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The 'Good War': The Second World War and Postwar American Society

As far as wars go, World War Two was a good one. It was a positive kind in our minds. That made it more difficult to deal with the Vietnam War, because there was such a contrast. (Steve McConnell [born 1947], in Studs Terkel, 'The Good War'; An Oral History of World War Two [London 1985], 584.)

During the various fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the second world war, culminating in D-Day, VE and VJ Day commemorations, many Americans, with participants from other nations, remembered countrymen who died in the years following Pearl Harbor. Others also looked back nostalgically to the second world war which, according to some observers, was 'the Good War', America's 'finest hour', and 'the most popular war in American history'. The historical profession, having for long ignored the war altogether, is writing increasingly of it as a glorious and, in modern parlance, defining moment in modern American history, shaping a 'postwar era' which lasted up until the 1970s. In this article I want to attempt some assessment of the war's impact on American society and try to locate it in relation to the pre-war and postwar periods.

An increasing volume of scholarship has contributed to a subtle but persistent shift in emphasis in the writing of modern American history. Where once contemporary United States history was seen to begin in the New Deal era with the creation of the modern presidency, the formation of new political alliances, the rise of organized labour, and development of a welfare system, increasingly it is the second world war which is used to mark the emergence of modern America. While the limitations of the New Deal's achievements have been endlessly debated by revisionist historians, the war years are seen in a comparatively more positive light. According to Geoffrey Perrett, the war

brought 'more desirable social change than did six years of the New Deal'. A recent study of the New Deal by a leading British historian also suggests that it was the war which was 'the juggernaut that ran over American society'. The New Deal, he writes, was 'a "holding operation" for American society; and ... for many Americans the decisive change in their experiences came not with the New Deal but with World War II'.

Taking a wider perspective, the second world war can be compared more favourably with other conflicts, at least in the twentieth century. Establishing a league table of the 'popularity' of America's wars seems a fruitless, not to say impossible, task, but most Americans still see the first world war negatively, as a failure which America might (ought) not (to) have entered, which led to war hysteria and civil liberties abuses, and ended the Progressive era. The Korean war remains the 'forgotten' war or is associated with the onset of the Cold War, while Vietnam is, of course, America's modern 'nightmare' of foreign policy failure, military defeat, domestic discord, and physical and psychological casualties. The second world war, on the other hand, is perceived as 'a great and good war', 'the last time that most Americans thought they were innocent and good'. Questioning this perception is not yet always readily accepted.

Participation in the second world war is often celebrated as militarily successful and morally justifiable (although some historians continue to question that assumption), and also for its positive effects on American society. According to Perrett:

> At home the effects of the war exfoliated into the fissures of a divided, insecure nation and bound it together as nothing else could. The war experience was a social cement that created an America that haunts our dreams.

In this scenario the war ended the Depression, brought social harmony, and created the basis for the affluent society. Unlike other powers, America emerged unscathed and triumphant. It was hardly surprising then that some Americans could recall the war as 'fun for America' — 'a hell of a good time'.

Clearly, the war years are seen as having long-term as well as short-term significance. The pathbreaking historian in this field, Richard Polenberg, pointed the way when he wrote that 'World War II radically altered the character of American society and
challenged its most durable values'. It was the war, Polenberg suggested, that turned America into a middle-class nation. Later writers have concurred: 'America was fundamentally changed by World War II, in every conceivable way', claimed Alan Wolfe, while William Chafe, in the first chapter of his study of postwar America, could write that 'wartime mobilization set in motion developments that would help transform American society — for the next four years, and for generations to come'. Perrett further suggests the war was 'the closest thing to a real social revolution'.

Most of these claims focus on key areas or issues, especially the role of government, with particular reference to the economy and employment, and questions of race, class, and gender. While the majority deal with the national level, some concentrate on regions or states. The best example is Alan Clive's study of Michigan, where war-boom Detroit became 'the hottest town in America'. As war industry led to a massive influx of new workers, including African Americans and women, a variety of new social problems arose. Although the most obvious consequence of the conflict was, writes Clive, 'a new and extraordinary level of material well-being', less apparent was the fact that 'the war accelerated forces in American life that had been disrupting the family unit for decades'. Thus, at the local level one can see important aspects of war and social change; firstly, that positive 'gains' could be offset by 'disruptive' consequences, and secondly, that while some changes might be new, elements of continuity were also present between the war years and earlier periods.

