

The Second World War in U.S. History and Memory*

With the advantage of historical hindsight, it is obvious that World War II dramatically transformed the United States. Equally obvious by now is the fact that most Americans at the time grossly misunderstood those transformations. One of the major reasons they failed to comprehend what had actually occurred is that their memory of the war diverged sharply from the historical reality.

Let me deal first, albeit briefly and incompletely, with that reality. Bluntly stated, World War II made the United States the most powerful and prosperous nation the world had ever seen. By 1945 it possessed not only the atomic bomb but also military forces numbering over twelve million and deployed around the world. Behind this awesome military power stood even greater economic power. The decision to supply Allied as well as U.S. forces with war matériel via Lend-Lease resulted in an enormous expansion of the U.S. economy, as well as a quantity of military supplies that overwhelmed the Axis.¹

The wartime growth in U.S. power occurred at a lower human cost than that endured by any other major belligerent. Americans suffered approximately 405,000 dead during World War II (291,557 in combat), a figure surpassed in U.S. history only by the Civil War. Yet by World War II standards this figure was incredibly low. The United States was neither bombed nor invaded, it placed in uniform a smaller percentage of its population (12 percent) than any other major power, and it had a lower total casualty rate in terms of percentage of

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1. The United States produced nearly two-thirds of all Allied military equipment during the war. By the end of 1942 it was already outproducing all the Axis powers combined, and by 1944 its war production was more than double that of its Axis enemies. By war's end U.S. factories had produced 86,000 tanks, 193,000 artillery pieces, 14 million shoulder weapons, 2.4 million trucks and jeeps, 1,200 combat vessels, 82,000 landing craft and ships, and 297,000 aircraft. See Richard M. Leighton, "The American Arsenal Policy in World War II: A Retrospective View," in *Some Pathways in Twentieth-Century History: Essays in Honor of Reginald Charles McGrane*, ed. Daniel Beaver (Detroit, 1969), 251; Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York, 1994), 432; and Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York, 1995), 190–92.

population than any other major belligerent. Indeed, for every American to die in World War II, fifteen Germans and at least fifty-three Russians died.²

Consequently, the United States emerged from the war not merely as one of two major powers in the world, but in reality as *the* superpower. Indeed, in no realm save army size could the Soviet Union be placed in the same category. By 1945 the U.S. gross national product had more than doubled from its 1939 figure and constituted more than half of the world's total, while its armed forces included an army of over eight million, the world's largest and most powerful navy and air force, and an atomic monopoly. Reinforcing this power was a human migration from Europe, begun in the 1930s, that made the United States the intellectual as well as the economic and military center of the world. Indeed, this infusion of brainpower fed a continuation of U.S. technological, economic, and military superiority for the rest of the century.

Americans were more than willing to use their new power. During the war they redefined their concept of security and reconsidered the wisdom of remaining aloof from European political and military conflicts. In place of that policy, incorrectly labeled "isolationism," came a belief that they would be mortally threatened should any power control all of Europe, and that they therefore had a very real and vital interest in preventing such domination.³ By 1941 such beliefs had led them into first an informal and then a formal alliance with England and Russia against Nazi Germany. By 1950 those same beliefs led them to enunciate new and revolutionary policies for relations with Europe, and for the rest of the world, under the rubric of "containing" their former Soviet ally and now Soviet menace.

The war led to equally dramatic domestic consequences. It ended the Great Depression and started an enormous economic boom. It also illustrated the effectiveness of Keynesian economic theories that had only been toyed with during the 1930s, and with them the larger role for the federal government that the New Deal had begun and that would accelerate in the postwar years. The war further resulted in a massive population shift as workers flocked to new defense industries in the far west – a movement that played a major role in making California rather than New York the most populous state in the Union within two decades of the war's end. Included within this movement was a continuation and acceleration of the black migration out of the South that had begun during World War I, and the entry of women into the workforce in unprecedented numbers and into a host of occupations previously closed to

2. Leighton, "The American Arsenal Policy," 251; Millett and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense*, 427–28, 653; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982), 8.

