2000 Second Place Argumentative Essay

Children on The Homefront

During World War II, governments were tried and tested, armies were defeated, and technology leaped forward. However, the effects of World War II extended further onto the American children. Death of fathers, collection of scraps, purchasing of ration stamps, the effects of propaganda, and the technicalities of rationing are all factors that influenced the children of that war. These conditions at work consequently caused the generation of children from World War II to grow into conscious patriots and avid supporters of the war cause.

With the death of family members, the family situation on the home front changed drastically. Judy Woodbury, who was a young child during World War II, testifies that the death of her father had a profound effect on her family. Judy recalls the 21-gun salute that the army gave for the death of her father and how “every time [she hears] that now, it sends shivers up [her] back.” Thousands of bodies were brought home from the war in April of 1948 where the same ceremony was preformed for multiple children’s fathers. Judy recalls that her mother was also seriously affected and was “never the same again.” The death of her father was not entirely negative though. Judy believes that with the onset of her father’s death she became “a much more patriotic person.” The death of a child’s father led the child to believe more fervently in the cause for which their father died, and consequently enhanced their patriotism for the country.

With the nation suddenly thrust into a war, all the resources of the United States were being used to provide supplies to the troops, produce a two-ocean navy, and increase the production of land artillery. Metal, paper, gas, and other natural resources became a rarity among the United States citizens. The government turned to the children of the country to aid in the supply and conservation of these precious resources. Robert Kirk, in his article concerning the mobilization of children in World War II, explains that government and educational leaders accentuated the idea that patriotism can be learned from becoming a part of the war effort (Kirk 223-4). The easiest way for children to become a part of that effort was to collect scraps of metal, rubber, and paper from around their local neighborhoods. Older kids, ages fourteen to eighteen were pressed with more common employment, so the deed of collection fell on the shoulders of the young children. Because the condition or size of the collected scrap was unimportant, “authorities considered children well suited for the task”(Kirk 225-6). Merrill Woodbury, who was a child growing up in Utah at the time, recalls that even aluminum wrappers from sticks of gum were collected and rolled into large balls. However, in most states, child labor was illegal, and the collection of scraps had to remain voluntary. Because children could not be forced to collect scraps, they were encouraged to think of collection as a type of competition (Kirk 227).

In order to accomplish a competition in collection, organizations came up with patriotic slogans to remind children of what they were working for. Terms such as “Salvage for Victory” were common campaign aphorisms. Schools often had collection competitions to rouse interest among the young students (Kirk 227). Showing just how effective the campaigns were, Merrill Woodbury states, “Yeah, we didn’t get any money or anything. It was just our way of helping our country.” Individual children, churches, and national organizations (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, etc.) participated in scrap drives (Sherrow 64). The voluntary act of helping the nation’s cause led to further patriotism among the youth of that era. As they helped their nation in a time of need, they began to realize their importance in being patriotic and supporting America.
Another way that children increased their devotion towards the war effort was through the purchasing of war bonds and savings stamps. War bonds were like temporary loans given by the citizens of the United States to the government during World War II. Citizens would buy a bond worth a certain amount and that money would go directly to the war effort. After a certain time period, the bond would mature (with a small increase in value due to interest) and one could then trade his bond for the money the government owed. The aim of the Defense Savings Program was to reduce the risk of inflation in America’s economy (United States 14). To accomplish this, new war bonds, Series E, F, and G, were issued for the cause of financing America’s troops in World War II. These bonds, however, were mainly appealed to those with a steady income (United States 6-7). Unlike bonds, saving stamps were cheap and easy to buy. Stamps were only ten cents each. After collecting a specified amount of stamps, they were placed in a stamp book that could then be traded in for a bond. Because of their low price, they were more appealing to the children. Merril Woodbury recalls that he and his classmates were encouraged to buy saving stamps, and many children would buy them whenever they found a spare dime. Merril describes the process as “a little savings project.” Through buying stamps and starting their own personal collections, the children demonstrated their patriotism and support for the nation’s financial well being.

Air raid drills provided yet another opportunity for children to demonstrate their diligence in adhering to the war efforts. Although the mainland of the United States was never attacked, neighborhoods constructed civil defense plans and ordered citizens to abide by “blackout procedures” (Sherrow 37). Merril relates his experiences with “practice blackouts” as he describes how a loud siren would sound, signifying an air raid drill. When the siren sounded, families of the neighborhood were to close all of the shades and turn off the lights within the house. If one did not follow directions, an Air Raid warren would promptly go to that house and remind that family of the rules. Children, like Merril Woodbury, would participate in raids with the goal to deny the warren a reason to visit their home. This accordance to duty strengthened the feeling of nationalism among the youth during World War II.

In a sense, the youth, particularly the young boys, demonstrated their patriotism indirectly as they played common games with their friends. Among little boys, mock battles of the Americans triumphing over the Axis powers were played with toy figurines. Merril Woodbury describes how he used to look up to the fighter pilots of the World War. He explains how he used to make toy planes out of wood and reenact war scenes with all of his friends. Merril Woodbury notes that “it was what most young boys did at the time”. Merril also remembers that is was a common practice for children to listen to the radios to try and find out which battles were won and which were lost. Children’s diligence in keeping up with the war effort as battles transpired combined with the respect the boys gave to the soldiers demonstrated the growing patriotism that was common in that era.

