

After the Day of Infamy: Man-on-the-Street Interviews

Group 1: The War and the Depression

Olaf Olson: My opinion of the present conditions relative to this war is that the low-paid wage earner is not getting the break that he should be entitled to, concerning the fact that the cost of living has been going up. The only ones who have been benefitting by it are those in the middle class and upper classes who had been getting increases in wages to adjust the higher cost of living. It seems that nothing has been done for the people who are in the lower brackets who have a very difficult time to make a living for themselves and their families.

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Bill O'Melia: Mr. President, I'm Bill O'Melia. Right now we're in the plant of the Barnes Products, Incorporated in Detroit. We're a small outfit compared with many plants around here, but we want you to know we're behind you one hundred percent and that we're all out for this job of winning the war. The Barnes family has been making computing scales for about fifty years. You'll find their scales all over the world and good scales too because I helped to make them. Now, we're feeding parts into the big plants of Detroit so that they can do the job that you want done.

Our plants switched over to defense work and us fellas who have made scales most of our lives are now doing something different. Curly Holdsapple over there has been a scale painter for forty-five years. Now he's operating a mealing machine and doing a good job of it too. I sealed scales for around twenty years and I'm running a [school (?)] machine now and the boss says I'm doing fine.

I suppose there are hundreds of thousands of fellas like me and thousands of small plants like the Barnes Products that have swung over one hundred percent to winning the war. The big plants get their names in the papers, but believe me us little fellas are doing an important job too.

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Ed Brodie: Mr. Roosevelt, I am Ed Brodie, a farmer and stockman southwest of Austin. This farm community is behind your policy and leadership one hundred percent. It seems the farm labor problem will be our biggest worry, being unable to pay wages that they can get in other fields. I'm farming a hundred and fifty acres and I'm ready to produce whatever we are called upon to raise in this farm belt. I think you have done more for the farmers in the South than any president we ever had.

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Group 1: Sacrifices at Home

Coreen Holt: ...This war was a shock to all of us and I guess the Midwest had felt pretty complacent and safe up to December the 7th, and it was kind of a jolt to know that we really were vulnerable. Now we're all trying to cooperate and do everything we can. I guess we're all behind the war effort a hundred percent. All the girls around the university are knitting for the Red Cross and whenever we go to theaters we dig into our pockets and give to the Red Cross donation. We do feel pretty badly when our boyfriends have to go, but I guess that's just part of war. Dad doesn't like the income tax very well and we don't have many dates now 'cause fellas haven't got cars. But like our president said we don't feel that anything we can do is too great a sacrifice. We're all behind the war effort a hundred percent and we know we'll win.

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Mrs. Norman Miller: ...I'm Mrs. Norman Miller, a housewife in Bloomington, Indiana. I guess we hadn't been very aware of the emergency until the last couple of weeks or so. But now with butter at forty-two cents and eggs at thirty-eight, we've sort of begun to sit up and take notice. With Norman's paycheck not increasing any and the men at the stone quarries getting laid-off every day or so, it's not so good. Oh, I suppose the men who get laid off at the quarries can go out to Burn City or go out to Charleston and work for the government. But with the government taking the tires and no way of getting there in your car, why I don't know what we're going to do now.

I guess we housewives can do our share though by sort of watching in the kitchen and saving all the scraps and using them as much as we can. Getting as much as we can out of everything we buy. If we just don't try to stock up on all food supplies, why I suppose we won't be forcing prices up. And that'd be good because then everybody will have a chance to get what they want in the stores and when they want it.

I think it's a good idea to limit the tires and the sugar and all the stuff like that because then we all sort of feel like we're helping with the war. I know I want to do my part and I know that all my friends here in Bloomington want to do their parts too.

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Group 2: War Goals

Jack Carlyle: Let's go in there and cut off a few heads, and blow up a few towns, and really show them what the losing end of a war looks like...When this war is over, I think the United States should take over the Western Hemisphere: Canada, Mexico, South America...If we're going to have to police the world, why, we should at least have charge of half of it.

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Edward Crane: [This is] a war to the death. There are two civilizations involved. Both of which cannot exist...I include the Hun or the Germans...in what I have to say about the Japanese. That is, we ought to exterminate both of them. There's no place for either of those races in the world today...It's going to be a long war, probably run six or ten years, but we ought to realize the fact there can't be any compromise and either one of two solutions is bound to follow. That is that the Hun and the Jap will go down or this country and England will go down.

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[Talking blues song by Pete Seeger]: Now as I think of our great land - its cities, its towns, its farming lands, with millions of good people workin' every day - I know it ain't perfect, but it will be someday...

