



**Keep From All Thoughtful Men:
How U.S. Economists Won World War II**

By James G. Lacey

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Reviewed by

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James Lacey, a scholar of strategy and national security studies, writes a fascinating book detailing the evolution of the munitions plan (victory program) in support of the U.S. war effort to defeat the Axis powers during World War II. The author asserts that the magnitude of this undertaking, necessitating extensive industrial mobilization of the U.S. economy, made World War II the “economist’s war.” Lacey supports his thesis by chronologically covering the major events and activities that led to the plan’s acceptance and execution.

The author first dispels the widely held belief that Major Albert Wedemeyer, USA (later, Lieutenant General), was the originator of the victory program. Lacey carefully discredits historians, and Wedemeyer himself, through credible scholarly forensics. He does note that Wedemeyer proposed a plan, as he claimed; however, it was not the one embraced by his superiors, let alone the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. In fact, Lacey shows the plan to be outright wrong anyway.

Lacey subsequently describes the trials and tribulations of military and civilian leaders as they organized and prepared the Nation for war—progressing from a humble ad hoc working group into the powerful War Production Board (WPB). He includes in this discussion the complex dialogue that took

place among these eventual planning power brokers (for example, Kuznets, Hopkins, Nelson, Knox, Knudsen, Nathan, and General Somervell), which was complicated by the number of their diverging personalities and agendas, all working toward a common endstate but often visualizing different ways and means to achieve it. Interwoven throughout are the philosophical debates that took place, such as those addressing funding, sourcing, and mobilization requirements, and how much of the U.S. economy would have to be directly committed to support the war effort. Also included are the conversations addressing assistance requirements in support of Great Britain’s and the Soviet Union’s war efforts.

The industry-by-industry assessment of U.S. production capacity, led by statistician Stacy May, and the mobilization analysis, led by Simon Kuznets, was instrumental to the fruitfulness of these discussions. They came to several notable conclusions. They determined that the military had underestimated its budgetary needs by some 50 percent. The country would run out of production capacity long before it ran out of money to finance munitions production. America needed to shift large segments of the labor force from one geographical location to another to meet military output objectives. President Roosevelt’s “must have” munitions were in direct conflict with the Nation’s production capacity. Diverting/creating added production capacity to meet the President’s requirement would adversely affect overall force capabilities and delay any possible landing on European soil to defeat Germany. The country could commit up to half of its economic capacity in support of the war effort without adversely affecting the short- and/or long-term well-being of the economy. This would be necessary to avert a protracted war. (The author further dispels the notion that the American public had to make great sacrifices in support of the war.) Finally, the United States would be incapable of sustaining a European landing force able to defeat Germany before May 1944. History proved them astonishingly accurate.

What is most amazing is that the analysts determined the most plausible landing date 3 days before the United States entered the war. In the end, Lacey professes that it was economists supporting the WPB, led by economic mastermind Simon Kuznets, supported by statistical work led by Stacy May, who ultimately determined the victory program and when the Normandy landing would take place.

The work involved in gaining industry’s collective and collaborative support for the war effort is another of the many interesting insights provided. Memories of being forced to expand production capacity in support of World War I, only to have to subsequently and significantly scale back at great expense after the war, made industry very apprehensive and fearful of a similar fate.

A unique feature of the book is its appendices, which contain all the historical documents that support the author’s argument. These documents include Wedemeyer’s victory program, Kuznets first feasibility study, and General Somervell’s written comments regarding the recommendations in the feasibility study. The book’s short title derives from one of the many derogatory comments made by Somervell toward Kuznets’s feasibility study results. The reader will find these documents valuable throughout his reading of the book.

Lacey has meticulously researched an inherently complex topic and crafted it in a concise and engaging way. This book is a must-read for 20th-century military historians, strategists, national security studies academics, and students. Also valuable is the author’s chapter in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), which he coedited. It directly complements this noteworthy body of work. **JFQ**

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