The release in 1998 of *Saving Private Ryan* by Hollywood director Steven Spielberg has revived again the debate over war and remembering. In this case, audiences have flocked to see a story of American troops, led by a dedicated captain, John Miller (Tom Hanks), attempt to rescue a young private from the field of battle just after the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944. Some reviewers have stressed how Spielberg’s film is the first to truly show the horror of battle, especially in its opening scenes, which depict the American landing on Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944. Modern technology has allowed the filmmaker to reproduce the frightening sound of German gunfire and the brutal reality of exploding body parts. American soldiers are shattered and maimed on the beachhead, and some fall apart emotionally from the stress of battle. As many reviewers have suggested, the movie counters images of heroic warriors by disclosing the real terror of combat and is in many ways an antiwar story.1

Ironically, while the Spielberg film reveals the brutality of war, it preserves the World War II image of American soldiers as inherently averse to bloodshed and cruelty. The war was savage; the average American GI who fought it was not. American men in this story are destroyed by war, and only a few actually enjoy killing Germans. At its rhetorical core, the story’s argument would have seemed very familiar to audiences in the 1940s: the common American soldier was fundamentally a good man who loved his country and his family. He went to war out of a sense of duty to both, and he wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. Rather than being a natural-born killer, he was a loving family man who abhorred the use of extreme force but could inflict it when necessary. This point is made well in the figure of John Miller. A high school teacher and part-time baseball coach from Pennsylvania, he disdains brutality and says that every time he kills another man he feels “farther from home.” Traumatized himself at times by battle, this common man still has heroic potential and is always up to the task of taking on the German war machine. It is a model found in dozens of wartime films that depicted

1 See Jeanine Basinger, “Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan,” *Perspectives* 36 (October 1998): 1, 43–47. Basinger suggests that Spielberg meant to speak to the “me” generation when Ryan asked his wife at the end of the film if he had earned the life that those who sacrificed themselves for him gave him. For Basinger, the film asks if one individual is worth the effort it took to save him (p. 47). See also Phil Landon, “Realism, Genre, and Saving Private Ryan,” *Film and History* 28, nos. 3–4 (1998): 58–63. Landon calls the film a “morality play” because it raised the question of what obligations war survivors and subsequent generations have to the soldiers who gave their lives.
average guys from Brooklyn or Texas who loved their everyday life in America or the girl next door. Miller is ultimately a representation of the brand of common-man heroism that infused the culture of wartime America. Without a doubt, a platoon of men like him could save Private Ryan and win the war. Norman Corwin’s famous radio broadcast of May 8, 1945, on the occasion of Germany’s surrender, makes the case for the courageous possibilities of the ordinary person. “Take a bow, GI. Take a bow, little guy,” Corwin told his listeners. “The superman of tomorrow lies at the feet of you common men this afternoon.”

Although anguish and bravery share narrative space in this film, they do not do so on an equal basis. The pain of the American combat soldier is revealed but is ultimately placed within a larger frame of patriotic valor. Some American soldiers in this story question the war effort and their superiors’ decisions, but in the end the nation and its warriors are moral and honorable. The fact that combat was so frightening serves mainly to reinforce our admiration for these soldiers and their gallantry. The entire narrative, for that matter, is immensely “reverent” toward the nation and its warriors, attempting to uphold its patriotic architecture with opening and closing scenes at an American military cemetery in Europe. The very design of these sites of remembering was originally driven by the desire to proclaim the unity of the American nation, with their rows upon rows of white crosses, and to serve as “permanent reminders to other nations of the sacrifices made by the United States.” If other nations were expected to recall their debt to America, Spielberg’s film makes the additional claim that survivors of the war (like Ryan) and subsequent generations of Americans need to recognize their obligations to these brave combatants. Thus, at the film’s end, Ryan can only look back over his life and the graves of the heroic dead and express the hope that he lived a life that merited the sacrifice his comrades made for him, one that consisted of devotion to family and country. In this veneration of patriotism and self-denial, the story takes us back to dominant political and moral values of the 1940s, which advocated collective goals over individual ones.