3. I join those who prefer "unilateralism" or "independent internationalism" to "isolationism." For the development of the new postwar definition of U.S. security and its relationship to the European balance of power see John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York, 1988), 20–47; Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1992); and my own *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

them – including 333,000 in the armed forces. The massive social dislocation engendered by all this movement – and by the drafting of over 15 million American men – deeply altered American family life.

The war also provided an enormous boost to the domestic struggle against racism, albeit more in the long run than immediately. Black wartime pressure did lead to the outlawing of racial discrimination in defense industries and new opportunities for black servicemen, but the armed forces remained segregated and race riots greeted many blacks moving north. Nevertheless the war had an enormous impact on the black civil rights movement – perhaps most notably in the psychological and ideological realms. Simply put, it became extremely difficult to defend racism within the United States in the process of fighting a world war against its Nazi version in Europe. German extermination of Europe's Jews only reinforced this fact by highlighting racism's end result. It is thus far from accidental that the black legal campaign against segregation accelerated after World War II and culminated in the Supreme Court declaring it unconstitutional less than a decade after war's end.

World War II had an equally profound effect on women, as their numbers in the workforce nearly doubled and they came to constitute an unprecedented 36 percent of that force. They also entered a host of occupations previously closed to them – a movement symbolized by the new, popular image of “Rosie the Riveter.” With millions of men in uniform many women also learned to complete tasks previously left to their husbands – from balancing the family checkbook to maintaining an automobile. For good reason the war is now viewed as a watershed in women's history.⁴

Yet most Americans in 1945 did not perceive the impact of the war in these terms. Indeed, for them victory in 1945 meant the end not only to the war itself but also to all the enormous dislocations and disruptions of the last fifteen years. Although the term would not be a political campaign slogan as it had been after World War I, there was nevertheless, once again, a strong desire for a return to “normalcy.”

As a result, Americans dismissed most of the dramatic domestic changes engendered by the war as temporary aberrations, caused by wartime exigency, which could now be reversed. This was most notable in regard to women, who lost both their wartime jobs and their change in status. In place of those jobs and status came the postwar “baby boom” and a return to prewar values whereby they were once again defined primarily as wives and mothers. This in turn became part of the conservative “quiet fifties” that followed the war and masked the enormous changes that had taken place, and that were continuing, beneath the surface. These would become fully visible during the 1960s and would be spearheaded not only by black and female activists but also by the children of the baby boom themselves. The generational revolt of the 1960s thus constituted

4. For an incisive and dissenting analysis see D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 213–38.

an extraordinarily ironic dialectic, as the wartime generation tried to ignore or reverse many of the changes wrought by the war and re-create a placid prewar world, only to find that world rejected by the children it had spawned as part of the effort.

The generational rejection went far beyond this, however, and it highlighted yet another set of changes wrought by the war: in the American state of mind. Based upon the memory of the war and its supposed lessons that Americans developed, these changes would undergird the transformation of U.S. foreign policy previously discussed and form the basis of the generational conflict that took place in the 1960s – a conflict in which the World War II generation would find its children rebelling against the very memory of the war that it had created.

Although Americans did not fight to “make the world safe for democracy” as they had in 1917–18, World War II was for many if not most of them another crusade. (General Dwight D. Eisenhower even titled his wartime memoirs *Crusade in Europe*.)⁵ This time the enemy was fascism, an ideology many of them considered the ultimate evil of the twentieth century.⁶ For that very reason as well as their victory, it was the “good war”; and it dramatically altered their view of human nature as well as recent history.