Similar patterns can also be observed in other areas which experienced dramatic wartime change. One writer, calling for more research, provocatively suggested that the second world war might be 'more important than the Civil War' for the southern states, while another writes that 'for many southerners World War II was a great divide' which 'reshaped their society'. Although pointing to the significance of the New Deal's southern policies, Morton Sosna argues that in changing the South from the nation's number one economic problem into an area of economic opportunity, it was the war which led to the 'breakdown of the South's economic, social, and moral isolation'.

Certainly, the war acted as a spur to economic change such as the mechanization of the cotton industry and the further development of mass-production techniques. Economic change was the
key to many other wartime developments — 'the veritable orgy of war-induced spending produced the biggest boom in American economic history', writes Sosna — and there can be little doubt that, if nothing else, it was the war that ended the Depression and confirmed the United States' economic dominance of the world. While GNP increased three-fold between 1941 and 1945, more industrial plant was built in three years of war than in the previous fifteen years, much of it financed by the federal government. The development of a form of state-managed capitalism through direct financing during the war went far beyond anything the New Deal had attempted, and can be seen as a major step towards the development of the postwar military industrial complex.9

What emerges from the study of the different states and regions is the way in which federal influence grew generally during the war, affecting everything from employment to health and housing. Certainly the creation of more than thirty war agencies and the doubling in number of the federal civil service suggests that the war did much to alter the balance of power within the American political system. The rise of the 'imperial presidency' clearly began with Roosevelt's role as commander-in-chief and leading instigator of foreign policy decisions and continued with the onset of the Cold War, but the growth of federal bureaucracy during wartime was also an important factor.

However, the role of government during the war can be exaggerated. Despite the plethora of war agencies, it was never as great or complete as descriptions such as The War Lords of Washington might suggest. Not until the second War Powers Act of 1942 did the President have authority to allocate priorities and resources, and the development of agencies for centralized control, culminating in the War Production Board (1942) and Office of War Mobilization (1943), often appeared faltering. With elections and congressional politics continuing almost as normal, Roosevelt's wartime administration faced resistance over issues such as taxation, labour conscription, and propaganda.10

Nothing illustrates the limited impact of the war on America better than the history of the US propaganda effort which was often confused in its aims and constrained by political opposition. As the leading historian of the subject writes: 'In the end American propaganda reflected American policy, and indeed America itself.'11 Rather than constructing war aims which might
be politically divisive, American propaganda pointed to what America was rather than what she might become, and stressed the negative features of enemy ideology. Having changed from the Office of Facts and Figures to the Office of War Information, the administration’s propaganda effort was criticized as ineffectual or as partisan in political emphasis, and had its funding slashed by Congress in 1943. In the end, domestic propaganda was chiefly handled through the mixture of government direction and private enterprise which summed up so much of the American war effort. That most American of institutions, Hollywood, became ‘a compliant part of the war machine’, and yet remained under private control.12

The war also helped to restore the place of the businessman in government and as hero in American society. ‘Dollar-a-year men’ flooded into government agencies while business entrepreneurs returned to national prominence. Californian shipbuilder Henry Kaiser became world-famous as the inventor of the prefabricated ‘Liberty ships’, Andrew J. Higgins was almost as well-known for the manufacture of landing craft in New Orleans, and the Ford corporation patriotically produced Liberator bombers at the massive government-financed Willow Run plant outside Detroit. On the west coast companies like Douglass and Lockheed spearheaded aircraft production which, sustained by the Cold War, was central both to the postwar boom and the growth of the military industrial complex.

