

The Best War Ever: America and World War II Study Guide

The Best War Ever: America and World War II by Michael C.C. Adams

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Plot Summary

"The Best War Ever - America and World War II," contrasts the image produced by media and historians to the real horrors of war by using selective memory and glorifying aspects of the war that were misleading and even deceptive. America and the Allied democracies entered the war for good reasons and it was by all judgments of history thus far, the right thing to do. Hitler and the Third Reich, bent on world domination, had to be stopped. America had stayed out of the war that had begun in Europe in 1939 until the attack by the Imperial Japanese Navy on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Prior to that, Americans did not have the stomach to enter the war that was raging in Europe and chose to turn their heads to the the genuine and far-reaching threat that Hitler was posing. However, after the Japanese attack, there was great enthusiasm among Americans to enter the war, especially the Pacific front of the battle to avenge the attack on the US Navy at Pearl Harbor.

An underlying reason for entering the war was that Germany and its allies by that time were attacking sovereign nations, a direct threat to US economy and national security. One of the myths revealed in this book is that America and England wanted to save the people who were suffering from Hitler's policy of ethnic cleansing. The Allies were not as concerned initially about the issue as they later were portrayed to be since there was evidence of widespread antisemitism in their own nations. Another myth that is exposed in author Michael C. C. Adams' work is that the nation stayed united behind the war effort. After the initial fervor for revenge after Pearl Harbor had faded, there was internal conflict within the US about engagement in the war. In an effort to boost support for the war, movies and magazine articles portrayed soldiers as wholesome, happy men who were eager to defend their country. John Wayne, who never served in a war, became the ideal soldier, brave and dedicated. The image was further solidified by war correspondents and censors who made sure no word of the real scourges of war such as the atrocities committed by Allied soldiers and their discontent in being there never made their way state side.

The fallacies created to convince America that the war was the "best war ever" perhaps succeeded in keeping calm in the country so that the government could continue to prosecute the war relatively unrestrained, but it probably did more harm in the long-term. America was told that prosperity always follows war and that war was not the blood bath that it really was. America also learned that it could use advanced weaponry which kills millions and destroys cities and terrain without really being held accountable. Americans are still struggling with the ramifications of these inaccuracies to this day.



Chapter One: Mythmaking and the War

Chapter One: Mythmaking and the War Summary and Analysis

People have a tendency to look on history as it best serves them, picking and choosing their way through what really happened to a partial reality that places the events in the best light. Historians have a difficult job where they must digest vast and often diverse information and remain neutral in a sea of conflicting information yet somehow develop one account that accurately lines up with what really took place. The current and popular point of view influences the story and the result is often some version of what really occurred. This happened with the history of World War II. It was morphed from a complex, dubious event to the Good War or a great and necessary war in which the good guys won. Though sitting on the sidelines initially, America was propelled into the war by the Pearl Harbor attack and eventually emerged as the leader of the world, admired by all. The enemy surrendered and was made into image of their victor. It was America's Golden Age or the time that everyone since has looked to as the ideal. It is the time we wish we could return to or at least live up to.

Selective history about World War II boasted about a tank that could "swim." We are not told about the twenty-seven tanks that when lowered into the water all sank causing the death of all the crews aboard. The media is complicit and actually drove much of this sentimentality. Newsweek, taking at more recent conflicts involving Vietnam and Lebanon, referred to World War II as the last time the US was seen as having a moral military. Another newspaper editor proclaimed that the army of 1990 was not made of the stuff that could win a war like the second world war. The idolization of the war encompassed other aspects of life where marriage vows were taken more seriously, kids behaved better and excelled at school, products were better made and lasted longer.

America was convinced that the weakness of England in dealing with Hitler prior to the war led to the bloody battle. The lesson learned was that bullies should not be talked to but roundly defeated in battle. President George H. W. Bush was an avid reader of World War II history just prior to launching the Gulf War. He made a strong link between the behavior of Hitler and that of Saddam Hussein. Editorials were warning against appeasement—a sure way to disaster. One editorial proclaimed that "Appeasement will get us all killed" (pg. 5.) The promised glory after the Gulf War victory quickly faded and the promised prosperity never materialized and the ethnic divisions within the Gulf quickly re-emerged.

The relative prosperity that America enjoyed after WWII fed into the glory of the event. America had come out of a depressing decade, one with bread lines and hobos, to one in which the average weekly wage rose by 72 percent between 1940 and 1945. Mainland America had not been attacked and its population did not feel the real sting of war as so many other countries did. Although the deaths and injuries of soldiers were



abundant, they paled in comparison to the losses of other countries and even to those of its own civil war. The post-war prosperity convinced the populace of the goodness of the war. And because Hitler and Nazism were easily recognized as evils that had to be eradicated, America saw the war's virtue as well.

Many disassociate WWII with the nuclear bombings—preferring to think of them as the dawning of the nuclear age. But in reality, the bombings were what ended the war and were an integral part of its history. A true history of WWII includes the many men who broke down after only days of fighting, who raped women, killed innocents and suffered nightmares and psychiatric or physical problems for the entirety of their lives. Post-traumatic stress disorder did not originate with the Vietnam war neither did the mistreatment by the public of returning soldiers—these were parts of WWII that have been swept under the rug. Things were not rosy on the home front during the war. People bickered about it, politicians politicized it and the initial feeling of national unity after Pearl Harbor was not long-lasting. Small farmers suffered while large corporations were glutted with capital. In order to support the war effort, many citizens paid income tax for the first time. American families experienced stresses as witnessed by a record number of divorces in 1946 and the degeneration of adolescent behavior and the increase in crime. Major social issues like the failure of education, drug addiction and materialism were not discussed because they were seen as unpatriotic.

