

World War II in Retrospect

Richard Polenberg

Memory and Myth: 1945-1995

There is a story, apocryphal perhaps but nonetheless apt, about Charles DeGaulle and Winston Churchill. The leader of the French resistance, it seems, was once asked about his notoriously stormy wartime relationship with the British Prime Minister. "Churchill always shouts whenever he's wrong," DeGaulle replied, "and I always shout whenever I'm right. Consequently, our discussions are rather noisy." In a very real sense, even fifty years after the end of World War II, discussion about the war in the United States is still astonishingly noisy.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the recent battle over the Smithsonian Institution's planned exhibit concerning the use of atomic bombs in 1945. The original plan, calling for a 10,000-square-foot display, was based on a script of some 600 pages. The American Legion and the Air Force Association were permitted to examine the original script, however, and vigorously objected to assertions that the need to use atomic bombs to end the war remained controversial, that "for most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against western imperialism," and that estimates of one-half to one million American casualties if an invasion of Japan had been necessary, were much too high.

When the script was modified to reflect these concerns, a group of scholars protested against the "historical cleansing" which, they said, rendered the account inaccurate. But when Congressional allies of the veterans threatened to slash the Smithsonian's budget and the Republican chairman of the House Appropriations Committee was appointed to the Smithsonian's Board of Regents, the director backed down and agreed the display would consist only of the *Enola Gay's* fuselage.

To appreciate how extraordinary it is that such a heated debate would occur fifty years after

the end of a war, let us imagine that the year is 1968: the year of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for another term, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, the turmoil at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago (and Mayor Richard Daley's famous remark, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, the function of the police is not to create disorder; the function of the police is to preserve disorder!"), and the election of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. And a national controversy suddenly erupts over Woodrow Wilson's policies leading to the 1918 armistice that ended the First World War! In 1968 the American people were exactly as far from the end of World War I as they were in 1995 from the end of World War II, yet in 1968, World War I seemed as remote, indeed as far as most Americans were concerned, as irrelevant, as the War of 1812.



But in 1995, World War II was still capable of arousing intense emotions, and to gain an even better idea of how truly extraordinary this is, let us consider certain demographic trends. The population of the United States is now 263.5 million, nearly dou-

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Controversy that engulfed the Smithsonian Institution's planned exhibit on the 1945 use of atomic bombs, resulting in a display that included only the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, which had dropped the

bomb on Hiroshima. (National Archives photo)



ble what it was during World War II. How many Americans are old enough to have meaningful memories of World War II?

- People who are now sixty-five years of age were eleven when we entered the war and fifteen when it ended, old enough, that is, to have formed a reasonably clear idea of the nature of the conflict. Today, 33.5 million Americans fall in the sixty-five-and-over category: that is, thirteen percent of the population — although since some of the elderly would surely have immigrated since 1945, we are probably talking about less than twelve percent of the population.
- More to the point, only people who are now seventy years of age, who were sixteen when we entered the war and twenty when it ended, are old enough to have served in the military or to have been formatively affected by the war. Today, 23.5 million people fall in the seventy-and-over age category: that is nine percent of the population, although again, allowing for immigration, we are probably talking about less than eight percent of the population.

So why is the war still capable of stirring such an intense reaction? The reasons, I believe, have to do with how Americans have perceived the war over the last fifty years and how those perceptions

World War II continues to arouse strong feelings, though only about eight percent of American's population is old enough to have been significantly affected by the war. (*Cincinnati Post* photo)

have been changing. For most people who fought in — or vividly remember — World War II, it was, first of all, a just war, fought for self-defense not conquest. When one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's aides said, "Never in our history have issues been so clear," he meant simply that Naziism was a radically evil, expansionist system and the Allies' only interest was to protect "The Four Freedoms." Second, it was a war whose consequences were, on the whole, beneficial: a good war in the sense that it produced economic prosperity, fostered ethnic, religious, and class unity; opened new job opportunities for blacks and women, and dramatically bolstered America's sense of self-confidence. Donald Nelson, who headed the War Production Board, perfectly captured this last sentiment: "Whatever this country wants to do it can do. Nothing is impossible for America." Third, the generation that lived through the war believed it was fought in a moral manner. The use of military force, however brutal and destructive, was proper, appropriate, and necessary. The policies that Roosevelt and Truman followed were, in this view, proportionate to the stakes involved.

I wish now to examine how the American people, in the space of fifty years, have come to view each of these three concepts: "the just war," "the good war," and "the moral war."

