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*More than Canned Meat:
The Rise of SPAM in World War II America*

ABSTRACT: *On the basis of letters, government documents, and news magazine coverage, this essay delves into the history of the luncheon meat SPAM in World War II America. Acquiring a ubiquitous reputation, SPAM was used in a myriad of settings and known far and wide by both members of the United States Armed Forces and civilians. The humorous aspects of SPAM and its curious history are put on display, revealing a connection between the canned meat and American identity.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; history of food; United States of America (USA); United States Armed Forces; World War II; SPAM; canned meat; rations; nationalism; identity*

Introduction

World War II (1939–1945) resulted in a plethora of food-related changes, and the most infamous product to emerge in the context of this global conflict was perhaps SPAM. This canned luncheon meat, created by the Minnesota-based corporation Hormel Foods in 1937, soon became a staple in the diet of civilians at home and soldiers across the globe once wartime came knocking on everyone's door. As the U.S. government prioritized a strong and healthy America as part of the war effort, attention to diet became a patriotic duty for all American citizens. As a result of contracts between Hormel and the U.S. government, military service members developed an especially close and complicated relationship with SPAM. Driven by the emerging scientific and administrative development of nutritional knowledge, the U.S. government's reliance on Hormel during the war contributed to the ubiquity of SPAM because it promoted patriotic messaging to American citizens and ensured global distribution through military rations. SPAM's widespread and infamous appearances in the daily routines of American life normalized the product's consumption and secured its lasting integration into the country's food culture.

1. Wartime Effects on Food

To build a strong and united home front while tensions were increasing across the globe, the U.S. government emphasized nutrition as a key component of wartime strength, with SPAM playing an outsized role. Connections between culture and food predated World War II, as meat had historically been associated with masculinity.¹ During World War II, meat symbolized self-preservation, strength, and growth, and it combined these ideals with taste and appetite.² The notion of building strength through diet influenced both civilian and military meals as food culture in the United States began to change. SPAM, the canned pork luncheon meat produced by Hormel, became widely prevalent during this period because it

¹ See, for example, Lauren Camilleri, Melissa Kirkovski, Jessica Scarfo, Andrew Jago, and Peter Richard Gill, "Understanding the Meat-Masculinity Link: Traditional and Non-Traditional Masculine Norms Predicting Men's Meat Consumption," *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 63, no. 4 (2024): 355–386.

² Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (University of Illinois Press, 1998), 90.

was nutritious, filling, affordable, and shelf-stable.³ These four qualities of the canned meat made it particularly appealing to the Armed Forces, who used it to supply soldiers at home and abroad, as well as to civilians, who soon became well acquainted with the product. On March 11, 1941, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (in office 1933–1945) signed the *Lend-Lease Act* after it had been approved by the House of Representatives and the Senate. According to the *Lend-Lease Act*, food was a “defense article,” and the president was invested with the authority to commission and purchase defense articles and to spend money on large contracts with food corporations.⁴ This opened the door for the U.S. government to enter into contracts with Hormel. Enacted almost eight months before the United States formally entered World War II, the *Lend-Lease Act* reflected the country’s mobilization efforts and facilitated the funding of the manufacturing and distribution of defense articles, including food (such as SPAM). As meat was central to the meals of most Americans, the government increasingly considered the respective potential strain during wartime and therefore dedicated its resources to the nutritional front.

Studies of American diets at the height of the mobilization for World War II revealed widespread nutrition-related concerns, which prompted the creation of national programs to fight malnutrition and emphasized canned goods (such as SPAM). In May of 1941, President Roosevelt convened a three-day conference on nutrition as a defense problem at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., and “the necessity for closer integration of civilian and military activities relating to health and welfare resulted in a new Executive Order.”⁵ The proceedings of this Washington conference provided insights into federal priorities as the country was about to enter World War II, and they reflected the administration’s efforts to align national defense strategies with nutritional efforts. Under the leadership of Paul V. McNutt (1891–1955), the head of the new Federal Security Agency (FSA) and coordinator of “Health, Welfare, and Related Defense Activities,” the conference announced that “hollow hunger” (of individuals who did not have enough food to consume) and “hidden hunger” (of individuals who were malnourished due to ignorance) would both be addressed by the U.S. government.⁶ This focus on nutrition reflected a holistic approach to the war effort, as all American citizens had a role to play in their country’s fight, whether at home or at the front.

