RSAJournal
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/12251
rsa.aisna.net

The American Memory of World War II

John Bodnar

Indiana University
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4529-5476
Email: bodnar@indiana.edu

Keywords

Identity, Memory, Pain, Trauma, War

The public remembrance of war in any nation is usually contentious. When societies attempt to craft memories of brutal conflicts, they enter a minefield of conflicting feelings and opinions. In looking at the vast array of memory activity – films, memoirs, memorials, and commemorative ceremonies – that often make up public reflections on warfare, widespread agreement is elusive. Government officials, movie makers, ordinary citizens, war veterans, and writers invariably participate in enterprises which are wide in scope and multifaceted.

The American memory of World War I is no exception. Today the myth of the "good war" dominates the nation's memory of the conflict. This myth portrays the war as a highly righteous endeavor that not only ended in victory for democracy over fascism but highlights experiences that brought out the best in the American people. The many proponents of this legend not only savor the defeat of evil regimes but see the war as a time when citizens displayed a sense of ethical values and patriotism that still resides at the core of American national identity. The romantic nature

of this fable not only reinforces virtuous views of the nation but manages to erase many of the bitter realities that mark the experience of the war itself. The elevation of myth over experience, however, was not accidental. Over time memory makers promoted this view not only to enhance a sense of national greatness but to tamp down the widespread expression of criticism and pain expressed by the generation that experienced the conflict firsthand. These alternative voices insisted that the human cost involved in terms of loss and trauma in a war should not be forgotten. After a full immersion in violence, Americans wanted to ensure that they be seen as a people inherently patriotic, principled and devoid of gratuitously violent tendencies. Explicit descriptions of state sponsored brutality and suffering invariably threatened such dreams.

The central problem of war memories has always been about the extent the traumatic could coexist with the heroic and how such ideas reflected upon the identity of the nation itself. As Jenny Edkins has insightfully argued, state responsibility for "grievous losses" can undermine the bonds of loyalty people can feel toward their nation and eviscerate hopes that their country can offer them safety and a stable future (5-15). This issue was by no means confined to the United States. In nations where the fight was lost and casualties heavy like Germany and Japan, for instance, it became difficult to recall the war in an objective way. Germans wrestled for decades after 1945 with not only their responsibility for the Holocaust but the accountability they bore for bringing so much death and destruction to their own citizens. It was not until 2005 that they were able to build a "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in the middle of Berlin.

In Japan, haunted by starting a conflict that brought human slaughter not only to their homeland but to the peoples of East Asia, a desire to escape questions of culpability colored efforts at remembrance. Officials prevented the teaching of war realities in schools for decades. Memorial planners in Hiroshima, the site of atomic devastation, elected to name a memorial site the "Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park" with the intent of spreading a message of peace and escaping questions of mass slaughter. They conveyed the legacy of the dead in the form of a memorial cenotaph. Discussions of accountability remained elusive.

America's debate over remembering World War II also revolved around the tension between the fallout from state-sponsored violence and the quest for a righteous identity. Critical judgements and feelings of sorrow and loss vied for attention with more honorable and less reflective feelings. The force of national commemorations focused on the need to justify the sacrifice and repair the damage the war brought to people's lives. Memoirists saw trauma as an object of forgetting. Such a project, of course, could not be conducted with ease. People – especially in local communities and in private homes grieved and lamented the loss of loved ones. In the literary sphere, soldiers home from the war wrote widely circulated novels and memoirs that chronicled the horrors of the conflict and offered overly critical accounts of America's capacity for violence. This is not to say there were no expressions of popular pride in the American victory. Veteran organizations repeatedly talked about the victory in glowing terms, often placing tanks in front of their buildings next to a flagpole as memorials. General Dwight Eisenhower's book on *Crusade in Europe* (1948) praised the military planning and civilian war efforts that helped insure the defeat of Germany. In a sense these positive stories were therapeutic in that they tended to omit much of the confusion and pain that was at the heart of countless subjective experiences.

Veteran writings did not see the war simply as a successful crusade. Popular novels by veterans like Norman Mailer – who served in the Pacific – upended visions of a glorious victory by offering the public a critical account of soldier attitudes. He featured profiles of warriors who were driven by violent impulses both to kill the enemy and, in their personal lives, harm women. In his 1948 book, *The Naked and the Dead*, the central premise was that the war in the Pacific revealed an astounding capacity for aggression on the part of the Americans. James Jones, another war veteran, authored novels that featured a highly contemptuous appraisal of Army leadership. In his novel, *The Thin Red Line* (1962) Jones cast soldiers as disillusioned by the violence they saw. Older men looked at new recruits (as) simply as cannon fodder rather than as heroic fighters.

