

# WHAT CAN I DO?

ISSUED BY THE OFFICE OF CIVILIAN DEFENSE

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As America entered World War II, it began a massive buildup of weaponry and war-related materials. Since many of the materials used in the production of weapons and other items for the military were also used in consumer goods, the government looked for ways to encourage people to sacrifice material comforts to help maximize wartime production. This article was part of a pamphlet issued by the Office of Civilian Defense, an agency of the federal government.

## **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions**

What does this pamphlet reveal about how Americans were expected to feel regarding the United States' involvement in World War II? Be specific in your answer.

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War changes the pattern of our lives. It cannot change our *way of life*, unless we are beaten. The kids still play baseball in the corner lot—but they knock off early to weed the victory garden, cart scrap paper to the salvage center, carry home the groceries that used to be delivered. The factory whistle blows—but it calls three shifts of workers instead of one. The daily paper still has comics, but it's the front page that carries the answer to the urgent question "how are we doing?" All over America there's a new tempo, a new purpose, *a new spirit*.

Hard work isn't bad—it's a badge of courage. That "old clothes look" doesn't matter. It's smart to be mended. "Sorry m'am, we can't get any more of those." Good! That means materials are going where they belong—into war weapons.

Only one thing worries us.

"I'm too old to fight!"

"I'm too young to fight!"

"I'm busy all day cooking and cleaning and mending." ...

But this is your war—and your part in it is clear. You don't need spare time. You need imagination to see the connection between tasks which to you may seem small and unimportant—and winning the war.

You need understanding, resourcefulness, self-discipline, determination, and love of America....

Conservation is a war weapon in the hands of every man, woman, and child. And here are two simple rules for using your weapon:

1. *Get along with less*—Every time you decide *not* to buy something, you help to win the war. Be tough with yourself in making each decision. Luxuries are out, and lots of things we used to think of as necessities begin to look like luxuries as we get more and more war-minded.

2. Take good care of the things you have. Most of the comforts and conveniences you now enjoy will have to last you for the duration. It's only common sense to make them last as long as possible. But there is no need to become frantic about your possessions, or to attach too much importance to them. That kind of thinking leads to a wild scramble for possessions and then to hoarding. In wartime, hoarders are on the same level as spies; both help the enemy.

War production goes faster when home life runs smoothly, and so it is a good idea to keep our homes and personal possessions in good order and repair. Do it now—don't wait until your things are past repairing. The more shipshape and tidy we keep our homes and personal possessions the less we will feel the need to buy new things.

Most people understand the *why* of conservation, but they want to know *how*—how to get on without, how to use less so as to contribute to the war supply, how to save, substitute, and salvage. Here are some of the "hows."

Consider, for example, a material so scarce that civilians will not get any more of it for the duration—rubber. Rubber is high up on the list of things we must contribute to the war.

We have been slow in changing our driving habits. Toll-bridge receipts were higher in January 1942 than in January 1941. This news must have pleased Hitler. It is bad news for Americans—as bad as losing a battle.

We are beginning to do much better. Pleasure riding is out for the duration. As of today we must pool our cars for necessary use, for driving to work, to school, to the shops. We must share necessary rides with our friends and neighbors so that no car goes on the road with even one empty seat. The empty seat is a gift to Hitler....

Make a thorough search of your closets, attic, cellar, and garage. You will be surprised at the amount of useless metal, rubber, rags, and paper that can be salvaged. Have a special place to put each kind of salvaged material. The children can help....

## V - HOMES

Millions of Americans are fighting this war in their homes every day in the week, every week in the year. They are doing millions of hard jobs, full chores, making millions of small sacrifices. They are saving and salvaging, conserving and converting. They are foregoing small pleasures, putting up with inconveniences and annoyances. They are doing these things freely and gladly

because they understand the meaning of their fight for freedom: freedom for themselves, their children, and the America they love.

These steadfast and devoted people receive no medals, no citations. They do not ask for recognition, but they deserve it, not only in justice to them, but as an incentive to go on working for victory. The road is long and hard, and all of us need cheer and encouragement.

The V-Home award is a badge of honor for those families which have made themselves into a fighting unit on the home front. If you and your family have earned such an award, you are entitled to put the V-Home certificate in your window. You will receive the award from your local Defense Council. If you and your family have not yet enlisted on the home front you can join today—the greatest civilian army in American history.

The V-Home certificate means something: it has to be earned. This is what it says:

### **THIS IS A V-HOME!**

We in this home are fighting. We know this war will be easy to lose and hard to win. We mean to win it. Therefore we solemnly pledge all our energies and all our resources to fight for freedom and against fascism. We serve notice to all that we are personally carrying the fight to the enemy, in these ways:

I. *This home follows the instructions of its air-raid warden*, in order to protect itself against attack by air.

II. *This home conserves* food, clothing, transportation, and health, in order to hasten an unceasing flow of war materials to our men at the front.

III. *This home salvages* essential materials, in order that they may be converted to immediate war uses.

IV. *This home refuses to spread rumors* designed to divide our Nation.

V. *This home buys* War Savings Stamps and Bonds *regularly*.

We are doing these things because we must *to Win This War*.

Source: "What Can I Do" by the Office of Civilian Defense (Washington, 1942). Reprinted in *America At War: The Home Front, 1941-1945*, edited by Richard Polenberg (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 8-11.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that this pamphlet reveals how the government attempted to persuade Americans to make the sacrifices required by the war. Students might cite such as examples as “Hard work isn’t hard—it’s a badge of courage” and “That ‘old clothes look’ doesn’t matter.” Students may also cite the pamphlet’s specific advice to get along with less, keep one’s possessions in good condition, and drive only when necessary to conserve gas and rubber. Students may answer that the pamphlet encourages civilians to consider themselves an integral part of the effort to win the war. Students may also argue that the pamphlet depicts following government orders as part of **contributing to the war effort**.