Making Meaning out of World War II: D-Day and the Good War in the United States of America

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Abstract

Leo Tolstoy has argued that the experience of war is meaningless. War is not a singular event, but instead millions of independently committed crimes. History is preoccupied with creating meaning out of the past: deriving causality, learning lessons, and weighing the importance of past events in the present. But the experience of war, violence especially, is not one that lends itself to meaning. Those who have lived through battle are usually unable to find any symbolic meaning in their experience. In the face of death, systems of meaning break down leaving those who fight wars at a loss for how to explain them. Although it is necessary to explain war, there is a contradiction between history and the experience of violence that can never be reconciled. To understand war, one must accept that wars may be fought for a reason, but that those who fight find war not to be reasonable.

There has never been a war as costly or brutal as World War II. But in the United States of America, politicians, historians, and the news media depict it as a “Good War.” They argue that it was good because the United States of America was in the moral right, and as a result any discussion of American behavior during the war must be voiced in terms of necessity, not crime. What has become known as the Good War narrative was not a product of the Second World War, but was a result of the Vietnam War. Starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, politicians and the media began promoting the commemoration of the D-Day invasions of Normandy on June 6, 1944, also known as Operation Overlord. Although it was a large and important operation, D-Day’s historical importance has often been misunderstood. It was not the turning point of the war in Europe, nor was it the beginning of the end for the Third Reich. Before the late 1970s, D-Day was not widely celebrated. But starting with Jimmy Carter, every American president except George H. W. Bush visited the Normandy beaches, although no president in office had done so before. As well, D-Day became more popular in the media in 1984, and its fame has not since diminished. Because of D-Day’s aesthetic qualities—an invasion of liberation, America’s cooperation with allies, the invasion’s complexity, its success, and the competent leadership that organized it—Good War narrators have elevated the invasion in rhetoric to a historical importance it does not deserve. D-Day functions as a celebration—and at times a justification—of American military intervention abroad, as well as a rhetorical tool to praise the American national character. This elevation culminates in a conflation of D-Day and the entire Second World War.

This conflation was institutionalized by Congress when it transformed the National D-Day Museum—founded by the Good War author, Stephen E. Ambrose—into the National World War II Museum, in 2004. Although the museum’s new name required it to expand it scope, it still clung to the D-Day narrative as a way to communicate the experience of the Second World War. The museum, like many other Good War stories, substantiates its claims using experiential history, praising the bravery and sacrifice of the Americans who took part in the war.

The unedited accounts of the veterans of D-Day explode the Good War and its attempt to create meaning out of World War II. Although the veterans took part in the historic invasion, the symbolic value of the event is lost on them, and instead they are preoccupied with the horror and meaninglessness of battle. The use of D-Day to articulate the Good War misses the point of discussing war; the discussion is not about apologizing for violence, but rather recognizing that it is criminal and meaningless.

"War began – that is, an event took place contrary to human reason and to the whole of human nature. Millions of people committed against each other such a countless number of villainies, deceptions, betrayals, thefts, forgeries and distribution of false banknotes, robberies, arsons, and murders as the annals of all the law courts in the world could not assemble in whole centuries, and which, at that period of time, the people who committed them did not look upon as crimes."

- Leo Tolstoy. *War and Peace*[1]

[1] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), Vol. III. Part 1, ch.I, p.603.

I. The Good War

World War II was a crime. Actually, it was millions of crimes: 72 million people killed and nine out of ten were noncombatants; the Third Reich perpetrated the largest genocide in history and the Allies ignored it; Tokyo, Dresden, Hamburg, Cologne, and hundreds of other cities were destroyed by firebombs dropped from the sky, and the war ended with two nuclear explosions. But most Americans think World War II was a good war.

The prevailing opinion in the United States of America is that World War II was good, despite its violence, because the United States had the moral high ground. Instead of a nuanced, historical answer as to why the Allies fought the Axis, simple binaries explain World War II: good versus evil, democracy versus authoritarianism, freedom versus tyranny. Not only was World War II an idyllic time that reflected positively on America's national character, the story goes, but it is also a model for how the United States should behave in the future. This story they tell of World War II is called the Good War.

One of the most vocal proponents of the Good War is the prolific and widely read historian Stephen E. Ambrose. In the introduction to his children's book, called *The Good Fight*, Ambrose explains why World War II was good: "America sent her young men halfway around the world, in both directions, not to conquer, not to pillage, not to loot, not to rape, but to liberate. And they did, not only in the occupied countries but in Germany and Japan, too. One veteran, when asked what it all meant, said that he felt he had done his part in turning the twentieth century from one of darkness into one of light." [2] According to the Good War narrative, World War II was fought by everyday heroes committed to a noble cause: a battle

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[2] Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Good Fight: How World War II Was Won* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2001), 4.

against evil, against the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Subsequent discussion of the United States' behavior during the war must therefore be couched in terms of necessity, not morality.

Other writers, far fewer, see in World War II the human capacity for incredible evil. They tell us that World War II was a nadir for humanity and remains a discouraging reminder of what the species is still capable of. Paul Fussell put it best: "it was a savage, insensate affair, barely conceivable to the well-conducted imagination (the main reason there's so little good writing about it) and hardly approachable without some currently unfashionable theory of human mass insanity and inbuilt, inherited corruption." [3]

Fussell is the best known writer among a little advertised group that is preoccupied with challenging the Good War narrative and exposing the facts about America's experience of World War II—the reality of violence and the resulting trauma. They argue, and are correct, that America did not fight World War II to end the Holocaust or to liberate the world from tyranny. The United States was attacked by the Japanese and the government rallied Americans to war by harping on vengeance and racist stereotypes. It was Hitler who declared war on America, not the other way around. Most Americans did not want to fight World War II; most did not know why the war was being fought. 10 million of the 16 million who served during the war were drafted and forty thousand of them deserted. The war was a brutal one, with 25 to 30 percent of all American casualties being psychological in nature. [4]

Something as contrary to human reason as war needs to be explained. Causes must be found, justifications weighed, actions evaluated. History must step in and tell us not only how, but why World War II happened. If human civilization is to continue, we need to be able to make

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[3] Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132.

[4] Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (The American Moment. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 87-89.

some kind of meaning out of our past, no matter how horrible. But Tolstoy is also right when he writes that war defies human reason. War is not “unfortunately violent,” or “sometimes violent,” or “ultimately violent.” It is essentially violent. War is experienced as millions of individually committed crimes, not as an abstract singularity that means something. That leaves us with an irreconcilable contradiction: history claims that the war was fought for a reason, but the experience of fighting a war is not reasonable.

The origins of the Good War narrative are different from the origins of World War II. One cannot speak of a Good War without implicitly acknowledging a bad one, and that bad war, as many have noted, was the one in Vietnam. [5] The story of the Good War was not born until 1984, although it had been in the offing since the early 1970s. This was the year Studs Terkel published *“The Good War”*, popularizing the term. The book compiles oral accounts, not all of them by veterans. It is a memory book designed to capture the reflections of what would later be dubbed the “greatest generation.” Terkel’s book testified as much to the aging of a generation as it did to a resurgence of the Second World War’s popularity. Terkel chose to use the label Good War because some members of that generation used it themselves to describe World War II. But he consciously softened his title, putting it in quotation marks “not as a matter of caprice or editorial comment, but simply because the adjective ‘good’ mated to the noun ‘war’ is so incongruous.” [6] Despite the title, Terkel’s book is not a Good War story. It is more nuanced than that. By putting the title in quotes he recognized that the Good War narrative is a story that

[5] The most recent example being Edward W. Wood, *Worshipping the Myths of World War II: Reflections on America's Dedication to War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 2-3.

[6] Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), vi.

masks the horror of the actual experience of war and often excludes discordant memories. But few writing at the time realized that ambiguity.

Since then, the Good War has also come to mean a specific narrative of praise. Michael C. Adams and Philip D. Beidler have given the term its new meaning as a mis-remembering of World War II. [7] In a recent book, *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*, Edward W. Wood Jr., a veteran of the Second World War, criticizes what he sees as the four major points of mis-memory in America: that the war was good in spite of the deaths of so many noncombatants; that the "greatest generation" was great; that the United States won the war largely on its own; and that "when evil lies in others, war is the means to justice." [8]

The promoters of the Good War story deal mainly in symbols and human interest stories, for the facts undermine much of their argument. They eschew historical perspective and rely heavily on aesthetics and rhetoric to tell a story of World War II designed to make Americans proud. The most important of these symbols is D-Day. In 2004 Congress authorized the conversion of the National D-Day Museum into the National World War II Museum, enshrining D-Day as the center of the national narrative of the war. Yet, even as presidents, congressmen, publishers, filmmakers, and museum curators reinforce the official narrative of D-Day and the Good War, veterans who experienced war return to Tolstoy's dilemma: how to make sense of an experience that defies all reason.

II. D-Day

Operation Overlord, commonly known as D-Day, is the central symbol of the Good War narrative, not because of its actual historical importance which is often misinterpreted, but

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[7] Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever*, and Philip D. Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1998).

[8] Edward W. Wood, *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*, 13.

because of its aesthetic and symbolic qualities.[9] The Allied Expeditionary Force's landing at the beaches of Normandy functions as a literary device, offering a unity of time, place, and action for different narrative threads in the Good War. By condensing the plot of World War II into a single day, a narrator can communicate the entire experience and the important lessons of the war in one dramatic moment.

D-Day was one of the largest amphibious operations ever mounted. On June 6, 1944, despite the threat of bad weather, a naval force of 5,333 ships and 11,000 aircraft landed 175,000 American, British, Canadian, French, and Polish soldiers on five Normandy beaches code-named Omaha, Utah, Juno, Gold and Sword. [10] The invasion, which started at dawn, was preceded by what was at the time the largest deployment of paratroopers in history. While most of the landings were carried out with relatively few casualties, the American troops who landed at Omaha faced fierce fighting that resulted in heavy losses. In total, 2,403 Americans died on D-Day, with American casualties numbering 3,581. [11]

The magnitude and technical complexity of the invasion made D-Day worthy of remembrance. But politicians and Good War historians would have us remember Operation Overlord for more than what actually happened on June 6, 1944. Discussing his experience of the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, Tom Brokaw claimed that it was "there on the beaches of Normandy, I began to reflect on the wonders of these ordinary people whose lives are laced with the markings of greatness." His experience of the D-Day commemoration inspired him to write

[9] I take my cue from Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), who has also argued that D-Day's importance to Americans is aesthetic, and it was her analysis that alerted me to this kind of interpretation of the battle. However, her interest in the battle pertains to how Americans cope psychologically with mass death, while I am interested in what meaning Americans find in war. Some of the points in this essay were originally made by her, but I have substantiated them in my own way toward a different end.

[10] Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 24.

[11] Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex*, 40.

his well-known and often cited book, if only by its title, *The Greatest Generation*. [12] Stephen E. Ambrose—whom Congress has called "America's preeminent historian," [13] and who was the historical advisor for Stephen Spielberg's popular film *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as the author of *Band of Brothers*,[14] the basis of a highly acclaimed HBO television series—presents D-Day as the "Climactic Battle of World War II." He perpetuates the false claim that if D-Day had not been successful Nazi Germany would have won the war. In his view, on June 6 the Allies turned the tide of war. According to Ambrose and the Good War story, more than luck led to victory that day. No, the Allies had much more on their side: unparalleled leadership in Dwight Eisenhower and an army of democratically raised citizen soldiers. D-Day was a gargantuan task, not of conquest, but of liberation; a task that required sacrifice and unity among America's allies and on the home front. [15]

Ambrose is not the only one who places D-Day at the fulcrum of victory in the Second World War. Politicians, journalists, and countless historians all subscribe to the same narrative elements: victory, liberation, competent leadership, unity, and sacrifice. By transforming D-Day from a battle into a symbol, D-Day became the epitome of the Good War narrative. In reaction to Vietnam, Americans created an evocative precedent for justifying a foreign policy of armed intervention as well as an image of themselves they could be proud of.

D-Day was an event, not a symbol. The Good War's supporters emphasize D-Day's aesthetic and symbolic qualities rather than its historical significance to enhance a weak,

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[12] Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xx-xxi.

[13] United States Congress, "Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2004, Public Law 108-87, 108th Congress, page 117 STAT 1054: Sec. 8134: Designation of America's National World War II Museum,." *GovTrack.us.* http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h108-2658, accessed April 9, 2008.

[14] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

[15] Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day,* 10.

unsubstantiated argument that, if D-Day had failed, the Russians might have sued for peace with the Germans. This argument's two most credible proponents, Stephen Ambrose and Dwight D. Eisenhower, offer no evidence to support this rather bold claim. [16]

In June 1944, the Allies did not praise D-Day in and of itself, except insofar as it put Allied troops in France. At the time, the Allies viewed it as the opening of a second front, not a major victory. On June 7, the day after D-Day, Winston Churchill told the press that "The battle which is now beginning will grow constantly in scale and in intensity for many weeks to come, and I shall not attempt to speculate upon its course." [17] The June 19 issue of *Time* spoke of the "just-begun campaign," [18] and General Bernard Law Montgomery told the Allied Armies "Let us go forward to victory…as we *enter* battle." [19] The invasion was perceived as important, but as the reapplication of Allied forces, not as the culmination of Allied efforts which the Good War narrative later fashioned it to be.