Much has been made of America’s prodigious production achievements which pointed not only to the underlying resources and potential within the US economy, but also to the failure of the Roosevelt administration fully to release them from the grip of the Depression. The war underlined the conservative nature of New Deal policies, or resistance to them, and finally converted some of the doubters to Keynesian economics. In 1945 federal expenditure was more than $100 billion; the most the New Deal had spent in any one year was $8.5 billion. As Polenberg wrote: ‘If the government could spend vast sums for war, surely it could spend a fraction of that amount for constructive social purposes in peacetime.’13

This is not to suggest that the war necessarily provided the impetus for further reform. Although wartime experience bore fruit in Roosevelt’s Economic Bill of Rights of 1944 and the passage of the Employment Act of 1946, such limited measures
only confirmed the lessons of the 1930s, namely that the govern-
ment had a central role when the economy faced an emergency,
but not necessarily when things were going well. The corollary of
this, of course, was that although balanced budgets might be the
objective of government, the 'guarantor state' required that they
would be abandoned if need be, as the Eisenhower administra-
tion was to demonstrate.14

With the rehabilitation of business and the winding-up of New
Deal agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and
Works Progress Administration, some observers felt that 'Dr
Win-the-War' had indeed replaced 'Dr New Deal'. However,
while Selective Service and the inclusion of fifteen million
people in the armed services provided one type of 'work relief',
full employment in the booming war economy meant that
many New Deal agencies were now redundant. Nevertheless,
'depression psychosis' ensured that the long-term reforms, such
as social security and fair labour standards, would continue and
be extended further in the 1940s and 1950s.

One direct consequence of the war which was perhaps almost
as significant as New Deal reforms was the Selective Service-
man's Readjustment Act, the GI Bill of Rights, which, through
its provision of loans for college, home and business purchase,
and other benefits, provided a limited welfare state to assist in the
transition from war to peace for almost fifteen million Ameri-
cans. For one of Studs Terkel's interviewees it was 'The GI Bill,
the American Dream'.15

If the GI Bill was one of the factors which eased the transition
to the Affluent Society, the war boom and wartime saving was
another. While many participating nations suffered hardships
ranging from shortages and rationing to malnutrition and starva-
tion and were left devastated by the war, this was hardly the case
in the USA, despite what one historian describes as the 'mystique
of unconditional sacrifice'. As John Kenneth Galbraith said,
'Never in the history of human conflict has there been so much
talk of sacrifice and so little sacrifice.' Quite the contrary, as Leff
puts it: 'War is Hell. But for millions of Americans on the boom-
ing home front, World War II was also a hell of a war.'16

Of course, rationing and shortages did occur in wartime
America, but rationing, introduced in 1942, was intermittent
and limited to some twenty items. It was also widely bypassed
through the black market which a considerable number of
 Americans felt was justifiable. But even without resort to illegal means Americans could enjoy a fair degree of comfort and indeed prosperity. John Morton Blum describes a ‘race for consumer goods’ which began right after Pearl Harbor and continued through to the end of the war. The building of supermarkets increased 400 per cent despite building shortages, and the incorporation of the war into advertising pointed to the enlistment of consumerism and the ‘privatizing of the wartime propaganda apparatus’.17

In contrast to the ‘hungry thirties’, some Americans recalled having ‘money to buy any kind of food’, or being able to go out for meals for the first time during the war. While real wages for industrial workers rose on average by 50 per cent, farm income rose 200 per cent. A woman recalled that farmers to whom she had paid relief in the 1930s were worth a quarter of a million dollars at the war’s end.18 Of course, such figures reflect the poor level of incomes for different groups in the Depression, but some historians have suggested that the war succeeded in bringing about the redistribution of incomes which the New Deal had failed so conspicuously to achieve. Incomes for the bottom fifth of the population rose by 70 per cent compared with a 23 per cent rise for the top fifth.19

Economic rewards and greater recognition from government through participation in war agencies and maintenance of membership agreements had a crucial effect on labour unions, including the previously ‘radical’ Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). According to Nelson Lichtenstein: ‘The experience of the CIO industrial unions during World War II formed a crucial stage in the transition from their institutionally fluid, socially aggressive character of the 1930s to the relative accommodation and bureaucratic stability of the postwar years.’20

Undoubtedly the conservatism of the Cold War encouraged these developments further, but wartime and postwar affluence had already taken effect. By 1948 one investigator reported that members of a formerly militant branch of the United Auto Workers now owned their own homes and had become consumers rather than ‘have-nots’.21

In addition to the apparent move towards greater economic equality, there was also a psychological feeling of unity and talk of ‘togetherness’. Before he entered military service, future president Richard Nixon accepted the boredom of working in the
Office of Price Administration dealing with rationing because 'we felt we were part of a bigger cause'. Other Americans claimed that 'a shared sense of commonality grew with the war', and spoke of 'a great coming together of people, working as a team'. Participation in the Office of Civilian Defense or the many war saving drives — to save metal or vegetable fats as well as money — helped encourage such feelings, even though their real contribution to the war effort may have been minimal.