Public Opinion: The "Just" War

The most striking conclusion to emerge from polls of public opinion is that Americans have always considered World War II a "just" war. If anything, that view is even more widely held now than it was immediately after the war ended.

In September 1947, the Gallup poll asked: "Do you think it was a mistake for the U.S. to enter World War II?" The results were: yes, twenty-four percent; no, sixty-six percent; no opinion, ten percent. So two-thirds of the American people believed the war justified. What is more surprising is that one-third of those polled either thought it was a "mistake" to have entered or had no opinion.

Unfortunately, the Gallup poll did not ask that kind of question again until the 1990s, when the fiftieth anniversary of the war combined with the

Persian Gulf war led to a new round of inquiries, although they were phrased somewhat differently: Respondents were asked specifically whether past wars were "just" or not. The results were remarkably consistent: In 1990, eighty-four percent said World War II was justified, eleven percent said it was not, and five percent had no opinion. In 1991, the corresponding figures were eighty-nine per cent, five percent, and six percent. And in 1993: eighty-six percent, nine percent, and five percent.

Two other features of these recent poll results should be noted. First, no other war in American history came close to achieving the approval rating of World War II. When asked if they thought the Revolutionary War was just, for example, only seventy-five percent of the respondents answered yes, and (perhaps put off by the word "revolutionary") nine percent said no, and sixteen percent had no opinion. Second, wars fought since 1945 are considered particularly unjust. In the 1990s, only forty-seven percent of those sampled thought the Korean War just, and a mere twenty-five percent considered Vietnam just.



Three blue stars on the flag; three family members in the service. One-third of the respondents to a 1947 poll believed entering World War II had been a "mistake;" perhaps many had loved

ones among the over one million U.S. troops killed or injured. (CHS Photograph Collection)

What accounts for the sizeable increase from 1947 to the 1990s, an increase from sixty-six percent to eight-six percent, in the proportion of Americans who believe that World War II was not a mistake but a just war? In part, the results may simply reflect differences in how the questions were phrased, since in 1947, respondents were asked if entering the war had been a "mistake," not if the war were "just," a word that may have elicited a more positive response. The 1947 results may also have reflected post-war disillusionment caused by the emergence of the Cold War and a residual isolationism. The reasons people gave for saying entering the war was a mistake were that the United States was no better off, had not gotten anything out of it, and should steer clear of other nations' conflicts.

There is still another explanation. The 1947 sample was composed entirely of people who had experienced the war, while the 1990 samples mainly included people who had not. The earlier respondents included the parents, spouses, and children of Americans who had been killed in action. There were nearly twice as many American casualties in World War II as in the Spanish-American War, World War I, Korea, and Vietnam combined. From 1941 to 1945, more than 405,000 United States troops died in battle or of other causes, and 670,000 more were wounded in action. It may be that their loved ones were among those who regarded our entry as a "mistake." By contrast, the vast majority of those polled in the 1990s could not have directly experienced wartime losses. All they had was an image of World War II as a "good" war.

That image is, in fact, a myth, one largely shattered by historical scholarship in the last fifteen years. I have surveyed the recent scholarly literature in "The Good War?: A Reappraisal of How World War II Affected American Society," in the July 1992 issue of *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. The newer interpretation of the war emerges not only in the work of professional historians, however, but also in the most influential and widely read book on the subject: Studs Terkel's *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two*.



Studs Terkel and "The Good War"

Published in October 1984, with a hard-cover print run of 125,000, Terkel's oral history quickly became a best seller. In April 1985, it won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction. The book eventually sold 450,000 copies in the United States and was translated into eight foreign languages. I will look first at Terkel's political perspective and that of the man to whom he dedicated the book, the Scottish newspaper reporter, James Cameron, and then I will examine the interpretation of the war that emerges in the book itself.

Louis ("Studs") Terkel was born in the Bronx in 1912, the third son of Samuel and Anna Finkel Terkel, a Jewish couple who had emigrated from Russia ten years earlier. Samuel Terkel was a tailor, and Anna a seamstress. But when Studs was only nine, the family moved to Chicago where his mother took on the management of a rooming house and then the Wells-Grand Hotel. Terkel attended the University of Chicago, graduating in 1932, and then the University of Chicago Law School, receiving a degree in 1934 but never practicing law.