War correspondents were censured in their reporting causing one Canadian reporter to proclaim that he felt more like a cheerleader than a reporter. Another writer, Fletcher Pratt, reported that the war was covered like a social function. The censors did a good job of creating an image of courage in battle, making sure to leave out the atrocities. Even John Steinbeck, a renowned and gifted writer, admitted that he slanted his reporting of the war so that civilians would not be shocked by its reality. General MacArthur, a known publicity-hound, always had time to issue press releases. For one solid year, he held out the myth that there were only 122 allied losses—a number that was cruel in its inaccuracy. General Eisenhower expected reporters to act as loyal defenders of the army. Eisenhower openly referred to journalists as part of the war effort proclaiming that "public opinion wins wars" (pg. 10.) The tolerance for only upbeat and stories with happy endings on radio, in magazines and in the movies fueled the mystical image of the war and its aftermath. The movies portrayed wounded white soldiers as quickly healing medical marvels who were anxious to return to the front line—both of which were patently untrue of course. One correspondent, Ernie Pyle, could not ignore the reality of the war and became embittered and disillusioned which, over time, was reflected in his reporting. He was killed by a sniper and the obvious question then is, "Which side was the sniper on?"

Post-war, reports, movies and books that dealt with the reality of the war were not absorbed by mainstream America and their writers were considered part of the fringe element. The rah-rah movies about WWII compelled many young men to sign up to fight in Vietnam. Once in combat, only then did they realize the lies and myths about war. Early on, Ronald Reagan understood the importance of image. As a baseball sportscaster, he described play-by-plays on the radio that were made more exciting by his words. He took on the image of a hero of the Golden Age because of his Hollywood



film work but had never served in the war and had only been out of the country one time before he became President. Reagan's Star Wars initiative had no chance of being effective because, as experts insisted, it had no basis in reality; rather, the idea came from one of Reagan's old movies, "Murder in the Air." Reagan embodied the good old days and the ability to reconnect to the Golden Age by his optimism and his ability to convince people to ignore that contemporary problems needed new solutions.



Chapter Two: No Easy Answer

Chapter Two: No Easy Answer Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of WWII, the right course of action was not as clear as it was viewed afterward. The Allies were not always allied. Although trouble was brewing early in the 1930s, the Allies chose to wait as they watched Italy's peak of power in the early '30s decline towards the end. While "appeasement" was blamed as the cause of war, no one explained, no one bothered to theorize about how things would have worked out better had they not "appeased" the enemy. Two competing theories about the ideal form of government were at war since WWI. Proponents of self-government opposed the theory that strong leaders were necessary for a strong nation. Between WWI and 1936, eleven countries opted for the strong leader, perceived to be a direct threat to the other nations of the West. Beginning in the 19th century when creature comforts in the US were on the rise, there was a nagging recognition that there was always a constant struggle for survival. This theory was known as social Darwinism. An occasional war was the remedy for a fat, satisfied nation that was vulnerable to attack.

The aftermath of WWI left the world in chaos and uncertainty. The Treaty of Versailles did little to assuage the fears and doubts about the future. The money that passed between countries was literally a circus: England and France borrowed heavily from America to fight the war, England and France demanded reparations from Germany so they could repay the US. Germany had to borrow from America to make the payments to France and England. Radicals in Germany who feared a Russian takeover and were waiting for the chance to pounce, wanting to loudly repudiate the Treaty of Versailles' assessment that Germany had been defeated in WWI. As the German mark was devalued in order to pay for reparations, Germany's economy worsened opening the door for Hitler, who promised to end the nation's economic woes. America, while offering rhetoric for a peaceful world, largely ignored the growing threat in Europe. A speculative bubble, not reigned in by the federal government, caused the 1929 stock market crash whose impact was felt all around the globe. Some countries actually deduced that their economic security lay in being conquered.

Mussolini emerged in Italy promising to remedy the Italian economy by conquering lands and resources and returning the nation to the glory and prestige it enjoyed in the days of the Roman Empire. Mussolini, although flawed and deceptive, gave rise to national pride. He was the answer to everything—it was said he even made the trains run on time. The controlled Italian media portrayed a mighty Italian Army that was actually weak and under-equipped. Italy's power was all flash and no substance. Japan had become a genuine threat to China, its weak neighbor. Internal strife in Japan was festering. Moderate factions were opposed by militant ones. Japan was hit hard by the 1929 crash and thereafter determined that their economic stability was dependent upon military conquest. They began by attacking and conquering Manchuria. Thrown out of the League of Nations for their aggression, they aligned themselves with Germany and Italy. Germany's inability to trade in a world of isolation created by the crash, crushed its



economy. Soon the Nazis gained power and the Third Reich, which Hitler bragged would last 1,000 years, gained power.

It's conventional wisdom that Hitler was insane and that a country of sane people wanted a madman as its leader. Hitler was not insane in a clinical sense. He appealed to many Germans who felt their efforts in WWI were not accurately characterized in the Treaty of Versailles. He was politically adept and grasped the despair and fears of the nation and the popular view that Germany was destined to be a major force in the world. A decorated soldier himself, Hitler promoted the notion that the German struggle could only be achieved by militarism. He was impressed with Italian Fascism and incorporated some of its concepts into Nazism. The Third Reich was based on fear which was felt by the full range of Germans from citizens to soldiers and on Hitler's theory that the masses were weak and wanted to be led.

White supremacy and antisemitism was not limited to Germany during Hitler's rise. It was found in many cultures including Britain and America. The West was slow to take action against Germany because it was viewed as a stronghold against Russian aggression since Germany and the West shared the same fears about Communist aggression. And, between 1932 and 1935, Hitler had elevated the German economy, which was seen as a boon to the rest of the world. However, the "final solution" or the extermination of Jews and others shocked the world. Perhaps to Hitler, who had witnessed the deaths of his fellow soldiers, killing the enemy, or who he perceived to be the enemy, was natural. By 1936, as resources were depleted, Hitler was on the path to war. He eyed Russian land as a way to create more livable space for his overcrowded nation.

Although Japan was emerging as a threat in its region, Britain was focused on the growing threat in Europe and although America had a condescending attitude toward Japan, it continued trade relations and did not feel that attacking them over Manchuria was practical. In Europe, some viewed Mussolini as a barrier against Communism. The logistics of France, located near Germany and sharing a border with Italy, made them disinclined to take a stance against the Germans. Economic sanctions issued by the League of Nations against Italy drove it closer to Germany. Italy did not approve of the anti-Semitic aspect of Nazism but felt they had nowhere else to turn. FDR was worried about losing the Italian-American vote and did not take a strong stance against Mussolini.

