Rosie the Riveter Gets Married

Chicago was just humming, no matter where I went. The bars were jammed, and unless you were an absolute dog, you could pick up anyone you wanted to. There were servicemen of all varieties roaming the streets all the time. There was never, never a shortage of young, healthy bucks. We never thought of getting tired. Too, three hours of sleep was normal. I'd go down to the office every morning half dead, but with a smile on my face, and report in for work. There was another girl there who was having a ball too, and we took turns going into the back room and taking a nap on the floor behind a desk.

Young workingwoman during World War II

The men went off to fight. Men were called to war, where their role as soldiers took precedence over their role as breadwinners. Families coped with new realities as men vanished to foreign shores to ward off the enemy, leaving women to fend for themselves.

These readjustments, challenging traditional gender roles and domestic norms, held the potential for long-term changes in public as well as private life. The war emergency opened the way for a restructuring of the economy along gender-neutral lines, bringing an end to sex segregation in the workplace. In addition, wartime dislocation might have led to postponement of marriage and childbearing, continuing the demographic trends of the thirties toward fewer and later marriages. But these possibilities did not materialize. In spite of the many gains women made during the war and their struggles to hold on to those gains, opportunities for them dried up in postwar America. Ironically, the experiences of wartime ultimately reaffirmed a domestic ideal of breadwinner, homemaker, and children. At a time when domesticity faced its greatest challenge, young men and women turned to marriage and childbearing in unexpected numbers. How and why this happened is the subject of this chapter.

Let us first look closely at what some historians consider to be the most substantial change of the 1940s: the entry of unprecedented numbers of female workers into the paid labor force. As a result of the combined incentives of patriotism and good wages, women began streaming into jobs, many for the first time. The fastest-growing group in the workforce was married women, who took jobs during the war in record numbers. In a booming economy responding to the needs of the war effort, the stigma attached to employed wives evaporated.

Yet this entry of women into the paid labor force was not as far reaching as it appeared on the surface. When we look closely at who these women were and what they did—particularly when we consider long-term possibilities—their opportunities appear much more limited.

As the epigraph suggests, World War II opened up all kinds of opportunities for women. New possibilities for work, play, and sexual adventure were everywhere. Yet women also faced hardship as fathers, sons, and husbands left for war, families relocated, and disruption became the norm. Taken together, all the changes, challenges, and difficulties of wartime had a lasting impact on the lives of American women. But at the time, long-term effects were not on people's minds. The question was how to respond to the emergency.

Emergency was nothing new to the young adults coming of age at the time of World War II. They had been reared on the trials and hardships of the depression. When war broke out they faced a new emergency calling for strength and sacrifice. Although the war brought an end to the depression, as prosperity returned it ushered in new challenges for women and men. Traditional domestic roles were thrown into disarray, and even the disruption took new forms. In wartime the stigma attached to employment for married women evaporated. Women not only were tolerated in the paid labor force, they were actively recruited to take "men's jobs" as a patriotic duty, to keep the war economy booming while
holding jobs at all, it is not surprising that even feminist organizations fighting job discrimination stressed women's need to work over their right to employment—a strategy that underscored women's responsibility to their families as their primary concern.4

Moreover, when we examine the statistics closely, we find that young married women, those most likely to have small children at home, made the smallest gains in employment during the 1940s—even less than prewar predictions. The reason is demographically as well as culturally interesting. Since single women had provided the largest proportion of the paid female labor force before the war, the demands of production during the forties quickly exhausted the supply. Few young single women were available, for the war almost immediately brought a drop in the marriage age and a rise in the birthrate. Because of these developments, young women who might previously have been expected to work for a few years were marrying and having children instead. Young married women with small children were encouraged to stay home. Although there were some day care centers to accommodate employed mothers, they were generally considered harmful to a child’s development. Although only three thousand such centers were established by the federal government, even these were not filled to capacity.5

The removal of these younger women from the labor market opened the way for older married women—those without young children at home—to enter the paid labor force. These women were the fastest-growing group among the employed, a trend that would continue after the war. Between 1940 and 1945, the female labor force grew by over 50 percent. The proportion of women employed rose from 28 to 37 percent, and women made up 36 percent of the civilian workforce. Three-fourths of these new female employees were married. By the end of the war fully 25 percent of all married women were employed—a huge gain from 15 percent at the end of the 1930s.6

Not everyone was comfortable with this development, however. A writer in Fortune magazine lamented: “There are practically no unmarried women left to draw upon. . . . This leaves, as the next potential source of industrial workers, the housewives. . . . We are a kindly, somewhat sentimental people with strong, ingrained ideas about what women should or should not do. Many thoughtful citizens are seriously disturbed over the wisdom of bringing married women into the factories.”7