Instead he joined the WPA Federal Writers Project and then became an actor with the

Studs Terkel, here in 1995, wrote the most influential and widely-read book about World War II, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two*. (Photo courtesy of The New Press)

Chicago Repertory Theater, playing such socially-conscious roles as the cabdriver, "Joe," in Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*. When the United States entered World War II, Terkel thought of requesting status as a conscientious objector but decided not to. He was called for service, but a perforated eardrum kept him from active duty. Terkel did, however, spend a year, 1942-1943, in Special Services, helping to entertain troops in military camps in the states.

In *Talking to Myself*, an autobiography published in 1977, Terkel embraces the American radical tradition. His heroes are John Peter Altgeld, the

Illinois governor who freed some of the anarchists unfairly convicted in the 1886 Haymarket riot; Lucy Parsons, the widow of one of "the Haymarket martyrs," whom Terkel heard speak and whose funeral he attended; and, above all, Robert M. La Follette, who ran for president on the Progressive Party ticket in 1924. Terkel recalls a reunion of the graduates of the University of Chicago Law School, class of 1934, in the fall of 1960. A straw poll was taken on that year's presidential election: Richard M. Nixon received forty-five votes, John F. Kennedy, forty-one, and "Fighting Bob" La Follette, one. None present doubted



Veterans described to Terkel how soldiers fighting on Okinawa became callous to killing and death. (National Archives photo)

who had cast that vote. Terkel explains that he preferred La Follette to “the two young make-out artists, who were more machine than human.”

Terkel’s villains are equally revealing. For Harry Truman he has only contempt: “Truman grew in the presidency, it is said. The impertinent question is hardly asked: Didn’t we, in a generation, diminish to his size?” Nor has he anything good to say about John F. Kennedy, whom he labels “Big Bad By God John, who ain’t blinkin’ for nobody.” Far from admiring Kennedy’s stance during the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Terkel believes that the President was placing all humanity in danger for the sake of gaining an edge in the off-year elections.

Terkel’s political outlook is founded on an abiding faith in the basic decency of working people, a profound distrust of the selfishness of the moneyed interests, and a passionate opposition to war which, in the thermonuclear age, necessarily spells disaster. In the 1940s, those views led to his involvement in a variety of left-wing causes. He spoke in behalf of the Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and the Civil

Rights Congress, all groups that ended up on the U.S. attorney general’s subversives list. In 1948 he backed Henry Wallace’s third-party presidential candidacy and served as master of ceremonies at the celebration of Paul Robeson’s fiftieth birthday celebration at the Chicago Civic Opera House.

In the 1950s, predictably, those associations led to his being blacklisted. He was the host of “Studs’ Place,” an NBC television show, when in October 1952, someone told the House Committee on Un-American Activities that Terkel had once invited him to join the Communist Party. NBC told Terkel to disavow his past and assure everyone of his loyalty, but Terkel refused, and his program was cancelled. So were his radio show and his newspaper column. At the time, Terkel explained, “If I am to be the Clown, I’d rather play it to King Lear than to Karl Mundt.”

With the waning of McCarthyism, Terkel again found himself the host of a popular radio program in Chicago and eventually a string of best-selling books, all based on interviews, brought him considerable success. But success did not alter his politics. In the 1960s, he was an outspoken opponent of



A belief in the decency of working people, such as these men on a Federal Public Works project in Cincinnati, is basic to Terkel’s political outlook and oral histories. (CHS Photograph Collection)

the war in Vietnam and a supporter of nuclear disarmament. By 1980 this inveterate supporter of third-party candidacies, from Robert La Follette to Henry Wallace, endorsed Barry Commoner's Citizens' Party.

In August 1968, Terkel was in Lincoln Park on the night the Chicago police attacked anti-war demonstrators outside the Democratic convention. With him was James Cameron, the friend to whom he dedicated *"The Good War."* A young reporter in London during World War II, Cameron covered the United States' atomic tests in the Pacific in 1946, an experience which affected him profoundly. In 1950 he went to Korea and decided that "modern war is in itself debasing, atrocity begets atrocity and beastliness breeds beastliness." In 1965 after an assignment in Vietnam, he concluded that the United States was fighting a "uniquely brutal and muddled war" which it could not win.

Cameron's own autobiography, *Point of Departure*, published in 1967, presents a view of war which is remarkably similar to Terkel's. Cameron rejects pacifism because, as he explains, only the Allied armies prevented Hitler from conquering the world. But Cameron does not therefore justify war or minimize its tragic dimensions: "Two world wars," he claims, "have anaesthetized our moral perceptions" and created the illusion that there can be a justification for killing millions of men, women, and children. "I am obliged to say that I personally feel that *nothing* justifies it — neither Communism, Fascism, nationalism, tyranny nor freedom; the conquest of the earth or the preservation of *any* way of life: nothing. Nothing in the world, however base nor however good, nor however theoretically admirable, can justify murder as an act of policy."