It was generally assumed that healthy individuals would make for a vigorous, capable, and willing population that would be able to rise to the challenges of wartime.⁷ This was especially important as jobs calling for defense workers were opening up across the country, requiring a fully mobilized nation. However, Americans who were likely to become these defense workers often came from areas where the population was found to be improperly nourished.

³ Carolyn Wyman, *Spam: A Biography* (Harcourt Brace, 1999), 17.

⁴ *Lend-Lease Act*, H. Res. [House Resolution] 77A-D13, 77th Congress 1st session, Congressional Record 233, daily edition (January 10, 1941), approved March 11, 1941, [online](#).

⁵ *Proceedings of the National Nutrition Conference for Defense*, May 26, 27, and 28, 1941, Washington, D.C., called by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), [online](#).

⁶ Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (Duke University Press, 2013), 45.

⁷ Biltekoff, *Eating Right*, 46.

On April 28, 1943, the *Victory Bulletin*, a publication of the Office of War Information (and thus intended for the general public), reported that the Nutrition-in-Industry Division of the national Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had found that food improved morale and was therefore to be considered a high priority. Referencing the “nutrition experts in this country,” the article identified adequate food as one of the most important factors in reducing workers’ absenteeism as it prevented “fatigue, labor-turn-over, and slow-downs in production.”⁸ This emphasis on nutrition reflected the government’s goal of maximizing industrial output while encouraging civilians to support the administration’s endorsed nutrition standards—especially for workers who were directly contributing to the war effort. Since total strength required total nutrition, the Roosevelt administration’s National Nutrition Program aimed to reduce the loss of man hours on the production front in communities, industrial settings, and homes.⁹ As nutritional goals focused on the working population’s wartime efficiency, nutrition was reframed as a social duty and civic responsibility for all Americans.

2. SPAM as a Solution

National wartime dietary goals provided a way for all to fulfill their patriotic duty, and soon Americans’ stomachs became accustomed to SPAM. Meat was widely praised, likely due to its association with virility and potency—the very qualities needed to win World War II.¹⁰ Americans had already viewed meat as an essential part of their diet prior to the war, and now meat’s particular qualities reinforced the desire among both soldiers and civilians to consume it. Meat was part of a balanced diet, and the government created nutritional guidelines to help Americans achieve such a balanced diet because “food can win or lose the war ... can ‘make or break’ our nation ... [and] can build or destroy morale.”¹¹ To frame food in a wartime support capacity and encourage the knowledge of nutrition as a patriotic duty, the U.S. government promoted the so-called “Basic 7,” which divided food into seven groups and encouraged Americans to eat one item from each group every day.¹² SPAM fell into Group 5, which included meat, poultry, fish, and eggs as items of consumption, and it had an even greater appeal when certain desirable cuts of meat became subject to rationing.

Meat rationing reshaped both military and civilian meals, and it created unexpected dietary changes for many individuals. As war jobs employed massive numbers of workers and paid higher wages than many had experienced before, more Americans were able to afford more expensive cuts of fresh meat. This increase in customer demand led to a decrease in fresh meat supply, and the restriction of up to 60% of USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) choice grade cuts of beef to military consumption limited civilians’ access to fresh meat even further.¹³ Despite meat being a central component of every meal for

⁸ “Adequate Lunch Service for Workers Helps Maintain Production: FDA Nutrition-in-Industry Division Reports Food Improves Morale,” *Victory Bulletin: Official Weekly Publication of the Office of War Information* 4, no. 17 (April 28, 1943): 452, Illinois Digital Archives, [online](#).

⁹ Biltekoff, *Eating Right*, 66–67.

¹⁰ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 112.

¹¹ Biltekoff, *Eating Right*, 59.

¹² Biltekoff, *Eating Right*, 58.

¹³ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 91.

