



**John W. Jeffries.** *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front.* Chicago, Ill.: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996. x + 213 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-118-1.

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**Published on** H-War (January, 1997)

In this brief, well-crafted work University of Maryland, Baltimore County historian John W. Jeffries presents a sophisticated, thoughtful overview of the revisionist work of the last quarter century on the home front, while insisting that traditional emphasis on continuity in business-government relations, racial and ethnic tension, and national partisan politics should not be overlooked.

Major works dealing with the home front effort implicitly have presented contrasting interpretations. In the first full-length history of the home front experience, Richard Polenberg wrote that "World War II radically altered the character of American society and challenged its most durable values," a view confirmed the following year by Geoffrey Perrett, who argued that "the war years provided the last great collective social experience in the country's history." [1] Yet in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate years, the interpretive focus began a subtle but significant shift, beginning with John Morton Blum's *V Was for Victory*, which asserted that "the wartime experience of Americans, nurtured in their culture and expressed in their politics, shaped American expectations about the postwar period at home and abroad," while Blum's Yale University student Allan Winkler wrote that Americans "confronted shifting social and political issues as they adjusted to new patterns that came to dominate their lives. They em-

braced changes, even as they clung to the values they had held before: Americans wanted a better America within the framework of the past." [2]

In the meantime, a younger generation of scholars born and raised in the postwar years broadened the focus on the home front by introducing social and cultural studies of the war's impact on African Americans, women, Mexican Americans, Indian Americans, political economy, military contracting, Hollywood film making, wartime advertising, and other areas of American life. More recently, oral historian Studs Terkel, literary scholar Paul Fussell, and cultural historian Michael Adams led the revisionist charge challenging what they termed "the myth of the Good War." [3] Much of the revisionist interpretation appeared in the first ambitious attempt to synthesize the foreign and domestic aspects of American intervention found in William O'Neill's dramatic, iconoclastic, and provocative work, *A Democracy at War*. [4]

Over the last generation, practitioners of the now twenty-year-old "new" social history began exploring the racial, class, and gender implications of the war mobilization, while more recently the new cultural history has tried to make sense of the limits and costs of the strategic bombing campaigns, the recent controversies over the Hiroshima atomic bombing exhibit at the Smithsonian In-

stitution, and new interpretations of such seemingly long-settled matters as the symbolic significance of the Iwo Jima flag raising, the complexities of wartime home front culture, and the postwar implications of American power. In this work, Jeffries, another onetime Blum student at Yale, expands his own earlier work on wartime politics in Connecticut, the watershed thesis about the war, and the continuities between New Deal reform and the wartime experience to provide what will become the standard classroom work on the home front.[5] Jeffries frames the work around the debate over whether the war was either a watershed event in U.S. history or whether the postwar emergence of the idea of the Good War can stand up to more recent examination. His own take is that

to understand wartime America and the impact and nature of World War II requires remembering that history is not just the story of massive, impersonal forces moving societies this way and that. It is also the story of men and women acting in time and circumstance, of the interactions between large forces on the one hand and ideas and individual intent and action on the other. (p. 15)

To develop this interpretation that goes beyond simple continuity or change, the Good War or flawed democracy, Jeffries includes chapters on economic mobilization; the victory at home and abroad in the midst of the organizational society; demographic changes in regions, communities, and families; the impact of the war on women and African Americans; a comparative look at treatment of German, Italian, and Japanese American ethnic groups at home and summaries of new work on Polish, Mexican, Indian, and Jewish Americans compared with the treatment of conscientious objectors and homosexuals in the military; wartime politics; and the cultural understanding of both wartime battle and postwar possibilities through the lenses of Hollywood films, government agencies and policies, advertising, and popular culture. Throughout the author draws primarily upon existing secondary works in a well-written

prose narrative that students will find understandable, informative, and interesting.

*Wartime America* bristles with short, capsule summaries of complicated, more specialized works, while wrestling with the niceties of an emerging post-revisionist interpretation weaving together expanded versions of the traditional approach focusing on the production miracles, the reemergence of big businesses as central institutions and such business leaders as Andrew Jackson Higgins and Henry Kaiser as popular heroes, the precedent-setting work of the March on Washington movement led by A. Philip Randolph, the Fair Employment Practices Committee, Roosevelt's infamous Executive Order 9066 for the relocation of Japanese Americans, the centrality of partisan politics in the congressional elections of 1942, the attack on New Deal agencies by the conservative 78th Congress in 1943, and the referendum on FDR's domestic concern with promoting economic and social security in the presidential campaign of 1944. Jeffries incorporates insights of the new social and cultural histories while providing balanced, responsible accounting for the ambivalent impact of social mobilization on working women, African Americans, various ethnic groups, and the civil liberties disaster that led to the imprisonment of Japanese Americans. His discussion of the Issei and Nisei relocation employs an innovative comparative view of both "enemy alien" German and Italian Americans and domestic treatment of Polish, Mexican, Indian, and Jewish Americans as well as the nation's failure to address the plight of Jewish victims and refugees seeking to flee Nazi genocide.

