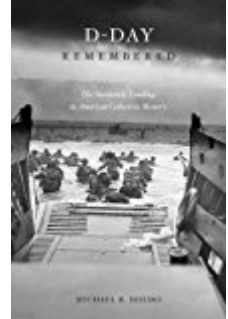


**Michael Dolski.** *D-Day Remembered: The Normandy Landings in American Collective Memory.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2016. 310 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62190-218-8.



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This book's title is unfortunately quite misleading. The book does not address the landings at Normandy themselves, nor is this a book about American collective memory. In fact, the author in his conclusion states that "memory" (a term he puts in quotation marks) "is a vague analytic tool and simply slapping 'collective' or 'public' in front of it only increases the potential problems with its usage" (p. 215). What emerges in the text is that the author himself appreciated the problems with the usage of the term collective memory. What he describes as "collective" memory (again the use of quotation marks) involved for Americans "multiple agglomerations of sometimes distinctive, sometimes overlapping groups" (pp. 215-216). These groups are identified later in the text, but how they overlap and interact is not clarified in explaining the author's use of "collective" memory. Although his bibliography clearly indicates that he has an acquaintance with the major texts related to the field of collective memory, Michael Dolski's work shows little discernible influence. It is clear from the layers of research indicated that the au-

thor has thought quite deeply about this theme, but decided to take a different approach than the title suggests.

Collective memory derives its strength from the group and represents an enduring design for the structuring of the present within the past. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs established the connection between collective and personal memory: it is individuals as members of a group who remember. War is a special category related to collective memory because it changes the lives of millions of people and alters patterns of life within a society. The events of the past through the trauma of war enter the individual as well as the collective consciousness and the experiences of war are remembered as a reconstructive representation based on a society's particular frame of reference at the time. Remembering things requires frameworks. Collectively affirmed signs, symbols, places, monuments, cemeteries, and museums are representations, or frameworks, of collective memory. These frameworks provide the group with a means to reconnect with history and validate the group's collective identity.

These basic concepts certainly could have driven Dolski's approach as a true exploration of American collective memory related to the signs, symbols, monuments, and most importantly, the role of the American cemetery at St. Laurent above Omaha Beach. Instead, Dolski starts out to explain how and why interpretations of the past are used to navigate and understand the present, stating that "the text shifts between constructions of the past and their employment in the present" (p. 9). Dolski settles on exploring American self-perceptions and self-conceptualizations reflected in D-Day commemorations and D-Day-themed books and films as "politicized framings" that "shape public consciousness of battles and wars" (p. 12). Although he seeks to explore the "efforts by veterans, politicians, journalists, government officials, scholars, and filmmakers to stamp D-Day on American memory" (p. 128), he primarily addresses the politicians and only briefly touches on scholars (Stephen Ambrose in particular) and filmmakers. Exactly how and why this stamping has taken place is elusive.

Dolski does admirable work in outlining the American self-perceptions and self-conceptualizations that are contained within the story of D-Day. On that particular day, the essence of American greatness and nobility was transcendently demonstrated as a "gallant sacrifice to save France from barbaric despotism," and even to preserve Western civilization itself (pp. 52-53). The battle represented America's moral authority in pursuing a just war of liberation as part of a collective effort of the united nations to oppose tyranny and oppression. The soldiers who stormed the beaches reflected the best of the nation and represented the American democratic ethos (p. 56); the dead and wounded represented the sacrifice of free men in the cause of freedom (p. 99). But unfortunately, Dolski's concept of "politicized framings" interferes with his explorations into using D-Day as a framework of collective memory to explain the idea of the American self in the twentieth century. What results are statements like these: "D-Day in

the Cold War thus became a means of reaffirming America's sense of greatness but also served as a blanket for the many struggles during superpower confrontation and proxy warfare" (p. 58). The Normandy American Cemetery at St. Laurent, instead of serving as the true touchstone of American collective memory and the main framework for not only Americans, but people from all over the world to see and understand the reflection of American self-conceptualization, is referred to by Dolski as "an effort to shape public appreciation of D-Day" (p. 60).

Throughout the rest of the book, Dolski conflates events in modern American history with American identity (a term he does not use, but the reader infers), and relates it all to a single event. He brings the reader decade by decade from Eisenhower to Obama, and presents the idea that D-Day is an empty vessel into which each president pours the context of his times. This approach could have been an opportunity to explore Halbwachs's concept of the shifting social environment influencing individual memories and how those memories are attributed to D-Day as a particular event in time related to a collective memory framework. But Dolski approaches these events from a less satisfying perspective, making rather generic statements intended to serve as the intellectual backdrop for relating how each president used D-Day within a politicized frame. For example, Dolski interprets President Nixon's remarks on twenty-fifth anniversary of D-Day in political terms only and offers no evidence to support an assertion that "Nixon could hope to quiet dissent against the ongoing war in Vietnam by linking it to D-Day's quest for freedom" (p. 99). In 1974 Omar Bradley, Lawton Collins, and Matthew Ridgway joined about 1,500 other veterans at the D-Day commemoration. They spoke of the importance of freedom, liberty, and unity in the face of danger. But Dolski notes that these remarks were presented in an "undercurrent of criticism," apparently overshadowed, as Dolski implies, by Watergate (p. 104). He explains the relative decline of

D-Day prominence at this time by observing that few people celebrated warfare in the late 1970s (p. 106). It is unclear if, indeed, there had been a decline in D-Day prominence, or how that decline was indicated. Dolski accepts that there must have been a decline because of the political climate.

