

Some *Unusual* Wartime Conservation Measures

1. During World War I, visitors to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue were greeted by an unusual sight on the White House lawn: a flock of several dozen sheep. President Woodrow Wilson purchased the animals in 1918 as part of a scheme to cut down on maintenance costs during wartime. The grass-chomping livestock acted as roving lawnmowers and fertilizer, allowing White House groundskeepers to enlist in the armed forces. Wilson also had the flock sheared once a year so he could peddle their “White House Wool” at auctions for the Red Cross. During one sale, the rare fleece netted a whopping \$52,823. Wilson’s sheep were sold in 1920, but they were a major hit with the public in the days before they left the presidential pasture. One ram named Old Ike even became a minor celebrity for his grumpy disposition and insatiable appetite for discarded cigar butts.

2. The same month the United States entered World War I, Yale economist Irving Fisher famously argued that the barley used in brewing beer could be put to better use baking bread to feed American troops. Others asserted that alcohol was a luxury that gobbled up much-needed resources and impaired job performance in wartime factories. These calls were fueled as much by a yearning for prohibition as they were by patriotism, but they were ultimately successful in winning restrictions on booze. In 1917 and 1918, measures were enacted limiting everything from the sale of alcohol around military bases and munitions plants to the amount of grain allotted to beer brewers. Other countries made similar efforts to keep their citizens clearheaded. Britain shortened pub hours and made it illegal to buy drinks for other patrons, and King George V tried to set an example by swearing off alcohol for the duration of the war. In Russia, Czar Nicholas II took the more extreme step of banning the sale and production of vodka outright.

3. During both World War I and II, many countries strictly rationed foods such as meat, sugar, butter and canned goods. To supplement their diets, citizens were encouraged to plant so-called “Victory Gardens” and grow their own fresh fruits and vegetables. The U.S. campaign began at the start of World War I, when timber tycoon Charles Lathrop Pack organized the National War Garden Commission with the goal of reducing strain on the food supply and shipping more produce to war-ravaged Europe. The “Grow Your Own” movement later became even more popular during World War II. Spurred on by propaganda posters urging them to “Grow Vitamins at Your Kitchen Door,” Americans planted 20 million gardens and cultivated nearly half the nation’s vegetables in their backyards. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt even promoted the cause by planting a Victory Garden at the White House.

4. Along with the rationing of food, rubber and gasoline, World War II also saw the U.S. government place strict limits on the sale of nylon, a synthetic material needed for ropes, netting and other military equipment. That was bad news for American women, many of whom had been crazy for nylon stockings ever since they hit shelves in 1940 (the first batch of 4 million sold out in only two days). Nylons effectively vanished from stores



around 1942, and patriotic women lined up to donate their old hosiery so it could be repurposed as parachutes and powder bags. Most ladies chose to go bare-legged for the rest of the war, but some turned to so-called “liquid stockings,” a do-it-yourself method that involved using leg makeup and an eyebrow pencil to recreate the look of stockings, seams and all.

5. Few things are more German than sausage, but during World War I, the Central Powers briefly outlawed its production to support the war effort. The bratwurst ban had its origins in the construction of zeppelins—colossal airships that were used in reconnaissance and bombing campaigns over Britain. Since each zeppelin required the intestines of thousands of cows to make its hydrogen gas bags, the Germans were forced to cut back on sausage-making in both the fatherland and the other territories under their control. Butchers, meanwhile, were required to hand over any cow intestines they had to the government.

6. In 1939, the British government circulated a pamphlet about how to care for household pets during wartime. Along with offering advice on first aid and instructing people to evacuate their animals from cities, the memo also suggested that owners consider having their pets “painlessly destroyed.” Fearing possible food shortages and roving packs of starved dogs, thousands complied. In the span of only one week, as many as 750,000 pets were euthanized by their owners or by animal shelters. The London Zoo, meanwhile, had all of its poisonous animals killed to prevent them from escaping in the event of a bomb attack. The pet cull continued after the beginning of the Blitz, but humane societies later stepped in to assist with care and evacuation. One London shelter, the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, took in as many as 145,000 animals over the course of the war.

7. While calls for daylight saving date back hundreds of years, the first practical attempt to “spring forward, and fall back” began as a conservation measure during World War I. In April 1916, Germany implemented the world’s first clock shift as part of a plan to save on electricity and divert extra coal to



their soldiers on the front. Many other nations soon followed suit, including the United States in 1918. Daylight saving was widely regarded as a wartime measure, however, and many countries reverted to standard time after the fighting ended. It would take more than 20 years and another World War before the practice became permanent.

8. Americans were asked to conserve bread by observing “Wheatless Wednesdays,” during World War I, but during World War II, the government took its rationing a step further. In January 1943, the U.S. War Foods Administration instituted a ban on what had once been advertised as “the greatest step forward in the baking industry”: pre-sliced bread. The rule was intended to save on wax paper and metal. Since pre-sliced bread required more wrapping than a whole loaf to keep it from going stale, the government assumed they could easily conserve paper and curb demand for metal bread slicer parts by having people cut it themselves at home. The public response proved how wrong they were. Bakeries argued they had more than enough supplies on hand to meet demands, and housewives criticized the law in the media. “I should like to let you know how important sliced bread is to the morale and sanity of a household,” began one woman’s letter to the *New York Times*. Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard eventually bowed to the pressure and rescinded the ban after only three months, admitting, “the savings are not as much as we expected...” [<https://www.history.com/news/8-unusual-wartime-conservation-measures/>]

Plus, of course, there were a host of other items that Americans were urged to conserve to win the war effort... and we did!