Jeffries manages to synthesize an increasingly complex body of scholarship without giving in to the danger of turning this account into part of the current intellectual cultural war over which group suffered most; whether social and cultural history should predominate over economic, political, and immigrant history; and whether the wartime experience should be viewed through the prism of post-

war activism of the 1960s rather than in the immediacy of the wartime years. For some readers, the author's attempts at intellectual balance and fairness may be judged a bland salad, while for others it might be seen as a fresh effort at integrating the best of traditional works and the insights of later revisionist accounts. In the chapters on economic, demographic, and social mobilization, Jeffries provides a wealth of statistical detail that many teachers will mine for class lectures, while counterbalancing it with personal memories that appear to come from various oral history interviews that unfortunately are not documented in either the text or the Note on Sources.

Jeffries emphasizes how the political economy of war reinforced prewar trends toward enhancing the wealth, power, and influence of the institutions of big business, thus laying the groundwork for later postwar fears of a "military-industrial complex." Despite this troubling development, Jeffries does not hesitate in crediting the Arsenal of Democracy with producing 80,000 landing craft, 100,000 armored vehicles, 2.4 million military trucks, 2.6 million machine guns, 20 million small arms, 41 billion rounds of ammunition, and 6 million tons of bombs (p. 45). He notes that, while Sunbelt communities of the West and the Atlantic coast and Gulf South profited from wartime growth and federal expenditures, the human impact on millions of Appalachian, black, female, and young wartime migrants raised serious problems with cultural adjustment, housing, family structure, changing gender roles, and childhood trauma. He challenges the early revisionist view of the war as a sea change of possibility for workers, blacks, and women, documenting his case with figures suggesting a considerably more complex reality than existing accounts posit. The chapter on wartime politics finely delineates the rise of the conservative coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats in the 1942 elections, challenges Alan Brinkley's argument for a new kind of liberalism emerging in the 1937-1945 period [6], furthers the ongoing debate over postwar planning by the

National Resources Planning Board, and credits FDR's 1944 reelection bid with drawing on that group's Economic Bill of Rights as a logical extension of the G.I. Bill and a possible postwar revival of liberal democratic reform.

More problematic is Jeffries' vague use of the term "depression psychosis" at key points (pp. 20, 58, 65, 166, 190, and 193) to account for the carry-over of both political and cultural values from the Depression era into the war years. He reminds us that a useful interpretation of a "turning point" requires comparative examination of continuities with prewar developments, wartime experiences, and postwar changes unrelated to the war years thus providing a needed corrective to a sometimes narrow, event-centered focus on just the war years. Yet like his mentor, John Morton Blum, Jeffries assumes an implicit interpretation of the Depression era and New Deal reform that is more often asserted than demonstrated. Jeffries' assumption about the continuity of New Deal liberalism into the war period challenges Alan Brinkley's argument in *The End of Reform* (1995) that a new, pared down version of liberal reform emerged in the key transition years of 1937-45 that moved away from statist planning toward Keynesian fiscal policy, individual rights, and restricted domestic policies. In *V Was for Victory*, Blum assumed that conservative American cultural values and national character from the 1930s were carried over into the war years. In sum, we now have three rather different views of the wartime experience to consider. Differences among Blum, Brinkley, and Jeffries over what happened in the 1937-45 period and in the post-1945 years suggest that the interpretive debate over the political, economic, cultural, and policy issues of the home front may have only begun.

Consider the case of the famous G.I. Bill of Rights. Often presented as a social reward to returning military veterans of World War II by a grateful American public (the scenario ending Blum's account), the G.I. Bill in Brinkley's version

