



Willow Run: Arsenal of Democracy

By early 1940, the aggressive behavior of Nazi Germany had sent a clear message to the White House in the United States of America that war in Europe was inevitable. Its message was clear to the President that the United States would be drawn into the conflict in Europe. By 1940, the government was supporting England with war materials and supplies; however, the loud voices of isolationists were preventing the United States from becoming totally engaged, so President Roosevelt was faced with the dilemma of having to maintain a low “go to war” profile. On December 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan changed that issue when they “suddenly and deliberately” bombed the American occupied territory of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Early on when the Nazi regime started its campaign of violence in Europe and air attacks on England, President Roosevelt was already giving it some financial aid. The direct attack on the United States occupied territory provided the much needed incentive for the President to begin a massive production program to realize the aspiration of his “V-campaign”...“Victory abroad.”

The government began to sign contracts with industry to supply war materials for the military at home and to support its Allies. Some automobile manufacturers declined to accept war production contracts because they believed that the war would be of short duration and they would lose their production momentum. By December 7, 1941, these issues were put aside to support the war effort and the government began to sign contracts with major manufacturers. In February of 1941, Henry Ford acquired land adjacent to land that he already owned near the city of Ypsilanti, Michigan in an area known as Willow Run, named after the creek that flows through the area.

By the spring of 1941, ground had been broken to build the largest airplane manufacturing plant in the world. This plant was designed to build a large four-engine bomber, the “B-24 Liberator.” The plant had 3.5 million square feet of space. At its peak in 1943, the Willow Run plant had 42,331 workers and by the end of that year it was producing 365 B-24’s per month...at the end of 1944, it was producing 650 each month.

The war effort began to require more workers and due to the lack of an abundant supply of men, women were called upon to join the war efforts in the defense industry as workers. Ford was given a directive to hire 12,000 women at the Willow Run plant to help the plant with its production. Ford began a massive campaign to hire women...they were to receive the same wages as men. Unfortunately, Ford did not launch a campaign to hire African American women even when there was a dire need for their labor...racism overrode their need to defend the country... even during time of war! As an example of the prevailing issue of racism, Louise Thomas had spent 120-hours in classroom training to learn the trade of riveting in a defense training class. She passed the test and decided to apply at the Willow Run facility; having been told that the plant was in need of workers with riveting skills. After her second trip to the plant, she was told that she could not be employed as a riveter at the facility; nevertheless, Ford had been directed to hire 12,000 women and it needed riveters. Determined to prevail, she took her case to one of Detroit’s major African American newspapers in order to publicize the racist employment practices in the defense industry that African American citizens were confronted



with when seeking equal opportunities in employment practices. While the Roosevelt White House had its “V-campaign” for victory abroad, it was turning a blind eye to the racism at home. The African American community was aware of this lapse in discretion and came to President Roosevelt’s aid by providing its own campaign entitled, “Double V” campaign...Victory abroad and victory at home over “racism.”

The city of Detroit experienced a massive immigration of African Americans as did many other Northern and West Coast Cities during the war years as they looked for work in the defense industry. Between the war years of 1940 and 1943, the African American population of Detroit grew by 48 percent. These statistics were the same in many major cities that had large defense plants... African American populations increased. It took pressure from civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, the African American press and the threat of direct action before President Roosevelt would sign an Executive Order stopping defense employment job discrimination. Due to this pressure, African American women were eventually hired as riveters at Willow Run. When you see a World War II poster of “Rosie the Riveter,” it is also appropriate to think of her as African American because she was a riveter and eventually helped to build Bomber aircraft at many defense plants throughout the United States of America.