This is the reason that I want to fight, not because everything's perfect or everything's right. No, it's just the opposite. I'm fighting because I want a better America and better laws, better homes, and jobs and schools, and no more Jim Crow and no more rules like "You can't ride in this train 'cause you're a Negro." "You can't live here, 'cause you're a Jew." "You can't work here 'cause you believe in unions, young man"...Dear Mr. President, we got just one big job to do, and that's lick Hitler, and when we're through, let no one else like him ever take his place to trample down the human race.

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John Henry Faulk: Well . . . say we defeat Germany and the Axis powers, do you think we should allow them to reestablish their Nazi government, the Fascist governments?

Reverend John Espy Watts: I think Germany and Italy ought to be allowed to reestablish their governments. I can't see any reason why a Nazi or fascist government shouldn't be allowed there, but we should try to arrive at more of a peaceful understanding and a peaceful way of living together. Something will have to be formulated some way in which we can live together.

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Group 2: Opposition to the War

Social Worker: I am not ready for our country to enter a war. I suppose I could be called an isolationist, but I went through school and college during the '20s and early '30s when the emphasis was upon the futility of war, specifically on the failure of the last world war in settling any of the essential problems and particularly in saving the world for democracy. Furthermore, I feel strongly that we as a nation are not prepared for a war either materially or psychologically. Rather than to walk toward the United States intervening, I would much rather see our people and government emphasize building up our armaments, unity among our people, and a way of life really worth fighting for in case it comes to the point that we must fight in defense of our country...

As a social worker I am disturbed by the willingness of many people to accept heavy taxation for armaments and to give of their efforts and money to aid the deserving people in foreign countries when they have been antagonistic, or at least quite indifferent, toward our own underprivileged group...

If we do get into this war because of aggressive acts on the part of other nations, which cannot be endured by our people, then I'm afraid we shall be in for a long war which will bring great suffering to us as well as our enemies. Then when the war is finally over I am sure we shall have to work out with all the nations, an international police force and a more equitable system of sharing the resources of the world. Again we shall have to make sacrifices since we are blessed with more than our share of the valuable natural resources, but if we are united and have built up a way of life in which the general social welfare comes first, we will be ready to take our role in the future and set an example for the other nations.

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Unidentified Man: Well, all I have to say is, they could have easily stayed out of this. They did the wrong thing by electing President Roosevelt. Although he helped some, he helped a whole lot, but still therefore he should have kept out of it. He could have easily made some arrangement for that country over there.

Alan Lomax (Interviewer): Pretty hard to make arrangements when somebody attacks you with a fleet of armors.

Unidentified Man: No. Well, the onliest word to that is fight back to that, but still he could have made some, you know what I mean, progress or something like that. He could have talked it out with them and explain it better and maybe they wouldn't did that...They might have been willing to listen to reason of course we don't know the true story ourselves...

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Group 3: African Americans and the War

Reverend W. J. Faulkner: This sudden and unfortunate attack of the Japanese on our country has revealed...a tragic attitude of unpreparedness and selfish indifference on our part to the real dangers confronting our nation and our democratic way of life. Too long have we been divided at home...in practices of stupid and costly racial discriminations, our enemies have conspired to destroy us.

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Dr. W. S. Ellington, Jr.: Mr. President, as I thank you for your Fireside Chats which seem so like confidential talks between friends at the close of a busy day, I'm thinking of fifteen million Negroes who are among the most loyal citizens in the United States...These millions of Negroes are doing all in their power to serve in the present crisis. Most defense industries are closed to him. The possibility of advancement in the army is definitely limited. If democracy is to survive, if democracy is ever to be made to work, our generation must make it work.

We want, as you do, to perpetuate the democratic way of life. Do all in your power, as we are doing, to remove the barriers, raise the ceilings, unshackle the loyalties, release the energies and the initiative of this loyal race, that together all Americans, all liberty-loving peoples may give their all that our way of life may survive.

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Mr. Walter Hadley: I...feel as a Negro that our boys should have a better place in the army and navy since we all have to fight together we should fight more for a solidarity in this country. Declare war on that nation in Dixieland to help us all have one common cause to fight for: liberty, equality, and justice for all.

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Unidentified Man: As a black American I'm quite naturally interested in democracy. However, I do feel that what we should do is get a little democracy in America first. In the United States, we haven't achieved any democracy...We are busy trying to bring the four freedoms to the rest of the world, but yet here in America they don't exist. I cite as examples of this the lynching in Sykestown, Missouri, the other day. The brutal shooting of several Negro soldiers in Alexandria, Louisiana, a couple weeks ago. And the ever-present and still continuing discrimination against Negro craftsmen in defense industries. Now to my mind this is not democracy.

