

H-Net Reviews

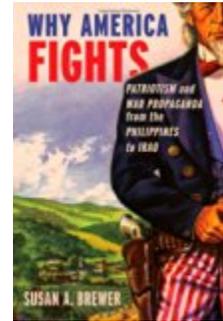
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan A. Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 342 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538135-1.

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In recent years, military history and diplomatic history have been eyeing each other with new appreciation. The 2012 meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) featured a roundtable panel entitled “Convergence of Military and Diplomatic History.”[1] In her 2011 presidential address to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Marilyn B. Young observed, “I think it is a good thing in an historian of American foreign policy to be preoccupied with war.”[2] But as scholars of both subjects realize, this convergence is only as new as it is old, dating in modern understanding at least from Carl von Clausewitz’s famous aphorism: “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Susan A. Brewer’s *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* is firmly set in this vein. It is a well-written synthesis of American propaganda efforts that seeks to remind readers that war, in a democracy, must always be “sold” to its citizens, and that in the twentieth century, this has entailed at times persuading, cajoling, browbeating, and deceiving the American people into supporting or accepting the wars their government has waged.

Brewer builds a narrative that views presidents and their administrations, from William McKinley to George W. Bush, as central agents of propaganda during wartime. Focusing on overt government information campaigns, Brewer argues that presidents and their administrations craft official narratives of U.S. war aims, drawing selectively on lessons learned from wars that came before and using evolving forms of media and methods of information distribution. By doing so, Brewer’s work does more than remind us that war and politics are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, by focus-

ing on the foreign wars of the twentieth century (and for Americans, wars in the twentieth century were all foreign wars), she suggests that politics became more heightened when war was being waged far from home, as the official narrative crafted at home required persuading U.S. citizens that Americans should put their lives at risk on foreign soil.

The clear pay off in Brewer’s analysis is her reading of the propaganda surrounding the Iraq War, distinguished from previous wars by its overt status as a “war of choice” and the progenitor of the language of “preemptive strike.” The key to the propaganda surrounding the Iraq War, in which the justification of the war given to the public and the truth of fighting the war on the ground were separated by a significant gap, is to understand that it was enabled by a presidential propaganda machine nearly a century in the making. And the key to this machine, Brewer argues, is to understand that always, always, U.S. pursuits of international power, often for economic reasons, have been papered over in propaganda with ideological justifications such as spreading liberty and democracy. As she writes: “The official narratives served to camouflage any contradiction that might exist between America’s pursuit of power and its principles. Indeed, propaganda projected the appealing notion that America’s global ambition and democratic traditions are one and the same” (p. 4).

Brewer begins her story with the Spanish-American War and the genesis of U.S. involvement in the Philippines. She points to President McKinley as an early proponent of the “management of news coverage,” who successfully convinced Americans that an overseas colony

abroad was compatible with democratic principles (p. 10). Brewer does not challenge the well-known narrative for why the United States got involved in the Philippines—what she calls “a divine mission” and “manly duty” to spread civilization—but she points to how this message was crafted by McKinley and conveyed to the people, giving nearly every slice of the American public a stake in the game (pp. 37, 45). The key to McKinley’s success was his ability to shape public opinion while appearing to follow it, a tactic adopted by many of his successors. McKinley’s message was perpetuated by his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, who proclaimed the link between American expansionism and the progress of civilization.

Brewer’s second chapter is about World War I. The creation of the Committee of Public Information (CPI) and the first mass-mobilized war of the twentieth century make the propaganda of World War I an important precedent for later wars and mark a significant development from efforts in the Philippines. The CPI used posters and film to create moving visuals of overseas atrocities, and used Army Signal Corps footage to make newsreels and documentaries that linked World War I to the narrative of civilization versus barbarism that had worked so successfully in the Philippines. Though Woodrow Wilson and his administration successfully convinced Americans to participate in an overseas war for democracy, his larger vision of an American-led world order failed. Further, the CPI, led by George Creel, was so successful at blending news and propaganda—and at sanitizing the horrors of trench warfare—that it left a bad taste in the mouths of many Americans, leading proponents of propaganda to rename it with the more innocuous term “public relations.”

If the Philippine War pioneered the global message of U.S. freedom and democracy in the twentieth century and World War I was a failed practice run, in World War II (chapter 3 of Brewer’s book), the message and mechanics combined to a rousing success of the U.S. presidential propaganda machine. Together, they created a narrative of U.S. involvement in the world that successfully convinced the American people to win the war *and* to win the peace, that is, to commit to U.S. international leadership following the war’s end. Brewer argues that the narrative of civilization versus barbarism was “retooled” to emphasize “the pragmatic rewards of victory—a better life and a safer world” (p. 88). This narrative was crafted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose fireside chats brought him into living rooms around the country, and by the Office of War Information (OWI), which was supported

in its efforts to provide democratic reasons for fighting by the news media and by Hollywood. It was so persuasive because it was presented as a “strategy of truth,” even as the brutality of war and the economic interests of the United States were often overlooked or downplayed (p. 88). It was also persuasive because it allowed Americans to overlook all the undemocratic parts of the war—the internment of Japanese Americans and the racial segregation of the U.S. military being only two of the most obvious examples. In short, World War II was cast as the “good war,” and this image, Brewer argues, would be “conscripted to serve in wars to come” (p. 140).