When Good War supporters build their narrative around D-Day, they minimize the significance of what happened before and after June 6, 1944. In arguing that D-Day was the turning point of the war, not only do they imply that continued fighting in the West after D-Day was an afterthought, making bloody engagements like the Battle of the Bulge a footnote in the story of victory, but they also ignore the contribution of the Soviet Union to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Eisenhower may have claimed after the invasion that "failure would carry with it consequences that would be almost fatal," [20] but for those fighting on the Eastern front, the crisis moment for the Third Reich was not D-Day in the summer of 1944, but the battle of Kursk in the

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[16] Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 40-41 and Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), 222.

[17] "Foes Surprised by First Blow, Says Churchill: Progress O.K.; Loss Light; Heavy Fight Ahead," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1944, p.15.

[18] "Supreme Commander," *Time*, June 19, 1944.

[19] "Monty's Message," *Time*, June 19, 1944 (italics mine).

[20] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 222.

summer of 1943, which Richard Overy describes as the end of "any realistic prospect of German victory in the east.[21] In Operation Citadel, the German army launched an offensive consisting of nine-hundred thousand men which was repulsed by Soviet forces with great losses on both sides.[22]

Before the battle of Kursk the high command within the Soviet Union had been desperately calling on the western Allies to open a second front; afterwards, according to Marshal Georgii Zhukov, commander of Soviet forces during the war, "No one had any doubt that Germany had definitely lost the war. This was settled on the Soviet-German front in 1943 and the beginning of 1944. The question now was how soon and with what political and military results the war would end."[23] Most historians agree that the Soviet Union's military contribution to the defeat of the Third Reich outweighed that of the United States and Great Britain. When the Allies invaded France in 1944, there were two-hundred and twenty eight German divisions on the Eastern front, with only fifty-eight in France. In the initial stages of the invasion, there were only fifteen German divisions engaged in Normandy.[24]

Not every historian tells a Good War story of D-Day, and some justify its importance differently than Ambrose and Eisenhower. In his *D-Day: Analysis of Costs and Benefits*, Gerhard L. Weinberg argues that D-Day was militarily important in the defeat of the Third Reich, but he chooses to emphasize the *post-war* significance of the landings. Although the United States did "far less" of the fighting, D-Day was still an essential operation because "if the United States were to have a significant share in the organization of the post-World War II order… it had to come from the establishment of a significant presence in the middle of the continent of Europe,

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[21] R. J. Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 210.
[22] Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 443.
[23] Zhukov, *Memoirs*, 593.
[24] R.J. Overy, *Russia's War*, 240.

and to this end there was no other route than the one taken on D-day." [25] The Cold War historian John Gaddis concurs that "the political significance of second fronts was at least as great as their military significance." [26]

III. D-Day's Ascendance

Even though many scholars recognize that D-Day was not the pivotal moment in the defeat of Nazi Germany, it came to be popularly recognized as so starting in the late 1970s. In May of 1978 the director of the American Military Cemetery for World War II in Normandy, Merlyn Grove, remarked, "I've seen over the last couple of years renewed interest in the war, particularly among youth, wondering what this war was all about." While half a million tourists visited the graves in 1977, Grove was expecting 750,000 in 1978. An article in the *Washington Post* Leisure and Tourism section remarked that visits to World War II battlefields and monuments were increasing. [27]

An overview of the covers of *Time* magazine reflects the ascendance of D-Day in America popular consciousness. On June 19, 1944 *Time* featured an image of Dwight D. Eisenhower in front of a sharp-tongued flash of lightning, with a citation from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, "He loosed the fateful lightning," a bold comparison considering to whom Julia Ward Howe was referring when she wrote those words in 1862. The magazine had numerous articles about the landings: Eisenhower's decision to 'go' despite the bad weather, the

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[25] Gerhard L. Weinberg, "D-Day: Analysis of Costs and Benefits, " in *D-Day, 1944*, *Modern war studies*, ed. Theodore A. Wilson (Lawrence, Kan: Published for the Eisenhower Foundation, Abilene, Kan., by the University Press of Kansas, 1994), 336, 330.

[26] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 19.

[27] Aline Moby, "Remembering Over There," *Washington Post*, May 28, 1978, sec. H5, p.41.

experiences of the common soldier, the liberated and "unliberated," as well as some inspiring words from General Bernard Law Montgomery. [28]

D-Day then stayed off the cover for another forty years, although *Time* did continue to recognize the invasion with short articles on the tenth, fifteenth, twentieth, twenty-fifth, and thirtieth anniversaries of the landings. The June 17, 1974 edition, whose cover boasted a feature on "Middle-Class Blacks," had only two paragraphs on the invasion. With only a single bitter year left in the Vietnam War, the article thought that D-Day "seems even more distant than 30 years." Instead of emphasizing liberation and victory, the article evoked a desperate, wounded optimism: "There have been others wars, changing alliances, crises. None has stimulated the exultant unity of which D-day was the ensign. Hope, the real victor at Normandy and later World War II battlefields, went on to suffer a succession of blows that may only now be relenting." [29]

But on May 28, 1984, not only did D-Day make the cover with the title "D-Day: Forty Years After the Great Crusade" featuring an image of American soldiers jumping out of a landing craft and wading onto a beach, but the magazine included four major articles on the subject. In "June 6, 1944" Lance Morrow wrote that, "the war in Viet Nam, in fact, had many Americans believing that the evil resided in themselves," and that therefore D-Day, "has a kind of moral freshness in the American imagination, a quality of collective heroic virtue for which the nation may be wistful." That moral freshness was the foundation of the Good War: "Never again, it may be, would war seem so unimpeachably right, so necessary and just. Never again, perhaps, would American power and morality so perfectly coincide." [30] Reagan's speechwriters read this article, and seven days later Reagan spoke at the fortieth anniversary of D-Day and told

[28] "Monty's Message," *Time*, June 19, 1944.
[29] "D-Day Plus 30 Years," *Time*, June 17, 1974.
[30] Lance Morrow, "June 6, 1944," *Time*, May 28, 1984.

Americans what he thought they wanted to hear, while justifying his own tough stance against the Soviet Union. [31]

The 1984 edition of *Time* was not a fluke. On June 6, 1994, the fiftieth anniversary of the landings, *Time* again featured D-Day on the cover, this time with a photo of Dwight Eisenhower in uniform. The edition was labeled as "Special Report: D-Day," and Eisenhower was framed with the subtitle "The Man Who Beat Hitler." [32] Zhukov must have turned in his grave. And to bring the wheel full circle, on May 31, 2004 *Time* again featured D-Day on the cover. It was titled "D-Day: Why It Matters 60 Years Later" offered "An Oral History by the Men Who Were There" and featured four articles. The issue was billed as an "Anniversary Special," which added a certain degree of ambiguity because the cover image was the same as that of the 1984 issue. One must wonder which anniversary *Time* was celebrating—the anniversary of D-Day or of the Good War. [33]

In 1959 Cornelius Ryan wrote *The Longest Day,* and it was an instant success. [34] Ryan used the oral histories of normal soldiers who took part in the D-Day invasion to write his book. According to Marty Morgan, a former student of Stephen E. Ambrose and the historian in residence at the National World War II Museum, Ambrose readily admitted that he was influenced by Ryan when writing his own 1994 book, *D-Day*. [35] The two books are similar. And like Ambrose's book, in 1962 Ryan's inspired a highly acclaimed and very popular film adaptation.

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[31] Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc, Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion* (New York: W. Morrow, 2005), 146.

[32] *Time*, June 6, 1994.

[33] *Time*, May 31, 2004.

[34] Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).

[35] Marty Morgan. Interviewed by Jason Resnikoff. National World War II Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 8, 2008.

But *The Longest Day* was an outlier. In 1959, even though Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, and even though the United States prided itself as the protector of democracy and capitalism against the Soviet Union, no presidents in office visited the beaches until Carter in 1978 and almost nothing was said in the media commemorating the invasions until the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was not that no one knew about D-Day in the early 1960s, it was that World War II veterans were not yet old and Vietnam had not undermined America's justifications in waging wars abroad. No one had any use for a Good War yet.

Douglas Brinkley has also noted that 1984 was a turning point for World War II in American memory. He gives Ronald Reagan credit for popularizing D-Day and World War II, which is misleading. [36] Reagan was not the only one on June 6, 1984 to capitalize on D-Day for his own political ends. While in 1964 only two senators mentioned the anniversary of D-Day[37]—probably only because of the influence of *The Longest Day* which had been released in theaters two years earlier—and in 1974 no one said anything about the invasions in Congress, on June 6, 1984, 22 members of the House spoke in remembrance of D-Day. [38] As Ed Markey, a Democratic representative from Massachusetts, said in the chamber, "Our news media are filled with the glorious and somber recollections of that fateful day." [39] Many politicians, Republicans and Democrats, used the anniversary as an opportunity to articulate their views on the United States' status abroad as a military power, as well as the meaning of World War II for Americans at home.

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[36] Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc*, 222-223.

[37] United States Congress, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 88th Congress* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1964), vol. 110, part 10, 12881 – 12882.

[38] United States Congress, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 98th Congress, Second Session* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1984) vol. 130, part 2, 15185.

[39] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15185.

They all subscribed to the same Good War narrative of the landings. Alan Mollohan, Democrat of West Virginia, said that D-Day was "the greatest military feat ever attempted," and like most of the other representatives he assigned to it a historical importance that it did not hold. [40] Many overestimated the number of Americans killed in the battle by about 7,500, giving the round number 10,000 instead of the more accurate although less impressive 2,403. Robert Coughlin, Republican of Pennsylvania, summed up much of D-Day's aesthetic value to the Good War narrative when he said that "The D-day invasion was an epitome of American strength and resources," and that it "was also symbolic of a united purpose amongst the Allies." [41]

All understood D-Day as the ultimate Good War story, but the story was employed by different representatives towards different ends. As one would expect, D-Day was an evocative and convincing symbol for members of both parties who espoused an interventionist foreign policy. The most overt use of D-Day to that end came from Democrat Clarence Long of Maryland. In 1984, he was chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Government Operations – which decided the State Department's budget as well as the allocation of all foreign military and economic assistance – and was essential to Congressman Charlie Wilson in his covert war to support the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. [42] Playing on Thomas Paine, Long said, "there were no summer soldiers on Omaha Beach, no sunshine patriots on Utah," and that if it had not been for the Americans on D-Day "there would have been no future for democracy." Citing the bravery of the Airborne troops he tells the story of Pvt. John Steele from the 82nd Airborne Division who, in attempting to take the little town of Sainte Mère-Eglise, got his parachute caught in the tower of a medieval church; which is a scene

[40] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15189.
[41] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15186.
[42] George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 175 and 183-193.

from *The Longest Day*, both the book and the movie. Long then claimed: "we too have an obligation to the future. We must take our stands. We must act for future generations as the men in Normandy did for ours." [43]

In 1984, D-Day held such power over the imagination of Americans that those espousing a limited use of American military power thought it necessary to couch their arguments in the D-Day narrative too. Unfortunately for them, D-Day was not a useful vehicle for advocating peace. In 1984, D-Day had become the American military experience *par excellence*. Ed Markey claimed that the D-Day story "is also the story of the costs of war." Reminding his audience of the threat of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union he added, "Today the superpowers have 6,000 times the firepower that was used in World War II. Let D-day be a reminder of the consequences of war, and of our hope for peace."[44] By adopting—some might argue usurping—D-Day's symbolic value as the epitome of World War II, he made an anti-war argument using a pro-war story: Markey's argument reads like a rearguard action because D-Day is not a particularly evocative symbol for the consequences of war. Dresden, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki would have served better. But in June of 1984 the discussion of World War II was limited to remembering D-Day, understanding it as both exceptional and the epitome of World War II and America's assertion of its power abroad.

Both those supporting and denouncing an interventionist foreign policy held up D-Day as a distant mirror, reflecting what Americans, whether at home or fighting abroad, should aspire to. This was the time of Reagan's "New Patriotism," when Americans were told to be proud of themselves and to forget Vietnam. D-Day showcased what kind of people Americans supposedly were as well as the values they purportedly held. Alan Mollohan said the invasion "was

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[43] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15186.
[44] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15185.

remarkable not only because of its grand scope, intricate planning and cool bravery, but also because it became a symbol of what ordinary men with purpose and dedication can accomplish in the struggle of battle." These ordinary Americans, according to the Democratic representative from Tennessee, Marilyn Lloyd, interrupted their lives "without a murmur of complaint, accepting their responsibilities to their country and fighting with bravery and heroism." [45]

Tom Coleman, Republican of Missouri, also saw D-Day as a symbol for what America should be, and how Americans should interact with one another. "Never since," he said, "have the American people been so united on what course our Nation should take." And making a last, lightly veiled reference to the bitter divisions among Americans as a result of the Vietnam war, he added, "The years since Normandy have been filled with contentious debate about what our role should be in the world," as if to say that Americans had lost touch with one another as well as their ideals, implying that Americans should somehow go back to the spirit, not of 1776, but 1944. [46]

Retrieving World War II and D-Day was necessary for all those who wanted to overcome what in 1980 Reagan called the "Vietnam Syndrome," a term which many would appropriate. Addressing a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, Reagan reminded them that "having known war, you are in the forefront of those who know that peace is not obtained or preserved by wishing and weakness." The war in Vietnam was not a mistake, he told them: "we dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful." Emphasizing the importance of a strong military, he asked whether or not peace was ever "more certain than in the years following World War II when we had a margin of safety in our military power which was so unmistakable that others

[45] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15189.
[46] United States Congress, *Congressional Record…98th Congress*, vol. 130, part 2, 15185.

would not dare to challenge us?" [47] If the memory of Vietnam was something that needed to be overcome, the memory of World War II was the way to do it.