Such positive views of the war's effects blur many of the realities of wartime tensions and conflicts. Wartime affluence, often the product of long hours, obscured the persistence of poverty and the concentration of wealth (rather than just incomes) which increased rather than diminished during the war. While labour unions undoubtedly gained in strength and influence, and saw their members achieve higher earnings, they were also subject to increasing regulation and wage controls — so much so, that despite an official no-strike pledge, the combination of inflation and pay freezes resulted in an outbreak of strikes involving three million workers in 1943. The strikes led in turn to the passage of the restrictive War Labor Disputes Act, the model for the 1947 Taft Hartley Act, which sought to restrain union rights in the postwar years.

If the war strained labour harmony and pointed to the persistence of aspects of class conflict, it also exacerbated other social tensions. According to John Morton Blum, the war 'posed a special test of the ability of American culture to accommodate to its inherent pluralism'. In fact, it heightened some differences; 'If you weren't in this group you were really an outsider', recalled one woman, a fact which became all too evident for the 112,000 Japanese Americans who were re-located in concentration camps in 1942 and lost an estimated $400 million worth of property and possessions in the process.

The treatment of the Japanese Americans has been the subject of numerous studies and is generally condemned as a sorry episode in American history. The only conclusion which can be reached is that the government's action was justified neither morally nor in terms of national security. The fact that there was never any evidence of sabotage was merely presented as an indication of Japanese cunning, and the denial of trust even to Japanese-born Americans on the grounds of 'once a Jap always a Jap' revealed the deep-seated racism behind these actions. As the
Commission on Wartime Relocation reported to Congress in 1983, the Japanese Americans were rounded up because of 'race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership'.

Other minority groups also suffered to some extent during the war or found wartime change to be a mixed blessing. Native Americans and gays have both been the subjects of recent studies, but the wartime experience of no group has been written about as extensively as that of African Americans. While the war years were once described as 'The "Forgotten Years" of the Negro Revolution', they are now widely regarded as 'the catalyst in the struggle for equal rights' which brought 'massive changes', 'altered the political, economic, and social status of Negro Americans', and, in the old clichés, marked 'a turning-point in the Negro's relation to America', and 'a watershed in the politics of race'.

There is little doubt that the war emphasized the contradictions between America's democratic principles and its racial practices. In 1940 the Arsenal of Democracy tolerated racial segregation and discrimination in its military institutions and defence industries. Black Americans, however, seized upon the opportunity presented by war to strengthen their demands for equality. Arguing that 'now is the time not to be silent about the breaches in our own lands', African Americans mobilized protest as early as 1939, and continued to argue for democracy at home and abroad under the famous 'Double V' slogan. Such protest brought some concessions in military policies even before America entered the war. Most famously, black civil rights organizations, led by trade unionist A. Philip Randolph in the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), won a major victory in 1941 when Roosevelt issued the Executive Order which outlawed discrimination in defence industries and established a Fair Employment Practices Committee.

It is tempting to see the MOWM and wartime black militancy as the precursors of the non-violent protests of the 1950s and 1960s. However, the campaigns of the 1940s themselves reflected earlier experiences, including those of the first world war when African Americans had been bitterly disappointed by the lack of progress despite their participation in the war. Black protest had also been evident throughout the 1930s, and the access to the White House gained under the New Deal made it easier for the African American leadership to exert influence in
the 1940s. Like trade union leaders, this left them open to charges of conservatism, and it has been suggested particularly that the black media lagged behind the masses during the war. It can, however, be argued that the toning down of black protest was in part an inevitable response to the reality of the military situation after December 1941 and to the concessions won in military and employment practices. It was also a reaction to white resistance to further change, and to the widespread outbreak of racial violence in 1943 which shattered illusions of national unity.27

