

Retired WSU Professor Writing Book On Detroit's Major Role in World War II

by Gerald Scott
News Dept.

There have been a dozen or more books written about the history of the Arsenal of Democracy over the years and decades, but no one book has been a knockout punch, so to speak, to best describe Detroit's massive industrial and technical accomplishments that helped win World War II.

President Roosevelt originally coined the phrase, "Arsenal of Democracy," in one of his fireside radio chats early in the war and of course the label has stuck since then.

Today, retired Wayne State University history professor Charlie Hyde is researching and writing a new book about the Arsenal, something he's spent over a year's worth of time on since he left WSU.

Hyde spoke about his ongoing research and writing project in a recent interview.

"My Arsenal of Democracy book, Volume One, I'm getting very close to having that finished," Hyde said. "I'm working on Chapter 7 out of 8 chapters. I've started on Chapter 8, which is going to be about the 'new workers' - women and African Americans in the auto industry during World War II.

"There's going to be a second volume because originally I had really wanted to do kind of a large format picture book with just some introductory pages for each section. But I got so interested in the story and there's so much information, I've written the first sort of scholarly book - it'll have some pictures - and I want to do a second book as a 'coffee table book' that will go with it."

The national public and metro Detroiters seem to be generally aware of Detroit's role, Southeast Michigan's role and the state's role in forming the Arsenal of Democracy from about 1940-45 as war clouds, followed by Pearl Harbor, helped to catapult the U.S. into World War II.

What's less well-known and what Hyde is researching is the breadth and depth of Detroit's larger contributions to national defense in the 1940s.

Everyone knows that GM, Ford and Chrysler each did their part to support the war effort, but once understood and highlighted, the depth of industrial accomplishment is downright jaw-dropping, even six decades later.

For example, it's not well-known that General Motors actually produced more Grumman Avenger fighter aircraft than Grumman Corp. did, through the auspices of then-GM subsidiary Eastern Aircraft.

And the Ford Willow Run bomber plant, which built more than 8,000 B-24 Liberator bombers from 1941 to '45, was such a massive undertaking that no less than Charles Lindbergh once described it as the "Grand Canyon of the Mechanized World."

And the Chrysler tank plant in Warren was built so fast in 1941 that for its first year, a locomotive engine sat in the plant to provide electricity and heating while the first tanks rolled off the assembly line, all while a coal-fired powerplant



The last Chevrolet car off the line in Flint in 1942, prior to retooling for war materiel. A local automotive author is researching a new book about the history of the Arsenal of Democracy.

was being built just west of the plant itself on Van Dyke to provide full-time electricity.

Also, most people are not aware that Detroit made a major contribution to the development of the atomic bomb - Chrysler's now-defunct Lynch Road assembly plant was gutted in that era to secretly make the gaseous diffusers used to help convert the more stable U-238 (uranium hexafluoride gas) into fissionable, weapons grade U-235.

The diffusion process itself took place in the mile-long K25 building at the government's then-secret Oak Ridge, Tenn., nuclear facility using the Chrysler Lynch Road diffusing system.

But the end result is that the uranium used to fuel the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima was assembled in part with help from Detroit's auto industry. A car bumper, nickel-plating technique perfected by Chrysler and its suppliers was used in the gaseous diffusion process.

These are among a whole series of historical gems that author Hyde is working to uncover and chronicle in his research and work.

"One of the things I've been able to do is to get some real insight from the auto industry's side of things about the relationship between the auto industry and the military," Hyde said. "Basically, the Arsenal of Democracy was run by an alliance of the military and the industry, industrial leadership.

"Roosevelt basically turned the responsibility over to those people.

"There was a civilian war production board but they didn't really have a whole lot of authority over actual purchases.

"Roosevelt in essence, threw his left-wing, New Deal Democrats to the side and said, 'If we're going to win this war at home with the Arsenal of Democracy, we have to have people who know how to do things.' The New Dealers did not want the government to sign any defense contracts with anybody who was in violation of the Wagner Act, which protected labor."

Eventually, those internal American political issues were overcome in favor of the larger defense effort. GM President William Knudsen ran the fledgling military-industrial com-

plex for FDR while George Romney, who would later become Michigan's governor, oversaw yet another war industry board in Detroit in the early 1940s.

Meanwhile, the overall depth and breadth of Detroit's effort continues to impress modern historians. The Packard Plant on East Grand Boulevard, for example, was reportedly the only such auto plant in the world simultaneously supplying ground vehicle engines, marine engines and aircraft engines.

The Packard Plant shifted from producing passenger cars as late as 1941 to a mix of Packard auto engines for Army trucks, marine diesel engines that powered fast Navy ships including JFK's famous PT-109 torpedo boat, and even Rolls-Royce Merlin aircraft engines that went into British fighters and bombers.

"A couple of things I learned was how effective government was in standardizing certain products like Jeeps," Hyde said. "Ford and Willys both made Jeeps, but after the first couple thousand units, they were all absolutely identical so all the parts were interchangeable (in the field).

"The same thing happened with the various categories of



An M26 Pershing tank at the Fisher Body plant in Grand Blanc in 1945. A new book is in the works about the Arsenal of Democracy.

trucks. The most important truck of the whole war was a two-and-a-half-ton capacity, 6 x 6, that General Motors developed - it was six wheels and they all had power to them.

"General Motors didn't make all of them - they were made by Studebaker under license and, interestingly, the Studebaker trucks all went to the Soviet Union under Lend-Lease. They had a different engine than the GM models.

"They really tried to bring a tremendous amount of standardization. In World War I, the American Expeditionary Force

in France had something like 120 different brands of trucks they were using - some were from different American manufacturers, they had some British trucks, French trucks, captured German trucks, you can imagine that it was a nightmare to try to repair these things."

The field lessons learned in France in World War I were applied to the uniformity of vehicles and parts during World War II.

Also, less well-known is that all manner of celebrities, royal family members from Europe,

Hollywood stars and industrial titans all visited Detroit in that era to see the Arsenal of Democracy in action.

Gen. Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, visited Detroit on behalf of those Chrysler diffusers. Also, Gen. Billy Mitchell regularly visited Detroit airplane and aircraft engine factories.

Charles Lindbergh secretly test-flew many of those B-24 Liberators built at Willow Run for his friend Henry Ford. Lindbergh was out of favor in that era but he flew the planes as a personal favor to Henry Ford.

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