

H-Net Reviews

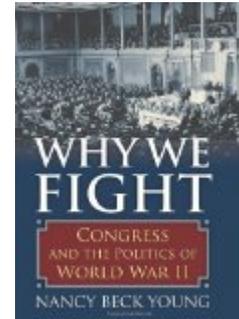
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy Beck Young. *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. Illustrations. 376 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1917-7.

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Published on H-War (December, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



We are daily bombarded with the message that our system—especially Congress—is more blatantly partisan, more viciously personal, and less able to set aside personal narrow interest for the common weal than ever. As frequently as any, the manner in which the nation closed ranks in World War II is provided as the exemplar for nation-above-politics, and harmony in the name of a greater good. Not surprisingly those good old days were neither so different from, nor so much better than, current attempts to solve today’s problem, a thought at once both reassuring and depressing.

Nancy Beck Young’s *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* closely examines the key legislative issues of the mid-twentieth century, and the means by which a very different congressional structure succeeded and failed in attempts to address them. Young begins with an extensive description of the seniority system that controlled Congress, and by extension much of American society, during the Great Depression and war years. She explains how strict adherence to seniority in the appointment of committee chairs gave disproportionate authority to southern congressmen. These men were mostly Democrats from safe seats in which large numbers of their constituents were categorically denied the right to vote. Young is careful to note that, while seniority is often challenged as an appropriate means to choose leaders, its putative replacement, merit, is generally supplanted by party loyalty. Moreover, she notes that since the southern voting bloc was a large, generally monolithic group at the time, it is likely that many of the same chairmen would have been elected by their peers, in any event.

The Senate, whose filibuster was as powerful in the 1940s as at any time in its history, may have differed in its procedural rules, but it was made up of many of the same powerful forces who controlled the House. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of *Why We Fight* is the frequent description of the colorful personalities whose names are now chiefly relegated to old congressional acts or courthouses. Carter Glass, Richard Russell, Sam Rayburn, John McCormack, and the undeniably loathsome Theodore Bilbo are just some of the characters whose statesmanship or foibles are put on display.

Young’s book is divided into two parts: the economics of fighting a war and the social issues that the nation faced at the time. There is a fundamental difference between the two; like it or not, a war was on and had to be funded. Social issues, including race, immigration, and what we now refer to as red-baiting, frankly did not require resolution. Not surprisingly, the first half of the book describes cooperation—a liberalism in praxis, as it is frequently termed in the work—that often brought relatively disparate groups together. The overarching economic questions of the period were those posed by the New Deal. Young explores the key philosophical dispute of the day: were Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s dramatic changes to the role of the federal government a temporary solution to Depression exigencies, or did they herald a new, permanent alteration to the fabric of society? This welfare to warfare question (another coinage minted liberally in the book) colored much of the debate about funding, price and wage controls, labor and strike regulations, and government pay.

Equally at play, and thoroughly addressed in the

book, was the growing antipathy between Congress and the Roosevelt administration. The author explains how the problems stemmed both from a general feeling that the executive's power was increasing at the cost of the legislative, and from personal dislike for many of the too-smart-for-their-own-good bureaucrats who irritated representatives on an individual basis. Both are well documented and leave a clear sense that many of the difficult questions of execution of a war by a democracy were not aided by FDR's ham-handed legislative approach.

While the first half of the book presents a rough-hewn and often bitterly won legislative success, the second reflects vituperative, generally futile fighting that achieved little and sowed the seeds of McCarthyism; much of the civil rights struggle of later years; and decades of recrimination about what America knew, and how it could have ameliorated, the horrors of the Nazi era. Each chapter tells a separate, sad story, including how long before commonly believed Congress already had a clear notion of the problems and pogroms of Germany; indeed, Senator Alben Barkley used the term "holocaust" as early as November 1941 (p. 141). Likewise, the hypocrisy of fighting a war against tyranny

and subjugation of "lesser races," while maintaining de jure segregation of African American citizens, was not lost on contemporaries in World War II. Finally, Young's discussion of the Dies Committee (a forerunner to the House Un-American Activities Committee) and its ad hominem attacks on individuals in the administration, amply demonstrates how the Second Red Scare, with all of its worst elements, was a product of the 1940s, not the '50s.

Young closes her work with a detailed examination of the decades after the war and the gradual changes to the legislative system that followed. Her discussion of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is especially illuminating as it examines the unique force that a strong, legislatively savvy president can bring to bear on even the most difficult social issue.

Why We Fight is thoroughly researched and well footnoted. It is not an especially easy read, as it assumes a fair knowledge of the personalities and issues that it addresses. In that regard, however, it is entirely appropriate for a graduate reading course in political science, and is highly recommended for anyone with a special interest in the subject.

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Citation: Bruce D. Cohen. Review of Young, Nancy Beck, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2013.

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