

# Are Bread Lines Just Around the Corner?

Editor's Note: *Sooner Magazine* presents the first of two articles by H. V. Thornton, University government professor and mayor of Norman, on problems to be considered in postwar thinking. In this first article, Dr. Thornton gives a general picture of adjustments the nation will have to make in changing from a wartime to a peacetime economy. In the second, he will deal more specifically with the important role to be played by cities in the transition. Dr. Thornton recently was appointed chairman of the Postwar Planning Committee of the Oklahoma Municipal League.

By H. V. THORNTON

WHAT WILL the returning soldier demand when an armistice calls a halt to hostilities? Even if the heaviest fighting and the greatest sacrifices do lie ahead, the question is entitled to serious consideration. Along some timid or excitable sectors of the civilian front, he has already assumed the proportions of a bogeyman, who will return to even scores and rebuild America. Actually, reliable reports indicate that he has thought little if at all about such matters. He is largely preoccupied under conditions which offer slight encouragement to the man who would ponder the problems of postwar economics.

Future events may persuade the serviceman that America must be remade after some new and strange pattern; but this outcome may depend upon our ability to make his return to civilian life reasonably convenient and purposeful. Probably his chief concern, as he looks forward to the peace, is a job. As a rock-bottom minimum, he wants the right to work, to raise a family, and if the mood strikes him to cuss the magistrates of the land with customary American impunity. He could not, with dignity becoming a good fighting man, ask less of his country.

It should not be forgotten that the American soldier is a civilian, who in this instance, reached maturity in the hard years of America's worst depression. He remembers, vaguely perhaps, the "Hoover-villes," eviction of veterans from Washington, apple selling along Main Street and Broadway, the whole tragic anticlimax to the lush prosperity of another postwar period. So far as his experience is concerned, promising, purposeful jobs were hard to find until WAR suddenly placed a premium on manpower. The irony of this fact is too much for a well-balanced sense of humor; too tragic to justify the hope that the serviceman, along with the masses of people, will be very tolerant toward ideological convictions, partisan prejudice, or vested interests which stand in the way of full peacetime employment. He knows, despite a gigantic public debt and the waste of a long

costly war, that America has sufficient resources—land, mineral, factories, and leadership—to reabsorb in useful employment not only the serviceman, but the millions of workers now occupied in war industries.

Nevertheless the task of restoring him to a peacetime role may be greater than he suspects, as a matter of fact, far more difficult than many leading civilians are disposed to admit. Among the latter the opinion commonly prevails that we will glide painlessly out of our wartime economy into an unprecedented boom. And to support their optimism, they point convincingly to the great and growing volume of deferred buying, and thirty or more billions of pent-up purchasing power.

The basis of this hope, however, is shaken when fundamental differences between the coming postwar era and the early 1920's is borne in mind. Our economy in 1917-1918 was characterized more by a change of pace than by a change of major purpose. Our primary contributions in World War I were manpower and food. We fought mainly with arms and munitions processed in the war factories of France and England. In this war we have become, to no small degree, "the arsenal of democracy," the provider of weapons for ourselves and the armies of the other United Nations.

The remarkable conversion of our factories for wartime production will always stand as one of the great achievements of the war effort. We could not have survived without it; but the very extent and completeness of the conversion constitutes a rough measure of the problems which

must be faced when demobilization day comes. These problems cannot be considered solely in terms of the rehabilitation of ten or twelve millions of soldiers, a task of no small proportion when we bear in mind the rather bad job we did twenty-five years ago with an armed force scarcely a third this size. The restoration of some twenty or twenty-four millions of war plant workers to peacetime pursuit adds immeasurably to the task, not only because they are more numerous than servicemen but because the number of their dependents is larger.

If due allowance is made for the greater size of our postwar armies, for those workers who will not be displaced because of the armistice, and for the fact that at this time we are considerably overemployed, it is not unreasonable to expect as a minimum temporary unemployment for from ten to fourteen million workers. In any event the number will be so great that the problems of postwar readjustment cannot be left to chance solutions.

Back of the hope that economic relations will automatically adjust themselves lies the assumption that once the fighting is finished people will rush to the markets for every form of durable goods. Of course this would happen if the goods were available. But they won't be available until plants now engaged in the production of war goods are converted back to the production of peacetime goods; and complete conversion will take time.

Not only will reconversion take time, but relatively little labor is needed in the process. For example, eighteen months were required to retool the Ford factory when the famous model T was replaced by the model A. In the meantime thousands of Ford workers were out of constructive employment. Hope prevails that we can do a better, swifter job of retooling our plants after this war, a hope which may have some foundation. But the record made in fitting our factories for the production of the materials of war is too impressive to be accepted as a measure of the time required for refitting our factories for peacetime production. True, we shall be faced with an emergency of very serious nature, but it will not be conspicuous or dramatic, nor will the guarantees of fat war contracts have much to do with the latter effort. Furthermore, in spite of the initiative and adventure which has always characterized American industry, some manufacturers may be in no great hurry to reconvert until they are sure of the direction in which economic winds will blow.