In Cameron's view, therefore, it is no contradiction to say that World War II had to be fought but, nevertheless, had the most inhumane consequences. That is the same argument Terkel made in *"The Good War"*: World War II was a "just" but by no means a "good" war. In fact, the book is a powerful indictment of war, all the more effective because the reader does not take the message as Terkel's alone but rather as that of the many people he interviewed. But in deciding who to interview, in



selecting appropriate excerpts from what they said, and in asking certain leading questions, Terkel made sure that his own message came across.

That message was that war is now unthinkable because it would mean nuclear devastation. "Now," of course, was 1984, when President Ronald Reagan was in the midst of a vast build-up of American military might to counter the supposed threat of the evil Soviet empire. "If there is another war, there will be no winner," one person explains: "It is madness." Bill Mauldin, the creator of the wartime comic strip based on the GIs "Willie" and "Joe," states that while World War II had to be fought, a nuclear war would mean the end of the civilized world. Should there be another war, a veteran says, "Send the politicians, let them fight it out. Yeah, like this stupid race that we're having of atomic wars."

Terkel establishes the book's dominant tone in the very first interview. John Garcia, a sixteen-year-old apprentice in the navy yard at Pearl

"Horror," declared a nurse whom Terkel interviewed. "That's what war really is." (National Archives photo)

Harbor on December 7, 1941, recalls that an American shell mistakenly hit the home of his girlfriend and killed her as she was preparing to go to church. Later on, assigned to active duty, he dropped explosives into caves in Okinawa in which men, women, and children were huddled; he shot a woman who was carrying a child on her back and never overcame the resultant feelings of guilt; he observed American soldiers celebrate V-J Day by firing their guns at random, killing thirty-two men in his outfit in the process.

Terkel's interviewees invariably comment on the brutalizing effects of war, the absence of glamour, the suffering of the injured and maimed. A nurse recalls the "horror" she witnessed — the burns, the pain, the horrible disfigurement — and says, "That's what war really is." Maxine Andrews describes how she and her sisters, invited to perform in military hospitals, had to hold on to each other to keep from breaking down when they saw men without faces, arms, or legs. Terkel sought out E.B. Sledge, a Marine who had fought at Okinawa and published a searing memoir of the battle. In his interview, as in his memoir, he presented a frightening picture of savage, ghoulish war, in which soldiers became callous and insensitive. "To me," Sledge declares, "the war was insanity."

The war, in Terkel's view, led to an erosion of justice, equality, and liberty at home. A Japanese American evacuee describes the humiliation of being herded to the Santa Anita racetrack, living in stables still smelling of animals, and then being shipped to a relocation center in Colorado where the barrenness was "devastating." An African American soldier tells what it was like to ride in the back of a train while German prisoners of war were permitted to ride in the front. Another interviewee describes the vicious prejudice against Mexican Americans which erupted in the zoot-suit riots in Los Angeles. The conscientious objector Terkel chose to interview was not someone who signed up for Civilian Public Service but someone who refused to participate, was jailed, and placed in solitary confinement. "All wars are the same," he asserts, maintaining that World War II was no better than Vietnam.

The war was destructive in a thousand different ways. A woman who landed a job loading shells in a war plant came in contact with a chemical substance that turned her skin and eyes orange and caused respiratory problems; her husband, a returning veteran, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and ended up battering her and the children. A gay soldier, who spent the war in fear of being hauled before a military tribunal, was eventually drummed out of the service and given a dishonorable discharge. A motion picture critic admits that wartime combat films robbed the enemy of all humanity and were the "essence of war propaganda." The destructiveness of the war is summed up by a woman whose brother was killed on a training flight and who expressed indignation at calling World War II a good war: "I was lied to," she declares; "I was cheated. I was made a fool of."

Not satisfied with cataloguing these harmful effects of the war, Terkel also wished to demonstrate that the mythology enveloping the war distorted our conduct of postwar foreign policy in the years that followed. Here a long interview with Admiral Gene Larocque was tailor-made to his purpose. In Larocque's view, World War II produced a generation of political leaders "who look upon military service as a noble adventure. It was the big excitement of their lives," and so they were willing to involve the nation in Korea and then Vietnam. The war, or rather the "twisted memory" of it, warped the nation's view, encouraging leaders to be willing — "almost eager" — to use force anywhere in the world. As a result, the United States "institutionalized militarism." War, the admiral said, means that old men send young men off to die. "We steal the lives of these kids. . . . They don't die for the honor and glory of their country. We kill them."