But the 1980s was also an important time for the veterans of World War II, not only politicians trying to inspire confidence in the American military. It is no coincidence that Tom Brokaw opens *The Greatest Generation* in 1984, or that Studs Terkel published *"The Good War"* in the same year. The 1980s was a time of generational shift, when the veterans of World War II were passing from middle age to old age. Remembering the war became more important because children and parents alike realized that time was running out. When a reporter asked John C. Hodgsen why he decided to go to the fortieth D-Day anniversary at Normandy he said, "I figured I wouldn't make the 50th anniversary." Other veterans on the same tour bus responded, "Hey, stop that. That's defeatist talk." [48] Reagan used the fortieth anniversary of D-Day to push his own ideology, in which America was a proud and magnanimous leader of the world. But Reagan did not invent the Good War. He snatched at it in 1984 because it was low hanging fruit.

And Reagan was not the first to do so, only the most successful. Although he did not make a big splash in 1971, Omar Bradley, commander of the US 1st Army on D-Day, in a forward to the compilation *D-Day: The Normandy Invasion in Retrospect*, gave the Good War narrative rudimentary shape when he called for:

> "Reflection on World War II and what it meant as a national effort; reflection on the proposition that a workable solution which gets results is better than an ideal solution which is unattainable; reflection on the personal sacrifice made by so many to defend freedom for the United States and to return individual freedom to Western Europe and the Pacific; all should be valuable in changing the perspective of our young citizens."

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[47] Ronald Reagan, "Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago Illinois, August 18, 1980," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html.

[48] Michael Dobbs, "Aged Veteran Climbs Cliff to Relive D-Day Drama," *The Washington Post*, June 6, 1984, A16.

If only those kids in the sixties would have remembered World War II they would have known how detrimental their whining about a pointless war in Vietnam really was. And if Bradley's Vietnam reference seems tacit, it comes through quite clearly in his discussion of a group of wounded soldiers he saw on June 6, 1944:

"But those twelve men learned on a beach in Normandy—as hideously as man can learn—that freedom is not a gift, and that democracy can extract both stern and unequal payment from those who share its bounty. Freedom is neither achieved nor retained without sacrifice by individuals, often in unequal measure. Many of our young men today are learning the same hard lesson in Vietnam."

If Americans could win on D-Day against the German army, they could certainly win in Vietnam against the Viet-Cong. And to drive that message home Bradley reminded his audience that, "Freedom is extended by a self-disciplined commitiment of every citizen to defend freedom where it exists and to extend real freedom to all men wherever they may be. These are the principles which free men may learn from the study of World War II." [49]

Bradley may have spoken a little too soon, but starting with Jimmy Carter, every American president except George H. W. Bush has visited the Normandy beaches during their time in office (and Nancy Reagan went by herself in 1982). [50] Before Carter, no American President in office had visited Normandy. But Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush all gave speeches there that subscribed to the Good War narrative. But just because they all told the same story does not mean they all told it for the same reason. Jimmy Carter's visit did not take place on an anniversary, but was the last stop on a world tour. His visit to Normandy was

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[49] Omar N. Bradley, "Forward," *D-Day; The Normandy Invasion in Retrospect* Eisenhower Foundation, Abilene, Kan, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), vi-viii.

[50] Donnie Radcliffe, "On the Path to the Past: Nancy Reagan at Normandy on the D-Day Anniversary," *The Washington Post*, June 7, 1982, C1.

designed to shore up relations between the United States and France. [51] Ronald Reagan had an ideology to espouse. Bill Clinton visited Normandy in the midst of the Whitewater scandal. Two months before he did, in early April, NATO recommenced the bombing of Bosnia and during his trip to Europe Clinton met with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and got him to promise to back NATO's campaign.[52] It would make sense for Clinton to remind the world about the success of American intervention in the midst of a NATO bombing campaign in Europe. When George W. Bush went to Normandy he had an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq to justify, as well as a war against terrorism. Each president had different, specific reasons to invoke the glory of D-Day, but each told the same Good War story.

They all pointed to D-Day as the turning point of the Second World War, the moment that assured Allied victory over Hitler. Reagan opened one of his speeches saying "We're here to mark that day in history when the Allied armies joined in battle to reclaim this continent to liberty," [53] while George W. Bush claimed at the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day that victory "began here, with the first footprints on the beaches of Normandy," and that it was here "where the victory was won, and where the greatest debt was owed." [54] Bill Clinton was so bold as to say that "June 6th, 1944 was the least ordinary day of the 20th century," and that it was "that exact moment on these beaches, the forces of freedom turned the tide of the twentieth century." [55] He was not alone in exaggerating the historical importance of D-Day. Bruce Nelan wrote for *Time* in

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[51] Eleanor Randolph, "Carter to Begin World Tour Dec. 28, visit 6 nations," *Chicago Tribune*, November 30, 1977, pg. 2.

[52] Bill Clinton, *My Life*, (New York: Knopf, 2004), 599.

[53] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument, Pointe du Hoc, France: June 6, 1984," http://www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/dday_pdh.asp (accessed October 24, 2007).

[54] George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush and President Chirac Marking the 60th Anniversary of D-Day, The American Cemetary: Normandy France," http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040606.html (acessed November 7, 2007).

[55] William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Omaha Beach Normandy," http://www.clintonfoundation.org/legacy/060694-speech-by-president-at-omaha-beach-normandy.html (accessed November 7, 2007).

1994 that "if the war was the century's turning point, the turning point of the war was D-day." [56] Ten years later at the National D-Day Museum, Vice-President Dick Cheney agreed that D-Day "was a moment to remember those who turned the tide of war in freedom's favor." [57]

Good War narrators make a tacit acknowledgment of the difficulty of the entire war effort by emphasizing the complexity of the D-Day landings, as well as the courage of those who took part in the invasion. A favorite story within the D-Day narrative is that of the Ranger assault on the Pointe du Hoc. On D-Day, the 2nd Ranger Battalion climbed a sheer cliff face some one hundred feet high to seize several gun emplacements. It was a daring mission, and out of the 225 soldiers that participated in the attack 99 survived. [58] In his speech at Normandy in January, 1978 President Jimmy Carter described the assault, "at one point, American Rangers had to scale a vertical hundred-foot cliff while the Germans above rolled down grenades upon them."[59] Carter invoked the Ranger attack on the Pointe du Hoc in order to stress the difficulty of the entire landing operation. At the Pointe du Hoc on June 6, 1984, with veterans of the assault present, President Ronald Reagan gave the longer of his two D-Day speeches, saying, "These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end the war." A reenactment of the assault in which young soldiers and veterans raced each other to the top of the cliff preceded the speech. [60]

But the Ranger assault is only one example. Politicians, popular media, and historians remember the entire operation for its size and complexity. Forrest Pogue, the premiere D-Day

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[56] Bruce W. Nelan, "D-Day," *Time*, June 6, 1994.

[57] Dick Cheney, "Vice-President Cheney's Remarks at D-Day Museum," http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/6021.html (accessed November 27, 2007).

[58] Douglas Brinkley,*The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc,* 5.

[59] Jimmy Carter, "Normandy, France, Remarks of the President and President Giscard d'Estaing on Visiting the Site of the D-Day Landings. Janurary 5th, 1978," http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29994 (accessed November 7, 2007).

[60] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."

historian before Stephen Ambrose, claimed that "concentrated in the mighty assault across the Channel from the ports of the United Kingdom was the power of the United States and the final surge of greatness of the British armed forces." [61] For Pogue the invasion holds an almost Platonic status as the essential military act. Ronald Reagan claimed at the Pointe du Hoc that it was "here the Allies stood and fought against tyranny in a giant undertaking unparalleled in human history." [62] In 1994 Bruce Nelan agreed that "Operation Overlord was the toughest of military propositions." [63] The historian Douglas Brinkley wrote in 2004 that "Everything about D-day was dramatic—the overarching strategy, the vast mobilization, the sheer number of troops. But it's the daring boldness and intrepid courage of the men that stands out." [64] "Nothing that followed," agreed Nancy Gibbs, commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the landings in *Time*, "surpassed in difficulty or cost the demands of the one day, when luck and fate and genius and nerve worked to give Freedom her victory." [65]

By depicting D-Day as a high risk venture followed by a resounding success, Good War supporters raise the stakes of the story. In June of 2004, President George W. Bush claimed that "in this massive undertaking, there was a plan for everything—except failure," [66] which is not precisely true, as Eisenhower had prepared a statement should the operation fail. [67] In June of 1984, Otto Friedrich wrote that "until Eisenhower made his decision, and until the highly uncertain outcome of D-day was assured, it was still theoretically possible that Hitler might yet

[61] Forrest C. Pogue, "D-Day – 1944," *D-Day; The Normandy Invasion in Retrospect* Eisenhower Foundation, Abilene, Kan, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), 9.
[62] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."
[63] Bruce W. Nelan, "D-Day," *Time*, June 6, 1994.
[64] Douglas Brinkley, "What They Saw When They Landed," *Time*, May 31, 2004.
[65] Nancy Gibbs, "The Greatest Day," *Time*, May 31, 2004.
[66] George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush."
[67] Forrest C. Pogue, "D-Day," 38.

win the war, or at least achieve a stalemate that would leave him the master of most of Europe."[68]

Another essential element of the Good War found in D-Day is the story of competent leadership. The Good War was run well, and therefore D-Day needs to have a master craftsman. Good War narrators identify this figure in General Dwight Eisenhower. Forrest Pogue concisely sums it up, understanding the importance of singularity in the D-Day story, when he writes, "As there is only one D-Day which comes to mind when the term is mentioned, there is one name above others that we associate with it – General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower." [69] In 1984 and 1994 *Time* emphasized Eisenhower's final decision to order the invasion in spite of bad weather. [70] Forrest Pogue and Stephen Ambrose did the same. In 1978 Jimmy Carter chose to mention all the major leaders of the invasion. [71] In his speech at Normandy in 2004, George W. Bush quoted Eisenhower twice. [72]

The Good War narrators also tell D-Day as a story of meaningful sacrifice. In 1984 President Reagan reminded the Rangers who attacked the Pointe du Hoc that "you all knew that some things are worth dying for. One's country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man." [73] The D-Day story is charged with imperatives to remember sacrifices made, and to live up to the debt owed to veterans. In 1994 President Clinton affirmed that "we must never forget that thousands of people gave everything they were, or what they might have become, so that

[68] Otto Friedrich, "Every Man Was a Hero," *Time*, May 28, 1984.
[69] Forrest C. Pogue, "D-Day -1944," 9.
[70] *Time*, May 28, 1984, and *Time*, June 6, 1994.
[71] Jimmy Carter, "Normandy, France, Remarks."
[72] George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush."
[73] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."

freedom might live." [74] Addressing the veterans directly Clinton told them, "we are the children of your sacrifice." [75] Before the prologue in his book, *D-Day*, Stephen E. Ambrose quotes the war correspondent Ernie Pyle who exhorts his readers to "forever be humbly grateful to those both dead and alive who did it for you." [76]

Most important was the claim that the Allies were spreading freedom through their invasion. The conflation of D-Day and World War II is most explicit when Good War narrators justify the operation in terms of moral obligation. In 1984 President Reagan went further, telling the audience gathered at Normandy that "there is a profound, moral difference between the use of force for liberation and the use of force for conquest," and spoke directly to the veterans, reminding them, "You were here to liberate, not to conquer, and so you and those others did not doubt your cause. And you were right not to doubt." [77] In 1994 President Clinton told those same veterans that "the rest of us know that the most difficult days of your life brought us 50 years of freedom." [78] Not only did they claim D-Day as a supreme moment of liberation, freedom, and democracy, but that D-Day had guaranteed American and European freedom ever since. In 1978, Jimmy Carter made sure to honor "the brave men and women of the past who have ensured our precious freedom today." [79] Clinton even intimated that with the fall of the Soviet Union, "the liberation of this continent is nearly complete," giving D-Day a modern-day significance, as if the decades in between 1944 and 1990 were beside the point. [80] Directly addressing veterans,

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[74] William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Utah Beach Ceremony Normandy," http://www.clintonfoundation.org/legacy/060694-speech-by-president-at-utah-beach-ceremony.html, (accessed November 7, 2007).

[75] William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Omaha Beach."

[76] Stephen E. Ambrose *D-Day*, 40-41 and Dwight D. Eisenhower *Crusade in Europe,* 13.

[77] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."

[78] William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Utah Beach Ceremony Normandy," and William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Omaha Beach Normandy."

[79] Jimmy Carter, "Normandy, France, Remarks."

[80] William J. Clinton, "Speech by President at Omaha Beach."

Reagan informed them, "You loved liberty. All of you were willing to fight tyranny, and you knew the people of your countries were behind you." [81]

President George W. Bush in his address at Normandy in 2004 made the most explicit reference to the Holocaust that any American president has made at a D-Day commemoration. [82] Invoking Anne Frank, Bush employed the supreme justification for America's use of armed force in 1944. Reagan, on the other hand, could not offend America's West German allies in the Cold War; he had to make do with an oblique reference to the Holocaust, saying only, "Jews cried out in the camps." [83] The Holocaust often trumps D-Day in war memory in terms of justifying the Second World War. But while the Holocaust, as President Bush demonstrated, is one of the primary justifications of that intervention, D-Day stands as the ultimate symbol of effective military intervention for a good cause.