But, as Spielberg remembers, he also forgets. Forties’ calls to patriotic sacrifice were contingent on assurances of a more democratic society and world. Government leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt took pains to make democratic promises in pronouncements like “The Four Freedoms.” And the Office of War Information (OWI) told Hollywood producers to make films that not only helped win the conflict but reminded audiences that it was “a people’s war,” which would bring about a future with more social justice and individual freedom. The democracy for which “the people” fought, in fact, was a cultural blend of several key ideas: tolerance, individualism, anti-totalitarianism, and economic justice. The representation of open-mindedness was aimed particularly at reducing ethnic

2 Norman Corwin, “On a Note of Triumph,” audiocassette available from Lodes Tone, 611 Empire Mill RD, Bloomington, IN 47401.
tensions at home. American individualism was venerated in the call for personal freedoms and even in the rhetoric of military recruiters. They promised that army life would not destroy a man’s self-interests but would preserve the same balance between individualism and teamwork that Americans experienced in their sporting endeavors. Frank Capra’s series “Why We Fight” (1942–1945) was a vivid example of the use of anti-totalitarian images to encourage support for the war. And slogans like “Freedom from Want” acknowledged the popular desire for economic security after the 1930s.

Spielberg’s turn to the moral individual in heroism and in pain at the expense of the moral or democratic community, however, suggests just how much this film is a product of the late twentieth century and not of the 1940s. The attainment of democracy rested in the 1940s on a sense of reciprocity between individuals and the institutions that governed their lives. In a totalitarian state, government and institutions dominated individuals; in a democracy, a relationship of mutual respect existed between citizens and institutions. People served the nation because they believed the nation would serve their democratic interests in return. Narratives that endorsed this relationship, such as those found in many wartime films, effectively linked the fate of the individual with the fate of the nation. Today, however, narratives and images about the destiny of individuals command more cultural space than those about the fortunes of nations. As a result, both political speech and commemoration have more to say about victims or people who have met tragic fates. Spielberg’s memory narrative of moral men represents very much the late twentieth century’s concern with the singular person in the past, present, and future. Cohesive narratives that effectively link personal stories to collective desires for progress are harder to find. Those that exist are disrupted by images of victims. Heroism and patriotism remain, but they must fight for cultural space with the claims of those who have sorrowful tales from the past or those who insist on redress rather than self-denial. Many believe that, since Vietnam, it is harder to commemorate gallantry and victory or to suppress individual subjectivities at the expense of collective ones. Thus delineations of victims—from Vietnam, from the AIDS epidemic, from racism, from child abusers, from rapists, from drugs, even from World War II—now command more cultural space. Statements of what was lost now eclipse expressions of what was gained.

This tension between the old patriotic narrative about the fate of the nation and the new expression of individual suffering and loss is expressed clearly on the Washington Mall, a central site of American cultural memory. In recent times, the process of nationalizing the representation of emotional shock and private pain appears arrested. The images of the old public history, dominated by powerful statesmen who were devoted to the nation, have been substantially modified by the appearance of victims. Names (and possessions) of dead soldiers constitute the

---


1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial, known simply as “The Wall.” Statues of American troops reveal men moving cautiously through a battlefield scene from Korea (1995); they appear fearful that they could be killed or hurt at any moment. Figures standing in Depression-era bread lines or listening for words of hope command attention at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial (1997), and, nearby, thousands of images pertaining to Holocaust victims have been mounted for exhibit (1993). Explanations for this transformation remain elusive. Some attribute the change to the impact on American culture of the Vietnam War and traumatic events such as the AIDS epidemic. The overall effect of the Holocaust cannot be discounted. Certainly, the nation’s ability to manage discourse about the past has withered, as many more voices—including the mass media—have joined in the production of culture.\(^6\)