symbolized a conservative shift away from New Deal liberalism during the war years, rather than the triumph of Rooseveltian liberalism. Jeffries presents his discussion of the bill in a chapter on wartime politics arguing that its passage by the 78th Congress in 1944 represented "reward, not reform, and reflected the enormous political power of veterans and their families, friends, and admirers" (p. 158). Yet the original idea for the bill came from Frederic A. Delano, FDR's uncle and head of the New Deal planning agency, in 1942, intended as part of a package for home front *and* military veterans after the war, part of a broader postwar agenda. In the early wartime years, FDR as Dr. Win-the-War buried the proposal by prohibiting Delano from discussing it in public. Reluctantly, FDR created a committee to examine its viability, joining the political bandwagon only after an intensive lobbying effort by the American Legion and congressional leadership from conservative Southern Democratic representative John Rankin (D-Mississippi) and feisty Senator Joel Bennett "Champ" Clark (D-Missouri). Between 1945 and 1955, the federal government underwrote \$33 billion in veterans' housing loans through the Veterans Administration. By 1956 \$14.5 billion of taxpayer monies had been spent to educate and train 7.8 million of 15.6 million eligible veterans. \$5.5 billion of that educational assistance supported one of the most remarkable generations of college graduates in U.S. history. Was this landmark piece of social legislation an outgrowth of New Deal liberalism, wartime necessity, or postwar prosperity and generosity? Examination of the passage and implementation of the G.I. Bill suggests that wartime policymaking stemmed from a complicated institutional, political, and cultural nexus that scholars have only started to examine in full detail. Students of the American home front still have plenty of room for debate over the nature, scope, and influence of wartime politics, economic policymaking, culture, and society.

Overall, *Wartime America* constitutes the single best one-volume history of the World War II

home front in the United States now in print. Hopefully Ivan R. Dee will quickly publish this work in an inexpensive paperback format for use in college classrooms along with other works in the American Way Series in which this is the latest contribution. Jeffries' work focuses on the central interpretive issue of the turning point/watershed debate that thus far scholars have not engaged openly. Jeffries' final evaluation hints at the possibility for a post-revisionist interpretation of the wartime home front, writing: "Much that happened at home during the war was laudable and salutary, a good deal was lamentable, and some was deplorable. Rather than rendering a simple verdict on the watershed thesis or the idea of the Good War, one must see the war years in all their complexity and historical context" (p. 198). To assess the turning point thesis, we need to consider not only the immediate wartime years, but also the prewar precedents found in the political economy of New Deal reform, Depression-era culture, and the complexities of U.S. social structure and institutions. We also need to begin the process of assessing the context of postwar developments in the economy, the party system, and the interstices of race, gender, culture, and class raised by the last generation of social historians. Jeffries summarizes the work of new military historians who have begun to address part of this agenda by examining the role of women, African Americans, and homosexuals in the American armed forces. More broadly, Jeffries has made an excellent start in reassessing the American home front by providing a brief, well-written narrative history that both provokes further thought and research among scholars and gives this generation of college students the historical context that postwar new social historians grew up with and all too often take for granted in many of their accounts.

#### Notes

[1]. Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1972), p. 4, and Geoffrey Perrett, *Days of Sad-*

ness, *Years of Triumph: The American People, 1939-1945* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), p. 12.

[2]. John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. xi, and Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1986), p. 2.

[3]. Studs Terkel, *The "Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[4]. William L. O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

[5]. John W. Jeffries, *Testing the Roosevelt Coalition: Connecticut Society and Politics in the Era of World War II* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979); Jeffries, "World War II and American Life: A Watershed," paper delivered at the Organization of American Historians' convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 1983; Jeffries, "The 'New' New Deal: FDR and American Liberalism," *Political Science Quarterly* 105 (Fall 1990): 397-418; Jeffries, "World War II and the Shaping of Postwar American Politics, Domestic Policy, and the Political Economy," *Queen City Heritage* 54 (Summer/Fall 1996): 48-59; Jeffries, "A 'Third New Deal'? Liberal Policy and the American State, 1937-1945," *Journal of Policy History* 8 (1996): 387-409.

[6]. Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). Cf. Patrick D. Reagan, "Creating The Organizational Nexus for New Deal Planning," in *Voluntarism, Planning and the State: The American Planning Experience, 1914-1946*, ed. Jerold E. Brown and Patrick D. Reagan (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 85-104; Reagan, "Governmental Planning in the Late New Deal," in

*For the General Welfare: Essays in Honor of Robert H. Bremner* ed. Frank Annunziata, Patrick D. Reagan, Roy T. Wortman (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 271-302; Reagan, "The Withholding Tax, Beardslay Rumml, and Modern American Public Policy," *Prologue* 24 (1992): 19-31; Jeffries' works cited in Note 5; and Michael K. Brown, Kenneth Finegold, David Plotke, and Alan Brinkley, "Forum: Alan Brinkley's *The End of Reform*," *Studies in American Political Development* 10 (1996): 405-25; and essays from the "World War II in Retrospect: A Meaning for the Good War" conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 13-14, 1995, reprinted in the special issue of *Queen City Heritage* 54 (Summer/Fall 1996). The author would like to thank Professor Kriste Lindemeyer, Tennessee Technological University, for sharing this last source and discussion about the conference.

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**Citation:** Patrick D. Reagan. Review of Jeffries, John W. *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

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