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“ALL OF US HAVE A DUTY TO PERFORM IN THIS WORLD”—AMERICA’S MOBILIZATION FOR THE SECOND WORLD WAR:

Maury Klein, *A Call To Arms: Mobilizing America for World War II*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 898. ISBN 978-1-59691-607-4.

Arthur Herman, *Freedom’s Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II*. New York: Random House, 2012. Pp. xiv, 415. ISBN. 978-0-8129-8204-6.

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During the Second World War, Army Quartermaster General Edmund B. Gregory stated that “It’s axiomatic that you can’t save time and money at the same time” (M[aur]y K[lein] 251). However, sometimes revolutionary developments overturn this maxim, as they did for Gregory during the war. When Henry Ford implemented an assembly-line method of building automobiles at his Highland Park plant, he shortened the time needed to make a car from many hours to ninety minutes. Twenty-five years later, in the greatest war in human history, Ford’s method ensured that more men were provided with more of the material needed to kill their fellow men than anyone could have imagined a few years before.

A Call to Arms and *Freedom’s Forge* tell the extraordinary story of the mobilization of America for the Second World War. While Maury Klein (Univ. of Rhode Island) takes a broad view, tracing the impact of industrial mobilization in many corners of the American nation, Arthur Herman focuses more narrowly on the leadership of a few crucial individuals. Klein, an economic historian, has written prolifically on the history of American industry, including railroading.¹ Herman, a specialist in world history and recent visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has published on a variety of subjects including the Scots and the British navy.²

Klein discusses manufacturing industries and the provision of manpower for the army, to be sure, but also investigates transportation, food production, the structure of government, information resources, and many other topics germane to industrial mobilization. In so doing, he goes beyond the normal frontiers of economic history into aspects of social or cultural history in a sweeping assessment of the shift from the prewar attitudes of the American public to its focus on victory.

Herman concentrates specifically on industrial mobilization, touching on political and other matters only in so far as they affected the effort to speed up production for the war. While Klein’s book surveys so many characters that no one individual stands out as a hero of production, Herman’s is, by contrast, mostly the story of two men—the automotive industry wizard William “Bill” Knudsen and the construction genius Henry J. Kaiser. Oddly in two books on economic history, neither features any maps, charts, or tables, apart from one exception in an appendix to Herman’s book.

A Call to Arms is divided into six chronological parts, one for each year from 1940 to 1945, comprising thirty-three chapters altogether. Klein notes that “On the morning of December 8 [1941] it was natural for Americans to think that everything had changed, even though they knew nothing as yet of what the changes might be” (MK 290). In fact, things had already been changing for some time, but only very slowly, because small changes were all the American people would accept until Pearl Harbor shocked them out of

1. See, e.g., his *Union Pacific*, 2 vols. (1987; rpt. Minneapolis: U Minnesota Pr, 2006), *The Change Makers: From Carnegie to Gates, How the Great Entrepreneurs Transformed Ideas into Industries* (NY: Times Books, 2003), *The Genesis of Industrial America, 1870-1920* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007), and *The Power Makers: Steam, Electricity, and the Men Who Invented Modern America* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2008).

2. See *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe’s Poorest Nation Created Our World and Everything in It* (NY: Crown, 2003), and *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (NY: Harper, 2004).

their neutrality. In his preface, Klein writes that three factors “have blurred our understanding of what happened during those tumultuous years” (MK 3). First, the United States joined the war more than two years after it began (in Europe), following an extended debate over whether to stay clear or join in. The result was that mobilization had two phases divided by the attack on Pearl Harbor—the first defensive (preparedness), the second offensive (participation).

The second obscuring factor Klein identifies was bad memories of American participation in World War I. Of those old enough to recall the earlier war, “Many if not most of them wanted no more of war, bailing out Europe from its eternal conflicts, or ‘blood profits’ for bankers and munitions makers. Generals are far from the only ones who tend to fight the last war” (MK 3).

Others, however, instead recalled images of American military unreadiness in 1917—soldiers carrying broomstick rifles at training camps so raw and roughly carved out of the countryside that even basic sanitation was missing, let alone barracks and mess halls. Loud voices proclaimed that such a state of negligence ought never to be allowed again. But Americans fight each of their wars as if it were their last, and such warnings were quickly forgotten by all but a few individuals.