America weakened the embargo against Italy by continuing some trade relations. In 1936, Germany took aggressive action by re-militarizing the Rhineland or its shared border with France. France was not in a financial position to defend itself. There was some hope that by revising the map of the Versailles Treaty and granting the Rhineland exclusively to Germany, that peace could be maintained. Austria felt an allegiance to Germany and Hitler since many of their people were of German stock. Hitler also demanded a part of Czechoslovakia that had belonged to Germany. At the Munich conference in September 1938, the French and English gave into Hitler's demands—which was the act of appeasement that many referred to as the cause of WWII. And France and England were appeasing Hitler because they feared them and felt their



armies inadequate to engage in battle with them. Just as there was an exaggeration of Western air power, the Germans overinflated the capabilities of their air force. Unintentionally, Charles Lindbergh helped reinforce that notion by proclaiming the German Luftwaffe as the most powerful air power in Europe. He also commented that France's air power was virtually non-existent. Britain was reluctant to challenge Germany because it could not count on the US as an ally because American popular opinion was staunchly against entering into another European war.

Germany swallowed the rest of Czechoslovakia and England called for the first peace time draft in history. Staving off war as long as possible, England and France had no choice but to fight when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. England's "appeasement" may have actually been a delay tactic because by the end of 1939, England's air power had been strengthened substantially and its radar system was almost fully operational. Perhaps appeasement could be more accurately described as a necessary delay to prepare the country for war. Russia and Germany signed a non-aggression agreement whereby both would stay neutral if the other went to war. Germany violated the agreement by invading Russia in 1941. Only then did Russia realize its mistake and join the Allied Forces. Japan went on with its aggressive ways by launching a full scale attack on China in 1937. This aggression disturbed the West which saw China as an important business partner. The American Navy was dispatched to the Pacific in hopes of calming the situation. Economic sanctions were imposed. Japan refused to back down and allied itself with Germany and Italy and continued their conquest into French Indochina. America responded by freezing all of Japan's assets and imposing a fuel oil embargo. Japan responded by attacking Pearl Harbor. There were no easy answers as determent did not work in Asia and appeasement did not work in Europe.



Chapter Three: The Patterns of War, 1939-1945

Chapter Three: The Patterns of War, 1939-1945 Summary and Analysis

Germany shocked the world by defeating Poland in less than a month. The Germans had introduced the blitzkrieg, or lightning attack, and armored panzer units brought about overwhelming superiority on the ground. Although battles with armored tanks were largely successful at the beginning of the war, most of the war was bloody, trench-to-trench and man-to-man warfare. The romanticism of the tank battles created images that were promoted by both the Allied and Axis powers. Although America was neutral at this point, President Roosevelt altered U.S. Neutrality acts in order to aid Britain and France.

Germany invaded Norway and Denmark to guarantee a supply of vital raw materials. The armies of Belgium, Holland, and France soon surrendered to German aggression. Germany stopped short of invading the scrappy Brits whose Royal Air Force turned back his invasion fleet. A stunned Germany now had a worthy opponent. Britain's victory in the Battle of Britain was a major reason for Germany's ultimate defeat. America, eyeing the growing potential of involvement in the war, introduced the military draft in 1940. Germany invaded Russia but failed to capture a major city. They devoted an enormous amount of manpower to retain the border land they conquered which greatly compromised their western flank. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the Americans were fully engaged in the war. The Germans underestimated America's resolve, thinking it was a soft nation and not ready to endure a long-term battle.

American public opinion favored that US efforts be focused in the Pacific. However, the American government agreed with Britain that the biggest push should be in Europe. If Germany conquered Russia, they would be virtually unbeatable. The Atlantic War between German U-Boats and the British and American navies ensued for months, not won by the Allies until mid-1943. The Allied forces had to defend Greece and, to protect oil resources, Egypt and the Suez Canal. Under Eisenhower's command, troops invaded the Vichy coast of Africa, eventually driving the Axis forces back into surrender. Next the Allies focused on Sicily which would give them a base in the Mediterranean. The Allies agreed to open two fronts a strong one in France and a smaller force in Italy. Although Rome fell on June 4, 1944, it was not until the next May that the German troops in Italy surrendered. Air campaigns by American and British bombers began attacking German strongholds in Germany and France. The bombings were so inaccurate that much resentment was generated from the French who lost who villages and had many casualties from the off-target bombings. By June 1944, the Luftwaffe was defeated and Allied planes roamed freely over Europe. One key tactic employed by the

Allies was the destruction of the German's fuel production facilities which ultimately left both planes and tanks immobilized.

The D-Day invasion in France on June 6, 1944 was the final push against Germany and was the largest amphibious offense in history. By August 25, France was largely free of any German soldiers. The Germans made a last ditch effort in Ardennes but were thwarted by ground and air power. American troops crossed the Rhine on March 1, 1945, and met Russian troops at the Elbe on April 25th. Hitler committed suicide on April 30th and Nazism collapsed with him. In the Pacific War, the defeat of Japan's defense of the islands required the brute force of the Americans. The Japanese were skilled fighters and every inch of advancement by the Americans was hard fought. Japanese fanaticism fostered an insensitivity in the Allied soldiers in combating their opponents. It was the right thing to defeat the Axis powers but it was wrong to glamorize modern technological warfare that had an unlimited capacity for destruction.



Chapter 4: The American War Machine

Chapter 4: The American War Machine Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4: The American War Machine

America had proved its militaristic capabilities ten-fold in WWII. Thought to be soft, the Americans came alive after Pearl Harbor and was the only nation able to support and finance two major war fronts simultaneously. However, America's contribution was ultimately magnified—American soldiers were the best, their arms and artillery were the best, they won the war for the world! Other myths about the era were that most young men were at war. Only 50 percent of soldiers saw actual battle and that most women worked where nine out of ten young mothers did not work outside the home. American production, while impressive, was initially not superior to that of Germany. When WWII began, America could equip only a third of its army. Detroit was uncooperative, more concerned about producing autos than tanks. Standard Oil maintained a business deal with Hitler's military for nine months after the war had begun. Despite all these hang-ups, production for the war was still massive. America's distribution of weapons to the Allies helped to position them for the superpower it would become after the war.