The more than 240 racial incidents in 47 different towns and cities during 1943 ranged from full-scale riots in Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles, through to industrial conflicts, ‘hate strikes’, in places such as Mobile, Alabama, and lynchings in a number of different states. While some riots predominantly involved whites attacking blacks, in others, such as Harlem, African Americans focused their anger and frustration on property. Each outbreak had its unique causes, but underlying them all was the sense of change brought about by the war. As black Americans demanded more, whites called for less. These tensions were exacerbated by wartime migrations, overcrowding in defence areas, competition for jobs, and conflict over housing.28

The war boom in defence industries led to a resumption of the migration of African Americans which had begun with the first world war but slowed during the 1930s. Half a million (17 per cent of black southerners compared with only 3 per cent of whites) left the South and others moved to cities within the South. Not only was the South ‘reshaped’, but according to Nicholas Lemann, the black migration ‘changed America’. Certainly, African Americans recalled that during the war they ‘got a chance to go places we had never been able to go before’, to ‘discover there was another way of life’, and ‘to work on jobs they never had before’. As a consequence ‘their expectations changed’.29

Some expectations were met as almost one million African American workers entered the labour force and the number of skilled and semi-skilled doubled. Even for black women there was change, although limited, in employment patterns, and it was said that ‘Lincoln freed the Negroes from cotton picking but “Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen”’. 
If, despite these changes, the significant fact of war experience for black women was 'the extent to which barriers remained intact', nonetheless the war years could still be remembered by African Americans of both sexes as

a very compelling, very exhilarating era. There was a feeling that you had hold of something that was big and urgent and was not going to last forever. There were opportunities for change which could not exist after the war was over.10

The mood of change which affected the black population was evident in the variety of different challenges to white racism during the war. Individual black Americans as much as organizations used the courts to challenge segregation in the military or refused to serve; others challenged the segregation of southern transportation, and in Montgomery, Alabama, the Women's Political Council, which was to be so important in the boycott of 1954–5, was formed after several people had been arrested for challenging segregation in 1946. Voter registration drives following the Supreme Court's decision against the all-white primary in 1944 were indicative of the new mood, and resulted in a 10 per cent increase in the number of registered black voters.31

Black servicemen not only protested against discriminatory practices during active service, but were also to be found among the black political activists at the war's end. More than one million African Americans served in different branches of the armed forces, and although there were improvements and even moves towards integration, the experience was often a bitter one. Nonetheless, a recent study of black servicemen's attitudes suggests that 41 per cent expected to be better off as a result of their service compared with only 25 per cent of whites. As one African American soldier wrote, blacks 'fight because of the opportunities it will make possible for them after the war'.12

There is considerable evidence that the experience of military service increased African Americans' unwillingness to accept pre-war racial practices. Black veterans were not only more inclined to re-enlist, they were twice as likely as whites to move to a different region after the war, and by 1947 it was estimated that 75,000 had left the South.33 The continued demographic changes increased the political influence of African Americans in northern states and undoubtedly contributed to Harry S.
Truman's decision to call for an end to segregation in the armed forces and civil service in the year before the 1948 election.

Other factors, too, contributed. Black protest against the Jim Crow military in 1947 and the presentation of a petition by the NAACP to the United Nations again threatened to cause considerable embarrassment for the Truman administration, as African Americans exploited the rhetoric of the Cold War. While the former governor of Alabama, Frank Dixon, acknowledged that 'the Huns have wrecked the theory of the master race', Truman announced in his message to Congress in 1948 that the 'world position of the United States' now necessitated action in race relations. Thus the wartime pattern of protest and progress, optimism and resistance, was to continue through a combination of both domestic and international pressures. Rising black hopes were encouraged by real economic progress, increased expressions of white support, and significant shifts in federal policy during and immediately after the war. Not until the mid-1950s did the limitations of such progress become apparent, and this realization contributed to the 'Negro Revolution'.

Some historians have suggested that a similar relationship existed between the war years and the arrival of the women's movement in the 1960s, but others question the war's significance in American women's history. William Chafe claimed that 'within five years, World War II had radically transformed the economic outlook of women', and that in its long-term effects the war represented 'a pivotal moment'. Others are less sanguine, suggesting that the war 'did not mark a drastic break with traditional working patterns or sex roles'. Such writers point instead to the short-term nature of wartime economic change, the persistence of gender prejudice, and the social conservatism of the 1950s.