Another Good War theme that finds fertile soil in the D-Day story is unity: at home and abroad. Forrest Pogue claims that D-Day "marked the finest hour of Anglo-American cooperation."[84] Otto Friedrich wrote in 1984 that "to more idealistic observers, the Allied invasions demonstrated the power of international cooperation," while Lance Morrow would write that "never again, perhaps, would the Allies so handsomely collaborate." [85] American presidents giving speeches at Normandy were also quick to remember the western Allies. In 1984 President Reagan praised "the unity of the Allies" on D-Day, and declared that it was at Normandy that "the West held together." [86] He also saluted those who "were already engaging

[81] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."
[82] George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush."
[83] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."
[84] Forrest C. Pogue, "D-Day – 1944," 9 and 11.
[85] Otto Friedrich, "Every Man Was a Hero," and Lance Morrow, "June 6, 1944."
[86] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument."

the enemy inside your beloved country—the French Resistance.” [87] President Clinton and George W. Bush followed suit by extending the hand of friendship to their French hosts. At the same time, they subscribed to France’s own Good War narrative, which conveniently omits any mention of Vichy.

D-Day was an effective way to remember the Allies because the USSR conveniently did not participate in the operation, allowing Good War narrators to side step questions of the Soviet Union’s contribution to defeating the Third Reich, while at the same time bolstering an image of an internationally responsible America. Reagan used D-Day to make his anti-communist “New Patriotism” clear: “We’ve learned that isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments with expansionist intent.” Carter, also concerned over the Soviet Union, claimed, “We are determined, with our noble allies here, that Europe’s freedom will never again be endangered. We now have about 200,000 Americans, fighting men, in Europe to make sure that this threat is never before us again.” [88] To emphasize that point, three days later he ordered another eight thousand American soldiers sent to Europe and an increase in defense spending from $112.9 billion to $125 billion. [89]

That the Good War story does not supply a well informed answer to why America fought in the Second World War is not an oversight, but the very point of the narrative. Invoking the past as a justification for a current interventionist policy only makes sense in an effort to avoid talking about why current wars need to be fought. Americans do not invoke the Good War to

[87] Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Normandy Invasion Ceremony, Omaha Beach Memorial at Omaha Beach, France. June 6, 1984,” http://www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/speech.asp?spid=19, (accessed November 7, 2007).

[88] Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the U.S. Ranger Monument.”

[89] Jimmy Carter, “Normandy, France, Remarks,” and “Carter Pledges to Send More Troops to Europe,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1978, pg. 1.

make a reasoned argument about war, but to avoid that argument. The Good War is both a weak explanation of the past and a manipulative explanation of the present.

Commemorating D-Day on July 1, 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney went to the National D-Day Museum and shared his thoughts on the significance of D-Day and World War II. As Cheney said, the National D-Day Museum was the only museum in the the world that "has as its central theme one day in the world's history, but what a day it was." Strange indeed there were so few museums dedicated to a single period of twenty-four hours. The vice-president made all the standard historical errors, but also stressed the similarities between America during World War II and America since September 11, 2001. Both suffered from sudden attacks and "responded by going on the offensive against freedom's enemies—in Asia, in Africa, in Europe and around the globe. Then as now, free nations came together to overthrow cruel dictators, and to liberate people suffering brutal oppression." Cheney went so far as to claim that Afghanistan and Iraq would be rebuilt, just as Germany and Japan were after 1945. Cheney's point was clear: if America could send its armies around the globe during World War II, it should be allowed to do so today. [90]

IV. D-Day: The National World War II Museum

Congress's relationship to D-Day also extends beyond 1984. In 1994 and 2004 Congress passed two practically identical bills, in 1994 declaring June 6 to be "D-Day National Remembrance Day" [91] and in 2004 simply recognizing June 6 as the sixtieth anniversary of the

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[90] Dick Cheney, "Vice-President Cheney's Remarks at D-Day Museum."

[91] United States Congress, "140 Cong. Rec. 9129 (1994) House of Representatives – Tuesday, May 3, 1994." *Heinonline.* http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.congrec/cr1400007&div=7&collection=congrec&set_as_cursor=45&men_tab=srchresults, accessed April 9, 2008.

landings. [92] Additionally, in 2004, Congress agreed to rename the National D-Day Museum the National World War II Museum, transforming what had been evocative rhetoric into something tangible. [93] D-Day had become more than the emblematic moment of the war; it was the war.

The D-Day Museum is inextricably linked to the Good War story in that it was thought up, founded, and promoted by none other than Stephen E. Ambrose. He claimed the idea for a museum about D-Day first came to him. According to Ambrose, at a meeting in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Dwight D. Eisenhower asked Ambrose if he had ever known someone by the name of Andrew Higgins, the owner of New Orleans based Higgins Industries, which designed and built the landing craft used in Normandy as well as many landings in the Pacific. [94] Ambrose responded that Higgins had died the year before he had moved to New Orleans in 1959. "'That's too bad,' Eisenhower said. 'You know he is the man who won the war for us.'" In his published memoirs, *To America*, Ambrose said that he "came away from that meeting determined someday to do something in New Orleans in recognition of what Higgins and his workers accomplished."[95] Andrew Higgins deserved a museum in his honor because Eisenhower claimed that the Higgins Boat was essential to success in D-Day, and therefore Allied victory.

According to Ambrose, the seed money for the museum came from the federal government, the House Appropriations Committee had set aside $4 million dollars, and many private donations from such people as Tim Forbes of the *American Heritage* publishing company and Peter Kalikow, one-time owner of the *New York Post*. [96] The State of Louisiana provided around $6 million in total, and after the success of his book, *D-Day*, Ambrose was able to put in

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[92] United States Congress, "Public Law 108-236, 108th Congress" *Govtrack.us*. http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=sj108-28, accessed April 9, 2008.

[93] Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2004.

[94] Ambrose met with Eisenhower to help edit the former president's papers. Ambrose later wrote a two volume biography of Eisenhower.

[95] Stephen E. Ambrose, *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 201.

[96] Stephen E. Ambrose, *To America*, 207 and 204.

$2 million out of his own pocket. In 1998, after the release of Steven Spielberg's popular film, *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg, the actor Tom Hanks, and Tom Brokaw all made donations to the museum. [97] The museum's original mission statement clearly established the institution as a physical articulation of the Good War. A place that, "celebrates the American Spirit, the teamwork, optimism, courage, and sacrifice of the men and women who won World War II and promotes the exploration and expression of these values by future generations." [98]

"The idea is to bring the whole story to life with personal accounts," Nick Mueller, the chairman of the museum, said before it opened in 2000. [99] Both Ambrose and Cornelius Ryan wrote their books using the oral histories of soldiers, and Tom Brokaw's book uses personal testimonies to discuss the generation that fought the war. From the beginning the museum intended to tell its story of D-Day through veterans' accounts, using the American Experience to capture the American Spirit.

The National D-Day Museum opened on June 6, 2000, and Ambrose called it a "smashing success." There was a parade with 10,000 veterans. Ships from the American, French, Norwegian, and British navies came. Pilots made fly-bys of the parade in period World War II aircraft as well as modern jets. The Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, gave a speech and so did former President George H.W. Bush. Even Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks were there, asking Army Rangers for their autographs. [100]

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[97] Stephen E. Ambrose, *To America*, 207-209.

[98] Meg Cahill, "RE: Jason from Columbia University," personal e-mail message from the National World War II Museum, February 27, 2008.

[99] "World War II Museum to Open in June," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2000, pg. 26.

[100] Stephen E. Ambrose, *To America*, 209.

The idea for a national World War II Museum was first raised in reaction to the Smithsonian Museum's Enola Gay controversy in 1994 and 1995. The Smithsonian had created an exhibit on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki featuring the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Led by the American Legion, some claimed the exhibit was too critical of the United States and centered too much on the victimization of the Japanese. A very visible and drawn-out debate ensued, and Congress eventually held an investigation on the exhibit. Under pressure, the Smithsonian removed all writing from the exhibit and left only the plane, allowing visitors to work things out for themselves. According to the National World War II Museum's historian in residence, Marty Morgan, the Smithsonian's disgrace was an inspiration for creating a National World War II Museum, where controversies of the kind the Smithsonian faced would not happen. [101]

The bill to transform the National D-Day Museum into the National World War II Museum was initially introduced on May 14, 2003 by a Republican congressman from Louisiana, David Vitter. The bill was referred, fittingly enough on June 6, to the Subcommittee on Readiness, where it died. But it was later resurrected and passed into law in 2004 as section 8134 of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act of 2004, where it had been stuck in under section heading "Miscellaneous". [102] The act was hundreds of pages long and included the budget for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The text of the bill was left unchanged. Although not enough people were interested in transforming the D-Day museum into the World War II museum for the bill to pass on its own, someone allocating money to the Department of Defense had thought it was a good idea, and that was enough.

[101] Marty Morgan, interview.
[102] United States Congress, "Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2004."

As to why the United States needed a National World War II Museum, Vitter argued that it was urgent to remember the "greatest generation" who were "dying at a rate of more than 1,200 each day…No other museum seeks to describe the volunteer spirit that arose throughout the United States during the war years of World War II – the spirit that united the country." The museum should communicate "the magnitude of the American contribution to the Allied victory in World War II, the sacrifices made to preserve freedom and democracy, and the benefits of peace for all future generations in the 21st century and beyond." Vitter's bill collapsed World War II into a single day, and touched most of the themes of the Good War narrative of the battle. What began as a rhetorical device to justify war and make Americans feel good about themselves, now enshrined by Congress as the official American memory of World War II. [103]

The museum never fully changed its name to the National World War II Museum. Instead it compromised, calling itself: "D-Day: The National World War II Museum." The museum occupies a large square building that was once a German brewery, and stands on the western edge of New Orleans's Warehouse District. As you approach the building, you notice that the sidewalk is paved with bricks, each branded with an engraved dedication. One reads "Ken Broo, 978th Field Artillery," and another, "Ross E. Geren, US Army, 3rd ARM. DIV." [104] There are hundreds of them, all bearing a different name. Before you enter the building, the museum tells you what kind of history it will relate: everyman's history, everyman's experience.

The façade is three stories of glass, crisscrossed with steel. Through it you can see the large room the museum calls the "Louisiana Pavilion." Hanging from the ceiling is a C-47 Dakota, the plane the Americans used to drop their paratroopers into France on the night of June

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[103] United States Congress, "Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2004."

[104] The following discussion of the National World War II Museum is founded on a site visit on the days of January 7 and 8 of 2008.

5, 1944. Next to it hangs a Spitfire, a British fighter plane that patrolled the skies above the beaches on D-Day. From unseen speakers you hear classics which evoke the war experience, songs like "Accentuate the Positive" and Nat King Cole singing "Straighten Up and Fly Right." The room is filled with the toys and tools of war. Jeeps, a half-track, artillery, a M4 Sherman Tank, a German 88mm flak gun, even a Twin-Disc Inc Marine Transmission Mode 1 MG101, the transmission used in three different kinds of landing craft. But holding the place of honor is the LCVP, an acronym for Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel, also known as the Higgins Boat, the reason the museum stands in New Orleans. It is square, missing most of the features one associates with a boat. It has a flat bottom and is essentially a box with a motor whose front door can be dropped open, allowing soldiers or a jeep to disembark quickly. Next to it stands an old man with a baseball cap on, which is emblazoned in yellow letters: "US Navy." Around his neck is a laminated badge stating in large letters that he was a veteran of World War II, "What can I tell you about the boat?" he will ask you. He will ask you because he is there to tell visitors about what it was like to drive a Higgins Boat, as he did during the war. Around the museum other white-haired men wander, talking to visitors and to one another. They are volunteer docents, all veterans of the war.

While the museum has expanded its story beyond D-Day since becoming the National World War II Museum, it has not abandoned the useful and evocative structure of the D-Day narrative. The museum is divided into four general sections. One deals with the origins of the Second World War, with most of the guilt being laid squarely on the shoulders of Germany and Japan, and some lip service paid to Italy. The second looks at the home front, about half of which is a room entitled "New Orleans: Home of the Higgins Boats" which goes into great depth about Andrew Higgins the man, and the importance of the boats his company built. The third section is

devoted almost entirely to the planning and execution of the June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion. At the end of this exhibit are two rooms titled, "D-Day: The Aftermath," and "The Nazis Quit," meant to address everything that happened in Europe after June 6.

Following the path the museum lays out, you finally find yourself in the last permanent exhibit of the museum, "Pacific D-Days." America's war against Japan is depicted as a series of amphibious landings against defended positions, with Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa being only a few. Each landing is described as a D-Day, which is both accurate and misleading. Indeed, any amphibious landing operation could have been described as a D-Day. But D-Day is a loaded term. Alone it means June 6, 1944, and all the associations that go along with Operation Overlord. By framing America's war against Japan in terms of D-Days, the symbolic meaning of June 6 is applied to an entirely different theater of the war, and to battles that in no way resemble the one fought in Normandy.

Throughout the museum are little booths, not much larger than confessionals, and in each there is a bench placed in front of a television screen underneath which are four to six buttons. Depending on which button you pushed, you will see different segments of stock footage from newsreels spliced together with still images from the 1930s or 1940s of some young person, often wearing a uniform. Into the booth is piped a segment of an oral history, each button activating a segment no longer than two minutes. There are fourteen such stations sprinkled throughout the museum and holding the stories together like a web are artifacts, posters, interactive displays, overhead slide shows, short movies, and life-sized recreations of battle scenes. The museum relates a military history powered by these individual stories and constructs its narrative not as a linear argument with one point following from the next, but instead as a

constellation of personal accounts, implying meaning rather than overtly arguing it. When put together these individual histories tell a Good War story.