In spite of their visibility, women still remained in a fairly small num-

ber of occupations. For all the publicity surrounding “Rosie the Riveter,” few women took jobs that were previously held exclusively by men, and most of those jobs ended at the conclusion of the war. These developments are typical of a pattern that began during the war and continued during the postwar years: numerical expansion of opportunities flowing into a limited range of occupations. Although more and more women were welcomed into the paid labor force, most of them still ended up in low-paying, sex-segregated jobs.8

Women did not accept this situation passively. They recognized their value and fought for better wages and working conditions. The activism of women working at the California Sanitary Canning Company provides one dramatic example. Energetic labor organizers like Luisa Moreno and Dorothy Ray Healy built a powerful union of largely Mexican and Mexican American women who were able to achieve a wage increase and recognition of their union. Family and community networks helped support and strengthen their organization. Although their union could not be sustained after the war in the face of mounting opposition by anticomunist crusaders, its successes during the war demonstrate how much control over their work lives these women were able to achieve.9

One reason for the wartime success of these women was the strength of their numbers. Women composed 75 percent of all workers in the California canneries. Because they were in the majority, their segregation from male employees allowed them to develop a female work culture in the plants. In other industries where men were in the majority, the segregation of women was a disadvantage. Automobile manufacturing, for example, remained male dominated. Before the war, women accounted for only 10 percent of all autoworkers, and they were concentrated in relatively few jobs. After an initial shutdown, the industry retooled for war production. When the plant doors reopened in 1942, male workers were in short supply and women were hired in unprecedented numbers. By the end of 1943 one-fourth of the industry’s workers were female.10

Throughout the war, however, the automobile industry kept women in certain jobs and men in others. The boundaries continued to shift as new definitions of “women’s work” were required, but the sex-segregated labor force remained. Despite the dramatic upswing in women’s workforce participation, the unions had not fully developed class consciousness that would include women in their concerns, nor was there
a strong feminist movement to assert women's needs. As a result, gender division of labor survived the war.10

In spite of women's dramatic contributions to the war effort, they were not able to achieve equal pay or working conditions. Their unequal treatment led to a campaign for equal rights. The Republicans in 1940 and the Democrats in 1944 supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) opposed it. Even Frances Perkins, secretary of labor, and Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady—two feminist activists—initially refused to support the legislation because they feared loss of the legal protections for women that had been enacted in the Progressive Era. In 1945 Congress considered the "Federal Wage Discrimination Act," but even with a fair amount of bipartisan support and some union backing that measure failed. When the ERA finally reached the Senate in 1946, a majority voted for it, but it failed to achieve the two-thirds necessary for passage.11

Instead of equal rights women got "protective" legislation, but those laws did not protect them from ill treatment on the job. Sexual harassment was rampant. One female war worker complained:

At times it gets to be a pain in the neck when the man who is supposed to show you work stops showing it to you because you have nicely but firmly asked him to keep his hands on his own knees; or when you have refused a date with someone and ever since then he has done everything in his power to make your work more difficult. . . . Somehow we'll have to make them understand that we are not very much interested in their snappy viritity. That the display of their physique and the lure of their prowess leaves us cold. That although they have certainly convinced us that we are men and we are women, we'd really rather get on with our work.

In spite of such difficulties, women took advantage of every opportunity the war offered. Almira Bondelid was a housewife when her husband left for overseas, but she did not sit home and wait for his return: "I decided to stay in San Diego and went to work in a dime store. That was a terrible place to work, and as soon as I could I got a job at Convair. . . . I worked in the tool department as a draftsman, and by the time I left there two years later I was designing long drill jigs for parts of the wing and a hull of B-24s."12

Unfortunately for women like Almira Bondelid, highly skilled, well paid jobs like the one she finally secured were not likely to last once the war ended. Even before the end was in sight, married women were encouraged to return to their domestic duties when the conflict was over. In addition, single women were expected to relinquish their job and find husbands. Although the war offered single women many new opportunities, they also encountered hostility to their newly acquired freedom.

There is no question that wartime offered women new chances to participate in public life and to enjoy a certain amount of sexual freedom as the epigraph to this chapter suggests. But at the same time, during the wartime emergency, single women were often seen as a threat to stable family life and to the moral fiber of the nation at war. As single women poured into the labor force along with their married sisters there were fears that they might not be willing to settle down to family life once the emergency ended. Perhaps these anxieties arose because unlike the 1930s, the war years brought a noticeable number of women out of their homes and traditionally sex-segregated jobs into occupation-previously reserved for men. In addition, the war removed men from the home front, demonstrating that women could manage quite well without them. Single women now became targets of campaigns urging them back into their domestic roles, campaigns that continued after the war.