By the summer of 1940 the army had about 280,000 men, with plans to increase the ranks to 375,000. The National Guard added another 250,000 potential troops, nearly all of whom lacked training.... Germany boasted an army estimated at between 5 million and 6 million, with another half million in the Luftwaffe. At best the American army could put five or six fully equipped divisions in the field. Hitler ... was said to have around 200 in all. The army needed not only more manpower but also the camps, equipment, uniforms, and weapons to arm and train them. Already some recruits were obliged to use wooden sticks instead of rifles in drills.” (MK 59)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was among those who took a more realistic view of the nation’s circumstances and the dangers it faced, though he still had a woefully inadequate appreciation of the material requirements of the task ahead. Still, under his administration, unlike Woodrow Wilson’s, Army commanders could at least conduct contingency planning. Before World War I, hearing that Army officers were making contingency plans, Wilson had accused Brig. Gen. Montgomery M. Macomb of preparing an offensive war; this sent the unmistakable message that the Army was not to think about even a hypothetical war with Germany. Such attitudes resulted in Americans going off to war with British rifles and helmets, to man French artillery and fly British and French aircraft. Determined to avoid the same mistakes twenty years on, FDR made politically cautious preparations for the coming conflict. Throughout the period, a growing number of people began to realize the danger and change their opinions.

Klein’s third factor may disappoint readers expecting *A Call To Arms* to tell more tales of the “Greatest Generation.” Tom Brockaw’s popular 1997 book portrayed the war years as a time filled with willing warriors backed by a dedicated home front focused on the single national goal of victory to the exclusion of petty personal interests. Klein begs to differ: “The time has come to deflate the ‘Greatest Generation’ myth” (MK 3).

The war generation in fact never formed a single united front, even after Pearl Harbor, and personal interests remained fundamental: “acrimonious splits between management and labor and those within the ranks of the labor movement” imperiled mobilization from the outset (MK 136). Pugnacious United Mine Workers leader John L. Lewis viewed management as a greater threat than Nazi Germany and meant to take advantage of increases in production to benefit his membership. FDR more than once had to use troops to force workers back into factories. Railway workers, unsatisfied with small gains, were planning a strike for 7 December 1941 that would have paralyzed the nation. That particular action did not take place, of course, but, as workers were squeezed by government wage and price controls, the threat of strikes recurred throughout the war.

As labor tried to benefit from the national emergency, many businesses and managers did their best to use it to roll back union gains made during the Depression years of the New Deal. Businesses sought to limit potential losses from capital investment by insisting that the government assume some of the risks associated with plant expansion—after the First World War, they had been forced to take losses on capacity

they could neither use nor depreciate. A recurrence of this situation seemed to loom large after the fall of France suggested that new plant capacity built to furnish European buyers might be wasted.

Countering the desire of business to gain and protect profits were the New Dealers who, remembering the interwar attacks on the “merchants of death,” were determined to prevent war profiteering. While the cooperation of business was essential to FDR’s mobilization plan, the president and his New Deal allies imposed an excess-profits tax that led Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, a Republican and former Wall Street lawyer, to insist that “If you are going to try to go to war, or to prepare for war in a capitalist country ... you have got to let business make money out of the process or business won’t work...” (MK 57). In spite of mutual loathing all round—labor against management, progressives against industrialists, soldier against civilian, agency against agency, ambition versus ambition—in the end the nation mustered sufficient trust or tolerance to achieve the necessary marvels of production.

In many cases, Americans at home hardly formed in a united front, either. For example, the system of rationing was meant to spread the sacrifice across the population, but “[the] image of Americans cheerfully accepting the need for it and patriotically abiding by it” (MK 432) is largely a fantasy, Klein writes. Whenever they could, Americans bought what they needed from “Mr. Black,” the underground market in gasoline, liquor, meat, cigarettes, tires, and whatever could not be obtained openly. John Kenneth Galbraith concluded that “never in the long history of human combat have so many talked so much about sacrifice with so little deprivation as in the United States in World War II” (MK 437).