Contests over public remembering were certainly not pervasive in most nations after World War II. Many countries were able to limit the representation of war trauma and homegrown victimization in their societies for a very long time after the war. In Japan, a long-term effort to conceal that nation’s culpability for atrocities in China or for starting the war in the Pacific has fallen apart only in recent years. To some extent, this campaign was sustained by silences in Japanese history books and by memorials to the Japanese dead that tended to remember them as innocent victims, not brutal warriors. In postwar Germany, the Holocaust was substantially denied in public; in many instances, Germans referred to themselves as “victims” of Nazi aggressors, denying the realities of German-sponsored brutality toward others. In France, for some two decades after the war, citizens tended to recall the conflict in terms of a patriotic narrative: brave French Resistance fighters under Charles de Gaulle waged an unrelenting campaign to free their captured nation from the Germans. This version of the war had elements that were true, but it failed to acknowledge completely the role of some French citizens who collaborated with the Nazis in sending French Jews to death camps. In much of the Western world, in fact, the contemporary memory of the Holocaust as an act of unparalleled barbarism did not emerge fully until the 1960s: publicity surrounding Adolf Eichmann’s trial and the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War for a time recalled images of the death of Jews.\(^7\)

\(^6\) For an account of how the large loss of life from World War I challenged forms of heroic national memory in France, see Antoine Prost, “Monuments to the Dead,” in Nora, Realms of Memory, 2: 307–30. On the popularity of the Roosevelt Memorial, see the Baltimore Sun (August 3, 1997): 2F; Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), 8–9.

In this essay, however, I want to argue that the narrative of heroism, patriotism, and democracy that permeated wartime America—the story that Saving Private Ryan seeks to restore only partially—began to decompose immediately in the aftermath of World War II. This would not be so apparent if one looked only at official commemorations and public monuments, such as the one dedicated in 1954 to the costly American victory at Iwo Jima. Mass culture, however, was more responsive to the range of personal emotions and recollections that resided in the hearts and minds of the people, and it frequently challenged “reverent” narratives by the late 1940s. Although limitations of space prevent a full discussion of the impact of mass culture on society, the central point must be made that mass cultural forms undermined disciplinary institutions (such as governments or churches) in their goal of managing the public expression of human wants. Films, for instance, thrived because they were able to broadcast the full range of human desires and emotions.

Long before Saving Private Ryan or even the Vietnam War, American mass culture was flooded with a torrential debate over the violence unleashed by war and, more importantly, over the turbulent nature of American society itself. Scholars have documented both political opposition to the American atomic build-up in the late 1940s and cultural expressions of anxiety over the possibility of world destruction by atomic weapons throughout the Cold War era. But this line of analysis is grounded too much in Cold War issues and fails to sufficiently appreciate the overall impact of World War II and the memory of violence and trauma that it generated. The war showed Americans that their fellow citizens were as capable of inflicting brutality as citizens of other nations, and it led them to search for the sources of such behavior within the home front itself. Public anxiety over victimization was as likely to be grounded in fears of dangerous impulses in the hearts and souls of fellow citizens as in fears about powerful weapons. The anxiety that linked popular nervousness over brute force in both wartime and peacetime America was articulated especially in the cinema and in literature. There, writers and directors challenged the sentimental views of the nation and the perspectives of the Office of War Information. In this oppositional view, American men and, for that matter, women were not inherently patriotic and loving but were domineering and ruthless. In its recognition of evil in the hearts and souls of “the people,” this construction of the nation and its citizens worked against the hope of a more democratic and prosperous future. Once it was demonstrated that violence could be homegrown and did not reside only in the visions of dictators, it followed that America itself could produce victims as well as patriots, treachery as well as loyalty.

