

*Reevaluating the “Good War”: David Kennedy and the US in the Second World War*

David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* is a force of new information and novel insights into one of America's most trying periods. What makes this book stand out for the student of history is Kennedy's constant challenge of popular narratives that dominate mainstream history, especially history taught in schools. Some of the narratives he tackles are Hoover as a “do nothing” president, how the New Deal really affected America and America's role in the Second World War. His analysis of the US in WWII is striking and important for all students of history to consider. Even though Kennedy's book is a history of the US, he treats the war as world history and places the US in the event as a participant and not the main actor. Through this he allows us to question some of the popularly held narratives about the US in World War II that many students walk into our classes with.

Kennedy's treatment of US involvement in the Second World War is a refreshing, new look at the standard narrative. Studs Terkel titled his impressive collection of WWII oral history “The Good War” and that has become the narrative that is taught in high school and dominates America mainstream beliefs. Taking a step back, Kennedy does what some do not: he analyzes what impact the US had on the World War not how the US shaped the war. That is, we tend to overlook what role other combatant nations had in the victory over the Axis powers. Kennedy takes a more “global” approach in the sense that he focuses not solely on US contributions but the sacrifices of others, especially the Soviets in the Eastern front. The war was “good” and justified in the sense that the enemies of the Allies were intent on world domination, enslavement

and extermination of mass populations. It was also “good”, as Kennedy makes clear, because of the outcome for America was that it can be identified as the clear leader in industry, armed forces, science (especially with the Atomic Bomb), standard of living and wealth.

Kennedy subtly erodes the popular narrative of US domination in WWII with startling facts and, in his epilogue he states that in 1945, with the Allies and the US victorious that looking back on the contributions of the US could cause some “discomfort.” (855) Kennedy repeatedly notes the tragic inability of the US to become involved as Germany and Japan began to expand and persecute various ethnic peoples. As episodes such as *Kristallnacht* were carried out, Kennedy refers to a Fortune poll which asked if the American people would like to raise the quota system to admit young children, the Wagner-Rogers bill, two-thirds replied “no.” Another poll of 1939 asked the American people, if they were a member of Congress, would they vote to increase the quota and allow a larger number of European refugees into the country? – 85% of Protestants, 84% of Catholics and “an astonishing 25.8% of Jews answered no.” (416-417) Or the tragedy of the St. Louis filled with 930 Jewish refugees fleeing Germany who were denied asylum in Miami and turned back to tragic fates in Europe. Kennedy comments that “Americans might extend their hearts to Hitler’s victims, but not their hands.” (417) Surely Americans could look back on their inaction with “discomfort.”

Americans could also look back on the delayed second front in Europe with wonder. Kennedy points to the political strategy behind waiting to open another front in order to relieve the pressure off of Soviet forces. After Stalingrad, Churchill and Roosevelt looked upon the Red Army as a force of incredible strength and one that could be trouble in post-war Europe. (585) Instead, they decided upon Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa, which led to the eventual stalemate in Italy, a “needlessly costly sideshow.” (600) By the time Operation

Overlord came and the US landed troops in Nazi Occupied Europe, it was 1944, five years after the Nazi juggernaut mercilessly rolled through Poland and began the war. That delay, as Kennedy pointed out, was calculated, but also something for Americans to reconsider. A quicker invasion could have meant millions saved. Additionally, Kennedy points to the condition of the *Wehrmacht* during the battle for Northwest Europe – an army that had been already “mortally weakened by three years of brutal warfare in the east.” (855) What the Americans did face was an small, weakened army and the figures provided show that the Allied effort in Northwest Europe was minor compared to the Soviet effort in the east: of the 5.4 million that served in Northwest Europe 135,567 servicemen died, a far cry from the tens of millions who perished in the brutal *Ostfront*. The US was late in entering the war (and only did so due to outside intervention) and fought a battered *Wehrmacht* when they arrived, Kennedy pushes the reader to ask himself, what was America’s true contribution?

Undoubtedly that contribution came in the form of supplies given to Russia and Britain through the “cash and carry” and “lend-lease” programs. His chapter entitled “War of the Machines” deals directly with this quote – “the greatest tangible asset the United States brought to the coalition in World War II was the productive capacity of its industry.” (631) At the start of Operation Barbarossa, the Soviets desperately needed munitions and vehicles, especially trucks to transport troops. The production miracle of WWII was in large part due to the massive unemployment of the depression which meant that the variable resources of labor could be quickly allocated to the appropriate industries crucial to the war effort. Started in 1941, Lend-Lease meant that the US could contribute to the war effort against Germany (the enemy Kennedy makes clear was Roosevelt’s first concern over Japan) without committing troops in his “short of war strategy.” Looking back, Kennedy asks us to consider America’s role as provider of

machines and money to the Russians – they used our goods to fight the “good fight” against the Nazis while the US simply provided the means and not the manpower. In the end, Kennedy argues, the US alone prospered from the war and lost significantly less troops than any other belligerent country. (856) Should the US reevaluate the way it teaches the war to dignify the sacrifices of other countries?

In his attempt to have readers reevaluate the narrative of the US role in WWII, Kennedy addresses many other themes. Among them are how war with Japan could most likely have been avoided, the brutality of the war in the Pacific and atrocities committed by Americans (not just Japanese troops), how the US sacrificed its moral standards through terror bombing campaigns in both Europe and Japan, how poorly FDR planned for the post-war world leading to the Cold War, or the way Japanese-Americans and African-Americans were treated during the war. I choose the three examples of isolationism, the delayed second front, and production in place of fighting because they are the most researched and best argued points throughout his analysis on WWII. Kennedy’s work is a force of new information and refreshing perspectives and reading this section has increased my knowledge of the era considerably. I know that I will be able to utilize this information and plan on using selected readings for my classes.

I also addressed the above three points because I felt they would be the most useful for my students. I have found that because of popular media treatment of the war in popular culture (most notably the movie and video game industries), American children have a preconceived notion of how the war played out and how it was won. That narrative is generally the same as the “Good War” thesis or Tom Brokaw’s “The Greatest Generation.” Undoubtedly these American men and women served proudly and with distinction in protecting their country, but focusing solely on the US contribution degrades the notion of a World War – a combined effort that saw

blood spilt on other people's soil, not the US, and saw millions die on that ground. Students should be exposed the war as the global conflict that it was through a multi-cultural approach – one that Kennedy's work inspires us to pursue.