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Group 3: Women and the War

Mrs. Jeb Wagoner: ...I feel like that we're just as much in the war now as the men are. And it's up to the women of North Carolina, as well as the United States, to do everything in our power to help win this war. We'll all have boys to go out there and fight, and it's up to us to see that they are furnished everything they need to fight with, and to eat, and everything else that goes with it. And I don't know what the rest of the women around here think about it, but that's my opinion. And so we'll fight to the end, till we're finished with the Japs, Germans, and Italians, as well all the other people that's trying to take the freedom away from the American people.

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Mrs. Sophie Paley: I'm a widow. I have a son in the army. I expected him home for Christmas and as war was declared he could not come. So I went to see him. I found him very well and happy. Happy to serve our country. As for myself, I'm also happy, and ready to do almost anything. I buy defense stamps and bonds as much as my budget permits me. I work for the Red Cross, and the house where I live, the women organize themselves as the American Women Volunteer Service and we are ready to do anything for our boys as well as for our country. So you see, in my little way I do as much as I can. I only hope and pray that God should give you health and strength to carry on your work and I'm sure that we will win. Thanks for listening to me.

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Mrs. Dorothy Fisher: ...In this time of crisis I feel that every housewife should budget her time and her money so that she may help our national defense. Budget her time so that she may sew or knit for the Red Cross, and budget her money so that she may buy defense bonds, and stamps. I also think it's the duty of every wife and mother to keep her home as pleasant and as cheerful as possible. Children don't understand this crisis and I feel that we shouldn't upset them continually by having them surrounded by an atmosphere of excitement...Like everyone else, I didn't want this war, but now that it has been thrust upon us I pledge myself to do everything in my power to win it.

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Group 4: Preparedness

Norma Ellis: ...I know that this is a time that's a very grave situation. It was true when Woodrow Wilson was president, Abraham Lincoln, and it is true with you. But I think it is time now that we eliminate some of the things that we have spent so much money especially eliminate all WPA and the CC camps and put that money to national defense. And I think that you should have been spending some of this money for a national [defense]. I believe as Teddy Roosevelt stressed, preparedness. And when you are prepared then you will be ready to fight. We remember now Pearl Harbor. If that had been fortified and if those men had really not been asleep on the job -- of course, that's not your fault - the situation would have not been like it was.

I would like for you to stress the national defense more and more. Make the people of America feel that they should every spare dollar buy the savings bonds. And all of the women of America should unite and get to work for the Red Cross. I thank you.

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Norwood Teague (Veteran): We had no idea. I mean, the attack was a total surprise as far as having the attack is concerned. We knew we were going to be at war. We didn't know when or where, whether it would be European only or whether it would be Europe and Asia or Japan, but there was no question we were going to get involved in the European part of the war. But Japan had designs on expanding territory for raw materials and for places people could go. They were getting pretty over-populated in the islands of Japan, and they had imperial ambitions. The tension had been building, of course, with the two Japanese ambassadors in Washington right at that time trying to work out differences, and it became more evident that things were getting far more tense. But to have them perform a surprise attack was quite a surprise to everybody.

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Group 4: Censorship

Mrs. Porter Lucas: Dear Mr. President, there are many questions that I would like to ask about this program that is going on now, but before I would ask those I would like to ask why our Department of Justice has been so lenient with those who have been caught in subversive activities. We have example of men who have been in high government positions that have been proved to be connected with different organizations that are absolutely against our form of government and our democratic ideals...I cannot understand why we have extended to them all the courtesies of democracy under these circumstances, and they are not alone. There are many of those people and if our Americans in foreign countries had been caught in similar circumstances, I am quite sure that those governments would not have been as merciful as we have been...

I am, of course, very much in favor of censorship by the radio and the press. I hope that it can continue to be largely voluntary. But if not, then it is our duty as Americans to get by with less news and less of other things. For we must know that everything that is printed on the front pages of the newspapers of America is made available to the world. Certainly, we are not entitled in times like this to know the military secrets. That is for you and your cabinet.

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Mrs. C. S. Johnson: Dear Mr. President, I am Mrs. C. S. Johnson, General Chairman of the Nashville Block Organization for Colored Citizens. As you move about the city, we are impressed with the eager response of our people of all classes to each request made of them in the civilian defense program. We have discovered that they believe in you. As Mrs. Roosevelt has recently said, we feel as if we are standing upon a solid rock and that rock is our faith in our fellow citizens.

In the face of this optimism however, we are faithfully met with one increasing fear which we pass onto you. Namely that the continuous flow of information regarding the location and magnitude of our defense industries and production centers is needlessly exposing our vulnerability to the enemy. And this one weakness in our system may blast in a moment this rock of civilian solidarity upon which we are building and upon which our victory must ultimately rest. We appeal to you therefore Mr. President and to the Congress to exercise all just powers to control those items in the daily news and syndicated columns which we Americans can well forego for the present without sacrificing any of our coveted liberties. To the end that we ourselves may know our weaknesses and our enemies may only be aware of our gathering strength.

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