From its inception in the eighteenth century, the nation-state has been haunted by visions of degeneration, chaos, and anarchy. Those potentially responsible for

such destructiveness have been located both inside and outside national boundaries. Ideally, the nation was imagined as a united community that would protect its members, grant them rights, and foster their material progress. In the consciousness of nations, citizens entrusted powerful men with civic affairs and the defense of boundaries. Serving as statesmen, patriarchs, or dedicated warriors, these men merited the admiration and gratitude of females and others dependent on them. It was understood that leaders and warriors might sometimes need to suppress savages on the frontiers of the nation or even minorities within it. But hints that they themselves were bloodthirsty or cruel could not only weaken their elevated status but threaten the cultural stability of the nation itself. Consequently, war always involves cultural risks even if the nation wins. Omer Bartov has observed that modern warfare and the massive trauma it generated incited feelings of anxiety in all participants and prompted a wide search for enemies and victims. This is what happened in much of the domestic politics of Cold War America and in the aftermath of Vietnam.

Even more central to my argument is the point that, after 1945, recognizing the war’s incredible scale of brutality caused ordinary Americans and probably people elsewhere to connect the cruelty of warfare with other forms of malevolence in their lives and society. Once war exposed how savage men could be, it did not take much of a cultural leap to see that everyone was threatened by warlike behavior wherever it was manifested. This process had distinct implications for remembering the war. Dominick LaCapra suggests that extremely traumatic events often force the imagination to employ extravagant metaphors, invoking terms such as in one’s “wildest dreams or most hellish nightmares.” In a sense, both the mind and the culture must find ways to confront the “unimaginable magnitude” of what took place. Thus the search for extraordinary models of enemies and victims displaced the wartime representations of a democratic nation and common-man heroism, and it undermined future attempts to represent the national society in a positive manner.

This argument moves away from standard paradigms regarding the relationship


between trauma and memory. It accepts and notes that trauma can lead to a “lapse or rupture” in the memory of emotional shock but contends that this form of repression is incomplete. The psychoanalytic study of trauma has revealed that the painful event usually returns against the victim’s will and only after an initial period of suppression or “absolute numbing”; the victim must first move away from the event before returning to it. This certainly appeared to happen to some extent in the public culture of the warring nations after 1945. But I will also offer evidence that a substantial amount of the trauma and anxiety, at least in the United States, was not restrained as much as it was displaced into the narratives of mass culture. One scholar has written that “the historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.” I would amend this position by claiming that, to a considerable extent, both the personal anxieties and the collective concerns over the violence of war never really left American culture at all.12

Some observers who have studied the impact of the Holocaust on postwar culture are impressed by the fact that the cultural suppression of trauma involved in “acting-out” the past in a nostalgic sense (something that suppresses the reality of pain) now appears to take place alongside the practice of working-through or confronting emotional disturbances. Nostalgia and mourning coexist. In looking at the films of postwar America and a modern feature like Saving Private Ryan, we clearly see what LaCapra calls “interaction, reinforcement, and conflict” between the need to forget and the desire to confront what happened.13 In its opening scenes, Saving Private Ryan confronts the horror; in later scenes, when GIs go off on an adventure to save one individual, it often lapses into play acting and a desire to fight the war over again. The same sort of tension was noticeable in American films about the war in the decade after 1945, although the narrative resolution of contradictions was not always the same. In Ryan, patriotic sacrifice as a frame of remembrance stands above both trauma and democracy. But in the immediate postwar era, some films effectively contested patriotic ideals. They often displaced the representation of trauma from the combat zone to American society or to a distant past, but the discourse over the pain of war was real. Thus, between 1946 and 1949, hardly any combat films of the war were made. Many features, however, were issued about the devastating consequences of the war on Americans as well as the potential Americans had to inflict harm on others. Moreover, combat did not disappear completely but was often exiled into the genre of the Western. The most thoughtful of these latter films actually located savagery in the character of the American cavalrymen and not Native Americans.14

12 Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in Caruth, ed., Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore, 1995), 4–8. LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz, 9–21, partially accepts the notion of repression but makes a more complex case for the idea that individual and collective memory exist within a dialogic framework, each testing and confronting the other. For insightful observations of how the scale of death in World War I and World War II prompted a search for an appropriate language of mourning, see Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge, 1995), 5–10.