Such alterations focused on a belief, based on the experiences of the 1930s and 1940s, that megalomaniacal tyrants who desired to conquer and enslave the world truly existed. Given what had occurred in the 1930s, a parallel belief emerged that U.S. policy during that decade had, by its passivity, aided in the rise of these monsters and thereby brought about the war. Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo could have been stopped, Americans now concluded, if only they had been willing to threaten and, if necessary, to use force. They thus came to view as a terrible mistake their 1919–20 rejection of collective security and the League of Nations and their subsequent policies during the interwar years – most notably the Neutrality Acts that had only served to reinforce the disastrous Anglo-French appeasement policy. Within this context World War II itself came to be viewed as a “second chance” to accept international involvement rather than repeat previous mistakes.⁷

Another one of those mistakes, Americans further argued, had been their belief in what came to be derisively known as the “Parchment Peace” – the series of arms limitation treaties during the 1920s without enforcement mechanisms most clearly represented by the toothless Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war. Peace, they now insisted, could result only from armed strength – not from meaningless and unenforceable treaties or doomed efforts to appease or ignore tyrannical aggression in other parts of the world. This constituted for many the

5. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, 1948).

6. Whether Japanese militarism should be described as Fascist remains a subject of scholarly debate – as does the very definition of the term. Americans at the time certainly viewed the ideologies of all three Axis nations as similar.

7. Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York, 1971).

key “lesson” of the 1930s and the war years, one President Harry S. Truman aptly summarized in his October 1945 Navy Day address: “We seek to use our military strength solely to preserve the peace of the world. For we know that this is the only sure way to make our own freedom secure. . . . We have learned the bitter lesson that the weakness of this Great Republic invites men of ill-will to shake the very foundations of civilization all over the world.”⁸ It was a lesson Americans would soon apply to the Soviet Union, as Stalin replaced Hitler in their minds and “Red Fascism” replaced the German variety.⁹ Not surprisingly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s cooperative wartime policy vis-à-vis the Soviets simultaneously came under savage attack for its supposed naiveté and appeasement. The 1945 Yalta Conference quickly became the key symbol, with critics claiming that FDR here gave away half of the world to Stalin and thereby lost the peace at the very moment the United States had won the war.¹⁰

Along with such beliefs and “lessons” went a corollary belief that human perfectibility was not possible – that there were severe limits to what human society could be, that devils lurked within us as well as outside, and that they had to be controlled. Such beliefs help to account for the generally conservative American attitudes of the postwar years, and the simultaneous attacks on all utopian ideologies. It is far from accidental in this regard that the postwar years would witness the publication and popularity of such works as Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* and Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology*.¹¹ Equally if not more telling was the growing influence of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whom containment author George F. Kennan would refer to as “the father of us all.”¹² Beginning in the interwar years and continuing into the 1940s and 1950s, Niebuhr lambasted both the general human and the specifically American quests for perfectibility and moral purity – be it via isolationism or its opposite but equally dangerous Wilsonian attempt to create a utopian world. In place of such views, and in the process of fighting their most extreme and dangerous forms of fascism and communism, he called for recognition of the human lust for power as well as the need to possess power in order to do good in the world, the subsequent inseparability of good from evil, and the consequent need to pursue balance-of-power policies – both domestically and in foreign affairs.¹³

8. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1945* (Washington, 1961), 433, 436.

9. Thomas G. Paterson and Les K. Adler, “Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930’s–1950’s,” *American Historical Review* 75, no. 4 (1970): 1046–64.

10. See Athan G. Theoharis, *The Yalta Myths: An Issue in U.S. Politics, 1945–1955* (Columbia, MO, 1970).

11. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York, 1951); Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL, 1960).

12. Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1996*, 8th ed. (New York, 1997), 63.

13. For an introduction to Niebuhr’s voluminous writings and thought see Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York, 1985); and Charles W. Kegley, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 2d ed. (New York, 1984). The list of Niebuhr’s published works in the latter runs to nearly forty pages.

Although Americans claimed to accept such conclusions, they did so in combination with a memory of the war so distorted and provincial that it subverted true understanding of Niebuhr's warnings. In addition to the oversimplifications inherent in the just discussed "lessons" Americans claimed to have learned from the events of 1919-1945, that memory grossly overemphasized their own role in defeating the Axis while downplaying or ignoring the roles of their allies. Along with this went a refusal, or an inability, to comprehend the very different postwar perspectives of those allies.

