BOMBING JAPAN. Shortly after the success of American troops in Normandy, U.S. long-range bombers began to pummel the Japanese mainland. In October MacArthur returned to the Philippines as he had promised, and in March U.S. Marines completed the capture of Iwo Jima in the bloodiest fighting in the Pacific up to that time. The raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi after the Iwo Jima campaign became the symbol of American triumph. Yet even worse fighting took place in June on Okinawa, the gateway to the Japanese home islands, where some 13,000 Americans and 100,000 Japanese lost their lives. So savage was the fighting in the last months of the Pacific War that troops in the field came to fear that a presumed invasion of Japan proper would cost the United States a million casualties, dwarfing the losses at Normandy the year before. The need to avoid such shocking losses became the overriding concern in the official rationale for what happened next.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On 16 July 1945 the United States detonated the world’s first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico. On 6 August a single American bomber flying over Hiroshima, the eighth largest city in Japan, dropped one bomb, code-named “Little Boy.” The resulting explosion, astounding even the scientists who created it, leveled more than four square miles of the city, instantly killing more than 50,000 people. As Stalin had agreed, Soviet troops entered the war in Asia on 8 August, as American demands for the unconditional surrender of Japan went unanswered. The Japanese government was confused at first, unable to verify the dimensions of the damage in Hiroshima because of destroyed communications lines. By the time Tokyo realized the catastrophic power of the Americans’ unprecedented new weapon, the deadline for surrender had passed. Thus, on 9 August a second bomb, “Fat Man,” was dropped on Nagasaki, essentially destroying that city as well. The next day the Japanese Supreme Council voted to surrender unconditionally. On the fifteenth, V-J Day, the Allies accepted it. The most horrific war in human history had finally ended. The victors’ effort to pick up the pieces would soon lead to new strife and a bipolar world tense with the possibility of nuclear war.

Mobilization. Alone of all the Allies, the United States had the manpower and resources to supply the entire war effort — and to win the war. Organizing this task properly would make or break the cause. No political leader was better placed than President Franklin D. Roosevelt to head this endeavor, and most Americans followed his lead with deep loyalty. Lauded as the architect of the New Deal, the president was believed by much of the public to have vanquished the Depression by force of his personality alone. The reality was different: despite success at alleviating the worst rigors of unemployment, hunger, and homelessness, government welfare programs had not cured the Depression. Ultimately, only mobilization for total war overcame the malaise. Before Pearl Harbor the Lend-Lease program and military preparedness required stepped-up production. The Selective Service Act of 1940 initiated the process of drafting young men for military service. Roosevelt’s closest adviser, Harry Hopkins, announced total mobilization and streamlining of the economy. Labor would be allocated, goods rationed, and nonessentials — right down to college courses — eliminated. Hopkins was quoted as saying, “I see no reason for wasting time on nonessentials, such as Chaucer or Latin... A diploma can only be framed and hung on the wall, a shell that a boy or girl helps to make can kill a lot of Japs.”

ECONOMIC CONVERSION. Between 1940 and 1946 the federal government spent $370 billion to prosecute the war, compared with the $46 billion it spent under the New Deal. No one worried any longer about overproduction, a much-feared weakness in American capitalism and one of the major causes of the Depression. War expenditures included items such as servicemen’s wages, veterans’ benefits, investment in synthetic-rubber development, and the building of bomber and tank factories. Costs associated with conversion from civilian production to war production were paid almost entirely by the federal government — that is, the American taxpayer.
President Harry S Truman at first had profound misgivings about using atomic bombs against civilians, and he explained his decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by stressing that the bombings were necessary to end the war, thereby saving the lives of many Americans and Japanese alike. Almost immediately after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, public doubts about the military necessity of the atomic bombings emerged. It was well known in the highest circles of the American government that Japan was using back-channel diplomatic means to seek an end to the war. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Strategic Bombing Survey stressed the near-total collapse of the Japanese economy and military. Allied bombing raids had badly damaged or reduced to rubble all but eight Japanese cities. Japanese factories had been obliterated. Most Japanese troops were in China, cut off from and unable to defend the home islands. The Japanese navy had ceased to exist. Many of Truman’s military advisers—including Navy Secretary James Forrestal, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Admiral of the Fleet William D. Leahy—were adamantly opposed to the bombings, believing that continued conventional bombing, a naval blockade, and the entry of the Soviet Union into the Asian war would end the war quickly. American policy had always called for unconditional surrender by all the Axis powers. Truman and some of his advisers were loath to accept a negotiated settlement to the Pacific war, particularly since Japan was all but prostrate. At the same time, Japanese kamikazes, while evidence of growing Japanese desperation, were taking a toll on the U.S. Navy. The cost of the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb was more than $2 billion, and some administration officials, including Gen. George C. Marshall, believed that failure to use the fruits of this expensive project while American servicemen were still dying would subject President Truman to severe public criticism.

Most historical questions about the use of the atomic bombs have focused on the worsening relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Under terms specified at Yalta the Red Army was to enter the Far Eastern war on 9 August 1945. Before the first successful atomic test at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 16 July 1945, American officials believed Soviet participation to be essential to Japanese defeat. After the successful atomic test, however, the United States had the power to force a quick surrender before Soviet troops could occupy Japanese territory. Truman did not want the same sort of quarrels over Asian territories that the Allies were having over Eastern Europe. A joint Soviet-American occupation of defeated Japan would have wrecked American strategies for the postwar reconstruction of Asian markets. As Secretary of War Henry Stimson had written in his diary, the United States “held all the cards . . . and we mustn’t be a fool about the way we play them.” The distance between American and Soviet national interests was already evident, and some of Truman’s advisors warned of future conflict. The United States had to display some counterweight to the combat-toughened Red Army. The fireballs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki announced America’s power and the willingness to use it.


For the first time income taxes were levied on the working and middle classes. To ensure revenues the government used the unprecedented means of payroll deduction. Bond drives were also an important means of financing defense output. To control inflation Uncle Sam was forced to impose wage and price controls, an outrage to free-market advocates, but these critics were somewhat mollified by the simultaneous suspension of the antitrust laws, which were supposed to prevent the emergence of monopolies in the marketplace. To win the cooperation of big business even further, the government instituted the “cost-plus-a-fixed-fee contract,” which spelled out a guaranteed profit for all government contractors. By the early war years Wall Street financiers, who had until recently denounced the Roosevelt Administration as a “pack of semi-communist wolves,” were demanding the predominant share of government contracts for the industrial corporations they represented. As Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson put it: “If you are going to go to war, or prepare for war, in a capitalist country, you have got to let business make money out of the process or business won’t work.” By the end of the war, corporate giants would dominate the American economy as never before. In 1940 about 175,000 firms accounted for 70 percent of the nation’s manufacturing output, while 100 other companies provided the remaining 30 percent. Three years later, with production doubled, the ratio was exactly reversed.