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Surplus Wars -I

Lead: To get a victory in World War II, the United States sacrificed the lives of nearly a quarter of a million of its sons and daughters, but at the Japanese surrender the war against a huge collection of surplus stuff had just gotten started.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the summer of 1940 the German war machine was nearly everywhere triumphant when Prime Minister Churchill of Britain began to warn that his country could no longer

comply with the U.S. law requiring cash payment for arms purchases. To rectify this problem, President Franklin Roosevelt suggested the idea of Lend-Lease and began sending ancient naval destroyers to the beleaguered and isolated British. This was just a small component of the preparations the administration was making for war. Long before Pearl Harbor, the United States was gearing up for the greatest conflict in its history. In purely economic terms, it was a war that was to consume three times the gross national product of 1940 or in excess of three trillion 1997 dollars as adjusted for inflation.

In the course of the war the United States purchased 299,000 airplanes,

1300 war production plants and 5400 cargo ships. In addition, it built a Navy with more than 1100 warships. When Japan surrendered in 1945 the U.S. government had to ask itself, what would it do with 4.6 million tons of ammunition, 21,000 tanks, 1800 prefabricated religious chapels, 25 million folding chairs, seven million tubes of toothpaste?

During the war no one really thought much about surplus when the awesome power of the U.S. economy was producing these mountains of matériel. The only concern at that point was the defeat of Japan and Germany. Whatever it took to do the job, that, and much more, was produced. With the surrender, reality

began to creep in and the Armed Forces began to look for ways of disposing of a million pounds of hog bristles or countless jars of black camouflage face cream. Next time: The Great War on Surplus.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Chiles, James R., "How the Great War on Surplus Got Won, or Lost," *Smithsonian* 26 (9, December 1995): 52-64.