

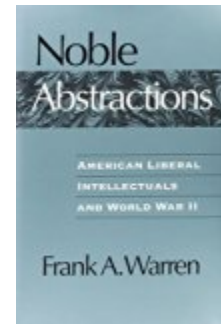
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Frank A. Warren. *Noble Abstractions: American Liberal Intellectuals and World War II*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999. xxii + 330 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0814-4.

Reviewed by Brett Gary (Graduate Program in Modern History and Literature, Drew University)

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A Disappointing War Against Fascism: Left-Liberal Journalists and WWII

Frank A. Warren, historian at Queens College and author of earlier studies of American leftists in the 1930s, has written a valuable and learned study of left-liberal intellectual journalists and their unmet goals for US social, economic, and foreign policies during WWII. As Professor Warren makes clear in his acknowledgments, this is a subject dear to him because the “noble abstractions” espoused by his cast of writers and critics were those embraced by his parents. The book’s subjects offered a humane vision of social and economic justice, and helped define the larger meaning of WWII as a revolutionary struggle against fascism, both in the US and across the globe. This vision, Warren argues, not entirely realistic to begin with, was “betrayed” (p. xii) by the increasingly limited notions of the war’s purposes as defined by President Roosevelt (in his incarnation as “Dr. Win the War”) and by the State Department. The key to both the analytical and narrative tension at the book’s center is in Warren’s assessment of the gulf between the reality of the war and those “illusory” but “also noble” abstractions articulated by liberal intellectuals – he refers to it as “the distance between those abstractions and liberal performance” (p. xiv). For Warren, those gaps between ideals and actions produced “political and moral dilemmas” that became irresolvable contradictions within American liberalism at war’s end.

If the issues, debates, and terminological battles vetted in Professor Warren’s book were the same ones suffusing his boyhood home, then his parents must have subscribed to a host of political journals, especially the

Nation, the *New Republic*, *Common Sense*, and *PM*, among others. Warren draws on these journals as his primary sources to produce a tightly focused and wide-ranging intellectual history of the left-liberal press from the beginning of US direct involvement in the war in 1941 to the war’s aftermath. Freda Kirchwey, Max Lerner, Bruce Bliven, Reinhold Niebuhr, Michael Straight, James Loeb, Louis Fischer, and a host of other influential left-liberal writers and editors take center stage, as they provided the ideas and critical analysis for those publications. Warren begins with his principles’ “interpretation of World War II as a democratic revolution and an international civil war between democracy and fascism” – the noble part of their aspirations – and shows, in each chapter, how their ideals were invariably (for him, inevitably) unrealized because of “their continued commitment to Roosevelt and the New Deal” (p. xiv). In most chapters the same useful, if somewhat predictable framework holds.

Warren first allows his main cast of characters to define through richly textured debate some political, economic, or diplomatic problem of the war. Then he examines the gulf between the left-liberals’ idealized rhetoric and goals and the war’s reality as defined by the Roosevelt administration. Thereupon he shows how this gulf produced moral and political dilemmas for the liberal intellectual community and concludes most chapters by showing how his journalists’ inability to distance themselves from their affiliation with the Roosevelt administration (especially their tarnished hero FDR) and the Democratic Party resulted in a weaker, increasingly com-

promised liberalism. Across a whole range of issues President Roosevelt failed to act upon their definition of and prescription for the war as a moral struggle against fascism; they in turn offered trenchant critiques of his inadequate social, economic, personnel, and foreign policy decisions, and yet he remained their leader and they never broke from him. Had they made the break, Warren avers, they might have had more influence because they would not have been taken for granted and their ideas would have at least been understood as “critical” analysis and not failed and disregarded policy prescriptions by unrewarded, cranky loyalists.

Warren is generally, but not entirely, sympathetic to the main cast of characters and their progressive world view, and he lukewarmly endorses the “Union for Democratic Action-*New Republic*-*Nation*-*PM* circle’s” (p. xvii) vision of the war as global “civil war” between democracy and fascism. He also agrees with their repudiation of Communism (both Soviet and American), but excoriates their inability to cut their ties to the Roosevelt Administration, especially with what he establishes as mounting evidence of FDR’s indifference to progressive liberal goals. For Warren this points to the fundamental flaw in liberals’ excessive commitment to the Democratic Party, and consequent failure to adopt an available option – withholding all but “critical support” for Roosevelt and the war effort. This was the policy proffered by Norman Thomas and the Socialist Party, and the one Warren would have chosen. Critical support would have focused on the “administration’s inequalities and failures” instead of justifying Roosevelt’s expedience by blaming others; it would have positioned them to sustain their critique of the capitalist system rather than acceding to a policy of reforming large-scale consumer-based capitalism; it would have severed them from any affiliation with reactionary Democratic Party policies on racial justice questions, from internment of the Japanese-Americans, to poll-taxes, thereby giving them the high moral ground; it might have allowed vociferous critics like Tom Amlie to stay inside the liberal community because there might have been a place for his organizing energies were his colleagues not intent on staying close to the exercise of power; and liberal ineffectuality in influencing administration policy and expectations for the war would not have been so pronounced.