Americans, civilians soon found out that it was to be rationed in order to avoid extreme shortages and inflationary pricing.¹⁴ In 1943, the U.S. government began rationing most cuts of beef, pork, and lamb according to a points system.¹⁵ This made it more challenging for families to secure the amount of fresh meat that they had previously consumed, yet meat continued to be expected as an ingredient at every meal. In this context, SPAM presented itself as an intriguing alternative because it was an inexpensive and shelf-stable meat option that was not subject to rationing. While rationing was effectively rewriting the grocery lists of many American citizens, Hormel increased the manufacturing of SPAM to adequately supply the population.

Government contracts further boosted the production of SPAM, ensuring that a steady supply was available in the United States. SPAM was one of only ten canned meats purchased by the military, and by 1944, 90% of all Hormel canned goods were shipped to the Armed Forces or to military aid programs,¹⁶ leading to the rapid growth of Hormel and its SPAM production. Food supply was central to the U.S. government's military logistics and its path to victory in World War II, and the entire country was portrayed as an integral part of the war effort by framing food behavior as military behavior.¹⁷ The military and the civilian population were called upon to work together toward freedom and liberation, as such a massive war demanded "all hands on deck." Thus, SPAM—the canned luncheon meat made from pork shoulder and ham—became a favorite in millions of families from coast to coast.¹⁸ According to a 1939 article published in *Life* magazine, SPAM was primarily and efficiently manufactured at Hormel's plant in Austin, Minnesota, however, to keep up with demand, additional production plants were soon established in other Midwestern towns, including Chicago, Indianapolis, and St. Louis.¹⁹ The same *Life* magazine article, written for a general middle-class American readership, used a light and pleasant tone to promote industrial food production and emphasized Hormel's innovation with regard to SPAM as both efficient and reliable. This illustrates how the positive public perception of SPAM as a modern and family-friendly product—well before the United States directly entered the war—ultimately prepared the canned meat's mass adoption. The expansion of Hormel's production reflected SPAM's growing ubiquity as it quickly became a staple for Americans during World War II. The U.S. government's purchase of vast quantities of canned goods for the Armed Forces further increased Hormel's production and distribution of the product, which also affected civilians. With SPAM stocked on military bases and in civilian kitchens, it became woven into wartime propaganda, encouraging patriotism through food consumption.

¹⁴ Stan Cox, *Any Way You Slice It: The Past, Present, and Future of Rationing* (The New Press, 2013), 24.

¹⁵ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 93.

¹⁶ Wyman, *Spam*, 17.

¹⁷ Jennifer Wallach, *How America Eats: A Social History of Food and Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 163.

¹⁸ "A Hog Goes to Hormel and to Fame," *Life* 7, no. 19 (November 6, 1939): 58–59, [online](#).

¹⁹ "Hog Goes to Hormel," *Life*, 57, 59.

Wartime propaganda promoted frugality and practicality, and SPAM embodied both qualities and became integrated into American life. As advertisements concerning food choices increased drastically in the 1940s, they proposed “meatless” days as acts of patriotism, with many alternative meals featuring SPAM.²⁰ Since this canned luncheon meat was not rationed on the home front, it served as a convenient replacement for standard cuts of meat in many homes across the United States. A letter from a mother to her soldier son during the war demonstrates the product’s versatility, as she explained to him how she had incorporated the canned meat in their family’s holiday dinner.²¹ This illustrates SPAM’s role in resourceful wartime cooking. As the 1939 *Life* magazine article had predicted, the product found a home in millions of cupboards, “where housewives know that SPAM is quick to prepare, needs no refrigeration, [and] is always handy for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.”²² Yet while civilian homes often embraced SPAM as a patriotic replacement for meat in their meals and consumed it willingly since it was a meat option that was not rationed, the canned meat was not as well received by soldiers who had no choice but to eat it regularly since it was a staple in their military rations. While both civilians and soldiers experienced the product’s massive proliferation during the war, the stark contrast between its general acceptance at home and its harsh rejection among the troops highlights the complex role of SPAM in the American wartime experience.