Americans saw themselves as having rescued the incompetent as well as undermanned British military forces from complete defeat at the hands of the Germans. Similarly they saw themselves as the saviors of the Soviet armed forces, which, while clearly courageous, could hardly have succeeded in defending their homeland without the valiant Americans. British and Soviet memories of the war differed dramatically.

From London's perspective, Americans had been latecomers, entering the war more than two years after it began, leaving England to fight alone from mid-1940 to late 1941, and then participating with the naive, arrogant, and incorrect belief that they should dictate both combined wartime strategy and a new, self-serving postwar international order at odds with British beliefs – and with international realities. Whether this was the result primarily of naiveté or hypocrisy was an open question. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden thought it the latter, commenting in 1941 that U.S. policy was "exaggeratedly moral, at least where non-American interests are concerned"; but a 1944 Foreign Office memorandum supported the former when it compared U.S. foreign policy to an "unwieldy barge" liable to "wallow in the ocean [as] an isolated menace to navigation" without a British pilot. Future Prime Minister Harold Macmillan similarly saw the Americans as a new version of the ignorant Romans, with the British serving as successors to the Greeks who actually ran the empire.¹⁴ Perhaps most telling of British views was an "acrid" postwar jingle about the Statue of Liberty: "I wonder is freedom still holding the light – Or is she just calling the waiter?"¹⁵

The Soviet perspective was even more divorced from the American. Suffering as many combat deaths in the Battle for Stalingrad as the Americans had in the entire war, as well as what is now estimated at twenty-seven million total deaths, the Soviets perceived the U.S. role in Allied victory as relatively insignificant compared to their own. Indeed, they viewed the Anglo-American delay in crossing the English Channel until 1944 as a deliberate attempt to bleed them dry. Prior to that crossing the Red Army had been responsible for more than 90 percent of the *Wehrmacht's* combat casualties. Even in the midst of the

14. Steven Merritt Miner, *Between Churchill and Stalin: The Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Grand Alliance* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 199; Terry H. Anderson, *The United States, Great Britain, and the Cold War, 1944-1947* (Columbia, MO, 1981), 12-13; Anthony Sampson, *Macmillan – A Study in Ambiguity* (London, 1967), 61.

15. Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade – and After: America, 1945-1960* (New York, 1960), 33.

great Anglo-American military sweep of western Europe during the summer of 1944, the Red Army inflicted casualties on the Germans that exceeded by two hundred thousand the total number of German troops deployed against Eisenhower's forces.¹⁶ From the Soviet perspective, all of this justified and entitled them to a postwar security zone in the west via retention of the territory they had lost in World War I and regained in the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, the creation of "friendly" governments in the rest of eastern Europe that they had just conquered, and the permanent weakening of Germany – all of which the United States would oppose as immoral, unwarranted, and a threat to U.S. security.

The U.S. perspective on World War II was myopic and provincial vis-à-vis not only its allies but also the peoples of Asia and Africa that it claimed to champion. While proclaiming a wartime and postwar goal of ending European colonialism, Americans simultaneously insisted that the process be slow and gradual so as not to create chaos the Soviets could take advantage of, and that the newly emerging nations line up with the United States in the ensuing Cold War while their leaders eschewed any connection with domestic Communists – whom Americans equated with the Nazi-inspired "fifth columns" of the 1930s and thus considered to be tools of Moscow. Such logic would lead the United States to a series of military interventions, in the name of halting Soviet aggression, into what were primarily civil and anticolonial wars – most notably in Greece, China, Korea, and Indochina. Indeed, Vietnam was where the World War II generation would apply all the "lessons" it had learned from that conflict to an area and a situation that had absolutely nothing in common with World War II. To make matters worse, those "lessons" were faulty because they were based upon a memory of the war that, simply put, was divorced from both the war's realities and the perspectives of the other nations and peoples that had fought it.

