

# The United States in War and Peace

A Regular Column by Shelby L. Stanton

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## Limitation Order L-85: Fashion and Morale

**During World War II, War Production Board (WPB) General Limitation Order L-85 restricted the amount of material yardage that could be used in civilian garments as part of the national war effort to insure adequate fabric supply for military production. The spirit of patriotism implicit in curtailment directives was fused with media and fashion industry sexual exploitation practices to encourage a new wave of abbreviated feminine styling. Nowhere was this trend more apparent than in the Hollywood-based movie culture and New York-centered magazine industry during a burst of shocking novelty accelerated by the wartime cheesecake and pinup frenzy. Designing attractive and interesting fashion in conformity with governmental cutting decrees harmonized ideally with the patriotic zeal to improve armed forces morale.**

**The new minimally designed youthful female attire featured in modern movies and stylish magazines was considered smartly fashionable because the abbreviated outfits were promoted either overtly or implicitly as helping to win the war. Public acceptance, or at least public toleration, was influenced by designs highlighting morale-enhancing feminine appeal that incorporated the least amount of fabric, both of which could be justified as morale-boosting and cloth-saving war measures. The foreword to Harriet Peppin's 1942 book, *Modern Pattern Design*, expressed this practical sentiment of wartime utilization, "From this limitation order undoubtedly will emerge more evidence of ingenious cutting, a painstaking application of the fundamentals of art as a means to creating beauty and glamour with the fewest possible yards of fabric, with the least possible number of operations".**

*Film star Claire Trevor's outfit curtails the maximum amount of material in allegiance to the general*



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*provisions of U.S. War Production Board Limitation Order L-85. Her patriotism was underscored by her 1943 marriage to Navy Lieutenant Cylos William Dunsmoore, who flew to Hollywood from Kansas during 1944 with accompanying publicity that “he had to spend his leave on a film set in order to see as much of his wife as possible before he goes on overseas duty”. They were divorced in 1947. (Collection Shelby Stanton)*

**The popular trend toward shorter and more abbreviated female clothing was heightened by the home sewing boom. This surge of domestic sewing was caused by the diminished availability of store apparel and ready-to-wear garments throughout the war years. Demand for pattern company products soared. For example, the sales volume for Butterick’s patterns increased dramatically after three consecutive years of financial loss from 1940 through 1942. Homemakers creating family wardrobes coped with widespread cloth shortages in the civilian sector by adopting specific limitations in the government regulations to pattern offerings. Butterick patterns implemented cloth conservation in patterns with fewer pieces and minimal employment of buttons, trims, and appliqué details, as well as shorter lengths adopted for outerwear such as jackets and skirts.**

*American child wardrobes were also subject to regulations established by U.S. War Production Board Limitation Order L-85. Families often made the most reduction in juvenile clothing to fit material limitations. This wartime tea-party frock of printed lawn depends on embroidered insertion across the shoulders, as well as black bows trimming the bodice front, for adornment. (Collection Shelby Stanton)*



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**Prewar dress conservatism faded as the drive to conserve material produced stylish liberation for the younger set. With Paris occupied, American taste for fashionable modernity turned to the Hollywood image makers who were only too happy to comply with governmental limitation orders to save cloth. The original intent of the WPB to freeze the prewar silhouette was undermined by the order’s actual impact on the American clothing and entertainment industry, which created a new fashionability for reduced skirt and dress lengths and ever-skimpier coverage.**



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*Universal Studio actress Martha O'Driscoll wears a costume generously conforming to U.S. War Production Board Limitation Order L-85 standards. Her morale-boosting overseas entertainment tours included the Aleutians. Tom Vallance wrote, "In 1943 she had married a young Lieutenant-Commander in the US Navy, but divorced him 10 months later stating that her husband had no comprehension of the demands on her time made by the studio, while admitting herself that she had not fully understood her duties as the wife of an officer in wartime. The court stayed her divorce for the duration of the Second World War" (9 November 1998 *The Independent obituary*).  
(Collection Shelby Stanton)*

**Young female fashion was accelerated into narrower, shorter and slimming styles which eclipsed prewar conservatism. By September 1942 the New York Times was reporting, "from the standpoint of conservation, which was the sole purpose of WPB Order L-85, the greatest accomplishment has been the hastening of the trend toward a slim silhouette" (H. Stanley Marcus, 13 September 1942 New York Times Sunday Section Magazine, page SM-22), and by the summer of 1943 the Chicago Tribune had to remind readers that, "L-85, the order that limits the amount of fabric in the dresses we wear, isn't entirely responsible for those extremely short skirts the young girls are wearing" (Eleanor Nagle, 20 July 1943 Chicago Tribune, page 15). Male appreciation for this revealing trend was soon reflected in official government pronouncements, repeated in numerous War Department information bulletins, which quickly seized upon this unintended consequence to promote the advantages of order L-85 for the war effort. Less cloth and more exposure supposedly provided a welcome morale boost to the soldiering population.**

*French actress Madeleine LeBeau, who fled to America from France ahead of the German occupation, also conducted a correspondence school for US soldiers in New Guinea, reporting in 1944 that her school was so popular that 11 servicemen were learning French through the medium of her letters. She models a minimized skirt typifying studio-approved WPB Limitation Order L-85 brevity for morale purposes. (Collection Shelby Stanton)*



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*Note: The next column will cover the duration and end of Limitation Order L-85. My information for this topic is based on personal research in U.S. National Archives Record Group 179.2 and supplemented by contemporary newspaper archives.*

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