While the M-1 rifle and the proximity fuse were superior and effective, the American bazooka anti-tank weapon was not on the level of the German panzerfaust. American and British tanks were weaker than their German counterparts. American firepower was overused where 31 strategic German cities were needlessly flattened. Stateside was far removed from the atrocities of war and people chose not to imagine the horrors caused by American weaponry. The ad world developed campaigns that featured happy soldiers, using new weapons without being injured themselves and relaxing at the end of the day by having an ice-cold Coca-Cola. The advancement of US weaponry was attributed to American know-how. Ads portrayed the gruesome flamethrower that burnt opponents to a crisp as necessary to maintain the American way. America engaged in combat without taking the responsibility of the havoc its military machine created.

Americans complain about big government but there was no bigger expansion of government than after WWII. An aggressive nationalism emerged with the dawning of the nuclear age. Atom bombs were developed in secret, disallowing a national debate about the consequences of such weapons. The draft for WWII was deeply resented by many young men. After Pearl Harbor, the attitude changed but only for a short while. The baby boom originated when men, trying to avoid service, got married and had babies. Class bias emerged when college deferments provided a way out for the white middle class. Black Americans were victims of discrimination—it was more difficult for them to get deferments or conscientious objector statuses. As the war wore on, manpower demands caused men who were previously rejected on physical or psychological bases to be accepted.



Comparing the German and American armies, an Israeli military historian found that the strength of the Germans was based on allowing lower echelon officers to make independent decisions while the American military was overly top-down in its decision-making process. The American system didn't permit lower level officers to have command and decision experience. The American military required too much paperwork of their officers which created the need for an enormous clerical staff. The army was not one big happy family. GIs resented the petty things they could be written up for - not saluting properly or having spots on a shirt - and being denied important things like visiting their newborns in nearby hospitals.

Intellectuals and Jews were often "picked on" by drill sergeants who thought they were rich snobs and needed to be brought down to earth. The more highly educated recruit had a difficult time "readjusting" his personality to suit the military. The better educated soldiers would often be selected for officers candidate school or an administrative assignment after basic training. The misery of basic training would continue into the battlefield for many often due to ethnic and class discrimination. Mexican-Americans served in disproportionate numbers to their population. Japanese-Americans served even though some of their relatives were in detention camps.

Blacks were discriminated against the most. The Navy only allowed blacks to be mess boys. The Army used black units to do menial jobs like loading and unloading supplies. Black officers were not allowed to command white soldiers. MPs could beat black soldiers found with white girls. Black officers couldn't eat with white officers. The Secretary of War justified not appointing black officers because since "leadership is not embedded in the negro race" (pg. 84.) Homosexuals who made it through induction, were constant targets of ridicule. Lesbians were more accepted because "butches" were considered pluses because they had male characteristics. There were "witch hunts" to ferret out homosexuals. Those who were accused of homosexual acts were often shackled and even beaten by MPs. The pursuit of homosexuals wasted time and money. Women, at first discriminated against, were ultimately heavily recruited due to manpower demands. Yet, women never represented more than two percent of the military since the use of women was restricted. Black women were the most discriminated against in their utilization. A disproportionate share of fighting and dying was relegated to underprivileged and unskilled white males. Many of these men were not happy with their fate but held their lines so they wouldn't let their fellow infantrymen down. These men felt the most remote from civilians who had no clue what they were asked to withstand. Infantrymen they felt resentment for many of their commanders who they did not view as good leaders. The military leaders were aware of the low morale of the front line soldiers and launched campaigns to try to quell their complaints.



Chapter Five: Overseas

Chapter Five: Overseas Summary and Analysis

Many American soldiers seemed childish to Europeans. They would chew gum, read comics, and play ball like big kids. The American war machine was powerful but had little regard for saving landscape and structures dear to Europeans. Many GIs were rude and contemptuous of Europeans. Some even stole and looted but received little or no punishment for their actions. The sexual needs of the soldiers were not dealt with—allowing the creation of secret brothels. PR campaigns inferred that American boys were wholesome and did not need sex. In truth, GIs fathered tens of thousands of illegitimate children in England alone. The venereal disease rate soared in Europe. Alcoholism was a problem, partially due to the Army's attempt to keep the soldiers from drinking at all. Drugs like amphetamines and Benzedrine were popular among the men. Psychological problems took their toll on the soldiers accounting for 25-30 percent of WWII casualties. It was a myth that the more battle a soldier saw, the more he became accustomed to it as the opposite proved to be true. Many psychological problems developed because most soldiers had been raised to believe that killing was a sin. The prolonged time infantrymen were expected to do battle also took its toll.

Troopships were cramped and smelled horribly often making the men vomit on bunks below them. The men would have to live in unclean and unhealthy conditions since it was difficult to clean the ships. To prevent suicide when the ships were ready to land on a foreign and dangerous beach, belts and ties were taken from the soldiers. Some were forced at gunpoint to go ashore. One ship's pilot went mad after having to navigate the boat through body parts of soldiers bobbing in the water. The landing on D-Day was a bloodbath with grown men were crying for their mothers. Inland, men were dying at the hands of unseen enemies which added to the terror. Deaths from friendly fire was another dire reality.

The sights of the dead and wounded were unbearable and the sounds of gunfire, planes and artillery were deafening. Many gun battles ceased with no explanation. Most were not won or lost. Some soldiers who went uncontrollably mad were killed by their own men. Soldiers had to carry on through exhaustion, malnutrition and illness. They had only rare opportunities for showers or changes of clothing. The foreign terrain was another challenge for the men. In the Pacific, they had to endure dense jungles and volcanic atolls; in Italy, cold and freezing rain; and, in Africa hot winds in the desert and sand in their food. The Pacific war contained other threats like poisonous snakes and malaria. Mud and slime was a struggle everywhere. Trench foot was responsible for 70 percent of non-battle injuries. Dogs and land crabs fed on dead soldiers who, out of necessity, were left behind. The smell of death would bring tears to their eyes. Most of the 75,000 MIAs in WWII were blown into vapor or became an arm here and a leg there. One GI was killed by his buddy's flying head. One soldier watched in horror as a tank rolled over his legs, killing him. Although advances in medical procedures in the field saved many lives, while many soldiers lived with disabilities the rest of their lives.