The museum recounts America's part in the war in Europe by first depicting America before the war, and then leading the visitor through the D-Day exhibit. In the oral history exhibit "The World Before War" Barney Oldfield, a native of Elk Creek, Nebraska claims that "It looked like the nation was really coming apart." Dick Winters, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, asserts that everyone hoped the war abroad would end without American involvement, while Martha Settle Putney from Norristown, Pennsylvania says that "I knew in 1936 Hitler was going to be a problem." [105] Each of these personal remembrances is loaded with historical claims about why the United States fought in World War II. All give the United States the moral high ground and justify its involvement, while also making a tacit claim that the war was good for the United States. The country was divided, claims Barney Oldfield, but of course, as the museum later argues and as the Good War story generally claims, the United States was never more united than it was during World War II. Dick Winters thought it would be better not to fight, implying that Americans are a peaceful people, while Martha Putney's claim that she knew Hitler was a "problem" suggests that the United States, as some kind of guiding moral authority, was justified in invading Europe.

But is it right to say that these people are mis-remembering World War II and its significance? Oral histories are cut and assembled by the historian to tell a particular story, just as textual evidence is selected and arranged. The reason experiential history becomes so problematic in the Good War narrative is because the evidence being harnessed is treated as something sacred, and therefore off limits to criticism. Although the oral history is edited, to

[105] Dick Winters's personal history was one of the central narratives of Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers*, as well as that of the television series.

disagree with the implications of Martha Putney's claims seems irreverent. To question the "greatest generation's" claims about their own lives seems arrogant. The museum, along with other Good War narrators, uses that fact to hide weak historical arguments behind unassailable human faces.

"The Men and Women of Higgins Industries" features five short segments of oral testimony. The booth is in a room dedicated to the boats built by Higgins Industries. Posters and model boats dominate the room. A written panel claims that Higgins's role "in the war is little known today, but his contribution to the Allied victory was immeasurable," in that the landing craft he built "gave Allied planners greater flexibility. They no longer needed to attack heavily defended ports before landing an assault force." The oral history booth features Ruben Bernard, a welder for Higgins Industries during the war, who was grateful, in light of the Great Depression, to be able to find steady work as well as an engineer. Graham Haddock remembered that Higgins Industries "had a lot of good people," all of whom were "trying to do their best for the war effort." As well, Lloyd Lovitt, a US Navy inspector at Higgins Industries, remembered a reporter who wrote a rough draft of an article about Andrew Higgins that seemed more like it was about Napoleon, Genghis Kahn, or Jesus Christ: "He had become famous," and he was "the big war production chieftain."

The museum's praise for Andrew Higgins and his boats is not just hero worship. In fact, the museum's admiration of Higgins and the landing craft is doing heavy narrative work that subtly eschews a historical analysis while still making a bold historical claim. By making Andrew Higgins and the LCVP important, the museum portrays D-Day as the central narrative of World War II without having to discuss critically why D-Day was so essential to defeating the Third Reich. In elevating an object from a tool to something almost sacred, as the museum does

with the LCVP, and by portraying Higgins as a visionary for designing the boat, the museum implies that the purpose to which it was put, the landing of troops on D-Day, was equally important. By praising the boat and by placing Higgins Industries in the context of the "war effort" narrative the museum can conflate World War II with D-Day without ever having to critically evaluate D-Day.

And as you pass out of the room praising Higgins and his boats, you enter the D-Day exhibit.

The D-Day exhibit, which doubles as an exhibit for all of America's war effort in Europe, opens with a German perspective, just like the first chapter in Stephen Ambrose's *D-Day*. This German perspective is literal: there is a full scale recreation of the telemetry room of the Riva Bella Fire Direction Tower in Ouistreham, Normandy. You walk inside and look through the narrow slits of the concrete to see a low, grey sky over the English Channel. Standing with you in the room is a stereoscopic rangefinder which, one can read, allowed the Germans to fire accurately at the approaching ships.

The oral history booth in this room is titled "Defending Fortress Europe." But this booth is slightly different from the others, not only in that it gives a German perspective, but also in how that perspective is portrayed. First, there is the issue of whose voice you are hearing, "These programs are the actual words of German soldiers who served in Normandy. The words are read by actors." But even though actors are reading English translations of German accounts, they still read them with German accents. Also, while the oral history segments in the other exhibits are individualized, with the name of each speaker clearly labeled, these oral histories are organized thematically. The first button you push is "Building the Atlantic Wall," and the actors inform us, among other things, that slave labor was used to build the Wehrmacht's Normandy fortifications.

In "Defending the Atlantic Wall," you hear that not every German soldier was totally committed to the defense of France. "Training" tells you that crack troops were sent to Normandy, and older troops received intensive training while waiting for the Allies to attack. Last, in "Waiting" you hear that the Germans thought the Americans were "wild, wild west," that they were brave but had little experience, and that the defenders were confident they could repel the invasion.

Although Stephen Ambrose did not personally design this exhibit, his influence is obvious to anyone who has read his book, *D-Day*. [106] The museum distances the enemy, not by completely dehumanizing him, but by depriving him of his own voice. The names of the people whose words are being read do appear on the television screen when the actors are speaking, but in their foreignness they are easily forgettable. That the participants own voices are removed, when subtitles could easily have been added using the available television screen, shows that the museum is clearly not interested in a German perspective in any way other than bolstering their particular view of who the Americans were and what they stood for. Knowing that the Atlantic Wall was built with slave labor lets visitors know that the Americans had the moral high ground and justifies the battle from the American perspective without actually addressing the battle. While the Americans were united at home and abroad, the Germans were divided, implying that every American wanted to fight.[107]

If the Germans had been fighting for a good reason, like the Americans supposedly were, they would have all been dedicated to the defense of the Atlantic Wall. That the Germans were well-trained is meant to emphasize the difficulty of the Allied task and therefore make it seem

[106] Marty Morgan, interview.

[107] Which, of course, is not true. In 1949 Samuel A. Stouffer published a statistical study of the American Army during the Second World War. He found that the two most commonly given answers for why the infantry continued to fight were: 1) not to let their buddies down and, 2) because they did not want their families to lose their pay and benefits if they were court-martialed. That same survey concluded that only 5 percent of them fought for an idealistic reason. Only 13 percent of them could name three of Roosevelt's four freedoms, and 33 percent could name none. Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever,* 172 and 87-88.

more impressive in its success, while the German confidence in victory implies that the victory was hard won, and never guaranteed. Similar to the elevation of the Higgins boat, the German oral histories depict D-Day as a gargantuan and essential success for the Allied war effort, but, beyond aesthetic explanations, never say why.

The depiction of the battle of D-Day starts with a life-size recreation of a glider that has crash landed. On the night of June 5, 1944, C-47 Dakotas dropped paratroopers over France and also tugged glider aircraft that could detach themselves and set down at landing zones marked earlier in the evening. As you enter the room titled, “Nightdrop in Normandy” you hear the sounds of crickets and cicadas and the drone of planes far away, interrupted by distant and sporadic gunfire. Half the room is dominated by a broken down glider, nestled in a hedgerow.

But the D-Day beaches dominate the museum’s portrayal of the battle. Specifically, two beaches: those code-named Utah and Omaha, which was where the Americans landed. While there is a full room given to Utah beach, and several to Omaha, only two sectioned walls are given to the other three, Juno, Gold, and Sword, where the British, French, Canadians, and Poles landed.

The museum pays closest attention to Omaha beach, the site of the day’s heaviest fighting. Overall, the entire D-Day operation cost relatively few casualties, but the vast majority of American deaths occurred on Omaha beach. The plan was that amphibious tanks were to land on the beach prior to the arrival of the infantry and lay down suppressive fire on German defensive positions, providing the disembarking soldiers with cover to attack the enemy’s strongholds. But most of those amphibious tanks foundered in the high swells of the English Channel, their crews drowning inside. One after another the tanks were put into the water and sank. While the commanders of the 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th division, along with the 16th

Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, had expected high casualties, the ensuing carnage, with entire boatloads of men shot before any could disembark, came as a shock. Moreover, German beach obstructions kept disembarking soldiers from moving off the beach, and for a time it seemed that the landings at Omaha would fail. Over 1,000 men were killed on the beach before soldiers were able to open a "drawer" and begin assaulting German positions.

The museum puts Omaha at the center of its D-Day narrative, devoting the most space to its story, much as Steven Spielberg centered his portrayal of the landings in *Saving Private Ryan* around Omaha beach. And like Spielberg's portrayal, the assault on the beach is understood solely through the experience of the men who landed in the first waves of the invasion. The exhibit on Omaha beach is divided into several sub-sections: "Visitors to Hell," "The 116th Infantry Regiment at Omaha," "The Rangers of Pointe du Hoc," "The Struggle to Survive," and "Turning the Tide." In the oral history booths, Private Felix Branham, of the 116th Infantry Regiment, remembered "chaos, blood, brains" as well as arms, legs, and heads removed from their owners. It was hard for him not to step on bodies. Lt. Col. Bill Friedman, of the 16th Infantry Regiment, had similar memories of a "mass of intertwined bodies." Trying to reach the lee of a hill, Friedman saw a group ahead of him killed and maimed by buried mines. The wounded survivors started feeling around where they had fallen in order to indicate a safe path for the soldiers following them. Sgt. Bob Slaughter, from the 116th, saw someone get caught in the propeller of a landing craft, but qualified this statement by saying it felt good to see the armada behind him in the English Channel, "backing him up." Likewise, an interview with Sgt. Malin Pike, who landed at Utah, remembered being confident on landing that they were "going to win the war."

Omaha was an aberration. Most of the beach landings were not so bloody. But a battle is not a battle without blood. The *Chanson de Roland* would lack its visceral punch if the Saracens did not manage to slay Roland, and how could we empathize with the rage of Achilles if Patrocles did not fall outside the walls of Troy? World War II was the bloodiest war in history, and if D-Day is to be *the* battle of the war it needs to be equally bloody. D-Day needs to be a hard won battle, even if most of the beaches were taken with little fighting. Therefore Omaha dominates the museum's story, and what the museum emphasizes is the battle's brutality. Centering the narrative on "bloody Omaha" gives D-Day a legitimacy it would otherwise lack. And while one could interpret the violence as an indicator of the criminality of war, one could also see it as bloody varnish of glory, not insanity.

The museum, like the Presidents at the D-Day anniversaries, also singles out the story of Pointe du Hoc, featuring it in their oral history exhibit for the battle. 1st Sgt. Len Lomell, of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, remembered the intensity of the fighting as he and his men scaled the cliffs below the German position, but said, "You just take it as it comes and do what you're trained to do. We're not heroes, we're just good rangers." Again, it is everyman's story. They are heroes, they are humble, but they are also just like anyone else.

The oral histories are not the only way the museum conveys experiential history. Throughout the Omaha exhibit are glass cases holding seemingly trivial artifacts, each loaded with sentimental and symbolic meaning. Earlier in the museum most of the artifacts had to do with what the soldiers carried, either their equipment or their weapons. For example, in one section titled "Final Preparations," which displays what American soldiers carried with them when they landed in France, there is included a package of condoms. These might seem self-

explanatory, but according to the museum, "Troops found these useful in keeping sand and water out of rifle barrels."

In the Omaha beach exhibit, some of the artifacts are designed to create a sense of proximity between the visitor and a historical figure. For example, on a wall is an image of a large landing craft sinking, LCL(L) 85. In the picture is a man, who we are told is Elmer Carmichael. In the glass case next to the photograph is the helmet that Carmichael is wearing in that very same photograph. But the artifacts do more than create a sense of proximity, they are also loaded with tacit arguments. In the same glass case is a watch with a wrist protector. It is important because it belonged to Harold Baumgarten, who received five combat wounds on D-Day and lived. How he received each would is described in detail, but ultimately the point is this, "Although in great pain and with enemy fire killing men all around him, he advanced toward the sea wall at Vierville… Despite his wounds, Baumgarten continued to move forward."

A variation on the same theme is the case holding the bullet pulled from Kenneth T. Delaney's foot, "Although shot in the foot, Delaney assisted more seriously injured soldiers. Days later, doctors removed this bullet from him. Delaney earned the Bronze Star for his service aiding the wounded on D-Day." It is everyman's history, true, but it is more than that. It is "everyman is a hero" history. There is a difference. The former is an attempt to compensate for the elitist tendency in history to assign greater historical meaning and influence to a few individuals, like generals and world leaders. The latter is, among other things, an attempt to glorify violence and to make a bold claim about the righteousness of war.

In the last room of the Omaha exhibit, a television shows a movie made up of segments of veterans speaking about their experiences on D-Day. There is no bench or chair in front of the television and it is placed in a corner. The result is that most visitors stop in front of it for only a

moment as they continue to walk through the museum, but the voices of those veterans echo throughout the entire room. As you look at the artifacts and pictures, their voices provide a constant commentary. Among other exhortations, one that stands out is, "Don't let the story die;" it was to preserve the story that this veteran "was given the power to talk."

