

Donald Nelson Encyclopedia Article

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Within a month after the December 7, 1941, Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and nine months before the Office of Economic Stabilization was created with Jimmy Byrnes its head, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945; served 1933–45) created the War Production Board (WPB) to guide the war industry mobilization on the home front. The president turned to Donald Nelson (1888–1959) to lead this very important task.

Born in Hannibal, Missouri, Nelson graduated from the University of Missouri with a degree in chemical engineering. Hired as a chemist by Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1912, Nelson rose through the company ranks to become executive vice president in 1939. As the German military swept through Western Europe in early 1940, Roosevelt became increasingly eager to assist Great Britain and France in their effort to stop Germany. He appointed Nelson in May 1940 to a Treasury Department post in charge of handling requests from foreign nations for raw materials and war materials. After France fell to German forces in June 1940 and Britain came under relentless intense aerial bombing, concern increased about preparing the nation for possible war. In January 1941 Roosevelt created the Office of Production Management (OPM) with Nelson responsible for purchasing billions of dollars of materials for the defense industries. In July, to spur the flow of needed materials to military and war industries, Roosevelt created the Supply, Priorities, and Allocations Board (SPAB) with Nelson its director.

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and declaration of war led Roosevelt to create the WPB in January 1942. U.S. war production was placed under the guidance of one person, Nelson. Immediately Nelson began taking such dramatic actions as converting the automobile industry to the production of war planes, tanks, and military vehicles. Nelson also oversaw the allocation of such critical materials as steel and production of synthetic rubber. Nelson remained head of WPB until he resigned in August 1944. Nelson became Roosevelt's special representative on a trip to the Soviet Union and China before returning to private industry, where he served as chairman of the board for several mining and chemical companies until his death in September 1959.