In fighting any war, Terkel was arguing, even the most just possible war, one always runs the risk of turning into what one is fighting against. To illustrate this, he used an interview with Philip Morrison, one of the scientists who worked on the atomic bomb and, after it was used, observed the devastation in Hiroshima. The physicists were mobilized by the Manhattan Project, Morrison reported, and

enjoyed a close-knit sense of community, but the war's legacy was disastrous. "When we beat the Nazis, we emulated them. I include myself. I became callous to death." The fight against fascism, that is, "transformed the societies that opposed fascism. They took on some of its attributes."

Terkel provided two terrifying examples of this process, although never describing them as such. He interviewed one soldier who was stationed at the 1946 atomic test in the Pacific and who believes his own government exposed him to deadly radiation. A leader of the "atomic veterans," he demanded that the Veterans' Administration provide medical treatment, and when he was turned down, went to Japan where, at last, he was regarded as a war casualty. Terkel also interviewed another veteran who was in Hiroshima after the blast and who produced a photograph of a crematorium used to dispose of the corpses. Holding the photograph in his hands, Terkel describes his reaction: "There are bodies and bodies. It is as though it were Auschwitz. Bodies like cordwood."

War and Morality

That quotation — the association of Hiroshima with Auschwitz — brings us back to where we began: the decision to use the atomic bomb. If World War II now seems more "just" but less "good" than it did fifty years ago, what is the current view of the means employed to fight it? Once again we may turn to public opinion polls:

- In August 1945, when Americans were asked if they approved of using the atomic bomb on Japanese cities, eighty-five percent said yes; ten percent said no, and five percent had no opinion.
- In August 1991, the Gallup Poll asked: "Looking back, would you say you approve or disapprove of using the atomic bomb on Japanese cities in 1945?" The response: Fifty-three percent approved; forty-one percent disapproved, and six percent had no opinion.

More significant even than this shift was the breakdown by age. The older the respondents, the

more likely they were to approve the use of the bombs. The approval rate among those fifty years of age and older was sixty-six percent; among those thirty to forty-nine years of age, fifty percent, and among those eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, only thirty-eight percent.

Even these results may understate the doubts Americans now feel about having used the bomb. The circumstances leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were so complex that the question should not be posed simply in terms of approval of disapproval. Suppose people were asked the following, more relevant questions:

- Do you approve or disapprove of not offering Japan surrender terms which would have included some protection for the status (if not the power) of Emperor Hirohito, protection we later offered without ever announcing beforehand that we would?
- Do you approve or disapprove of not offering a demonstration of the bomb over an uninhabited area, before representatives of all nations, including Japan, before actually using it?
- Do you approve or disapprove of not giving an explicit warning to Japan that we had developed such a bomb and would use it in the event she failed to surrender, and not urging that civilians be evacuated from the target cities?
- Do you approve or disapprove of dropping the bombs on civilian centers of no essential military value?
- Do you approve or disapprove of dropping the second bomb on Nagasaki within three days of the first, allowing a less than reasonable time for a response to the bombing of Hiroshima?
- Do you approve or disapprove of using the bomb not to avoid an invasion of Japan with its consequent casualties, but to bring the war to an end before the full effect of the Soviet Union's intervention against Japan could be felt?



ed would be lost. If the only choice were between using the bomb or an invasion, then using the bomb is morally justifiable. But it was not the only choice. There may have been ways to have ended the war without either using the bomb or invading the mainland.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim, an American prisoner of war who survived the Allied bombing of Dresden, becomes an optometrist and hangs a sign in his office: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom always to tell the difference." Vonnegut adds: "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future." If we cannot change the past, our changing view of it — and especially of whether World War II was a just, a good, and a moral war — may yet change the future.

All the options implicit in these questions had their advocates at the time, and all were rejected because they posed unacceptable risks — a demonstration might have failed, for example, or more lenient surrender terms might have opened Truman to political attack, or a warning might have exposed American planes to unnecessary danger. But in wartime, all options involve risks. It is just a matter of which ones a nation is willing to take.

So the debate over the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, and over probable American casualties in the event of invasion, misses the point. The issue is not whether the atomic bomb saved a half-million or one million American lives, as Harry Truman would eventually claim; nor whether it saved the 46,000 lives that the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimat-

The complex circumstances leading to President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb deserves thoughtful analysis beyond "approve-or-disapprove."
(National Archives photo)