As you leave the beaches, the museum finishes the story of the war in Europe very quickly. An oral history exhibit, "After D-Day" gives the general shape of the Good War story to which the museum ascribes. Most of the testimonies pertain to the experience of combat, but the last from Staff Sgt. Preston McNeil differs in the rhetorical work it does. A member of the 761st Tank Battalion, he was present at the liberation of a concentration camp. He describes the gas chambers, furnaces, seeing a "mad-scientist" laboratory where human remains were preserved in jars, as well as survivors dying from malnutrition. Later, he went to his tank and cried, "I really didn't believe anybody could do something that terrible," he said. It was "something you thought you'd never see in life." The Holocaust makes an unannounced and disjointed entrance into the D-Day narrative, much more explicitly than anything Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, or George W. Bush said in their speeches at Normandy.

In the last room of the exhibit, next to a panel labeled "The Cost of Victory," one can read a quotation from Captain Dick Winters of the 101st Paratroopers. "The memory of starved, dazed men who dropped their eyes and heads when we looked at them through the chain-link fence…leaves feelings that cannot be described…those people behind that fence left me saying, only to myself, 'Now I know why I am here.'" The museum justified D-Day using aesthetics. This historical argument, that America fought the Second World War to end the Holocaust, is simply false.

The museum ends the exhibit with one last justification, but it is one of the few that is ever overtly articulated. "The Americans who fought in Europe came to the continent not as conquerors but as liberators. They came and fought because they had to," the last panel says, quoting almost verbatim from Ronald Reagan's 1984 speech. "Often what held them together was not country and flag, but unit cohesion—loyalty to those who served beside them. Still, most also believed that this was a war that had to be waged." The war was not only fought by everyday men, but it was also fought for noble ends. "Their sacrifice was the most profound any person can offer. Their legacy is a safer, more humane world. And for this we must be forever grateful." If anyone were to leave the museum wondering what the point of all that bloodshed was, they could set their heart as rest. America made the world safer, and America ended the Holocaust. Because the link between D-Day and the Holocaust is so tendentious, as is the conflation of D-Day with the entire war against Germany, it makes sense that the museum would call on an unhistorical justification to finish its story.

Experiential history is a useful tool for hiding the loosely bound seams of the Good War story because the evidence itself seems sacrosanct. The museum favors a specific kind of experience for its story. On its website it invites veterans to submit their own oral history, either through an interview or by submitting a statement. The museum suggests certain "Oral History Guidelines." The Guidelines offer questions which are meant to guide a person in creating his personal narrative, or to conduct an interview with a veteran. It is assumed that the person giving their history is, or should be, a veteran, "Did you enlist or were you drafted?" And as the museum likes to distill its history into pivotal moments, it asks "Where were you when you found out about Pearl Harbor?" "Where were you on VE-Day?" and "Where were you on VJ-

Day?" The vast majority of the other questions do not relate to *why* the person decided to fight, or *why* they thought the war was necessary. Instead, the questions run in the vein of pure military experience, "What weapon(s) did you qualify on during basic training? (M1903 rifle? M1 rifle?)," or "What qualification level did you achieve? (Marksman? Sharpshooter? Expert?)," or, "What type of equipment were you issued before you deployed overseas?" or "Were you involved in any invasions? (If 'yes' please describe)."

Besides the technical fascination these questions reveal, there is also a certain human interest betrayed, but not an interest in the *individual*. Instead, the museum is looking for the "buddy" narrative that is critical to the Good War story, "Describe the people you trained with in basic training?", and "Did you admire your commanding officer?", and "Did you admire the people you served with?" Stephen Ambrose did write a book called *Band of Brothers*, and based on the importance the museum ascribes to heroism and unity, one can imagine that it is looking for answers that fall into line with those themes. It is clear in the word choice. The question was not, How did you feel towards your commanding officer, but did you *admire* him. Competent leadership is important to the Good War. [108]

But another kind of experiential history finds its way into the narrative the museum creates. In the entrance hall, on a podium in front of the Higgins Boat, is a notebook, and above it a plaque that reads:

> "We are collecting information on the involvement of 'small boats' in U.S. amphibious warfare from 1939 through 1974. We would GREATLY appreciate it if all WWII, Korean War and Viet Nam vets who landed in LCPs, LCP(L)s, LCSs, LCPRs, LCVPs,

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[108] "Oral History Guidelines." National World War II Museum, http://www.nationalww2museum.org/legacy/oralguidlines, accessed 11/6/2007.

The museum asks two other revealing questions, "Were you ever taken under enemy fire? (If 'yes' please describe)", and, perhaps more importantly, "Did you return fire? (If 'yes' please describe)." In 1947 Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall claimed that, in both Europe and the Pacific, seventy-five to eighty-five percent of American troops did not fire their weapons at the front line. The claim became controversial in the late 1980s and the question of the claim's veracity has still not been answered. Edward Wood, *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*, 42.

> LCMs, & LVTs during WARTIME conditions would sign this register. Please indicate where & when you landed & in what type of boat you rode."

Although the museum wanted information from veterans, most of the entries are not from them. Instead the children of these men used the notebook as an opportunity to record their reactions to the museum. Many thank the museum for telling the story their fathers would not tell them. On September 9, 2007, someone wrote, "William H. Brintump, NY – USMC – Guadalcanal, a mortar man, my father. Never spoke much about the war because of his own personal reasons, but this museum filled in all the blanks for me – his daughter." Beneath this another wrote, "Robert D. Wilt – U.S.M.C – Guadalcanal, my father [also] never spoke much about his time overseas either (just above)! He received [a] Bronze Star. This museum is a great honor to him and all the soldiers that served." Kathy Clair, the daughter of a U.S. Marine, Wendell Iverson Hall, wrote on December 15, 2007, "My Daddy fought in the Pacific. Each time he tried to talk about the war he could never get passed the story of the landing where they had misjudged the tide and all those 5'2" [sic] and under drowned because their backpacks were so heavy. Thankfully Daddy was 6'4 ½". He was proud to be a Marine and proud of his service to the U.S.A."

Even though Cornelius Ryan was writing experiential history in the 1950s, this form of evidence has become more pertinent in the past twenty years. In May of 2001, a short article appeared in the *New York Times* under the title, "Stories From Silence." Similar to veterans from other wars, it claimed, "the veterans of World War II came home from combat with silence on their lips," but the question of how to memorialize them "gains in urgency" with each passing year. "By the end of this decade," the article said, "most of those veterans will be gone." The children of those veterans who wrote in the World War II Museum's notebook were very aware that those gaps in their fathers' and uncles' stories could never be filled. Many find experiential

history to be important, not because of the history being related, but because of those relating it. Standing on the edge of the abyss, all the final words gain new meaning and land on the ear with more weight. These testimonies are not simply evidence, they are last words. The museum provides these stories and serves the emotional needs, not only of the generation that fought the war, but their children as well. "For the nation as a whole," the article continued, "the collective memory of World War II has been broken up by time, and what remains is individual memory, which becomes more and more precious as it becomes scarcer and scarcer. What we want now, as a result, is not the saga of the broad historical canvas of World War II – the sweep of international conflict – but the individual stories themselves, the ones that so many veterans did not know how or chose not to tell."

The museum should not be seen as only an articulation of a specific argument about American foreign policy and American righteousness, although it certainly is that too. It should also be seen as a place built to cope with death, not those that occurred in the war abroad, but those occurring now at home. The Good War gives meaning to violence, but it also gives meaning to individual lives slipping away. [109]

V. The Experience of Violence

All these interpretations of the experience of violence have an end in mind. They all want to make a specific argument: that World War II was good, that the men who fought were all heroes, that we should all be willing to fight again. But there is another way of interpreting the experience of battle, one that does not immediately lend itself to the preoccupations of history.

War and Peace is a brilliant and beautiful book for many reasons. Among them is Tolstoy's awareness of the weakness of language and symbols in the presence of death.

[109] "Stories From Silence," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2001, A10.

Symbolism breaks down as one draws nearer to death, and an object or action that would be loaded with meaning in peace becomes meaningless in war. [110]

Tolstoy has the young Nikolai Rostov look death in the face for the first time at Schöngraben, a minor battle in the weeks before Austerlitz. When Nikolai charges across the line separating the Russian and French armies, his horse is shot out from under him. Getting up, nothing makes sense. The French are no longer the French, they are simply men who wear blue coats. “Well, here are some people,” Nikolai thinks, “They’ll help me!” But as Nikolai realizes that these men are the enemy, he thinks, “Who are they? Why are they running? Can it be they’re running to me? Can it be? And why? To kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so?” And then Nikolai remembered his mother’s love for him, and he remembered the love of his family and friends, and to him “the enemy’s intention to kill him seemed impossible.” [111]

And years later, when Nikolai has become a seasoned veteran, he realizes, “when telling about military events, people always lied, as he himself had lied in telling about them; second, he had enough experience to know that in war everything goes on quite otherwise than we can imagine and recount.” [112]

It is proximity to death, Tolstoy tells us, violent death especially, which renders systems of meaning useless. Language, right and wrong, even cause and effect cease to have any explanatory power in battle. Violence in war cannot be described in terms of meaning because that violence is not experienced as something meaningful, only as something bizarre and terrible. In that shadowy place between the two armies into which he charged, between life and death, all

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[110] My analysis of *War and Peace* has come almost entirely from Liza Knapp. I took her course on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky at Columbia University my last semester of college. Before her course I had not realized how much literature gives us both emotional and intellectual tools for making sense of the human condition. History should do the same, and I see no reason to compartmentalize two studies that share a common goal.

[111] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Vol. I, Part II, ch. XIX, p.189.

[112] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Vol. III, Part I, ch. XII, p.647.

the systems of meaning created by human civilization ceased to function, leaving poor Nikolai Rostov at a loss for how to describe it. He cannot explain battle using words, because words imply meaning while the experience of violence does not.

The National World War II Museum, politicians, and Good War historians tell the story of D-Day as one full of meaning, relying heavily on experiential history. But those who fought on D-Day and after, like Nikolai Rostov, do not recount D-Day as something full of symbolic value. It is not just that these veterans do not ascribe the same meaning to the fighting on June 6 as the Good War narrative, it is that most of them grant it almost no meaning at all.

For the veterans of D-Day, the singularity of the event, the unity of time, place, and action which is so important to the Good War story of the battle, does not exist. John Robert Slaughter was a Staff Sergeant who landed at Omaha Beach on June 6 with the 116th Infantry Regiment, the 29th Division. Someone asked him whether D-Day was his most memorable experience in the war, and he responded, "Well, I tell you, we had so many of them. I mean every day was a memorable experience. They were all bad. I mean I've had, you know – I didn't get hit on D-Day, but I sure did get hit up at Vire and up at Saint Lô." [113] What made a moment memorable for Slaughter was getting wounded, not its historical importance. But more importantly, the distillation of the war made by the National World War II Museum and the politicians makes little sense to someone who experienced combat over months.

Jesse Beazley, a private first class who landed on Omaha Beach with the 2nd Infantry Division, also explodes the singularity of D-Day, "They say, well, a major battle is a major battle, but we fought a battle every day. My outfit was in combat, starting from Omaha Beach

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[113] John Robert Slaughter, "John Slaughter Collection," interview by Martha E. Hopkins, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/9, ~ 2001.

there, I think it was out of a year, 337 days – you can look that up on the record, but I think that's right – that we was in combat, and that was every day. We was fighting everyday of our lives."[114]

Veterans remembering D-Day usually do not place it in a larger historical context, but as would be expected and as is natural, think of D-Day as a part of their own story. As a result, when most veterans are asked to recall D-Day, they remember it primarily as a battle they took part in, not as a hallowed historical event.

But that does not mean that veterans are not aware that they are telling history when they remember their experiences. Jesse Beazley, in an unsolicited oral testament, one without an interviewer, says at the very beginning that he thought it was necessary to let future generations know about the war and "what it's like." He promises to "tell it like it is." "I think the American people needs to know what war is," Beazley says, "They don't know. They don't really know. Only the ones that's lost sons, and they don't know what they went through, they don't know all the suffering they put up with. I'll try – that's the reason I'm putting this on here, in the hope it will be a help to somebody." As late as 2004, when he made his testament, after the praise of D-Day had reached its apogee of symbolic value, Beazley felt that Americans did not own up to the experience of violence in war. He felt that the experience had not been communicated well enough, and he says that is so because "the American people are fortunate people, you've not had bombs dropped on you, you've not seen the dead that I've seen, you've not seen the slaughter that I've seen, you have not suffered the things that we have suffered. I'm talking about the ones that died and the ones that are still living, we'll never get over it." Although Beazley clearly wants to communicate the experience of battle, he also tacitly admits that it is impossible

[114] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection," self-interview, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/10474, January 13, 2004.

to really do so. For him there is something too terrible in it, that in spite of the history he tells, one full of horrific memories, he comes to the conclusion that Americans will still not understand what he is talking about. [115] The same sentiment was expressed by Jay S. Adams, another private first class who landed at Normandy on June 6, with the 37th Engineering Battalion, when he said in an interview he gave in 2001, "If you hadn't seen it, it's hard for anybody to believe it in trying to explain it to 'em, just exactly how it was." [116]

That thing that keeps men like Beazley and Adams from fully conveying the experience of battle is the effect of a prolonged proximity to violent death. When William Jennings Arnett's niece asked him if his experience in the war, where he landed on Utah Beach as a Sergeant with the 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 5th Division, helped him later in life, he told her that being in combat did not help him with his job, "Of course, it changes you. Anybody that is in the combat zone is completely changed." When she asked him to elaborate on what he meant, he said, "Well, I would say after about a week in combat you are old. I don't care if you are 19 years old or what, but you are an old person," and that, "when you are in combat, you know that you could be killed or hurt. No doubt about it." [117]

Beazley described something similar when he remembered coming in to Omaha Beach on a landing craft, "And I couldn't see anything because I was hunkered down in the boat as we went in, but I do remember seeing the looks on the faces of the young men, most of them was 18, 19 years old, we had kidded in life like soldiers do, but all at once it got complete silence, and young men looked like old men." They looked old because they were afraid of dying in some horrible way. Beazley remembered thinking, "I didn't know whether I'd get hit and lose my legs

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[115] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection."