Propaganda can be associated with the growth of patriotism found among the children of World War II. There were many forms of propaganda that accompanied World War II such as movies, songs, and posters/ads. Although prejudices were sometimes enhanced by propaganda, prejudices often encouraged nationalism and support of a war effort. Many wartime movies focused on Nazi Germany and the atrocities that are associated with Germany’s war actions (Sherrow 302). Merril recalls that even in non-war related movies there were often short film clips before the movie, depicting soldiers from the front line, explosions, and low flying planes. Darel Bartschi, who also witnessed some movies of that time, explains, “almost all of the films had patriotic and war themes”(5). These movies and images aided in raising support for the American lines. Music, too, acted as a medium through which propaganda was sent to children. Merril states that there were many propaganda songs to boost morale and particularly remembers one that “poked fun” at the Japanese fighter planes and troops. Merril recounts that through the media, children of that era were told to believe that Americans were good and that Japanese were bad. Because children were so impressionable, the propaganda machine took a large toll on the youth, usually persuading them to be more dedicated to the American cause.

The posters and ads of the World War II era reflect how the nation was trying to increase patriotism and nationalism. Often, the posters would depict possible consequences of an Axis power victory, and many were directed towards the children. One poster of the time showed children on a lawn with a large swastika shadow on the verge of overtaking them. The caption reads, “Don’t Let That Shadow Touch Them Buy War
Bonds” (World War II Posters). By putting children onto the poster, it directly appealed to them and persuaded them to buy more savings stamps. An ad in the Salt Lake Tribune was printed on December 8, 1942, depicting Santa Claus accepting war bond stamps from a poster soldier with a caption reading, “For Victory Buy United States War Savings Bond Stamps” (Salt Lake Tribune). The Santa figure certainly attracted the attention of children as they were subtly reminded to support American efforts. Many propaganda forms focused their attention towards children so as to motivate allegiance within the youth of America.

Propaganda of the war instilled many prejudices within the children of World War II. Merril Woodbury admits that because of the movies, songs, and posters he saw, he “learned to hate the Japanese and the Germans and the Italians.” He discusses how he used to draw cartoons of Japanese and labeled them “every derogatory remark that would get you in trouble today.” This prejudice was brought on largely by fear of the enemy as posters often over exaggerated the closeness of the Axis powers to the home front and portrayed the homes of America to be in grave danger (World War II Posters). Judy Woodbury recalls that when she went to movies as a child, the Japanese were always depicted in a “really scary” manner. Because of the movies, she had nightmares of “little yellow Japanese men coming up a ladder and through [her] window.” The fear of the enemy was easily transformed into patriotism among children. Not wanting their fears to become realities, they were motivated into diligently aiding in all areas possible to support their country in warding off the enemy.

Within children’s magazines of the war period, many comic strips were formed to subtly show children how they could help and become patriotic. Comic books contained new slogans such as “scrap the Japs” and “junk the Axis” (Kirk 227). These mottoes reminded children to maintain their diligence in collecting scrap for the troops over seas. Other comic books started new story lines to encourage children’s efforts. Jack and Jill, a common magazine for children during the war, started a new comic called “The Scrappers’ Club,” which portrayed a group of children whose goal was to bring back large amounts of scrap to donate to the war cause (Kirk 228).

Rationing in the United States was instituted soon after America entered the war. Because of rationing and its effects, children had to sacrifice their regular meals for meager and substituted meals. Merril Woodbury defines rationing as “a system of equitable distribution.” Indeed, rationing did affect every family in the United States as the distribution of food, gas, rubber, sugar, and many other common items was regulated around the nation. Bartschi states that almost as soon as the United States had entered into the war, they were subject to the laws of rationing (2). Rationing was almost a forced patriotism. Children and adults were thrust into a unification of cause that helped spread support for fellow countrymen. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his message to congress in 1942, stated, “it is obviously fair that where there is not enough of any essential commodity to meet all civilian demands, those who can afford to pay more for the commodity should not be privileged over others who cannot” (Bentley 14). Children of the war era were given smaller portions and substitutes of food. Merril remarks that during the war, he and his family didn’t spend their money on regular items, instead, his money went towards the war efforts. In this way, the children sacrificed food so that the soldiers fighting the war would have enough food to continue defending freedom.

Merril recollects that butter was in short supply and that groceries of varying types were “a rarity” that were unable to be purchased. Sugar, jam, and tea were other items that became great “luxuries” throughout World War II. Because of the rationing stipulations, children could not take comfort in certain common dishes and meals on holidays and other special occasions often became ordinary or less than ordinary meals. Some young people would aid their families in raising gardens so that they would not have to be as dependant on their war stamps (Sherrow 102). These types of sacrifices built up a sense of duty to country as children demonstrated their willingness to conserve the limited supply of food within the United States.

Another common necessity that was rationed to the American public was gasoline. When asked which rare item he missed most during his childhood, Merril responds that he mostly missed the use of gasoline. He describes the process by which the government went about conserving gasoline: an imposed law of a thirty mile per hour speed limit on in town roads and a forty-five mile per hour speed limit on the highways. The rationing of gas
began in Utah at 12:00am Tuesday, December 1, 1942 (“Gasoline Sales Drop Close to Zero as Rationing Begins”). Bartschi relates that his family was rationed to about two gallons of gasoline each week, and that this restriction hampered travel or any kind of movement within the state (2). Because of the rationing, communities were encouraged to pull together and form carpool groups when driving was needed. Children walked to most of their own personal destinations in order to preserve gas resources within their families. Sacrifice, again, among children highlighted their own contributions to the war effort in the United States.

World War II had many effects on the world, one of which is the noticeable rise in patriotism and nationalism among the children of that era. The increase of duty to country can be attributed to the death of thousands of fathers, responsibilities of children to collect war materials, new forms of propaganda in the media, and the processes of rationing. These factors combined led the children to realize what their country was fighting for and encouraged the youth to become a part of the war effort. Although the extent to which the children actually aided in the war effort may never be known, it can be seen that the generation of children from World War II emerged from the war with a stronger sense of allegiance to the United States of America.