



Charging for Services ("Coffee and Donuts")

Executive Summary:

The Red Cross sold coffee and doughnuts instead of giving them away to military personnel during World War II at the request by the U.S. Secretary of War. This caused bad feelings at the time and has spawned myths ever since, including accusations that the Red Cross sold other items such as sweaters and cigarettes (false) and that the Red Cross sold coffee and doughnuts in other conflicts (false).

Key Facts:

- Service agencies in Britain helping British service members were less well-financed than the American Red Cross; they charged British military members for the same items that American service members got free from the American Red Cross.
- To avoid further embarrassment to the British, who were playing host to thousands of U. S. troops, the U.S. Secretary of War requested that the American Red Cross begin charging American service members for such items as coffee and doughnuts in its canteens.
- The Red Cross interpreted this request as a wartime demand and complied so that it could continue its aid to U.S. troops. However, the Red Cross sold items at or below cost and never profited a penny from these sales.
- Since the end of World War II, the American Red Cross has not charged military personnel—not in the Korean, Vietnam, or Persian Gulf conflicts, for example.

Talking Points:

- The American Red Cross sold coffee and doughnuts to military personnel during World War II for the first and only time in its history.
- It was a matter of morale: the American Red Cross sold these items at the request of the U.S. Secretary of War because service agencies in Britain could not afford to give away similar items.
- The American Red Cross sold items at or below cost and did not profit from the sales.
- The American Red Cross has never again charged military personnel for refreshments.