13 LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz, 10–46.

Wartime films were not without their own set of contradictions, to be sure, although patriotism, unity, and democracy dominated the stories. In tales about the war and gender relations, women were assigned crucial roles of support for the men they loved with devotion. This point was made clear in films such as Since You Went Away (1944) and Pride of the Marines (1945). Ethnic cooperation was fostered in numerous depictions of American platoons, such as Bataan (1943). Hatred for authoritarian regimes was certainly prevalent in movies such as Sahara (1943), and patriotic sacrifice was venerated in films such as Wake Island (1942), which evoked memories of American heroism at Valley Forge and the Alamo. The grim reality of war, the random and unheroic nature of much death, and the sometimes futile plight of the common soldier broke through in creative stories such as A Walk in the Sun (1945), but its cynicism was rare. More common was a film like Air Force (1943), which effectively merged personal interests and collective needs. In this film, men love their mothers and wives, naturally want to defend their nation, kill the treacherous Japanese, and fight bravely in the Pacific. A tailgunner who feels that he has not been treated fairly in the past eventually lets go of his anger as he joins the fight. The entire film is framed by a preamble from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, suggesting that the military struggle is ultimately about “a new birth of freedom” and the need to preserve “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Saving Private Ryan, by contrast, invokes the memory of Lincoln as an expression of the ideal of patriotic sacrifice, not as a call to work for more democracy.\footnote{Basinger, World War II Combat Film, 34–37; Thomas Doherty, Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II (New York, 1993), 122–48. Saving Private Ryan invokes a letter (traditionally ascribed to Lincoln) to a mother whose five sons “died gloriously on the field of battle.”}

Postwar films moved away from wartime censorship and immediately into a discourse over how the violence unleashed by the war could wreak havoc with the American future. The suggestion that dangerous impulses resided in the souls of Americans themselves was at the core of film noir features of the later 1940s. In both mood and story, these films countered sentimental and optimistic assessments not only about the future but about Americans themselves. The 1946 film The Killers made evident the “ubiquity” of viciousness and victimization in everyday American life. The central character, played by actor Burt Lancaster, is drawn into a life of crime, betrayed by a woman, and gunned down in the symbolic space of American democracy—the small town. So much for the potential of stable gender relations. Dana Polan has argued that the war was a “disciplinary moment” in which diverse discourses came together to “empower a particular social reality.” But it was increasingly clear in the immediate postwar period that critical images of America and Americans could no longer be domesticated and that, as Polan writes, “discourses of commonality” had reached the limits of their persuasiveness.\footnote{Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial (New York, 1995), 238; Michael C. C. Adams, The Best War Ever: America and World War II (Baltimore, 1994), 12; Dana B. Polan, Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950 (New York, 1986), 70–71.}

The productions of film noir did not always connect despair directly to the event of World War II, but the popular classic by William Wyler, The Best Years of Our Lives (1946), certainly did. In this story, servicemen return home with deep
emotional and physical scars. One is haunted not only by the memory of flying bomber runs over Germany but by the realization that his wife had been unfaithful while he was away. In other words, he was victimized by events both abroad and at home. Another veteran, who drinks excessively upon his return, manages to advance the cause of a just society; through his job at a bank, he makes it easier for ordinary veterans to get loans that will help them rebuild their lives. Trauma is acknowledged; the hope of a democratic future still persists.17