In the meantime, the savings of the soldier, worker, farmer, and small business and professional people may be dissi-



H. V. THORNTON, '22BA, '29MA

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pated for ordinary living expenses. This outcome is almost certain if, in a thoughtless mood, we sweep aside all forms of price control after hostilities cease, a mood incidentally which finds active support in some influential quarters. While it is impossible to know the full nature and extent of the dislocations which may follow in the wake of the armistice, we must, out of a sense of self-preservation, make intelligent preparations for such emergencies as the transition may present. And in such preparation, a public works program must be granted a major role.

Yet in spite of the rather obvious need for a public works program, incorporation of the idea in postwar plans is frequently received with skepticism or open hostility. In some measure, the attempt to avoid public works as an integral part of postwar planning rests upon confusion of programs of this nature with P. W. A., W. P. A., and other made-work activities of the depression. This misconception is unfortunate because public works have always stood on their own merits. They have been indispensable to the economic development of the country. It is hardly conceivable that our giant automotive industry would have attained its greatness had the taxpayer not been willing to provide the country with network of hard surfaced roads, an example of public works par excellence.

But to greater degree, opposition to this approach rests on the belief that the public debt has already reached, or will reach, an impossible size before the end of the war. Public works means more public debts! Of course, those who are particularly sensitive in respect to public indebtedness might be answered tritely by calling attention to the dangers to our whole economic structure if political stability disappears in a postwar depression. This cannot be dismissed as a grim possibility. There are, however, some promising developments in the broad field of public finance which are rarely taken into consideration, and which afford some encouragement to those who feel that our financial structures have been stretched to their limit.

While the federal debt has attained unbelievable size, state and local debts have in most instances declined at a very satisfying rate. In 1931, the total debts of all local governments in Oklahoma stood at an all-time high of \$182,646,000. In the past twelve years this figure has been reduced to approximately \$65,000,000. A state debt of \$38,000,000, which created enough excitement a few years ago to force adoption of the so-called budget balancing amendment, may be retired in four or five years by surpluses in the state's general fund. Oklahoma's experience is not unusual among the states. From the fiscal point of view, they have profited from the war economy, and will be in position to assume a greater share of the cost of an adequate postwar public works program.

States cannot make war, as political jurisdictions they cannot participate in the conduct of war; but no constitutional limitation forbids state measures which may make war's aftermath less painful. A courageous approach to the varied problems of reconstruction, among other things, will restore the dignity and integrity of state and local governments. But aside from such matters, there is sound justification for extensive expenditure of public funds for the repair and extension of the plants and structures of almost every political jurisdiction in the state. Either because of necessity or design, or both, they will be neglected during the war emergency.

The municipalities of this state alone are spending \$10,000,000 less annually on capital structures and their repair that would have been expended under normal conditions. Such interests cannot be neglected indefinitely. There never will be a more propitious time for launching public works programs than will come with the armistice. But they ought to be sound programs, based upon thoughtful planning.

A great deal of furor has been raised by the suggestion that private business and government act in close and understanding partnership for the purpose of solving the problems of postwar reconstruction. As a matter of fact, such partnership has always existed. After all, commerce and trade are based upon a scheme of law and order. Many of our greatest problems, involving the economic well-being of the whole nation, cannot or will not be solved by private business. Among these are soil conservation, public health, highways and some aspects of transportation. Our system of private enterprise, accepted in its best and fullest sense, cannot survive unless leaders are willing to join with their government for the purpose of establishing positive measures which will assure work immediately following the armistice and continually thereafter.

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## WAVES

Ensign Dessie Abbott, '42m.ed, Oklahoma City, was assigned to duty at the Naval Air Station, Jacksonville, Florida.

Ensign Helen Marie Jennings, '37ba, former Oklahoma City school teacher, was assigned to duty in New Orleans.

Virginia Watkins, '39he, Byng, Oklahoma, was on duty as a specialist second class at the Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas.

Marilyn Lloyd Lovell, '42ba, San Antonio, Texas, was on duty at the Naval Air Training Center at Kingsville, Texas, as an aviation machinist's mate third class.

Velta Easton, '40-'41, Shreveport, Louisiana, was an apprentice seaman in training at the Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School, Northampton, Massachusetts.

## Coast Guard

Caleb F. Carpenter, '37-'41, Oklahoma City, electrician's mate second class, was assigned to duty at Virginia Beach, Virginia.