This distorted memory of World War II also subverted a true understanding of Niebuhr's warnings about the dangers of power. So did the continuing and related U.S. tendency to view the world in Manichaean terms – exactly what Niebuhr railed against. Indeed, Americans by the 1960s had fallen victim to most if not all of the dangers and abuses of power while claiming to be fighting against them in the global war against the Soviet Union.

Senator J. William Fulbright would accurately label this the "arrogance of power,"¹⁷ an arrogance that led Americans to equate their own interests with universal values and thus to an unquestioning belief in the purity of their own motives. To the rest of the world, however, those motives and behavior appeared once again, as they had during the war, to be the result of ignorance and/or

16. Jonathan R. Adelman, *Prelude to the Cold War: The Tsarist, Soviet, and U.S. Armies in the Two World Wars* (Boulder, 1988), 128; John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York, 1990), 128–30; Russell D. Buhite, *Decisions at Yalta: An Appraisal of Summit Diplomacy* (Wilmington, DE, 1986), xv–xvi.

17. J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York, 1966).

hypocrisy. As an Indian delegate at a 1951 cultural conference commented after an American compared New Delhi's Cold War neutrality to that of a lamb that is neutral between the wolf and the shepherd, such a view conveniently ignored what the shepherd did to the lamb after having "saved" it from the wolf!¹⁸

American behavior was similarly condemned by the children of the postwar baby boom, who by the late 1960s were college-age adolescents. As they compared official rhetoric with reality, many of them concluded that their parents were guilty in Vietnam of the very sins they claimed to be fighting against in the war against communism. This in turn led those children to question that broader conflict and its foundations – which included their parents' memory of World War II and its supposed "lessons."

One of the results in the 1960s and 1970s was a growing historical revisionism by a new generation of younger scholars that condemned U.S. actions not only in regard to the origins of the Cold War but also in regard to World War II itself. This revisionism was both cause and effect of the youthful rebellion against the lessons and worldview of the World War II generation, and in its extreme form it virtually stood the standard view of the U.S. role in the war on its head. Rather than naively "stepping aside" during the 1930s, revisionists argued, U.S. policymakers had actually encouraged fascism during the interwar years as a means of preserving order against both nationalistic and communistic revolts. Some even went so far as to argue that the isolationists of the 1930s had been correct, that Nazi Germany did not constitute a threat to the United States, and that statements to the contrary merely illustrated how global and aggressive the U.S. definition of "security" had become. Far more argued that Japan had never constituted a threat, and that U.S. racism and trade sanctions against Tokyo constituted unbearable insults and a virtual declaration of economic war that forced the Japanese into the Pearl Harbor attack. Such racism and aggressiveness continued after that attack and were boldly illustrated by the disgraceful internment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps, race riots, refusal to do anything to rescue European Jewry from Hitler's Final Solution, a virtual war of extermination against Japanese forces in the Pacific, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – an action critics attacked as barbarous, unnecessary to obtain Japanese surrender, and undertaken out of motives of both racism and a desire to force the Soviets to accede to U.S. hegemony in Asia, Eastern Europe, and indeed the whole world.¹⁹

An interesting aspect of this revisionism is that in its extreme form it is virtually a mirror image of the traditional American view of themselves in World War II, and its emergence over the last three decades has resulted in

18. Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1968), 76.

19. These numerous revisionist works have been analyzed in a series of historiographical essays on U.S. foreign relations in the interwar, World War II, and Cold War years, originally published in *Diplomatic History* and reproduced in Michael J. Hogan's two edited collections, *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (New York, 1995) and *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941* (New York, 2000).

furious debates. These have by no means been limited to the scholarly community. Indeed, the 1995 controversy regarding a Smithsonian Institution exhibition about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima led to a public and congressional uproar – and eventually to the cancellation of *any* historical analysis whatsoever because of a total inability to agree upon what that analysis should say or emphasize.²⁰

What the Smithsonian controversy clearly represented was a continuing generational and ideological struggle for the memory and meaning of World War II between those who fought it on the one hand, and their children who lived with its consequences on the other. To the former the key point about the atomic bomb, for example, was that it ended the worst horror of their lives; to the latter, however, it was an atrocity that began the worst horror of their lives.