Along with their new economic endeavors, the perceived or potential sexual activity of single women also became a cause for alarm. A typical wartime pamphlet warned: "The war in general has given women new status, new recognition. . . . Women are 'coming into their own' in this war. . . . Yet it is essential that women avoid arrogance and retain their femininity in the face of their own new status. . . . In her new independence she must not lose her humanness as a woman. She may be the woman of the moment, but she must watch her moments."13 This theme is echoed through the prescriptive literature written during the war. One textbook explained why women had to watch their moments so carefully:

"The greater social freedom of women has more or less inevitably led to a greater degree of sexual laxity, a freedom which strikes at the heart of family stability. . . . When women work, earn, and spend as much as men do, they are going to ask for equal rights with men. But the right to behave like a man meant [sic] also the right to misbehave as he does.
The decay of established moralities came about as a by-product. In this remarkable passage, the authors state as a scientific fact their opinion that social freedom and employment for women cause "sexual laxity," moral decay, and the destruction of the family.14

Women were urged to stay "pure" for the soon to be returning veterans, and men were told to avoid contact with single women for fear of catching venereal diseases. As Allan Brandt has shown, wartime purity crusades marked a revision of the germ theory: germs were not responsible for spreading disease, "promiscuous" women were. Widely distributed posters warned soldiers that even the angelic "girl next door" might carry disease. "She may look clean, but..." read the caption next to one picture of everybody's sweetheart. Wartime ushered in a preoccupation with all forms of nonmarital sexuality that had been dormant since the Progressive Era. It ranged from concern about prostitution and "promiscuous" women to fencings campaigns against homosexuals and other "deviants" in military and civilian life.15

Those campaigns were not fully effective, however. Young women found tremendous new chances to pursue sexual relationships and forge communities during the war. More young women moved into the city and away from neighborhood and parental supervision. Many now earned their own money and took charge of their own leisure time and behavior. For some young heterosexual women experiencing this new independence, men in uniform held special appeal. "When I was sixteen," recalled a college student a few years later, "I let a sailor pick me up and go all the way with me. I had intercourse with him partly because he had a strong personal appeal for me, but mainly because I had a feeling of high adventure and because I wanted to please a member of the armed forces." With so many girls in this adventurous spirit, one teenage boy described wartime as "a real sex paradise. The plant and the town were just full of working girls on the make. Where I was, a male war worker became the center of loose morality."16

Lesbians found similar opportunities, especially in the military. Phyllis Aby quit her job as a lab technician to join the WAVes because she "wanted to be with all those women." Homosexuality was not allowed in the military, of course, but lesbians were not easily identified. "I remember being very nervous about them asking me if I had any homosexual feelings or attitudes," she recalled. "I just smiled and was sweet and feminine."17

The military establishment was not fully prepared for the impact of large numbers of women, and it took pains to promote a "feminine" image of female recruits. The entry of women into the armed forces during the war marked a major change from the past. They were recruited into every part of military service except combat. As Oveta Culp Hobby, director of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, proclaimed, women "are carrying on the glorious tradition of American womanhood. They are making history! ... This is a war which recognizes no distinctions between men and women." To the female Americans she hoped to recruit, she said, "This is your war." Women of "excellent character" who could pass an intelligence test could enlist, provided they had no children under fourteen. The WAVes accepted healthy women with no dependents under eighteen if they were unmarried. A WAVE who married could remain in the service as long as she had finished basic training and her husband was not in the service. The birth of a child brought an "honorable discharge."18

At first glance it appears as though the armed forces offered dramatic new opportunities for women to shed their domestic roles. Yet on closer examination it is clear that the war emergency gave these endeavors a temporary quality while making it impossible to combine jobs in the service with family life. In addition, every effort was made to dispel prevailing notions that military work would make women "masculine" or ruin their moral character. The military presented the image of the female recruit as very "feminine" as well as domestically inclined. A guidebook for women in the armed services and war industries, for example, included a photograph of a young WAVE with a caption that described her as "pretty as her picture ... in the trim uniform that enlisted U.S. Navy Waves will wear in winter. ... smartly-styled, comfortable uniforms ... with a soft rolled-brim hat." Women were needed for their "delicate hands" and "precision work at which women are so adept," and in hospitals where "there is a need in a man for comfort and attention that only a woman can fill." Women's corps leaders did little to challenge prevailing notions about female domesticity, they assured the public that after the war enlisted women would be "as likely as other women to make marriage their profession."19

These publicity measures met with only partial success amid public sentiment suspicious of women in nontraditional roles. In fact, rumors about the supposedly promiscuous sexual behavior and scandalous
As a result, the potential for a restructuring of the paid labor force that would dismantle the sex-segregated pattern of employment never materialized. In spite of all the changes wrought by the war, in the long run work for women remained limited to certain occupations, with low pay and the expectation of short duration. Traditional marriage, complete with economic dependence on the male breadwinner, was still the norm. It was, in fact, one of the primary reasons given for fighting the war.