As Warren writes, “What my reading of the history of the liberal intellectuals during World War II suggests is that their goals would have been better served if they had dropped their strategy of building liberal influence within the Democratic Party and devoted their energy to

building a democratic left movement detached from the Democratic Party” (p. xiv). Professor Warren’s democratic socialist aspirations frame the implicit “what if?” questions that form the core of the book’s overall assessment of left-liberal intellectuals’ ineffectuality and those dashed left-liberals aspirations shape the arc of the book’s narrative. In short, the book is a study of liberal idealism constrained by liberalism’s political alliance with the Democratic Party. “Perhaps it was inevitable,” Warren argues, “that the desperate war situation and the horror of fascism should have produced a political vision high on idealistic goals but minus the power or the ability to implement the goals. But what the liberal intellectuals did was to invest in Roosevelt as the leader and in the New Deal as the administration that represented progressive forces that could achieve those idealistic goals” (p. 36). That was fatal thinking, he argues, by those who should have known better.

As an intellectual history of war-era journalists’ ideas and moral fervor, the book captures the hothouse atmosphere of political journalism in a time of extraordinary crisis. Warren offers a broad sampling of debates and pronouncements about highly specific time-bound issues that quickly became ephemeral due to the rapid succession of events and new crises to be managed, and he succeeds in drawing larger patterns of thought and analysis out of that atmosphere; at the same time, he shows how quickly changing events often caught his cast of writers in cycles of overstatement, tendentiousness, backpedaling, and retrenchment, illustrating how they were also trying to discern larger patterns and hang onto their moral bearings. As an intellectual history of the era, it offers a valuable, focused lens on an important group of left-liberal journalists and their responses to policies with which they often disagreed. At moments Warren’s nuanced, careful recounting of passionate debates is stunningly rewarding, such as his discussion of the exchanges between Kirchwey, Fischer, and Niebuhr over Soviet needs and intentions in the postwar era.

Yet, as a political history of US liberals and liberalism at war, the “internalist” reading of left-liberal journalists’ responses to the decisions of political leaders is limited. We are infrequently provided larger contexts for understanding official policy-making beyond how Warren’s journals and journalists responded to those decisions. Therefore we get only a second or third-hand understanding of official perceptions and rationale. Moreover, the liberal intellectuals in this study are virtually all outside the policy-making and administrative apparatus. We never hear from a whole generation of liberal intel-

lectuals – government officials, scientists, political scientists, journalists, historians, sociologists, lawyers, writers and others – who threw themselves into the fray as government policy-makers, researchers, intelligence officers, propagandists, mid-level bureaucrats, and so on. We hear from policy-makers (many of whom were also liberal intellectuals) only as their decisions are interpreted by Warren’s cast, and much of the book’s discussion is about frustrated responses to good ideas gone unheeded and in reaction to ill-formed decisions and policies implemented by powerful men at the center of power but at the periphery of the book’s attention.

This is not to diminish the importance of journalists as intellectuals, intellectual history, or Warren’s particular history. I learned a great deal about dozens of issues as they were discussed in the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *PM*, *Common Sense* and war-related works produced by writers for those publications. The intellectual community comprised by Bruce Bliven, James Loeb, Freda Kirchwey, Robert Bendiner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Max Lerner, Louis Fischer, I.F. Stone, Michael Straight, Alfred Bingham, and Tom Amlie (and others) is indeed compelling, and I learned much about how they thought and argued about the war and its aims and the excuses they made for FDR. But I did not learn much at all about them as thinkers – where they came from, how their mindsets were formed, what their political education had been, and how they arrived at their positions of considerable (but limited) influence as leading left-liberal writers and opinion-makers. More critically, I felt thrown into the middle of an ongoing argument in this book, encountering a full cast of characters who themselves are aware of the fault lines and fissures and ruptures in the history of this so-called liberal community, but whose author is largely silent about those fissures and the recent past. Warren begins *in media res*, and the sense of beginning in the middle of debates suggests a potentially limited audience for this work – namely, those already well familiar with the history of left-liberal intellectuals in the popular front era, the war years, and the early cold war, or the serious student of US policies in World War II.