Sailors had to endure blown up body parts on their decks. Airmen fought in chaotic conditions in the air sometimes resulting in US pilots taking out their own peers. The relatively thin skin of the bombers was vulnerable to ground attack. The blast to one bomber left only the pilot's teeth. American soldiers found it easier to kill Japanese than European soldiers. For one, physically the Japanese looked less like them; and, secondly, the Japanese were notorious for their brutality. The Pacific war descended into real horror. American soldiers were known to boil the heads of Japanese soldiers and send the skulls home for souvenirs. Other GIs used the penises of dead Japanese soldiers for target practice. Of course, the Japanese were just as brutal. Fortunately, most military men did not see battle. For those who did, psychological and physical problems followed some for life; others learned to embellish or compartmentalize their experiences. Many others never got the opportunity to return home.



Chapter Six: Home Front Change

Chapter Six: Home Front Change Summary and Analysis

What makes WWII the best war ever is the united and confident America that was achieved by the effort. The war resulted in the greatest prosperity period in history. By 1945, the US owned two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, fifty percent of its shipping and over half of global manufacturing. In more recent times, that era has been held up to new leaders, challenging them to match the leadership of FDR and Eisenhower. Like other cultures, Americans have selective memory and that the golden age was perceived to have no ethnic or gender discrimination where all families were happy, marriages were solid, children were perfect students and perfectly behaved. Taking the glow off that era is the reality that prosperity is not a remedy for all problems. Also a reality is that war does not necessarily bring on prosperity which was expected in the Gulf War but never realized. In 1991, there was a stockpile of defense weapons and a volunteer army that was already in place. Unlike 1991, the government in 1940 was deficit free and could spend liberally on the war effort.

While it's true that war unites a country to some degree, it can also drive wedges in its society. Due to the the large military contracts received by corporations, many small businesses were forced out of the market. Two months after Pearl Harbor, Business Week reported that 200,000 small businesses failed. There was resentment at home over the migration of workers. For example, Willow Run, a small town outside of Detroit, was the site of a Ford plant that started making bombers. Residents of the small town considered those moving there for jobs as riff-raff. By the same token, those who moved there didn't feel welcome. Housing shortages in such towns created overcrowding and poor living conditions. Living conditions in black areas were dreadful. Unrest and violence followed and a riot broke out in Detroit. At one company, white women forced a strike rather than share bathrooms with black women. Ironically, Hitler's abuse of people elevated the issue of civil rights in America and the infancy of that movement began post-war with groups of blacks and sympathetic whites. Young Mexican-Americans suffered from discrimination and began forming street gangs and riots broke out in Los Angeles. Japanese were removed to retention camps in the Pacific region.

Academic freedom in universities was being compromised by the firing of professors with liberal views and the hiring of unqualified people like airplane mechanics and other technicians in their places. The prosperity of the war years created the teen culture. Teens could easily get jobs and have spending money which led to financial independence from parents. Schools were becoming social centers where the latest styles could be paraded. Teens increased their drinking and smoking habits. Gangs and vandalism were on the increase. Business prosperity and juvenile delinquency seemed to progress together. Many people had more money than they ever had and it was easier to come by. The middle class made the largest gains. People were buying things

they did not need and luxuries became necessities. Those enjoying the new prosperity at home were concerned about returning GIs eventually flooding the job market and ruining their newly found prosperity. Middle-class women did want to return home after the war but had dreams of new ranch homes in the suburbs, not the crowded and old homes of pre-war times.



Chapter Seven: A New World

Chapter Seven: A New World Summary and Analysis

The Allied powers endorsed the same reasons for fighting WWII. They were the right of national self-determination and the Four Freedoms such as the freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear. Russia was the only ally that refused to advocate these goals. Post-war under the Marshall Plan, America provided over \$12 billion to support European economic recovery. New prosperity was seen in the US with 64 percent of Americans becoming homeowners after the war. But neither a perfect world nor a perfect war had been created. Some theorized that the West's bloated image of itself prevented it from seeing that it had been "defending something pretty defective against something even more loathsome" (pg. 137.) The Allies forgave the atrocities they committed while they were outraged by the same type of behavior by the enemy. Although controversial and unproven, some claimed that one million German POW's died of hunger and neglect at the hands of the Americans and French.

Americans came to believe that by special providence they were the "watchmen on the walls of freedom" (pg. 138.) Covert operations by the US government became a new standard. Spying and assassination were accepted ways of combating evil. Roosevelt framed the structure of the United Nations which would allow the powerful nations to dominate the world order. American and Russian relations devolved at the end of the war. The Russians resented the US demand that Germany be made to surrender, fearing that the US wanted as many Russian soldiers slain as possible. For their part, the US did not want a repeat of WWI, when the Germans insisted they didn't lose the war because they did not surrender.

The US and Russia disagreed on two major issues. America was against Russia taking control of border states that provided them a buffer zone against attack. America did not trust the Russians enough to share the secrets of nuclear arms setting up an intense arms race eventually resulting in the Cold War. The fall of China to communism strengthened America's resolve to fight it. Conservatism in the US increased and the House Un-American Activities Committee was established to rout out domestic communists.

The aftermath of the war saw set-backs for women in the workplace. Ethnic minorities didn't feel the power of the Four Freedoms that the US fought for. Homosexuals were investigated and denounced as communists and perverts. Only 7.5 percent of the veterans in the south who received help from the GI bill were black, although they represented a third of all soldiers from that region. The Civil Rights movement gained momentum. Membership in the NAACP rose markedly. Author James Baldwin felt the discrimination experienced by black veterans fueled the racial unrest in the '60s. After defeating Hitler for ethnic abuse, at first blush it seemed astonishing that America would tolerate discrimination on its own soil. But PR aside, the Allies did not go to war because of Hitler's ethnic policies—the went to war to due to Hitler's aggression against



sovereign states. Antisemitism was quite evident in both America and England before the war. Post-war, the United States hired some Nazi war criminals who were useful in the arms race. One of those hired was the notorious Klaus Barbie who was known as the Butcher of Lyons.