Popular culture was filled with many such messages. One example was produced under the sponsorship of the Office of Facts and Figures. It was a series of programs aired on all major radio networks in 1942 in an effort to mobilize support for the war. One highly acclaimed segment, "To the Young," included this exhortation:

**YOUNG MALE VOICE:** "That's one of the things this war's about."

**YOUNG FEMALE VOICE:** "About us?"

**YOUNG MALE VOICE:** "About all young people like us. About love and gettin' hitched, and havin' a home and some kids, and breathin' fresh air out in the suburbs... about livin' and workin' decent, like free people."

Demographic patterns during the 1940s show that Americans conformed to this expectation. Women may well have entered war production, but they did not give up on reproduction. The war brought a dramatic reversal in patterns of family formation that had characterized the 1930s. Whereas the depression was marked by later marriages and declining marriage rates and birthrates, the trends toward younger marriages and an increasing birthrate normally accompanied by the postwar era were well under way during the war years. Over one million more families were formed between 1940 and 1943 than would have been expected during normal times. And as soon as Americans entered the war, the birthrate began to climb. Between 1940 and 1945 it jumped from 19.4 to 24.5 per 1000 population. The marriage rate also accelerated, spurred in part by the possibility of draft deferment for married men in the early war years, and in part by the imminence of departure for foreign shores. We find, then, the curious pattern of widespread disruption in domestic life accompanied by a surge into marriage and parenthood.

We find these same patterns in popular entertainment. Whereas the most popular novel picture of the 1930s was *Gone with the Wind*,
story of survival during hard times focused on a shrewd and tough woman whose domestic life ends up in shambles, the top box office hit of the 1940s was quite different. The 1943 war propaganda film *This Is the Army*, starring Ronald Reagan, was the most successful movie of the decade. In this film the men are center stage as they finish the job their fathers began in World War I. The plot revolves around the efforts of the central character’s sweetheart to persuade her reluctant soldier to marry her. Finally she succeeds, and they wed just before the hero leaves to fight on foreign shores. As he marches off with his buddies, she remains at home, providing the vision of what the men are fighting for.

Off the screen as well, images of celebrities shifted. For men, the brave soldier eager to return to hearth and home provided the ideal masculine type. Film heroes, like all able-bodied male Americans, were expected to pull their weight in the war effort. Men who got deferments were resented—all men were urged to do their military duty. It is interesting that the “he-man” was the most popular male image during the 1930s, when the economic depression threatened to undercut the strong and independent male. During the war, however, men had plenty of chances to prove their masculinity in traditionally manly ways. The soldier was the prototypical he-man, after all. Now we find women paying homage to men’s gentler qualities. In an item titled “What Should a Girl Expect from a Man?” female stars stressed such qualities as “kindness and tact,” “keeping his temper,” “courtesy, consideration and sweetness.” Instead of references to the tough guy, women now mentioned “manners, fidelity, companionship.”

For women we also find a new image portrayed by female stars. Rather than continuing the trend of the 1930s toward more autonomous women as role models, which might be expected in the wartime situation, female celebrities were suddenly featured predominantly as wives and mothers. Ann Sothern, in a 1944 article titled “What Kind of Woman Will Your Man Come Home To?” urged women to fit their lives to their men’s. She told her readers to take an interest in their husbands’ interests. Read up on what he is doing, what we’re fighting for, what will come afterward. . . . Your plans for your life together afterward are important. . . . We began planning our house together—our “perfect house.” Then we began to think about the nursery . . . and that became the most important room in the house-to-be, the most important thing in our plans for the future and it made us feel our sense of responsibility to that future. . . . When he comes back it may take a few years for him “to find himself”—it’s [your] job—not his—to see that the changes in both of [you] do not affect the fundamental bonds between [you]. . . . I won’t bother to remind you of the obvious, to keep up your appearance—to preserve for him the essence of the girl he fell in love with, the girl he longs to come back to. . . . I know that a lot of men are dreaming of coming back not only to those girls who waved good-by to them. They are dreaming of coming back to the mothers of their children!

