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Still the "Good War"?

Tom Zeiler

University of Colorado Boulder
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0522-3011
Email: thomas.zeiler@colorado.edu

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In *"The Good War"*, the oral historian, Studs Terkel, explains why he placed quotation marks around his title. They were there to distinguish World War II from other conflicts, to clearly demarcate good and evil. Later generations, up to this day and including my students, venerate it as a Good War, too.

Yet they miss the irony. Terkel's meaning was not an appeal to pacifism or conscientious objection, though he gave them a voice. Nor was he necessarily taking sides even if he was left-leaning (and investigated for being a communist as a result). He coupled "good" to "war" because the combination was so incongruous; war could never be good, regardless of the views of pundits then and now.

How could a war that slaughtered 65 million people, devastated millions of homes, farms, towns, and cities, and witnessed horrors from state-sanctioned rape to starvation to genocide to atomic bombs be deemed "good?" People back then were shocked by these outcomes, and they should be today as well.

Trivializing World War II as anything less than a bloodbath so great that there has not been another such conflagration in eight decades (though the war in Ukraine conjured up reminders) is a disservice to the very heroes that my students seek to emulate. Actually, it belies belief to think that the very *context* of a human experience that resulted in such carnage could be construed as good. One does not need to be an ethicist pondering morality and just war theory, a jurist concerned with war crimes, or even a military historian researching strategy, operations, and tactics to conclude that World War II – the most destructive event in recorded human history – was actually the worst war ever.

Of course, there are multiple ways to justify the notion of a "good war." Proponents argue, correctly, that the war was necessary. Eradicating the evil of fascism, and its Nazi offspring and Japanese militarist cousin, required violence never seen before or since. The democracies were fighting for their very way of civilized life, and the immense sacrifices they made prevented a return to the Dark Ages. And there were major positive results of the good war as well. Germany, Italy, and Japan became peaceful, productive citizens of the world after their defeat. The United States not only came out of its isolationist shell but emerged as a global leader, spreading its democratic capitalist and moral values around the world, largely for good, and creating an international system that kept the peace while defeating, over the next near half-century, another evil in Soviet communism. Furthermore, this was total war, an unlimited conflict (unlike limited wars that later sparked controversy due to their vague objectives and inconclusiveness) in which the terrible adoption of atrocities was tolerated to defeat total evil.

These explanations for a "good war" are ingrained into the legacy of the Second World War, but this unconstrained war was also so dire that humanity recoiled from ever repeating it. That impulse became a guiding sentiment behind the successful postwar security, political, economic, and social institutions that prevented a third world war – this despite the specter of a nuclear conflict that could obliterate the planet.

The idea of a "good war" should also turn attention to the pre-war period. It is worth remembering, as historian John Bodnar argues, that while Americans united in the fight against aggressors abroad, they struggled against each other to get to that point. In short, they were ambivalent about joining the war. Like publisher Henry Luce, some celebrated the

opportunity but others expressed cynicism and regret. Memory studies help us understand the tragedy, making heroes out of a so-called "greatest generation" as if these people, no matter how courageous, were different from people who came before or after them. Yet Americans were not more exceptional than other combatants, except in that their stories are related by nationalists of liberal and conservative stripes bent on showing how American internationalism rose to the occasion in World War II, planting the seeds for Cold War vigor.

Yet there was a vast gulf between interventionists and isolationists as war broke out in Asia and Europe, with organizations like the America First Committee pursuing up to the Pearl Harbor attack a policy of separation from world affairs. Americans might have agreed on the dangers of tyranny but not on how they should deal with it. Thus, even well-intentioned liberals, with their faith in humanity's goodness, could fight for freedom by brutally killing (Bodnar 1-9). That inconsistency pulls back the veneer of the good war thesis.