One problem in all this is to separate images from reality, and issues of social class from those of gender. In advertising and government propaganda the ubiquitous American wartime heroine was, of course, Rosie the Riveter, the new shipyard worker often cited as the key example of wartime advances. There clearly was some dramatic change — a survey of the shipbuilding industry in 1941 found a total of 36 female workers; in 1943 there were 160,000. As one woman recalled, 'The war years offered new possibilities. You came out to California, put on your pants and took your lunch pail to a man's job.' All told,
more than eight million women joined the labour force, an estimated three million more than would have done so normally. However, the majority of these were women who had worked before, and those in blue-collar work generally came from a blue-collar background.

The proportion of women in the labour force rose from 25 per cent to 36 per cent during the war. More significant, 75 per cent of new women workers were married and 60 per cent were 35 or older. Several states now removed the laws (often introduced in the 1930s) prohibiting the employment of married women as teachers, and there continued to be a general change in the distribution of the female workforce towards older, married women in the postwar years. However, most long-term gains in women’s employment were in areas already associated with female work. There tended to be a concentration in white-collar clerical work rather than the much publicized shipyard or other heavy work, again emphasizing the issue of social class.

Whatever the changes in female employment, most met continued resistance and opposition. A fear of so-called ‘New Amazons’ was widely evident and discrimination persisted. Women were generally segregated, denied top positions, and despite equal wage policies paid on average 40 per cent less than men. Even more, wartime employment gains were often temporary — two million women were laid off at the war’s end, and the proportion of women in the labour force fell back down to 29 per cent. However, the percentage of women in the labour force was still higher after the war than it had been before, and by the early 1950s was growing again and was soon above 30 per cent.

Chafe points to the ‘strange paradox’ that, despite expanding job roles, attitudes towards women remained largely unchanged. At the war’s end, government propaganda which had stressed patriotic duty in getting women out to work, now did the same to get them back into the home. Work, particularly for married women and mothers, was stressed as exceptional and in the war and postwar years ‘the suburban ideal of companionate, child-centered marriages with little scope for careerism’ became a dominant stereotype.37 The Ladies Home Journal could state that the nation’s number one task at the end of the war was to ‘make it better, easier, cheaper, and safer to have at least three babies a piece’. Nonetheless, for at least one woman ‘defense work was
the beginning of my emancipation as a woman. For the first time in my life I found out that I could do something with my hands besides bake.’ That she doubtless spoke for many was indicated in polls in which women expressed a strong desire to stay in work at the war’s end.\(^38\)

If women found at least temporary independence and liberation during the war, they also bore the brunt of domestic hardship — loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional strain in addition to the problems of coping with the demands of work and home. Separation of families due to military service or migration to war work had a particular impact on women. One described ‘the misery of war’; ‘pregnant women who could barely balance in a rocking train going to see their husbands for the last time ... women coming back from seeing their husbands, travelling with small children’. Marjorie Cartwright recalled her marriage to a sailor in the 7th fleet: ‘I lived alone for four years during the war and they were the most painful, lonely years I think I will ever spend.’\(^39\)

Children and the family were often seen as the greatest victims of wartime disruption. The *Washington Post* observed in 1944 that ‘from Buffalo to Wichita it is the children who are suffering most from mass migration, easy money, unaccustomed hours of work, and *the fact that mama has become a welder on the graveyard shift*’ [my italics].\(^40\) As if to reinforce particular stereotypes of women and to confirm the temporary (and undesirable) effects of war, child-related problems were often associated with the wartime activities of women. Considerable attention was given to ‘eight-hour orphans’ and ‘latch-key children’ and a great deal of discussion focused on juvenile delinquency which appeared to rise during the war — sometimes by 20 per cent or more.

The government assistance for childcare and nurseries through the Lanham Act of 1942 which provided funds for war-boom communities was intended to alleviate such problems. However, many women were reluctant to leave their children in the care of strangers or the state, preferring instead to leave them with relatives, friends, or even in cars in the factory car park. Such responses illustrate the ambiguities of wartime liberation and reveal the persistence of ‘traditional’ attitudes among women themselves. Marriage rates also suggest that the war strengthened family values rather than undermined them, as the number of marriages increased at the war’s start and again at its conclusion.
Not surprisingly birth rates followed suit, reaching a height of 26.6 per 1,000 of the population in 1947, and leaving a legacy which was to emerge in the ‘youth culture’ of the 1960s.