While Klein’s argument may seem to diminish the memory of the war generation, he simply shows that, like any other, it contained “heroes and cowards, stalwarts and shirkers, mainstays and misfits” (MK 5). Given the economic depression and the war its members lived through, Klein suggests that “unluckiest” might be a better descriptor than “greatest” for this generation. The truly remarkable thing is that, out of a miscellany of often selfish and incompatible interests, the nation nevertheless managed to pull together well enough not only to win the war but to emerge from it as a superpower. Klein asks the interesting and sobering question: if the World War II generation was not uniquely great, why do more recent generations seem to many observers incapable of reaching the same level of accomplishment?

Like *A Call To Arms*, Arthur Herman’s *Freedom’s Forge* documents industry’s response to the call for mobilization, covering the same ground and reaching similar conclusions. For example, the notion of the Greatest Generation gets a similar treatment, and both books dismiss the postwar myth that an ultra-competent federal government centrally managed America’s rearmament effort. New Dealers certainly hoped to extend their control over business during the war, but the conflict demanded a level of expertise transcending ideology and necessitated some degree of accommodation with business leaders. The need to defeat the Axis powers trumped partisan political motives.

Herman tells a compelling and sympathetic tale of personalities—the industrialists William Knudsen and Henry J. Kaiser. Both men often figure in *A Call To Arms* as well, of course, but tend to get lost in the throng of characters that crowd Klein’s account. *Freedom’s Forge* contains nineteen chapters including the conclusion. The first eight treat the period prior to Pearl Harbor. These constitute the most extensive discussion to date of Knudsen’s mobilization work. Herman describes a modest man who, motivated by patriotism and loyalty, answered the president’s call to leave his position in the automotive sector and take on the daunting job of changing the direction of American industry. Having accepted, Knudsen set out to persuade industry leaders to begin making the changes essential for victory in the war to come.

Knudsen initially received no official standing or legal authority from FDR, but worked behind the scenes in a field—mass production manufacturing—as specialized and intricate as brain surgery. He used his reputation from the automotive industry and his powers of persuasion to coax American manufacturers to retool their plants for war production. Because so few people understood his work, he never received the recognition he richly deserved. At one point, he was even criticized by Eleanor Roosevelt, when auto workers lost their jobs as industrial priorities changed. Knudsen had in fact anticipated and tried to prevent such hardships by maintaining production for civilian markets, but he was accused of interfering with mobilization by people ignorant of the difficulties involved in the changeover from peacetime to wartime produc-

tion. Eventually, the government forced the automobile lines to close after Pearl Harbor, which caused mass unemployment while Detroit repurposed its plants; hence the First Lady's misplaced criticism. Knudsen did not try to explain himself to her or to the press (AH 162-63).

In early 1942, reading the news as it came over the ticker tape, Knudsen learned he had been fired (AH 164), swept aside in yet another of FDR's attempts to arrive at the proper organizational structure for the war. Since he was too valuable to leave languishing on the sidelines, Roosevelt soon commissioned Knudsen as a lieutenant general, giving him free rein to get on with the work of spurring production. He remains the only civilian to be given such a high army appointment.

Henry J. Kaiser came into his own after the shooting started. He had earned a reputation as a dam builder during the Depression, but was confident of his ability to move into and conquer a new field, in this case, shipbuilding. Ships had previously been individually hand built by skilled craftsmen according to time-honored techniques. Kaiser not only applied the principles of mass production to the industry, but employed workers who had never even seen a ship, let alone *built* one. By war's end, Kaiser's shipyards had turned out almost fifteen hundred vessels for the Allies.

Together, Klein and Herman provide a salutary balance to the traditional drums-and-trumpets and "great leader" variants of military history found in many books on the Second World War. The drumming in their books is of hammers forging the tools of war and the trumpets signal the end of one work shift and the beginning of another. Both authors spotlight the little recognized true heroes of American mobilization for World War II, men who believed, as Bill Knudsen put it, that "All of us have a duty to perform in this world" (AH 340). While both of the books reviewed here are remarkable (and very readable) accomplishments, *Freedom's Forge* is the more accessible account and *A Call to Arms* the more comprehensive.