All sides adhered to such thinking. Numerous accounts exist of Axis and Allied combatants who expressed qualms before, during, and after ferocious (even sadistic – see Americans taking trophies from dead enemy soldiers, including body parts) in military campaigns. In this war without mercy, people engaged in unimaginable behavior, entirely counter to their conduct had they stayed home. Think of college-aged kamikaze pilots heading to their death, or Allied bombers who discovered that their victims below faced a choice of remaining in basements to suffocate or running outside to be burned alive. There were plenty of bystanders, moreover, too terrified to resist concentration camps in their neighborhoods or stop Jews from being shipped out on trains. More evidence has become public about rape by US soldiers, of which black men became the scapegoats. The sobering fact is that while there was no government-mandated policy of brutality such as Germans, Soviets, and Japanese followed, like others, Americans often annihilated their enemies or possessed the mindset to do so.

To be sure, most of the world did not know at the time about such savagery, but the reality became clear as wartime turned to legacy building. Nonetheless, after reading popular accounts like US Marine E.B. Sledge's 1981 memoir, *With the Old Breed*, Americans still called the war a good one. The battle royale in 1995 that led to the cancellation of the Smithsonian

Museum's exhibit of the *Enola Gay* continued this mythology. The exhibit attempted to explain why the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima but veterans countered that it dishonored their service. The publication a few years later of television anchor Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* reinforced the good war thesis, which was alive and well. Sentimentalism, romanticized imagery, and nationalist nostalgia prevailed.

That was unfortunate, because at a level of base injustice, some of the most decent leaders in the United States, like President Franklin D. Roosevelt and California's attorney general (and future Supreme Court Chief Justice) Earl Warren, accepted the internment of Japanese Americans. Warren later regretted his actions but not until the danger had passed. The same went for racism. The Double V Campaign by the Black community pushed for democracy abroad and at home. We now celebrate the war as a catalyst for racial change; both professional baseball and the US Army were desegregated after the conflict. But the legacy of Jim Crow persisted well after as the so-called "Greatest Generation" confronted racism abroad but did not bring that fight home effectively until a new generation took up the call for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.

My point is not to belittle Americans during World War II. Much good came out of a bad experience. Yet we should be careful not to put veterans on a pedestal because doing so cheapens their humanity by making them into a sort of Superman hero. Video games unfortunately do this, sanitizing the record with cool graphics.

Furthermore, that the war was actually hell for the heroes was borne out by reports from psychologists in the 1980s, when the Greatest Generation began to retire. No longer distracted by work, they now came to grip with their emotions. They had suppressed their wartime experiences; this was not a generation, like the Vietnam veterans, who talked a lot. For many, memories of their horrific experiences surfaced. Wives reported that since the war, their husbands awoke in the middle of the night screaming in panic, dread, or sadness. Therapy was challenging also because the media, politicians, and family so lionized them that it was hard to descend from their good-war podium. I discovered their mental states from oral history projects and from flying to Iwo Jima in 2005 with veterans who were accompanied by hero-worshiping friends and family to commemorate the

60th anniversary of that battle. Many of these former combatants, now in their eighties, were uncomfortable with the glorified reception.

Beyond personal struggles and culture wars is another pitfall of the "good war" concept. It not only trivializes war itself but it also downplays how war arrives at our doorstep in the first place. The failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan might have provided some remediation in this regard. In addition, self-interested nationalist reactionaries, posing as populists, ignore the successful history of internationalism that resulted from the war. Disaster might be awaiting us. We worry about aggressors crossing borders, as Russia did in Ukraine and China might do with Taiwan. Regional expansion of those conflicts could lead to global war.

We are also concerned about the rise of fascism, autocratic conduct, and isolationist tendencies within many countries, including the United States. Those were the very elements that drove the world to war decades ago. And those developments are why, on this anniversary, we should question the goodness of any war and do our best to prevent a recurrence.

Author's bionote

Tom Zeiler is Professor of History and Director of the Program in International Affairs at the University of Colorado Boulder. He has written *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* and *Annihilation: A Global Military History of World War II* (Bloomsbury, 2003), as well as studies on international economy and globalization and baseball history. His most recent book is *Capitalist Peace: A History of American Free Trade Internationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and his book, *Beyond the Nixon Shocks*, which explores the demise of the "American Century," will be published in 2025.

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