3. Canned Meat’s Ubiquitous Presence

As the U.S. military increasingly utilized the canned luncheon meat during World War II, Hormel’s flagship product soon developed an infamous reputation. Soldiers received so much SPAM that had been specifically produced for them that, in 1942, when the Army had to purchase a substantial order of “ordinary” SPAM as a substitute for the government kind, members of the Armed Forces noticed it immediately, and the incident subsequently became known as “SPAMgate.”²³ Considering that soldiers were able to distinguish easily between what was—from their vantage point—“real” and “fake” SPAM, their familiarity with the canned meat was certainly unquestionable. During World War II, over one hundred million pounds of SPAM were shipped abroad, demonstrating the canned luncheon meat’s far-reaching influence.²⁴ But soldiers eating SPAM several times each day grew disdainful toward the blue can, and they made their feelings heard. According to a 1945 article published in *The New Yorker* magazine, Jay C. Hormel (1892–1954), the man widely considered responsible for SPAM, maintained a “scurrilous file, in which he dumps the letters of abuse that are sent to him by soldiers everywhere in the world.”²⁵ Brendan Gill (1914–1997), the journalist who wrote the article, endeavored to capture a more personal side of Hormel as a corporate

²⁰ Terrence H. Witkowski, “World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers,” *Journal of Advertising* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 78.

²¹ Wallach, *How America Eats*, 168.

²² “Hog Goes to Hormel,” *Life*, 59.

²³ Wyman, *Spam*, 20.

²⁴ Andrew Smith, “SPAM,” in *Food and Drink in American History: A “Full Course” Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2013), 1019.

²⁵ Brendan Gill, “Spam Man,” *The New Yorker* (August 11, 1945): 19.

executive. By referring to Hormel's "scurrilous file" as a representation of the canned meat's standing in the United States Armed Forces, Gill showed how Hormel's relationship with the U.S. military had created the vast global presence of SPAM, which led to its firm establishment in the cultural wartime memory. While the canned luncheon meat's constant presence sparked many complaints, it also inspired a unique subculture. Tales of SPAM's infamy were heard across the globe, as service members referenced the canned meat in letters, songs, cartoons, and various other forms of war literature.

SPAM became a staple of military culture, and it made appearances in a wide range of literary works authored by enlisted soldiers. Many contributed to the widely disseminated "Ode to SPAM." Consisting of approximately forty lines, it described the various ways in which soldiers prepared the canned meat to conceal its contents, and it ended with a humorous clause that, if a soldier were to return home and his wife would make him SPAM, their marital bliss would cease.²⁶ For as many cans of SPAM as members of the Armed Forces endured throughout the war, there were almost as many stories, jokes, cartoons, verses, songs, and even prayers mentioning the ubiquitous blue cans. SPAM references eventually permeated the language of the war: colloquially, Uncle Sam became Uncle SPAM; the European invasion fleet was hailed as the SPAM fleet; the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal for service was renamed the SPAM Ribbon; the United Service Organizations (USO) toured the SPAM circuit; food supply depots turned into SPAM Canyons; and multiple U.S. military encampments re-christened themselves as SPAMvilles.²⁷ In 1945, the prolific American writer Len Zinberg (a.k.a. Ed Lacy, 1911–1968) published a comedic story in *Yank: The Army Weekly* about a man in the Army whose excessive love of the canned meat became the highlight of his military career. This man, a fictional individual by the name of Cyrus Ringer, was not happy about being in the Army, but his attitude changed with his first meal, namely, when he was served SPAM. Ringer's love of SPAM soon attracted the attention of his superior, and he was promoted to T-5 (Technician Fifth Grade) with the special mission to travel from mess hall to mess hall and ask for seconds of SPAM to promote the canned meat. Ringer soon grew "fat and sleek," but he eventually told his commanding general that he was ready to go home. When the general refused to let him out of the Army, Ringer informed him that he was already out—in fact, he had received a "Section 8" (i.e., he had been judged mentally unfit for service) "two seconds" after he had announced that he liked SPAM.²⁸ Zinberg's story suggests that SPAM was quite unpopular in the U.S. military during World War II—so much so that anyone liking the canned luncheon meat simply had to be deemed mentally unfit. Created by and for American soldiers, *Yank: The Army Weekly* catered to military humor with the intent of boosting morale, and this satirical tale of a soldier's love of SPAM offered an entertaining message and a not-so-subtle critique that would have resonated with many service members. It also underscored that American soldiers during World War II were

²⁶ See Wyman, *Spam*, 19.