Sothern herself intended to practice what she preached; she planned to learn to share “outdoor sports and prize-fighting which I’ve never liked but which he likes. . . . I’ve made up my mind that I’m going to like them too. . . . The least we can do as women is to try to live up to some of those expectations.”

Along with the wifely focus of the 1940s came a move away from flamboyant sexuality, as exhibited by stars of the 1930s like Mae West, toward a more prudent respectability. Young starlets were featured who lived quiet, simple lives with their parents, subbing the fast life of Hollywood. Bette Davis, noted for her strong-minded independence in the 1930s, proclaimed in 1941 that men and women are equals today in business, politics, and sports—they are as brave, intelligent and daring collectively as are men. But it’s still “a man’s world in spite of the fact that girls have pretty much invaded it.” And because it is a man’s world, women must protect the most precious thing they have: their reputations. For modern women still want what grandma wanted: “a great love, a happy home, a peaceful old age.” Do not be afraid to be termed a “prude,” said Davis, “Good sports are dated every night of the week—prudes are saved for special dates. Good sports get plenty of rings on the telephone, but prudes get them on the finger. Men take good sports out—they take prudes home—yes, right home to Mother and Dad and all the neighbors.”

In keeping with such expressions of enthusiasm for marriage and the family, even men’s sexual fantasies were often publicly constructed around images of conjugal bliss. The walls of barracks were decorated with pinups of women in alluring poses reminding the men why they were fighting. Movie star Betty Grable was the most popular pinup, not
because she was the most sexy and glamorous, but because she had a rather wholesome look. Grable came to represent the girl back home, and the "American way of life" that inspired the men to fight. As one soldier wrote in a letter to Grable: "There we were out in those damn dirty trenches. Machine guns firing. Bombs dropping all around us. We would be exhausted, frightened, confused and sometimes hopeless about our situation. When suddenly someone would pull your picture out of his wallet. Or we'd see a decal of you on a plane and then we'd know what we were fighting for."

Grable became even more popular when she married bandleader Harry James in 1943 and had a child later that year. It reinforced her image as everyone's sweetheart, future wife, and mother. To be worthy of similar adoration, women sent their husbands and sweethearts photos of themselves in "pinup" poses. Betty Grable herself urged women to send their men photos of themselves in swimsuits, to inspire them to fight on and come home to an erotically charged marriage. Men at war were encouraged to fantasize about sex that awaited them when they returned—not with the "victory girls" who hung around bases, but with their wives. In the words of one GI, "We are not only fighting for the Four Freedoms, we are fighting also for the priceless privilege of making love to American women."27

Most soldiers would go home to do just that, and propel the marriage rates and birthrates to new heights. For women, the opportunities that had opened in public life during the war shrank with the return to peace. The War Manpower Commission assumed that "the separation of women from industry should flow in an orderly plan." Frederick Crawford, head of the National Association of Manufacturers, found a point of agreement with his usual adversaries, the union leaders, when he said, "From a humanitarian point of view, too many women should not stay in the labor force. The home is the basic American institution." Many women rejected this idea. As one argued, "War jobs have uncovered unsuspected abilities in American women. Why lose all these abilities because of a belief that 'a woman's place is in the home'? For some it is, for others not." But her words would be drowned in a sea of voices calling on women to prepare to assume their places in the kitchens and bedrooms of returning servicemen.28

By the time young adults emerged from the depression and the war, they had been sobered by years of emergency that propelled them to—ward a vision of "normalcy" focused on traditional family life. The war had extended the state of crisis that characterized the depression and further disrupted domestic gender roles. Yet when the war ended, gone were the positive role models of independent women who offered a viable alternative to marriage, as the nation turned to reaffirmation of family values and female subordination. There was no positive vision of marriage resting on economic equality; nor was there any trend in the economy toward gender equality. Rather, men and women alike expected to relinquish their emergency roles and settle into domestic life as breadwinners and homemakers. During as well as after the war, all the major institutions in which Americans lived and worked came to foster this vision of a nation finding its ultimate security in the traditional American home.

Notes
2. Parts of this chapter are drawn from Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988). Whereas *Homeward Bound* examined primarily the experiences of white middle-class women, this essay moves beyond that focus to examine the lives of women from different class and ethnic backgrounds. For an extension of this discussion, see May, *Pushing the Limits*.
8. Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the*
24. "What Should a Girl Expect from a Man?" Photoplay 23 (June 1943).


28. May, Pushing the Limits, chap. 2.