[116] Jay S. Adams, "Jay S. Adams Collection," interview by Thomas A. Swope, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/151, July 5, 2001.

[117] William Jennings Arnett, "William Arnett Collection," interviewed by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/998, ~ 2001.

or my sight or I'd get killed quick, or I'd make it." And what was on his mind was not liberation, or sacrifice, or unity, or the size of the invasion, but instead, "I thought of my home, and my mom, and my dog, and my friends, and then I wondered how in the world this come me to be here in this situation, a young man, realizing that probably I didn't have much chance to live because I knew what was ahead of us there." [118]

Jay S. Adams remembered landing on Omaha Beach and coming to the top of a hill where he saw his best friend who had been in a different boat during the landing. When they saw each other "he jumped on my dozer there, throwed his arms around me, and the tears just run out of his eyes. He's so happy to see that I made it." [119] Tolstoy describes a line between two opposing armies as a line between life and death. When you approach the line, all the elaborate structures of meaning and understanding humans create for themselves cease to explain what is happening. Approaching death, especially with a healthy body, runs too much against the grain for a person to make sense of, and for the men who landed on D-Day, their memories affirm that.

This proximity to death silenced those who came home. Many say that it took somewhere between fifteen and twenty years before they felt they could begin to talk about their experiences in battle. If the violence they experienced had meaning, it would lend itself to words. But for them the experience of war was not suitable to be spoken of, or could not be spoken of. In 1994 someone asked the question of how the war changed James R. McCartney, who landed with the 2nd Armored Division at Omaha Beach four days after D-Day, and he said, "Oh it was pretty impressive the first few years. The first or 15 years, I couldn't even talk—I wouldn't have been able to talk like we are tonight for 10 or 15 years and I couldn't go to a funeral. There were many

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[118] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection."
[119] Jay S. Adams, "Jay S. Adams Collection."

things I couldn't get myself to do." [120] When William Jennings Arnett goes to veterans' reunions they never talk about battle, "No. We usually talk about the funny things, what we did on a furlough when we were in the states and all that kind of stuff." [121]

But while most of the men who fought on D-Day and afterwards did not talk about their experiences for the next twenty years, many relived their experiences regularly in their sleep. William Jennings Arnett remembered that he "had recurring bad dreams where you, your wife kicks you to wake you up because you are moaning and groaning and everything. And that went on very heavy for about, oh, 15, 20 years. And even maybe once a year, I will have one of those dreams." It is not always the same dream, but it is a result of being in the combat zone "And anybody that is in combat long enough will crack up, no doubt about it." [122] The same is true for Jesse Beazley. At night, whenever it thunders outside, he wakes up. He has nightmares, and sometimes he goes around the house breaking things. "I have to sleep now with a mattress on the floor in case, so I won't come out of the bed and things like that. After all these years now, all of these years since 1944, that has hung with me that way." [123]

Many of the men who describe fighting on D-Day describe it as a nightmare. When an interviewer asked Ellison Parfitt, who landed on Utah Beach on June 6 as a Private First Class with the 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, whether it was awe inspiring to see the Navy's salvos explode on Utah Beach, he said, "You know, it's like a bad dream. I can remember somehow getting to a hedgehog, I guess they called them, and trying to hide behind it, and I remember when I hit the water it was cold and that's all I remember." [124] When Beazley

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[120] James R. McCartney, "James McCartney Collection," interview by Amy Judge, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/10556, December 9, 2003.

[121] William Jennings Arnett, "William Arnett Collection."

[122] William Jennings Arnett, "William Arnett Collection."

[123] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection."

[124] Ellison W. Parfitt, "Ellison Parfitt Collection," interview by Robert O. Babcock, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/4654, October 29, 2002.

landed on Omaha Beach, he "would run a while and then I'd have to fall because I was give out, and finally got into behind the – as well as I remember, it was kind of a hill there, and I got in a rise there on the ground on the beach, and I got in behind that, and most of that then to me is a nightmare." [125] The choice of word is revealing. A nightmare is not only something frightening, but something nonsensical. A nightmare usually has a logic of its own, and those who experience them cannot say why one horrifying image should follow from the one before. To the men who lived through D-Day it was a nightmare because to them it made no sense, the experience was too frightening.

It is not only in their inability to speak or in recurring nightmares that the veterans of D-Day fail to give meaning to their experiences. When they do tell their stories, the stories lack a narrative structure and often lack any kind of critical analysis. They simply remember what they lived, but often the memories seem random. Usually they are a series of unsettling and traumatic images which have nothing to do with one another, and often the entire story is somewhat incoherent. How much time passes between one memory and another, where specific events took place, all of these are compressed into a kind of mishmash. No particular point in the narrative contributes much towards a final understanding of the event, and the conclusion often has little to do with what the narrator has said.

Take Jesse Beazley's story as an example. Like the memories of most of those who landed on Omaha Beach, what he remembers is horrific. After being blown out of his landing craft from some kind of explosion, he climbed onto the beach, "You were stepping over you – your American soldiers, and some of them were begging for help and crying for help. I seen them with their face half blowed off and some of them with their intestines hanging out, and they'd just look at you with a pitiful look because you couldn't do nothing for them." But along

[125] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection."

with the upsetting there is also the bizarre, “I saw a cow, a French cow, blew right up in a tree. The tree was halfway just leaning over, and she was blew up in there.” Beazley’s story is one that jumps from strange image to strange image, the whole thing held together by fear and confusion. Instead of a story of unity in the face of danger, he remembers, “I didn’t know anybody, I wasn’t with anybody. I was completely separated from anybody that I knew,” but nevertheless he fought, among strangers, until nightfall. Hiding in a German foxhole he remembered “hunkering down in there, and then I got to wondering if the invasion had been a failure, and they had pulled out and left me and I was by myself, and I expected Germans to come down and kill me at any minute while I was laying in my hole.” He put his bayoneted rifle between his legs to impale anyone who might try to jump in his hole, and fell asleep. During the night the Germans shelled the area, but he slept through it, awaking to find everything around him devastated and strange. Among the most specific of his memories were “cattle walking around with their hips sticking out and their legs blowed off. The awfulest mess I ever seen.” He also remembered seeing “American bodies fighting in Normandy there in June and July that would be – would be laying out in the sun and swelled up and bust. The clothes would pop off them because the bodies got so big. That’s American soldiers.”

The only thing shaping Beazley’s story is horror. He does not remember the fighting on D-Day as being symbolic in anyway, but instead personalizes his experience. Cows in trees, sleeping through artillery bombardments, and bodies swelling in the sun; one point in the story does not follow to the next in any particular way, except that this is what he remembers and what he dwells on when he thinks of D-Day. Beazley fought in Europe until the defeat of Germany. He continues his narrative after D-Day, but only recalls more upsetting images. He remembers fighting in the snows of the Ardennes Forest in the Battle of the Bulge and seeing hands and feet

sticking out of the snow, then watching the snow melt in warm weather to reveal German and American corpses. He remembers something called the "meat wagon," a two and a half ton truck on which corpses would be heaped, often not in one piece, "They's just pitch them on there like that. And it takes something out of you. You can see the enemy dead, but when you see your own troops, that hurts. I remember those things. They'll always be with me now. I'm 80 years old, nearly 81 right now, and they never left me."

He also remembers, "little children running around the streets and their parents dead, and nothing to eat and no water to drink. That's French towns, I'm talking about, that we were liberating. We were driving the Germans out, but we had to do that, we had to destroy their town to do it." Even this point, that Americans inflicted suffering on the French people they were supposed to liberate, passes by without further commentary; it is neither preceded nor followed by any analysis or value judgment. All these upsetting images come together to form a story that does not attempt to answer the question why? Or, what for? Beazley does not recall any moments of evaluation, but instead he remembers thinking, "you go through the horrible experience of those things, hungry people and people starving and people dying, and the you – you – you remember what peace you had in the United States, growing up, you remember the wonderful feeling it was to be able to get out, and I thought how good it would be if I could lay down one night without thinking somebody's trying to kill me, if I could just go to sleep one night and sleep in peace, I could just rest."

At the end of this story one would imagine that Beazley would roundly condemn war. Everything he has said, even his proclaimed goal to reveal the truth about war, would lead one to anticipate a condemnation of the institution. But, whereas the story he told seems to be one of senseless, meaningless violence, when he comes to the end of his story he tags on an afterthought

full of meaning. In 2003, he says, he was invited to the State Capitol of Kentucky to receive a medal of thanks from the French for liberating their country in 1944. He points out a letter Eisenhower distributed among his troops before the invasion, "It's really a nice piece that he told about and what was expected of us and what was in front of us, that the whole world depended on us that morning, on June 6, 1944, that was the balance of the war, that was the beginning of the end of Adolph Hitler and his regime." He is proud that 18, 19, and 20 year olds were able to defeat the "supermen that Hitler had." They came from everywhere, he says, from the city, the country, and the backwoods, and that, together, they had "won the battle." "We had stood for our country," he says, "and fought for our freedom, and I hope that freedom stands, and I hope people understand what it takes to get freedom, what some people has to go through." Particularly interesting, considering Beazley recorded his history in 2004, are his last remarks, "Now we're going through the war in Iraq, and young men are dying again over there, dying terrible deaths, but we have to keep our faith and believe in what we believe in and keep our country strong and all." [126]

It is a strange way for Beazley to end his story. The conclusion does not follow logically from what he has said. The meaning he ascribes to his experience in D-Day and the war is compartmentalized. It is completely separate from his memories. Unlike the Good War version of the D-Day story, Beazley sees nothing meaningful in the actual battle. In fact, his version of the battle makes little sense. He is only able to ascribe meaning to war by distancing himself from his own memories of it. To give it meaning, he mentions receiving a medal in 2003, and a letter written by someone else. He assumes that wars happen, and that they are terrible, but that the discussion of the purpose of war must be divorced from the war itself. So for Beazley the meaning of D-Day has nothing to do with the actual experience of D-Day.

[126] Jesse Beazley, "Jesse Beazley Collection."

Beazley is not the only one to tell a story of D-Day that reads like a nightmare, something terrible, absurd, bizarre, and meaningless. Fred Millet landed with the 5th Ranger Battalion of the 79th Infantry at Omaha Beach on D-Day. His description of the landing is likewise dreamlike and macabre. He describes knowing that once the gangway of the landing craft went down it would not be an option to stay on the boat, and that "they weren't going to be there to take you back. So we had only one way to go, and that was ahead." Running up the beach, troops used an explosive device called a bangalore torpedo to blow holes in the obstacles the Germans had placed there, and Millet remembers "we got up through a little gully. I don't know if it was the bangalore torpedo going off or what, but I lost all kind of sense of where I was at and everything else." What he does remember next was looking out over Cherbourg, waiting to make an assault and cleaning his rifle, "these cows were laying around there, bloated with their feet up in the air, and Germans laying around, their faces turned black already." A friend of his went from body to body, searching for souvenirs, "That's where we had our mess truck come in and give us our first meal, in this area where all these dead Germans and dead cows. So anyway, if you didn't want to eat, you didn't eat." The next thing he remembers happening was that his friend Wright was shot accidentally by someone cleaning his rifle, "That was another one that was missing in action done by our own man. He died on the way back to the hospital. That's the guy I used to go to church with down in Camp Blanding, Florida. So, anyway, we cleaned our equipment." [127]

When an interviewer asked James R. McCartney if he benefited in any way from his experience in war, he could not respond in full sentences. What came out was a jumble, "Yes, I guess you'd have to – years ago, I wouldn't have said it did any good, but I think as you look back and you see what young people are doing today – it –" Regrouping, he continued and

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[127] Fred Millet, "Fred Millet Collection," interview by Alice Healy, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/5344, December 3, 2002.

produced something somewhat more coherent, “I had five years. I was a civilian before, I was a college student before, and came out and– there were five that if it hadn’t been for the killing of people it would have been good, I could look back now and say it was good training. It was not wasted time, but it’s such a – just the killing and the just – the one thing I would like to say, the Air Force. I have all the respect for the American and British, the Allied air force.” And with that he changed the subject, and spoke about how much he appreciated the contribution of Allied air power, without which the D-Day landings would have failed. [128] McCartney wanted to think that somewhere in his experience there was meaning, but could not articulate it. For him, finding meaning in his experience of battle, in this case finding something positive in the experience that built character, was too difficult. As much as he wanted to say that he took something positive away from his experience, the contradiction between meaning and killing, meaning and violent death, was too stark for him to overcome. When he tried to synthesize meaning and violence, language literally failed him.

Nowhere is that conflict clearer than in the exchanges between an interviewer looking for a Good War story and a veteran remembering battle. When an interviewer asked Ellison W. Parfitt if he had any occasion on June 6 to fire his rifle he answered:

> Ellison W. Parfitt: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: You did?
>
> Ellison W. Parfitt: That’s a strange feeling, to shoot at a human being. I never could bring myself to go look and see if I’d hit anyone.
>
> Interviewer: I understand that.
>
> Ellison W. Parfitt: I couldn’t do it.
>
> Interviewer: Yep.