The grand memorials of the postwar era were much more about heroism. The most famous one from the early postwar era was the Maine Corps memorial to the battle of Iwo Jima erected near Washington DC in

1954. Ever since it has remained one of the most popular and recognizable memorials of the American war effort. The monument consists of an image of American soldiers raising a victory flag after a fierce battle against the Japanese. It was based on a news photo that was published by the military to offer people back home a sense that victory was at hand at a time when overall casualties were running high. In fact, at the time of the photo, actual victory at Iwo Jima was far from certain. The striking feature of this aesthetic rendition of warfare was its failure to reveal the tremendous human toll of the encounter. One third of all marines killed in World War II died at Iwo Jima. The memorial itself did not mention this fact; it concentrated on the "uncommon valor" of the troops (Marling and Wetenhall).

Years later research revealed that the personal feelings of the men depicted in bronze and their families were far from persuaded that valor was the only way or even the best way to describe their sense of what happened. The family of one soldier became so upset over all the patriotic ceremonies after the war that celebrated their dead son's sacrifice that they stopped going to such events. Their remembrance was dominated by the pain of his death, and they refused to turn it into something more heroic. One of the men pictured in the statue, a native-American, died alone days after the dedication of the memorial, a victim of alcoholism and despondent over the fact that victory and sacrifice had not led to more justice for his people in their own country (Bodnar 87-89).

A similar pattern unfolded in the commemoration of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the site of a Japanese attack upon a naval base that drew the United States into World War II in both Europe and Asia. Americans vowed in 1941 never to forget Pearl Habor, where 2,000 Americans died, and they never did. A memorial to the USS Arizona, a ship sunk by the Japanese with some 1,100 sailors on board, was erected in 1963. The aesthetics of the memorial attempted to achieve a blend of tragedy and triumph. A gleaming white structure was built over the sunken hull of the ship which was clearly visible under the water. Bubbles rising to the surface reminded tourists of the human remains entombed below. Architects designed the roof of the visitors' structure over the ship to be low in the middle and high at each end to represent a drawn longbow ready to spring

back. The implied message was that the nation was bent by the attack but sprung back to vanquish the enemy. In this representation of bitter war realities, traces of death were more visible than they were at the Iwo Jima site. The names of the dead were placed inside the visitors' room above the ship. During the 50th anniversary celebration of the attack in 1991, however, veterans paraded through the streets of Honolulu with smiles to a cheering audience that sang "God Bless America." It was a celebration. Eventually the trope of victory was reinforced near the Arizona site when the battleship Missouri, upon whose deck the surrender of the Japanese took place in 1945 in Tokyo Bay, was placed nearby. Now tourists could see the beginning and end of the victorious struggle in the Pacific.

Years later the pain of the families that lost men in Hawaii leaked into the public consciousness. The discovery of DNA caused the Department of Defense in 2015 to launch an effort to identify the mass of bones that had been recovered from other ships destroyed in the Japanese assault. As scientists began to collect DNA samples from families who lost relatives at Pearl Harbor, they were able to find a match with some of the bones. This was dramatic because the families of these casualties never knew what happened to their relatives. News reports began to appear throughout the nation of such discoveries and official ceremonies in which surviving family members received containers with remains and learned what truly happened. It soon became clear that many of these people had suffered for years not only from the loss of loved ones but from the uncertainty of knowing their fate. Accounts revealed that grieving mothers waited for years after the war for a "knock on the door" from missing sons. Others wept in public as they took possession of what was left of their kin. One family kept a "wooden heart" as a private memorial of their loss. Others held on to wartime telegrams indicating that their relatives were missing in action. Wooden hearts and a mother's grief are seldom the stuff of war memorials. They convey a suggestion of skepticism over the war effort and disrupt hopes that a nation's war reminiscences can be more about noble victories and heroic citizens than brutal actions and enduring pain.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

John Bodnar is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Indiana University. His books include *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Indiana University Press, 1985); *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1992); *The 'Good War' in American Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); *Divided by Terror: American Patriotism after 9/11* (Indiana University Press, 1985).

WORKS CITED

Bodnar, John. *The "Good War" in American Memory*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.

Jenny Edkins. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics.* Cambridge UP, 2003.

Marling, Karl Ann and John Wetenhall. *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero*. Harvard UP, 1991.