The book takes on a more cynical tone as we approach the 1980s, as illustrated by these comments: "The moral implications of these D-Day tales remained as doughty as usual: they also fit into contemporary affairs as a fine accompaniment to belligerent Cold War rhetoric" (p. 121) and "the moral sense of purpose and the hyperbolic assessment of dashing men conducting glorious work proved a popular formula" (p. 123).

In June of 1984, between 10,000 and 15,000 veterans attended the D-Day commemoration ceremonies. Reagan's Pointe du Hoc speech reflected the president's optimism and moral certitude, asserting the importance of extending the blessings of liberty, the triumph of democracy, and the willingness to sacrifice for a great and noble cause. Dolski notes that it was a powerful speech in that it conformed "to widely accepted views" (p. 128). For President Clinton, 1994 was an opportunity to present D-Day as an act of liberation and new birth of freedom for the world to the hundreds of thousands of visitors who came to Normandy for the commemoration (p. 163). Dolski refers to this event as a symbolic hand-off from the Greatest Generation to the Baby Boomers, and observes with a pert aside: "The public enjoyed these tales of D-Day glory, which made the underlying message of world responsibility ... easier to consume" (p. 167).

President Bush at the 2004 D-Day commemoration, according to Dolski, "evidently felt that the D-Day paradigm—of America liberating others at great cost because it was right to do so—would ease his salesmanship efforts" in selling to a divided America and a poisoned international environment that a message of sacrifice for freedom could be transferred from Overlord to Operation Iraqi Freedom (p. 203).

Dolski has a bit more trouble fitting President Obama into his politicized approach. He notes that when the president spoke at the Normandy American cemetery in 2009, he was taking a short respite from the battle over health care reform, one of the "contentious debates raging through America" (p. 212). He paused to extol America's clarity of purpose, unity against evil, and individual bravery and selflessness that changed course of history. Obama observed that the story of Normandy is the story of America.

Dolski also is quite good at explaining how D-Day provided a means for politicians, writers, and filmmakers to tell a story palatable to Americans: America and its allies had triumphed over evil on the beaches of Normandy. Cornelius Ryan's book *The Longest Day* (1959) and Darryl F. Zanuck's 1962 film of the same name were both depictions of heroism and sacrifice of the common man for a worthy cause that led democracy to overcome tyranny. Stephen Ambrose's popular histories provided a romantic take on D-Day that fed nostalgia for an imagined past and provided a moralistic example of the American will and spirit, and the unlimited potential of democracy (p. 161). His book, *Band of Brothers* (1992) extolled heroism, duty, and sacrifice. The heroes of the book represented the best of America serving in a noble cause. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) was a cultural event representing a passing of a torch between generations. It also emphasized the themes of courage, duty, and sacrifice as Americans from every part of the country came together to defeat evil (p. 174). While addressing these and

other examples, we see a continuous theme that transcends political time and even historical time. Dolski, however, does not explore the powerful and lasting themes contained in these works that relate to the American self and constitute a unique collective identity reflected in the constructed and reconstructed memory of D-Day.

In his conclusion, Dolski does approach this idea. "The D-Day tale [a curious choice of words by Dolski, but not explained]," he observes, "remained a story of America, of Americans, and of American perceptions of themselves" (p. 227). Indeed, the author insightfully captures his true theme. The reader perceives this theme earlier in the book, even if the author does not make it explicit. It is remarkable to note that every president who commemorated D-Day, regardless of political stripe (or the politicized frame), spoke the same elevated words and evoked the collective memory to explain America and Americans to the world. The consistency of that message—of noble sacrifice for the greatest of causes, human freedom—and the determination to support that cause now and in the future is why D-Day is so important. Applying Dolski's insights, we can provide the following summary by applying some of Halbwachs's concepts of collective memory. The memory framework of D-Day, whether presented in the words of the presidents and authors, or in the images on film, has served as the means by which, at every moment, Americans are capable of reconstructing the past and communicating recollections that constitute the values, ideals, and characteristics of the nation.

Dolski has written a useful book, especially in his approach to tracing the unique American concept of D-Day and its use in reflecting American self-perceptions in the twentieth century. The role of D-Day in American collective memory, however, has yet to be written.

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