The most powerful cultural attack on the sentimentality and heroic quality of wartime culture came in Norman Mailer’s 1948 novel The Naked and the Dead. Mailer was a veteran himself who had served in the Pacific and had seen firsthand some of the destruction caused by the atomic bomb in Japan. His narrative is one that centers not so much on the war as on the nature of American society and the patterns of male behavior it engendered. Stationed on a fictional island in the Pacific, Mailer’s GIs are not particularly capable of patriotism or virtue. Rather, they are consumed by personal quests of power and destructiveness. A minor character on the island expresses the Roosevelt administration’s view that the conflict is a “people’s war” that will lead to a more democratic world for all mankind, a point that the OWI worked assiduously to inject into wartime films. However, General Edward Cummings, a major character in the story, envisions a postwar world dominated not by democracy but by the “Right” and the “Omnipotent Men” who will lead America. Clearly, Mailer saw an innate drive for power and dominion in American men that Spielberg does not. For Mailer, this drive was realized not only in the massive retaliation against the Japanese but in the lives of domineering men like Cummings, whose father had been sent him to military school to make him “think and act like a man.”18

Cummings’s perspective frames the novel’s unflattering portrayal of American manhood, and Mailer contends that the male drive for dominance could be found in democracies as well as dictatorships. When someone suggests to Cummings that men would fight out of love for their country, he dismisses the notion as a “liberal historian’s attitude.” For Cummings, it is not democracy that motivates American men to fight. Instead, they learned to be aggressive from living in a society of unequals in which most men were trying to climb upward from humble origins.

Mailer’s story is important not only because it represents a critique of the official views of why America fought and of the romantic images of the American fighting men but because it connects narratives of victimization from the 1930s with those of the 1940s. That is to say, he suggested that both experiences, economic conflict and war, can destroy lives. American culture in the postwar era still reverberated with the aftershocks of the Depression and with notions that revealed the pitfalls of capitalism. In fact, many conservatives had attacked the OWI during the war precisely because of its liberal orientation, which connected the idea of a “people’s war” to the need to respect labor as much as business in narrative films. Numerous films continued to reveal the manner in which the nation’s fundamental economic system destroyed as many individuals as it rewarded. In All My Sons (1948), an industrialist decides to place profits before patriotism, resulting in the production

17 See Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York, 1992), 77.
of planes with faulty parts. When American airmen lose their lives as the result of his decisions, the man is traumatized enough to take his own life. In *Champion* (1949), a man throws away relationships with people who care about him for a chance to become a boxing king. In this story, the boxing ring becomes a metaphor for the marketplace pursuit of wealth and fame.  

Remembering war as the progenitor of victims rather than heroes was central to a number of films in the late 1940s. In *Crossfire* (1947), soldiers bring their brutal ways back home. Some are described as capable of going “crazy” once there is no one around to give them orders. They engage in drunkenness and murder and even acts of anti-Semitism. In general, they do not seem to have the clear sense of purpose that soldiers in *Saving Private Ryan* exhibit regarding the desirability of resuming domestic arrangements or serving their country. Before *Crossfire* ends, one soldier even kills another.

Two years later, *Home of the Brave* (1949) connected the respective trauma-inducing abilities of war and society. In this tale, an African-American soldier, James Moss, suffers severe emotional distress due to the brutality of racism in the United States and the effects of combat. Moss undergoes treatment for what a military psychiatrist calls “traumatic shock.” (In reality, the discovery of psychiatric stress during the war had a profound influence on the way the military treated this problem. Entering the war, the common assumption was that emotional breakdowns in battle were the result of a weak or less than manly character.) Moss is depicted as deeply disturbed by the insults he received in civilian life and from racist soldiers in the military. When he hears his good friend being tortured by the Japanese on a secret mission and is forced to leave his partner to die on an island in the Pacific, he breaks down and cries. The psychiatrist gives him a drug that allows him to relive and, therefore, to come to terms with his combat experience. He realizes that war trauma is shared equally by people of all races. As he goes back home to open a bar with a white friend, we get a hint that the success of a postwar future will depend not only on putting the trauma behind us but on resolving inequality and prejudice as well.