The aging and passing of the World War II generation has not ended this conflict. It has admittedly softened somewhat, with the popularity of recent World War II books by Stephen Ambrose and Tom Brokaw,²¹ and movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, perhaps illustrating a desire on the part of members of the baby boomer generation to make peace with as well as pay homage to their parents while there is still time to do so (that time is rapidly disappearing: the Boston *Globe* reported on 11 November 1999 that World War II veterans were dying at the stunning rate of eleven hundred per day).²² But such efforts have not included a surrender to the World War II memory and ideology against which that generation so fiercely rebelled. Indeed, the clearest dividing line within my U.S. history classes whenever a controversial World War II subject is discussed remains a generational one, with my 17–22 year-old undergraduates virtually unanimous in their condemnation of U.S. behavior and in opposition to the defense of it launched by the retirees who often audit my courses in order to view their own lifetimes in historical perspective.

It is interesting to note in this regard how different *Saving Private Ryan* is from its 1962 predecessor, *The Longest Day*. Both films pay homage to the men who landed at Normandy on 6 June 1944, but the former does so without the latter's hagiography. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of Steven Spielberg's film is its ability to honor those men and what they did without glorifying either them or the event itself. One can almost hear a generation saying that it will recognize and respect its parents for what they did without accepting their idealized memory of what took place – or what it all meant.

Equally if not more interesting and revealing of the continued generational conflict is the attack on military history for its glorification of World War II

20. See Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars: the Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996); and Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (New York, 1996).

21. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (New York, 1997); Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York, 1998).

22. Thomas Farragher, "A Thinning of the Ranks," Boston *Globe*, 11 November 1999.

launched by Andrew C. Bacevich at a 1994 scholarly conference at the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, the Netherlands, and the angry retort by British military historian Brian Bond. To Bacevich, both a historian and a Vietnam veteran officer, military historians by that glorification were guilty of endorsing the effort during fiftieth-anniversary commemorations to envelop Normandy and the rest of the war “in sanitized and self-congratulatory myth,” a process previously described by Paul Fussell as the “‘Higher Disneyfication’ of World War II.” To the older Bond such “confused arguments” were not only “grossly unfair” to the profession but also “inappropriate to an international historical conference assembled to commemorate the victorious Allied campaign in 1944–45 to liberate northwest Europe” and not the “right platform” for what he labeled Bacevich’s “general diatribe against war and its treatment by historians.” Not all modern wars, he continued, had been “manifestly pointless or futile.” As Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute President William vanden Heuvel commented and others in the audience clearly realized, these conflicting approaches and statements illustrated most vividly the continued gap between the World War II and Vietnam-era generations. They also highlighted the validity of conference organizer Charles F. Brower’s comment, in what may have been the understatement of the entire episode, that “undertaking a thoughtful and balanced historical reconsideration of the last year of World War II in the midst of a period of intoxicating commemorative celebration is a tricky task.”²³

Yet as evidenced by the Smithsonian controversy, this struggle is more than generational. Indeed, it has clearly become part of the so-called culture wars that divide Americans by numerous factors in addition to age. Given that fact, the battle over the war’s memory, and meaning, will probably continue long after the last World War II veteran has died. Hopefully, but far from likely, the results will include less historical distortion than has occurred in the past.

23. The Bacevich comments and Bond rejoinder are reprinted in the proceedings of the conference as edited by Charles F. Brower IV, *World War II in Europe: The Final Year* (New York, 1998), 289–98. Brower’s own quote is on p. 1, and his summary and assessment of the exchange is on pp. 8–9. Vanden Heuvel’s comment is part of my recollection as a participant in the conference and witness to the confrontation. Even the bluntness of the printed words does not fully convey the intensity of the feelings exhibited.