, although on a much more limited scale, developing tank, aeronautics and space equipment.
3. The affluence of the post-war period led to a building boom both within Detroit and out in newly developing suburbs. Infrastructure improvements, including new freeways, made it easier for veterans to settle in communities that surrounded the city of Detroit.