Even more traditional war films of the period were reluctant to temper the anguish of battle with simple images of bravery and valor. In *Battleground* (1949), the point of view of the ordinary fighting man was stressed. War for these “battered bastards” was confusing and painful. Some are looking for a “good clean flesh wound” that will get them out of battle and back to a field hospital and, perhaps, home. As Private Holley, actor Van Johnson claims that the PFC, or private first class, in his military rank stands only for the fact that he is “praying for civilian” status. In this film, there is no cataclysmic battle or talk of democracy or patriotism, only an intent focus on fighting to stay alive or to take a small piece of ground. There is dogged determination on the part of American troops in this film against superior enemy forces and bitterly cold weather, but *Battleground* tries hard to say that the average GI was uninterested in putting any sort of political frame on an experience that he detested.

By 1950, a popular war film such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* went a bit farther than...
the cynical commentary articulated in Battleground by mounting a direct attack on some of the men who won the war, even as it sustained heroic notions about them. John Wayne starred as a dedicated Marine sergeant capable of training soldiers and leading them into battle. This film was supported extensively by the Marine Corps, which supplied it with an array of military hardware, and it is often seen as a pivotal representation of the heroic American war myth. But there is considerable irony in this narrative. Shots of brave American fighting men attacking the Japanese on Tarawa and Iwo Jima are countered by expressions of regret over the fact that men like Wayne (Sergeant Stryker in the movie) ultimately elect the ideals of military life over those of domestic life. Unlike John Miller in Saving Private Ryan, Stryker is a zealous soldier who has little interest in maintaining close ties to his wife and family. War is brutal in this film, and men get killed, although 1950s film technology could not achieve the sense of fear that Spielberg’s does. The Sands of Iwo Jima also made a much more determined attempt to work through the impact of war on men and to address the concern that military life exacerbated natural impulses toward violence, which would have devastating consequences for American society. Unlike the Spielberg film, The Sands of Iwo Jima made a specific plea to American men to put the violence of wartime behind them. Audiences watched as a young marine tells Stryker that he wants to raise his son to read Shakespeare, not the Marine manual. And they saw Stryker come to regret the way he mistreated his wife and son. Film historians astutely note that when Stryker is killed near the end, the heroic and violent warrior of World War II is symbolically destroyed. Ryan only asks us to honor these men and “earn” the freedom they have left us. Presumably, pacifistic pleas are unnecessary because in Spielberg’s world these men are not inherently violent.

By the middle 1950s, it was clear that a far-reaching contest over how to recall and forget the war was under way. At the dedication of the Iwo Jima Memorial, citizens gathered to venerate victory and the men who earned it. This was by no means a suppression of popular sentiment. The memorial represented well the belief that ordinary men fought gallantly, that the war was worth the sacrifice, and that the trauma could be put behind us. The same point is made in the film To Hell and Back (1955), which depicts a brave and decorated soldier who is close to his family. But members of the wartime generation continued to represent some veterans as brutes who had no place in peacetime America in films such as A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), Peyton Place (1957), and No Down Payment (1957). During the war, women had already expressed fears that military experiences incited men to misogynistic behavior. In 1954, Harriet Arnow articulated another critique by writing a novel, The Dollmaker, of how the war (and capitalism) destroyed the independence of a woman.

For a time in the 1960s and 1970s, Cold War pressures reinvigorated heroic images of American men and quelled some of the cultural divisions that had marked the immediate postwar era. In 1962’s The Longest Day, the prowess of the American military and men of all ranks was validated. This movie of epic proportions lavished attention on the planning that went into the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944 and the extent to which the “biggest armada the world has ever known” was firmly under American leadership. A small amount of space was turned
over to the heroics of the British and the French resistance, but the “star” of the feature was the collective effort of the Americans. The Nazis in this feature were disorganized; the sons of democracy were eager and united in purpose. Heroism crowded out serious discussion here of personal trauma or the emotional and political longings of ordinary soldiers.