[128] James R. McCartney, “James McCartney Collection.”

> Ellison W. Parfitt: I…it just….I asked my minister about it one time, I got a little book over there, there's some parts of it left. And I said, "Why would I put down in there that I shot my first German?" And he said, "It was a target. You were taught to shoot at a target. That was it." I guess I accepted that answer because it was one of the weakest ones, but it was my easy way out.
>
> Interviewer: Uh…Where did you spend the first night?

The interviewer changed the subject because he was uncomfortable, and from the video recording of this interview it seemed as if Parfitt wanted to say more. What Parfitt was saying could not easily be reconciled with a good war. When Parfitt went to his minister he wanted meaning, he wanted to be sincerely convinced that either what he did was right and that something good could be found in it, or that what he did was wrong and that he was guilty of a crime. But he did not find either. Parfitt knew killing was wrong, but when he went to a moral authority he was told that it was not wrong, which he knew was not true. Parfitt's country put him in a difficult situation and told him he needed to kill. Then his church told him, although he knew better, that killing was not wrong. Then the interviewer failed him by changing the subject. Parfitt was a man abandoned by all those institutions that were supposed to give meaning to his life. It seems like a heartbreaking, maddening kind of loneliness, to feel you have done something wrong and for no one to agree.

The tension between the meaninglessness of violence and the meaning of the Good War narrative, the different stories that Parfitt and the interviewer want to tell, shows up again.

> Interviewer: As you started up from D-Day, and moving, one of the things that you've contributed to the archives of the 22nd Infantry is a piece of a parachute.
>
> Ellison W. Parfitt: Oh yeah.
>
> Interviewer: Tell about that.

Ellison W. Parfitt: Well there was a lot of, a lot of troop…paratroopers who'd come down in that area, and we found them hanging in trees, where they'd been [lifts up his head slightly, closes his eyes, and takes a long pause] very…uh, how do you say it…they'd been disemboweled. And there's nothing to make you more angry. I don't think there were many paratroopers taken prisoner that day. It made the men go wild to see that happen. And we had a couple that we picked up and took with us. And that same day, I found an old parachute. A cargo chute. And I just wrapped it up, cut the down lines off of it, and that kept me warm for a week or two. That was good to sleep in. It was warm and yet it was cool. Yeah, I bought several of them after the war.

Interviewer: But you wrote on this one that you've contributed, you wrote somewhere along the way all the places you had been.

Ellison W. Parfitt: Oh yeah. [in agreement, not that he had forgotten.]

Interviewer: So was that something you did all at once, or did you do that, have that idea-

Ellison W. Parfitt: No that was done sparingly at times, some of them done by candlelight. With, if I remember right, with some ink pens that we had. I forgot, I sent that to my mother. I sent one to Marge. Mom got the biggest one, I think it was. I think that's the one I sent down to be put in our archive.

Interviewer: Yep. It's hanging on my wall.

Ellison W. Parfitt: Yeah?

Interviewer: I look at it everyday.

Ellison W. Parfitt: Well isn't that something, though.

Interviewer: Yep. Yep, I've got it in a shaded spot on the wall.

When Parfitt heard the word "parachute" his mind jumped to "paratrooper" and then he remembered the sight of the dead soldiers hanging from a tree. Then, thinking about the word "parachute," he returned to the narrative the interviewer set up and began to address his question. The tidbit about the piece of the parachute, on which he wrote all the places the regiment had been, implies something about Parfitt's dedication to his unit as well as his self-awareness in

taking part in a "historical" event. But when Parfitt remembers the war this kind of symbolism does not occur to him. Instead he is preoccupied with those paratroopers tangled in the tree.

One last exchange between Parfitt and the interviewer is even more revealing. For the first month after the invasion General Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. was in Normandy, and before he died of a heart attack, Ellison Parfitt was his bodyguard. The interviewer continually showed interest in Parfitt's experiences with Roosevelt, and made an effort to steer Parfitt towards speaking of memories that involved him.

> Interviewer: Teddy Roosevelt was credited with working on, figuring out a way to get through the hedgerows, working along with some other people. Do you recall any of that action, that he –
>
> Ellison W. Parfitt: No, I don't, I don't recall that. Except that's where I think they put the bulldozer blades on the tanks. And they started using them to break through the hedgerows.
>
> Interviewer: Right.
>
> Ellison W. Parfitt: Because I – my squad leader, who I'd been a good friend of, in the 22nd, was buried by one of those tanks. We couldn't get him out in time. He's a fellow from Albany, the name of Miller.

General Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. is a hero of the Good War version of D-Day. He is an important character in Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day*, Peter Fonda portrayed him in the film adaptation of the book, and a life size wax sculpture of the man stands in the National World War II Museum. He, along with others, stands as a symbol of competent American leadership in the Second World War, a leadership that was willing to sacrifice itself along with the normal soldier. But Parfitt, for all his earlier praise of the general, had his own preoccupations which did not lend themselves to symbolism. Instead, the interviewer's search for a specific meaning in the

war came up against a memory in which a good friend was buried alive by one of the general's ingenious tanks.[129]

Arch Lewis, Jr. was a second Lieutenant and a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division. On the night of June 5, 1944, he parachuted into France, but missed his drop zone by about ten or twelve miles. He found himself completely alone and did not know where he was. Like the others, his story is hard to follow. He wandered around Normandy for days, seeing Germans and avoiding them. He eventually found himself in a shed owned by an old French woman who served him milk. At one point members of the French Resistance led him to another band of lost paratroopers who were trying to find their way to the coast. Time in Lewis's story is vague. Some of his memories are set during the day, others at night, but he is unable to specify where he was, what he was doing, or exactly how many days passed. He primarily remembers being disoriented and frightened.

After being reunited with the group of lost paratroopers, they all found themselves under attack, and before Lewis had the chance to throw the grenade he had in his hand someone raised a white flag and they were all taken prisoner. In the group was his friend Pinkosky. Some time later, either that day or the next, two P-51s, American fighter planes, made a strafing run at the group, "They had orders to shoot anything that moved behind enemy lines, and that's what they were doing, and they thought we were Germans." The planes made two passes and the Americans jumped into ditches along both sides of the road to avoid the .50 caliber machinegun fire:

> Anyway, we got the – after the second strafing they gave us orders to, you know, move on, and I got a look back, and Pinkosky, a buddy of mine, he was in our battery C, he was – I guess his head was between my feet. That's how close we were. He

[129] Ellison W. Parfitt, "Ellison Parfitt Collection."

> didn't move. I said, 'Come on, Pinky. Let's go.' I looked back, and he was lying in a pool of blood. He had been hit between the knee and the hip and bled to death and didn't make a sound. We buried him up on a hillside. We didn't have his rifle and his bayonet. We didn't have his helmet to put on there. All we had was we put a couple of sticks together with a shoe – shoelace – and tied them together and put his dog tags on that. They never found him. I found out later on they never found his body.

Lewis then continues his story. He describes his time in a POW camp somewhere in Poland, how he was constantly hungry and cold. He remembers being liberated by the Russian army, finding Red Cross packages that the prison guards had been hoarding, and finally scouring the countryside looking for food. His memories of this time consist primarily of strange images. He remembers riding on a cart pulled by a horse, finding a bottle of champagne with his friends, seeing a large Russian truck bump into their cart and watching his friend chase after their horse who ran away. Finally, he was sent by Russian authorities to Odessa, where he and other American and British soldiers went out to restaurants and the opera before finally being put on a boat for England, and then home.

After finishing his story, the interviewer asked Lewis if he had kept a diary during the war. He responded, "No, I didn't. I had some—I have some signatures here. And getting back to Pinkosky, I think I kind of skipped over that because when I came home—I didn't know about this guy. We thought he had been buried back here in this country, re-interred back here." Lewis goes on to explain that he and his wife returned to Normandy in 1994 for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. When he was there, he saw that Pinkosky's name was listed on the wall of the missing, and then, he says, "it really hit me. And I felt so guilty because I had never called his parents when I came back, only because we only assumed that he had been re-interred. So when I came back I tried in vain for a while to – to find the family."

When he returned to the United States, Lewis contacted a producer from the television show, "20/20," and she was able to locate Pinkosky's three surviving brothers. Lewis met with

them and told them how Pinkosky died, "but I finally got through and found them, and that made me feel better somewhat." The interviewer then asked him what it was like to go to the 50th anniversary of D-Day, "Well it was good and bad. Some of the boys, I talked to them later, that were—they were advised by the VA not to go back, and I can understand that, but I don't—I don't regret it, although it—I went through hell after I found all that out, but it was worth it. People were wonderful over there, and I think they appreciate what we did for them."

At the 50th anniversary of D-Day, Bill Clinton told the same story that Ronald Reagan told in 1984, and that George W. Bush would tell in 2004. But what Lewis took away from the commemoration had nothing to do with what Clinton said about sacrifice, liberty, unity, freedom, or the "turning point of the twentieth century." D-Day's symbolic significance was completely lost on him. His trip there reminded him of something much more immediate and human. His friend had died and he had buried him, but no one knew where his body was. After coming home, Lewis wrote to John C. Melzler, Jr. at Arlington Cemetery and told him that after he contacted Pinkosky's brothers they "showed me two letters one of which stated that 'Pinky' was missing in action. The other letter stated that he was killed on the 9th of June and was buried in Arlington Cemetery," but that after contacting Jerry Yates at Arlington he learned, "they could not find any information on John Pinkosky." To Lewis, that was wrong. Besides survivor's guilt, Lewis felt a sense of responsibility to Pinkosky's family. In a letter to Senators Coats and Lugar on February 16, 1995, a little less than a year after the 50th anniversary, Lewis wrote, "I feel a sense of remorse for not getting in touch with the family after the war. I also feel a sense (strongly) of responsibility for going forward with an effort to remove 'Pinky's' name from the Wall of the Missing if that is possible."

Lewis's search for Pinkosky's body, his family, and his mission to remove his friend's name from the Wall of the Missing has no symbolic value to Lewis. It is instead an assertion of human dignity in the face of inhuman violence. The anniversary did not remind him of how noble his mission had been on June 6, but instead how awful it was that Pinkosky's family never discovered what happened to him. Lewis's attempt to reassert essential human values, in a war in which his good friend died nonsensically from friendly fire, shows an intuitive understanding that meaning cannot be found in battle, but outside of it. Lewis had to try to bring in the norms of death and mourning into the reality of battle, where funerals are so makeshift that where bodies are buried is easily forgotten. For Lewis, the D-Day anniversary was a reminder that something awful and wrong had happened to his friend, and that he had to do everything he could to set it right.

Although Lewis does not find the Second World War's meaning in his own experience of D-Day, he does find it somewhere else. In his interview he remembered the soldiers he served with, "They are a wonderful outfit. I read the book *Band of Brothers*, and I think we are a smaller band of brothers. There were only 90 of us; there was 250 of them, I think, but we were a smaller band of brothers, just as tough and just as loving and a wonderful group of guys. I can't say anything better about them." [130] Lewis needed Stephen Ambrose's book, an external source, to give meaning to his war experience. He could not do it himself at Normandy, either in 1944 or in 1994. But, with a cleaner narrative, one that excluded his memories of battle, he was able to find something to take away from World War II.

[130] Arch Lewis, "Arch Lewis Collection," interview by Patricia H. McClain, *Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress*, collection # AFC/2001/001/540, undated.

VI. History and Violence

History is an attempt to find meaning in the past. History hopes to comprehend the past by shaping disparate, disconnected events into a clear, clean narrative. But those who experience violence find nothing clear or clean about it. The Good War history of World War II ignores that contradiction. Historians use the experiences of soldiers to create meaning out of a battle to which the men themselves do not ascribe meaning. Their stories of battle are incoherent, with the only unifying theme being the horror of combat. Their stories are testaments to the incoherence of the experience of violence. Those who give this history a meaning are historicizing, narrating, rationalizing that which is impossible to explain cogently. Conflicts among nations, irreconcilable contradictions in world outlook, grievances, war aims, justifications; all of these are the history of war, and it is in them that we find war's meaning. But there is no history of the experience of violence, and there cannot be.

So what do we do with the experiences?

The meaning of history has weight, and so does the meaninglessness of violence. The two make up an insoluble contradiction: sometimes people find it is necessary to fight a war, and war is always criminal. History and violence sit opposite each other in the scale, neither weighing more than the other. We need to give meaning to the past to make sense of what has happened, but violence will always annihilate meaning. There's the rub. It is a Catch-22 that burdens the sensitive soul. The meaninglessness of violence should always remain as a caveat, a snaggletooth in the mouth of history. Using violence as the basis on which a history of meaning is built misses the entire point of discussing war: to explain violence, not vindicate it. The goal is not to overcome the contradiction and to synthesize history and violence, like the Good War does using

D-Day. A mature society recognizes the contradiction between the meaning and meaninglessness of war, and accepts both.

What is gained by accepting this contradiction?

Allowing it to stand unsynthesized lets us understand what war is. To ignore it, as the Good War does, to make meaning out of violence, removes the ugly criminality of war. Should wars never be fought? World War II may indeed have been unavoidable. But by accepting the contradiction, one is forced to take responsibility for the crimes one has committed, even if they were deemed necessary. And more importantly, when thinking about war in the future, one will feel the weight of violence tugging him away from the weight of history. Going to war should not be a question of living up to an idyll, but instead a question of how much criminal behavior we can tolerate in our society.

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