Whether spurred on as a way to beat the draft, or because couples contemplating marriage decided that there was no point in waiting longer, the increase in marriage was to some extent offset by the rise in divorce which also reached its highest level immediately after the war and was not to be equalled again until the 1970s. Perhaps those who married in haste repented at leisure: another of Terkel’s contributors recalled: ‘I don’t think I’d have married so foolishly, if it weren’t for the war ....’ For others the war may only have made possible something which had been denied or postponed due to the poverty of the 1930s.

Women, marriage, and the family provide a good illustration of the excitement and confusion the war brought with it. However, the disruptive consequences of war affected more than women and children. As a consequence of military service or defence work, over twelve million people moved out of state and another thirteen million moved within states during the war. Over a million entered California alone, the location of half the nation’s shipbuilding and aircraft industry. Such movement was not, of course, new — one has only to think of the Okies and Arkies of the 1930s, many of whom were now absorbed into the shipyards — but the movement was much more widespread during the war. Many towns, large and small, were overwhelmed. While major centres like San Francisco and Detroit grew by more than half a million each, the naval town of Portsmouth, Virginia, grew from 4,500 to 48,000; the population of Seneca Falls 70 miles southwest of Chicago rose from 1,200 to 6,500 as workers came to build landing-craft on the river shore. In all cases, the problems were much the same only different in scale and emphasis. There were conflicts between old inhabitants and newcomers, blacks and whites, and these rivalries were often compounded by social problems resulting from overcrowding of homes, schools, and recreational facilities.

After the war such pressures, assisted by wartime savings, the GI Bill, and new federal mortgage arrangements, fuelled the housing boom which helped to create the physical reality of the postwar suburbs and the mental state associated with them. Not surprisingly, after years of disruption and change stretching back through the Depression and war years, Americans were more
than willing to settle for a return to a normality and stability based on ideals of the past. Fearful of the future, ordinary Americans sought security and order in the postwar world. Betty Friedan described how women felt: 'We were all vulnerable, homesick, lonely, frightened. A pent-up hunger for marriage, home, and children was felt simultaneously by several different generations, a hunger which in the prosperity of postwar America everyone could suddenly satisfy.'

The 'ferocious pursuit of private domesticity' contributed to the postwar political climate and the fundamental conservatism which is a key to understanding the mood in the 1950s. While the Cold War was rooted in the new international situation created by the war, the postwar hysteria which affected America and produced McCarthyism reflected the fear and uncertainty arising from decades of social and economic change. It was not the war alone, but the experience of the Depression and war together which separated one generation of Americans from those who followed. While the second world war brought economic progress that only served to emphasize the fear of a return to the Depression, wartime also brought unsettling social change affecting women and black Americans particularly. If the second world war was the 'Good War' for America in some senses, it was not without its costs in either the long or short term. Thus the shock of the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s and 1970s was perhaps all the greater because many Americans had a misleading memory of the second world war or none at all.

Notes

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10. The development of the war agencies is dealt with in Polenberg, War...


14. See Iwan W. Morgan, Eisenhower versus the 'Spenders': The Eisenhower Administration, the Democrats and the Budget (New York 1990).

15. Terkel, op. cit., 142.


19. Polenberg, One Nation Divisible, op. cit., 64.


33. Modell, op. cit., 838.


36. Harris, op. cit., 121; Campbell, op. cit., 72–83; Paddy Quick, ‘Rosie the Riveter: Myths and Realities’, Radical America, 9 (July–August 1975), 115–32. The experiences in the shipyards are tellingly described from first-hand experience in Katherine Archibald, Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity (Berkeley, CA 1947).


41. Terkel, op. cit., 122; Costello, op. cit., 13, 30, 277; A.A. Hoehling, War II Over Here (New York 1966), 159.

42. Polenberg, War and Society, 140–3; Lingeman, op. cit., 70–6; Robert J. Havighurst and Gertha Morgan, The Social History of a War Boom Community (New York and London 1951) gives an account of Seneca’s experience.


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