²⁷ Wyman, *Spam*, 22.

²⁸ Len Zinberg, "The Man Who Liked SPAM," *Yank: The Army Weekly* 3, no. 32 (January 26, 1945): 16, [online](#).

inundated and saturated with SPAM, which is why their attitudes toward the canned luncheon meat infiltrated many forms of military entertainment and culture.

SPAM's versatility, both as a food item and as a physical substance, engendered a wide range of uses during World War II, enhancing its already dubious cultural prestige and complex status among soldiers. Its fattiness permitted soldiers to employ it as a substitute for Vaseline, as gun lubricant, as a candle if a piece of cloth was shoved in the middle, as bait for fishing, as water-proofing for leather boots, tents, and matches, and, when mixed with gasoline, even as a substitute for Sterno (i.e., canned heat).²⁹ The uses beyond food consumption that service members discovered for SPAM were extensive. Army mess sergeants made pots and pans out of flattened SPAM cans; one U.S. fighter pilot used SPAM cans to repair holes in aircraft wings and fuselages; and—a most impressive alternative—Corporal Dillon Hopson of the Forty-third Infantry division allegedly threw fifteen slices of SPAM and silverware at a Japanese soldier, thus knocking a grenade out of his hand.³⁰ These experiences, ranging from necessity to ingenuity, cemented SPAM's place in the wartime experience.

SPAM became part of America's wartime identity, and the U.S. government's contracts with Hormel contributed to the canned luncheon meat's lasting legacy. According to a letter sent by former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (in office 1953–1961) to retired Hormel President Horace Harold "Tim" Corey (in office 1954–1965), Eisenhower had eaten his fair share of the canned meat and, along with scores of other soldiers, had made some unkind remarks about it; however, he was able to officially forgive the Hormel executive for his only sin, namely, for sending too much of it.³¹ This candid personal letter demonstrates the extent to which SPAM became ubiquitous during World War II, but it also shows how SPAM's cultural symbolism was internalized and continued to live on after the war. SPAM acquired its infamous reputation throughout World War II due to the U.S. government purchasing and Hormel supplying so much of it. Wartime identity was shaped by political food choices, and giving up their customary cuts of fresh meat in favor of SPAM's canned variant showed Americans' dedication to the war effort.³² SPAM's influence eventually extended over many of the territories of the war's Pacific Theater, and the canned luncheon meat became one of the staples of postwar food charity and assistance. This rendered SPAM instantly recognizable to many Pacific Islanders, and it remains popular in Hawaii, Guam, Saipan, and the Philippines to this day.³³ SPAM became ubiquitous as an alternative protein and played a transformative role in American food history.

Conclusion

The U.S. government's contracts with Hormel during World War II made SPAM omnipresent across the nation. Aided by nutritional campaigns, enhanced production and distribution efforts, and both military and civilian responses, the canned luncheon meat's ubiquity was a

²⁹ Wyman, *Spam*, 23.

³⁰ Wyman, *Spam*, 23.

³¹ Wyman, *Spam*, 24.

³² Wallach, *How America Eats*, 164.

³³ Smith, "SPAM," 1019.

direct result of its infamous appearances virtually everywhere, and SPAM's proliferation during World War II firmly embedded it in American food culture. Today, SPAM is more than just a canned good: it serves as a testament to the way in which wartime policies, nutritional knowledge, and national identity can intersect to leave an "edible" mark on history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Grace Engelking of Sacramento, California, earned her three Associate's degrees (2024) at Sierra College in Rocklin, California, and her B.A. in History with a double minor in Hellenic Studies and Premodern Worlds (2026) at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), where she is a member and past treasurer of the Rho-Xi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). Beginning in fall 2026, she will be pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUS. The essay published above originated in a course on Historical Skills with a focus on the history of food offered by CSUS's Department of History.