In 1970, the release of Patton again reaffirmed the brilliance of American military strategy and leadership, although this film also took an extended look at the psychological traits of a heroic leader as well. Neither Patton nor The Longest Day paid much attention to 1940s concerns about democracy or the potential for brutality of Americans themselves. For General George Patton, war was less an act to save democracy than it was an opportunity to realize his dream of becoming a brave combatant—a certain type of man. “All real Americans love the sting of battle,” he reportedly told his men. He was famous for his intolerance of subordinates who were traumatized by battle, who failed to relish killing the enemy as he did, and who lacked the fighting spirit to be a brave warrior. That is why he loved so much leading the triumphal parades of victors into liberated towns in Europe. Cheering crowds reaffirmed his sense of what war and men were all about.

Catch-22 (1970) appeared at the same time Patton did, however, and it suggested that the cultural effort to laud the World War II experience of Americans was in deep trouble. Certainly, the impact of Vietnam was crucial here, but it should be recalled that the story was drawn from a novel authored by a World War II veteran (Joseph Heller), as was the film of The Naked and the Dead (1958). This cynical view of the American military in World War II Italy completely debunked not only the integrity of military leadership but any effort to look at the war in heroic or sentimental terms. In this story, American soldiers use their spare time looking for cash or sex and actually question orders to drop bombs on innocent civilians. One U.S. serviceman kills and rapes an Italian woman. The central premise of the narrative is an antiwar statement, pure and simple. Captain Yossarian, the central figure, wants doctors to declare that he is insane so he can get out of the war completely. The “catch” is that the wish to escape from war is a perfectly sane idea and, therefore, cannot be a basis for judging someone to be insane.

Today, stories of glorious rises and tragic falls dot the landscape of American cultural memory. The celebration of personal dreams is discussed more widely than collective destinies. Images of a proud nation are contested by those of a society capable of inflicting pain and suffering. In this culture of contradictions and silences, cultural memory is subjected, in the words of Griel Marcus, to “an anarchy of possibilities” and, in the terms of Pierre Nora, to a “series of initiatives with no central organizing principle.” But that “anarchy” is fiercely contested in the Spielberg film, not to restore the vision of a democratic nation but to rehabilitate traditions of good fathers, patriotic men, and self-sacrifice. Miller and Ryan do not challenge moral conventions, are not inherently violent, and are willing to relinquish personal dreams. They recognize that the fortunes of the nation take
precedence over their own futures. The film *Saving Private Ryan* does not say that personal sacrifice is glorious as does *Patton* or that wars are free of death and trauma as does the Iwo Jima Memorial. Distinct boundaries between cultural categories, like the tropes of heroic soldiers and personal pain, have generally been difficult to maintain since 1945. But the film chooses to take sides in the modern culture of opposites by protecting a sentimental view of American men that was seriously disrupted by both World War II and Vietnam. In fact, it basically suppresses a critical view of American society as well, preferring to suggest that the American future will best be fashioned by moral individuals rather than by democratic reforms.

Postwar films tended to treat the American warrior and American society in a more evenhanded way. They shared with *Saving Private Ryan* a tendency to remember the turmoil and stress. This is not an invention of the 1990s. Postwar films and culture actually went further, however, in exploring the consequences of the war, which is exactly what Bartov argued when he claimed that the acknowledgment of victims impelled individuals to find reasons for the suffering. Because the Spielberg film attempts to preserve the memory of patriotic sacrifice more than it desires to explore the causes of the trauma and violence, however, it is more about restoring a romantic version of common-man heroism in an age of moral ambivalence than about ending the problem of devastating wars.

The failure of *Saving Private Ryan* to evoke the memory of “a people’s war,” moreover, reveals the film’s conservative politics. Past, present, and future are now contingent on standards of individual behavior rather than on democratic ideals such as the quest for equality, a just capitalism, or citizen participation in political life. Spielberg’s film about trauma and patriotism suggests why the contemporary turn to memory, anguish, and the testimony of victims is about more than the demise of the cultural power of the nation. It also has a great deal to do with a sense of disenchantment with democratic politics and with turning political life over to “the people.” Visions of a democratic community are feeble in this story, which remembers individuals in a more exemplary way than they were understood by their own generation.

---


---