Returning soldiers suffered from psychological and physical problems. Readjustment to being home was difficult. Many tried to be "manly" and repress their feelings, they drank, gambled, and became violent and depressed. Society did show gratitude for the efforts of the soldiers through the GI Bill which provided funding for education and housing, although some viewed the entitlement as a step toward socialism. Some saw the GI Bill as strengthening a growing middle-class while others saw those who benefited from the funding as unsophisticated and anti-intellectual. The war brought prosperity and a strengthened middle-class. More people were educated but contempt for intellectualism increased. The patriotism fostered by the perception of the "good war" caused young people to eagerly volunteer to fight communism in Vietnam only to be disillusioned when they discovered what war really meant.



Characters

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the President of the United States when World War II began in 1939 and when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941. The American government had decided against engaging in the war when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939. President Roosevelt did take the steps to alter the U.S. Neutrality Laws following the invasion so that the US could assist the European democracies with financing and arms in their fight against Hitler and the Third Reich. Roosevelt expressed the sentiment of the free world when he proclaimed that the United States could not be a spectator in a world dominated by force.

Even with the menacing threat that faced the region by an ally of Hitler, Roosevelt failed to take a strong stand against Mussolini and his Fascist government in Italy. FDR was worried about losing the Italian-American vote and not surprisingly, behaved very much like a politician. Despite the fact that Roosevelt was not driven by principle alone and that he was genuinely concerned about his political future, decades later American leaders like President George H. W. Bush were challenged to emulate the leadership of World War II heroes like Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower.

As a result of the Allied victory, Roosevelt framed the structure of the United Nations, a body that would allow the powerful nations to have global domination. FDR recognized the conservative trend in the US in 1944 when he replaced his liberal VP Henry Wallace with the more conservative Harry Truman as his running mate.

Adolph Hitler

Adolph Hitler is cited as skewing German history to such a degree that it convinced and compelled the people to take a course that ultimately led to their own destruction. Many scholars view Hitler as insane and that for some reason a nation of people opted for a crazy man to lead them. Hitler no doubt had "issues," but he was not deranged as witnessed by his superior tactical and strategic skills that brought him closer to winning a world war than anyone would have ever imagined.

Hitler knew how to push the right buttons on his people. He expressed what many Germans felt, which was their efforts in World War I were mischaracterized when the Treaty of Versailles was drawn up. The Germans had not surrendered and therefore should not be termed as the losers of that war. Hitler appealed to the German's national pride and was politically adept enough to demagogue the despair and fears of the nation and capitalize on the the widely held view that Germany was destined to be a major world power. A decorated soldier himself, Hitler promoted the notion that the German struggle could only be achieved by militarism. Hitler built the Third Reich based



on reaching the base fear in people and on his observation that the masses were weak and wanted to be led.

Germany was facing the same economic pressures that were hitting the rest of the world in the late '30s. The German mark had been devalued in order to pay reparations to France and England for World War I. As Germany's economy worsened, the opportunity presented itself for Hitler to convince the masses that he had the solution to the nation's economic woes. The Nazis gained momentum and the Third Reich, which Hitler bragged would last 1,000 years, came to power. When Germany was defeated in 1945, Hitler committed suicide and the Nazi party died with him.

The American Soldier

The American soldier, especially the infantryman, was misunderstood and under appreciated. The wretched condition that they were made to endure along with the atrocities and horror that they faced themselves as well as inflicted on the enemy were never revealed to the public. Instead, the American GI was presented with a wholesome and pristine, although false, image.

President George H. W. Bush

In deciding whether to launch the Gulf War, President Bush was avidly reading stories about World War II. Editorials were warning him not to appease the enemy, which was a not so subtle reference to claims that the British appeased Hitler prior to WWII.

General Dwight Eisenhower

General Eisenhower considered the press corps a leg of the Army. It was their job to sell the war to the people at home because popular opinion was what won wars.

General Mark Clark

General Mark Clark is said to have put soldiers at risk when the Allies liberated Rome. Due to a scheduled photo shoot, he hurried the soldiers in the flushing out of resisters, thus placing his men in undue danger.

General George Patton

A stickler for regulation, General George Patton would follow soldiers into the latrines to make sure they were wearing their helmets when having bowel movements. He also considered men who were suffering from psychological problems as cowards or "mommie" boys. He was known to hit at least two men who were hospitalized and suffering from such problems.



Neville Chamberlain

Neville Chamberlain was the British Prime Minister who agreed to German commands at the Munich Conference. Chamberlain was accused of the appeasement of the enemy which, many felt, led to the world war.

Ernie Pyle

Ernie Pyle was a famous war correspondent who was embedded with an Army unit. Initially, he went along with painting a positive picture of the battle. However, he became disillusioned and began reporting the atrocities and horror that actually took place. He was soon killed by a sniper.

Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Russians, or Soviet Union, during World War II. Stalin's was the only nation to object to the Allied vow to fight for the right of national self-determination and for the Four Freedoms, which are the freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear.



Objects/Places

Pearl Harbor

America initially stayed out of World War II which officially began in 1939 when Germany attacked Poland. However, the US enthusiastically entered the war when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Germany

Germany was irked that they were termed the losers of World War I. They had a chance to prove their power to the world when in 1939, the Germans began World War II by attacking Poland.

Japan

Japan was one of the Axis powers and an ally of Germany. When they attacked Pearl Harbor, the Americans engaged them in a vicious battle on the Pacific front of the war.

The Third Reich

The Third Reich is how Hitler referred to the German nation while he and his Nazi party led the nation. He bragged that the Third Reich would endure for 1,000 years. He was only about 988 years off in his estimation.

England

England was one of the Allied powers of WWII. By turning back the advancing German Navy which was attempting to attack England in the Battle of Britain, the English achieved a key victory that was considered to be the turning point in the war.

France

France was one of the first European democracies to surrender to the Germans in World War II. They had a shared border with Germany called the Rhineland, which was ceded to the Germans at the Munich conference.