Such an audience is likely to be impatient with the absence of any discussion of pre-war debates among left-liberals, liberals, Popular Fronters, Communists, and others about US entrance into the war. On occasion Warren’s own immense knowledge of the fault lines of 30s radicals, progressives, socialists, social democrats, liberals, popular fronters, anti-Stalinist leftists, ex-Communist popular fronters, Communists, and

so on, is clear in how precisely it informs his understanding of wartime alliances, but all of that background and clarification stands outside of his text. That those profound and deeply antagonistic conflicts from 1937-1942 all exist outside this book’s discussion of liberal intellectuals at war is a problem, at several analytical levels. First, it actually makes the formation of the wartime “community” of liberal intellectuals less extraordinary than it was – because there were so many wounds and so much distrust the relative wartime amity and agreement would be more telling set against the backdrop of the liberal-left’s own “civil” war. Second, it fails to account for earlier and arguably far more important articulations of the “noble abstractions” by people such as Archibald MacLeish and Robert Sherwood, who began defining the war as a moral confrontation between democratic ideals and fascism years before Warren’s book begins. Thus, while Warren’s cast of characters and left-liberal journals provide him with clear archival and textual focus for his study, and makes it possible to manage discussion of a wide range of issues in some depth, it does exclude other key liberal intellectuals who were probably more central in defining the war’s meanings. Their absence limits the claims that can be made for the centrality of the book’s main figures.

That said, Warren does provide a nuanced, provocative, insightful history of the “Union for Democratic Action-*New Republic-Nation-PM* circle” at war, and a quick list indicates some (but not all) of the issues that he addresses in two hundred and fifty six pages of text. The book’s overall narrative moves from the articulation of the pro-war liberal intellectual community’s vision of what the war was about to the eventual rupture of that community because of shattered dreams and differing perceptions of what dreams were still salvageable as Cold War fears descended over the republic. Along the way we get many workmanlike discussions about particular issues: the uses of the keywords that defined the war as a democratic revolution; Freda Kirchwey’s and Max Lerner’s rebukes of Henry Luce’s “American Century” essay; debates over curbing monopoly capitalism versus full employment as a sufficient postwar goal for radical democracy; debates over US policies toward fascist neutrals in France, Italy, and Spain and the State Department’s perfidy in these policies; how US policies toward our allies, especially England and the USSR, were complicated by their relations with each other; the formation of the UDA as a center for liberal action and activism, and the limits on the UDA’s effectiveness because of its proximity to the New Deal; Henry Wallace’s apotheo-

sis as the liberal idealist in the Roosevelt administration and the liberal anguish at his being left of the ticket in 1944; the absence of liberals' moral outrage over the internment of Japanese-Americans, civil liberties abuses in general, racism in general, and their virtual silence on the dropping of the atomic bomb; liberals' inadequate organization and action on racial and gender injustice in the US; the declining fortunes of Tom Amlie as a spokesman for liberal idealism; the British Labour Party's successes in forming an effective critical and political power bloc, compared to US labor; the perception of Socialist prewar isolationism as evidence of its irresponsibility and non-viability as a third party alternative; and the road not taken by liberal intellectuals, or how supporting Norman Thomas would have saved liberal intellectuals from fatal compromises and contradictions, and a fatal optimism that belied the war's tragic realities.

Such a broad canvas permits Warren to hear from a good many writers and to explore a range of problems at the heart of left-liberal intellectual culture as the US struggled to win a war on two fronts and to envision itself as a more democratic place. Warren's assessment of the intellectual tensions and failures are explained by his perception that the liberals misunderstood how limited reform would be if it was going to take place within a capitalist framework – as he writes, “What triumphed, for better or worse, was liberal capitalism” [and] it was a far cry from the high, if vague, hopes for a new democratic revolution” (p. 36). But even more fatal was their inability to think past FDR as the leader of progressive forces and the resulting diminution of the power of progressive ideas in American political life, he argues.

Warren has performed an important job in this study, helping to open up WWII to the necessary reexamination of the idea of liberal consensus. He has a commanding knowledge of his materials, has done yeoman's work

organizing and clarifying the debates that left-liberal intellectuals engaged in so passionately, and his sense of the sadness of lost opportunities to make a better world gives the work its passionate, moral center. Yet the constant recurrence of Roosevelt's implicit duplicity gives a more one-dimensional overall analysis to these complicated matters than they deserve. Professor Warren chastises the liberals for their seizing upon “liberal persons” rather than movement building (p. 254), but himself seizes upon the same liberal person to explain too much. Throughout the book his judgment of ideas is scrupulous and tough-minded, so it is therefore surprising that FDR as bogeyman plays such a central role in his causal framework. Nevertheless, I no doubt will return to this book again and again for instruction and insight on a host of wartime issues.

On a completely different issue, having nothing to do with the quality of Professor Warren's work, and having to do with editorial decisions, I want to utter a complaint: The editors at Ohio State University Press have somehow agreed on an endnote system for this book that is thoroughly annoying. The use of initials and abbreviations for proper names and journal titles in the endnotes means that the reader must constantly return back to the list of abbreviations (I wanted a little tear-sheet I could use as my bookmark), imposing a time-consuming burden upon the reader, making the endnotes far less useful than they should be. This would appear to be further evidence of the publishing world's decision that the end-of-the-book scholarly apparatus is superfluous. It is not, and the specific decision here diminishes this work of scholarship.

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