In her fourth chapter, Brewer argues that the act of “forgetting” the Korea War was key to the construction of the Cold War ideological narrative and a new “wartime relationship between the government and citizens” (p. 177). The conflict in Korea marked a key conversion of the official narrative to democracy versus communism, and from a “strategy of truth” to a “strategy of credibility”—from the pursuit of truth to the pursuit of the appearance of truth (p. 144). The “Forgotten War,” Brewer argues that the war in Korea was forgotten precisely because it did not quite fit the narrative of democracy triumphant—it petered out to a stalemate that has yet to end. To distract the American public from the complicated situation in Korea, the Eisenhower administration offered a simplified story about the global Cold War. But this simplified version became accepted as truth, and “the Cold War narrative that began as propaganda to promote policy ended up shaping policy” (p. 177).

The Vietnam War, chapter 6 in Brewer’s narrative, is more important for what it did not accomplish than for what it did. The Korean War strategy, which created the Cold War narrative and through sleight of hand directed the American public’s eyes elsewhere, only worked so far during Vietnam. Over the changing administrations of the war, the American public was pointed away from Vietnam and toward “World War II analogies, a Cold War worldview, and divisions on the home front,” but all of these left the ultimate question lingering of why Vietnam at all (p. 182). This left a sense of disenchantment among the U.S. public, both with the U.S. government and with the U.S. mission in the world. A lot of the disenchantment came from what came to be called the “credibility gap,” that is, the fact that the media strategy “relied on communicating to Americans the way they were supposed to feel about the war, not what was actually happening” (p. 227). Vietnam also solidified television as a news source and one that conveyed “emotional messages of patriotism, trust, and reassurance” as well as “objective

information” (p. 181). Brewer’s chapter on Vietnam is the most meandering, reflecting in its history the confusion of the event itself. Unlike the shorter wars that preceded it, there were many official narratives that emerged from Vietnam as each administration attempted to take control of the story for its own ends.

Brewer’s last chapter, apart from a brief conclusion, is on Operation Iraqi Freedom. Brewer’s narrative has been building to this point, as she argues that the Iraq War, an unprovoked “war of choice,” was essentially a perversion of the World War II narrative and a twisted application of the tactics of the OWI. If Brewer’s long story has been how U.S. presidential administrations have participated in a transition from shaping news to producing it, the official narrative of the Iraq War was the *pièce de résistance*, albeit with disastrous consequences. The “spin” produced during the Iraq War was a “blurring of news, propaganda, and entertainment,” and was persuasive enough to make the ultimate unveiling of its erroneous premises traumatic on its own. Ironically, the biggest lesson from Vietnam—that propaganda asserting reality was not the same as reflecting it—was not one that the administration remembered.

Brewer’s book is most useful in the way it crafts a long story about the evolution of war propaganda, but in some ways that is also its weakness. The U.S. war in Iraq led indisputably to a debacle (to put it mildly) in U.S. foreign affairs, and, we now know, was perpetrated on false information. But in attempting to place the blame for the fighting of a war on presidential administrations, Brewer risks overlooking the incredibly complex machine that drives a modern war. This is, of course, a little bit her point—what for McKinley was politically expedient becomes presumed policy for Bush in Brewer’s story. But for a history of wars, Brewer’s book is light on the military aspect—to what extent were military advisors and officials in the Department of Defense contributors to official narratives? Her chapter on Korea and the conver-

sion of World War II to a long-term Cold War is in many ways the most interesting one in the book, but with the Cold War came explosive growth in infrastructure, bureaucracy, and expertise production that were not exactly divorced from policymaking. In addition, the U.S. ways of making war—or at least deploying force—changed remarkably over the twentieth century, something that Brewer’s focus on acknowledged wars, rather than armed conflicts, necessarily overlooks.

But what all readers can take away from Brewer’s book is the point that America’s foreign wars have been built on the back of persistent misunderstandings of foreign people. The problem for every administration that Brewer chronicles has been “how to persuade Americans that they were fighting for the highest stakes in a limited war in a small faraway country about which they knew nothing” (p. 145). Key to all of the strategies—successful and less successful, purposeful and less purposeful—was the assumption that where America leads, others will follow. If Brewer’s book shows us anything, it is that this steadfast belief in the superiority of the American way of life, in its exceptionalism, has been constantly appealed to and never borne out. But for all that Brewer’s story is one of repeated hoodwinking of the American people, and the many ways policymakers and everyday Americans have misinterpreted the world around them, the ultimate message is not a cynical one. “Americans,” writes Brewer, “continue to think for themselves” (p. 282).

Notes

[1]. For a description of the AHA panel, see <http://aha.confex.com/aha/2012/webprogram/Session5745.html>.

[2]. Marilyn B. Young, “‘I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war’: The United States in the Twenty-First Century,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (January 2012): 1-15, quotation on 1-2.

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