



James T. Sparrow. *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 344 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-979101-9.

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## The Permanently Strong National State Finally Arrives: The United States in World War II

James T. Sparrow, an assistant professor of history at the University of Chicago, takes a fresh look at the arrival of a durably strong national state in America during World War II. In so doing, he revisits a period and its problems that earlier works, such as John Morton Blum's *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (1977) and Richard Polenberg's *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (1980), first addressed seriously a generation earlier. Sparrow's new book, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*, explores how and why that stronger state finally triumphed, and what the consequences of that shift were for ordinary Americans.

Sparrow divides his book into two parts. The first, "Ideology, Political Culture, and State Formation," is subdivided into three chapters. The first chapter explores the shift from the Depression-era New Deal state to the early wartime one. Sparrow argues persuasively that despite the growth of the national state in the 1930s to address Depression-era economic problems, the state in that era never proved to be all that strong, which helps to explain why the Great Depression lasted into the early 1940s. Chapter 2 looks at the nation's morale following Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II, including Americans' shock both at the suddenness of the Japanese military attack on December 7, 1941, and the jarringly swift declarations of war against the United States by the governments of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy only a few days later. Chapter 3 delves into early popular and elite resistance to the strong national state that grew up very rapidly to deal with those military challenges.

The second half of *Warfare State*, "Encountering the State in Everyday Life," is also divided into three chapters. The first chapter explains how the federal government approached the fundamental issue of war financing through such transformative measures as mass income taxation with significantly progressive rates that

hit upper-middle-class families very hard, and a less coercive approach in the form of appeals to the masses to buy war bonds. The second chapter deals with the federal government's pressure on the adult population to "work or fight," with its implicit subtext that failing to do either aided the enemy. Other implications included a need to refrain from strikes that disrupted war production and from resistance to the draft, which would undermine the nation's creation of a fighting force big enough to help defeat the Axis armies. The third chapter focuses on America's citizen-soldiers; the varying degrees of enthusiasm with which they fought; the tensions among them based on class, ethnicity, and race; and their sense of what they were fighting for and what, if anything, the government owed them in return for doing so.

*Warfare State* is less original in its parts than in its whole. This is especially true of the topics discussed in the book's second half. For example, much of the material that Sparrow presents regarding how the U.S. government financed the war was discussed very effectively in *V Was for Victory* and Julian E. Zelizer's *Taxing America: Wilbur D. Mills, Congress, and the State, 1945-1975* (2000) about the arrival of mass income taxation in the 1940s. The discussion of the World War II labor regime was, similarly, addressed very effectively earlier by Nelson Lichtenstein in his *Labor's War at Home: The Cio in World War II* (2003). What is truly new about Sparrow's book is his ambitious attempt to pull all of these discrete issues together so as to evaluate in a truly comprehensive way what the arrival of a strong and lasting federal government did to and for Americans. Of special interest is Sparrow's emphasis on the degree of voluntarism in America when compared with the more coercive Fascist and Communist regimes that participated in World War II. The bond drives are a leading example of that difference. The American state relied more heavily on persuasion through advertising and mass media than the Axis

powers and the Soviet Union did. Although Sparrow's basic comparative point on that score appears sound, one can overstate it. He is so fair-minded in his use of evidence that readers may well find themselves wondering how much freedom ordinary Americans had to resist the kinds of pressures they faced from the state to work hard, serve in the armed forces if called to do so, and contribute via taxes and bond purchases to the war's financing.

Another key issue that *Warfare State* explores in greater depth than earlier, more specialized accounts, is the argument that as the obligations of national citizenship grew, Americans' sense of entitlement vis-à-vis the federal government increased. In effect, as the

1940s went along, antistatist attitudes diminished, Sparrow argues, because the federal government provided ever more benefits to people, corporations, and social groups that they saw as earned by having met their expanding citizenship obligations. Thus this rapidly growing and much more intrusive and expensive federal government served to reduce deeply rooted elite and popular opposition to a durably strong national state. On this key point, *Warfare State* makes its case persuasively.

In short, Sparrow's clearly written, engaging, and timely book will be of interest to many kinds of historians of modern America.

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