Poland

World War II began when the German Army attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. Hitler and the Nazis stunned the world by defeating the Poles in less than a month.

Russia

Russia had a pact with the Germans that both nations would stay neutral if the other became involved in a war. Germany broke this agreement by invading Russia who then realized its misjudgment. In 1941, Russia joined the Allied powers to fight against Germany.

The Four Freedoms

The Allied powers, except Russia, proclaimed that they engaged in World War II to fight for the right of national self-determination and for the Four Freedoms. They are the freedom of speech and religion and the freedom from want and fear.

Appeasement

The English and French met with Hitler just prior to the beginning of World War II at the Munich Conference. The two European democracies agreed to meet Hitler's demand to redraw the map from the Versailles Treaty, giving the Germans more land. Critics viewed that meeting these demands was an act of appeasement that ultimately led to World War II.



Themes

Causes of World War II

Though years apart, World War I was at least partially responsible for World War II. When the Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919 to end the first world war, Germany was characterized as the loser of the war. Years later, in the 1930s, German pride was busting at the seams to have what they considered a misrepresentation of their role in World War I corrected. In their view, the Germans did not want to be termed the "losers" of the war since they did not surrender. The Germans were not signatories of the treaty and refused to acknowledge the veracity of the agreement.

By the mid-30s, Adolph Hitler had captured the rapt attention of the Germans who were suffering from the worldwide economic strife that had begun with the Great Depression. He told them he had the key to the economic woes of the nation which included conquering other lands and countries which would provide the over-populated German state with more land and resources. Hitler capitalized on the dissatisfaction that most Germans felt about the conclusion of World War I and the widely held belief among the people that Germany was destined to become a superpower. As the German economy declined, the Third Reich rose to power. World War II began when Germany attacked Poland in 1939.

Fearing the powerful German Army both on the ground and from the air, England and France agreed to German demands at the Munich Conference, allowing them to have part of Czechoslovakia and part of the Rhineland, the shared border of France and Germany. This act termed "appeasement" was viewed by critics as the event that caused the war—the thinking being that a bully must be stood up to, if not he will always demand more.

One myth about the war was the the Allied powers entered the war to combat Hitler's policy of ethnic cleansing. Since antisemitism was common in both America and England at the time, that issue was not top in their minds. England entered the war to save themselves since Germany was a serious and growing threat. America entered the war because they were attacked by Japan, a German ally, in December 1941 and because one democracy after the other was falling to the Nazis in Europe, thus posing a serious threat to the recovering US economy and to its national security.

Discrimination in the Military

While the government and the media presented a rosy picture to the public-at-large about the conditions and the character of the American soldier during World War II, an abundance of ethnic discrimination existed among the ranks. In the Navy, black sailors were usually used as messes on deck. In the Army, black GIs were used for menial jobs like loading and unloading. Initially, they were not trusted to fight on the front line since



they were not considered brave or smart enough. MPs had authority to beat black soldiers found with white women. Black officers were never allowed to command white soldiers. Black officers were also not permitted to eat with white officers. Answering a concern about the lack of black command officers, the Secretary of War proclaimed that "leadership was not embedded" in black men.

Women were discriminated against as well. Through the process of attrition as the war dragged on, demands for more recruits grew. A huge campaign to recruit women was launched; however, never more than two percent of the Army ever consisted of females since the commanders considered their use very limited. Female soldiers also had to be cautious about over-sexed male soldiers who frequently were responsible for raping female soldiers. Many on the outside concluded that women were recruited for the specific purpose of meeting the sexual needs of the male soldiers.

Men were carefully screened for homosexuality. However, the gay men that made it through quickly became the target of ridicule and even abuse. MPs were allowed to beat them. Virtual witch hunts were conducted to rout them out. Too much time and money was spent on trying to find homosexuals during World War II, effort and resources that could have been used in much more fruitful ways. Lesbian soldiers were more accepted than gay soldiers. First of all, there were much fewer women in the military and thus fewer lesbians. Secondly, the male characteristics of "butches" were considered laudable.

War and Prosperity

One of the myths of war is that prosperity always follows. This belief was rooted in the prosperity that did follow World War II. However, there were special circumstances that resulted in that economic boom that does not necessarily hold true in other cases. World War II had followed the greatest financial downturn in American history and indeed that of the entire modern world. The country was just beginning to come out of the dregs of the Great Depression in 1939 when the second World War began with Germany's invasion of Poland.

The US kept a watchful eye on Europe as country after country began to succumb to Adolph Hitler and his Third Reich. America, knowing that as the plight of Europe deepened by the day and week, was aware that it was on the verge of an epic battle. Its military power in 1939 could not have stood against that of Germany; therefore, between 1939 and 1941, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America was pulled into the fray, America had the chance to built up its Army and Navy. Since the US had little or no deficit, it was free to spend liberally on the war. In so doing, plants sprung up across the nation that were producing round-the-clock the weapons, artillery and equipment necessary to wage a full scale war. Business thrived and unemployment declined. When one million American soldiers were eventually dispatched to Europe and the Pacific front, their departure left even more opportunities for employment.

In 1991 when President George H. W. Bush waged war in the Gulf, many expected a boom as experienced during World War II. That anticipated prosperity never happened. The circumstances were far different during the Gulf War. The Defense Department had stockpiles of weaponry and equipment and therefore there were no additional production demands. In 1991, the US had a voluntary military and there was no need to recruit additional soldiers who would have opened up employment opportunities for others. Lastly, the US was burdened with huge deficits in '91 and there was not liberal amounts of money available to spend on the war. Prosperity can result during war but it is not guaranteed. It all depends on the circumstances at the time.

Style

Perspective

"The Best War Ever, America and World War II" is written in the first-person narrative. The author of the book is Michael C. C. Adams who is a professor of history at Northern Kentucky University. Professor Adams also holds a chair of history and geography at the same college. Since Adams is a professor of history, his credentials in writing this book are beyond question.

Professor Adams has written other historical works on war and combat. They include "Fighting for Defeat," "The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War One," and, "Our Masters the Rebels" for which Adams won the Jefferson Davis Book Award. Adams had a personal interest in the ferreting out the true story of World War II. He dedicated the book to Charles Corringham Adams of the British Royal Air Force. He was Adams' uncle and was part of the RAF's Fighter Command and lost his life while in a battle during World War II.

Not only did Adams rely upon his own knowledge of the epic battle, but he tapped the resources of a multitude of experts and documents covering the war. In his bibliographical section, he lays out the large amount of material he used in his extensive research and preparation for the book.

Tone

Since the author, Michael C. C. Adams is a professor of history, the tone of his book, "The Best War Ever, America and World War II" is professorial in nature. It has an academic, text book quality in that the story of World War II and the events leading up to it are laid out in great detail, accompanied by references and analysis. Although Adams is broaching a subject that many would find offensive, which is the partial dismemberment of America's Golden Age, he does so with gentle argument and logical presentations. Not only is Professor Adams an acknowledged expert in history, he relied on numerous resources who helped in compiling the complicated account that he has presented. Just as he proclaims at the beginning of the account, he, like all historians, are faced with a sea of information about World War II from they must try to ferret out the truth, especially since there was such a campaign to filter out much of the event's reality.

Although the subject is one that may not be universally palpable to Americans, Adams is careful to maintain a respectful, neutral tone totally lacking in sarcasm and avoiding the opportunity to lecture. Adams tells the story that the US government did not want to tell, that filmmakers and magazines chose not to tell, that war correspondents could not tell, and that censors did not allow to be told. It is the fact that war is brutal and ugly. It kills, maims, and does not deliver on many of its promised benefits.

Structure

"The Best War Ever, America and World War II" is separated into seven chapters. The first chapter, "Mythmaking and the War," describes the practice that many cultures, including America, have in using selective memory in writing their histories. Chapter Two provides the historical account of why the Allied forces engaged in war against the Axis powers. Chapter Three describes the brutality and atrocities of the war and its progression between 1939 and 1945. Chapter Four contains the powerful military machine that America became during WWII. Chapter Five details the impact that America's weaponry and soldiers had on Europe and Asia. In Chapter Six, the author recounts the changes that the war had on the home front; and, the last chapter analyzes the legacy that both the deceptive images and the reality of World War II left for the world.

Several illustrations and maps of the war-torn regions accompany the account. There is a preface and acknowledgments section preceding the chapters. An afterword describes the damage of over-glamorizing war and the need to look at such events honestly to understand the ramifications of battle. There is a bibliographical essay which details the resources used to develop each section of the book. The last portion of the book is an index for easy reference for specific topics.

Quotes

"To make our understanding of history manageable, we try to retrieve from the huge clutter of the past only those events that seem to be particularly useful, interesting, or exciting" (Chapter One, pg. 1.)

"The problem is that we may learn from the past but we cannot live in it. History cannot be repeated, particularly when our version of it is heavily mythical" (Chapter One, pg. 5.)

"At the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson was a key exponent of international cooperation and the League of Nations, but the US Senate voted against League membership in 1920, hurting the credibility of the League" (Chapter Two, pg. 25.)

"The Japanese military, convinced that America was preparing for an offensive war on the home islands, called for a preemptive strike that would seize the resources Japan needed and perhaps force the United States to make an arrangement for dividing power in the Pacific. In this respect, Pearl Harbor may be viewed as the last act in the degeneration of U.S.-Japanese relations" (Chapter Two, pg. 41.)

"The survival of Britain was a major factor in Germany's defeat, for Hitler now had an implacable enemy on his western flank, an enemy that had increasing material assistance from the great manufacturing nation across the Atlantic. The United States, said FDR, could not be a spectator in a world dominated by force" (Chapter Three, pg. 46.)

"To accept that this was a war of sophisticated weaponry has become a convention in the West, but it was in reality a war of desperate attrition, and victory in the end hinged upon human death" (Chapter Three, pg. 68.)

"The corporation emerged as a vital symbol of Americanism. The role was hammered home by advertising, which made a vital connection between brand name manufacturing, American values, and world peace" (Chapter Four, pg. 75.)

"The soldiers themselves had learned that they as individuals didn't count: America would survive, but many of the cogs in the war machine would not" (Chapter Four, pg. 82.)

"In World War II, psychiatric casualties were often seen as 'mommies' boys,' spoiled brats without manliness. This was the view of General Patton, who notoriously twice hit men in army hospitals suffering from stress" (Chapter Five, pg. 95.)

"At some level, the soldier was caught between competing and incompatible values: killing was both reprehensible and admirable. Similarly, he was the victim of conflicting

loyalties: to be of service to his family, a man had to stay alive and provide for them; to be of use to his nation, he had to be willing to die" (Chapter Five, pg. 97.)

"We are determined that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle our flag will be recognized throughout the world, as a symbol of freedom on the one hand—and of overwhelming power on the other" (Chapter Seven, pg. 136.)

"The manipulation of news during the war created a permanent trend. Today, as much as 70 percent of daily news may be PR put out by politicians, business, or the media itself. This means that we are often fed a very incomplete and misleading version of reality" (Chapter Seven, pg. 154.)



Topics for Discussion

What opinion did America have of World War II and of American soldiers? Who was responsible for creating a bloated image of the war? How did this image filter over to American life stateside? What conflict did it create between infantrymen and civilians?

Why did American soldiers feel less compelled to kill German soldiers than Japanese soldiers? What reputation did Japanese soldiers have?

When did the United States enter into World War II? What event caused the US to join the Allied Forces in World War II and made Americans enthusiastic about it? How long did that sentiment last?

What benefits did World War II bring stateside? What problems were caused on the home front by the war? How was employment affected by the war?

What discrimination existed in the military during the war? What discrimination existed after the war on US soil? How were black GIs treated after the war? Homosexuals? Women?

What did the Allied Forces pledge to achieve by entering into World War II? What were the Four Freedoms? What Allied nation refused to take ascribe to the same goals as the other democracies? How did the Cold War start?

What ramifications did the glorification of war leave for future generations? How was another generation of soldiers impacted by the skewed image of war? How were leaders impacted by the purported Golden Age of America?