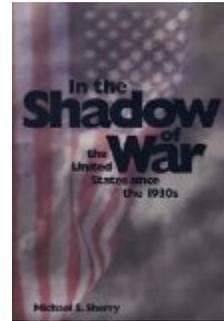


H-Net Reviews

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Michael S. Sherry. *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995. xii + 595 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06111-6.

Reviewed by Thomas W. Zeiler (Department of History, University of Colorado at Boulder)
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Perpetual War

We stand at the end of a violent century, much of it embroiled in some form of war. Living under this “shadow of war” resulted in the “militarization” of American society, according to historian Michael S. Sherry. Evidence of militarization—“the process by which war and national security became consuming anxieties and provided the memories, models, and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life” (p. xi)—is compelling. This rather disturbing synthesis argues that a political culture, shaped by civilian elites, elevated defense requirements to the highest priority. Affluence and a phobia toward military power, however, deterred regimentation and a warrior spirit. War’s influence was omnipresent but also “quixotic” (p. 500) and confronted uncomfortably by Americans. Yet security-driven ways of addressing problems abroad influenced the imagination, transferring militarization into the domestic arena.

A brief summary of the book must suffice, though it fails to do justice to the intricate, nuanced argument and rich details. Sherry believes that militarization began before the Cold War, during the New Deal era when Franklin Roosevelt used war analogies to combat the Depression. By the late 1930s, he conceived a security ideology that linked technology, capitalism, the activist state, and military power. Pearl Harbor both outraged and terrified Americans, who welcomed growing state power and a national defense economy during the war but were anxious about the process of militarization afterward. The Cold War institutionalized the military-industrial-scientific establishment and codified consensual politics, security ideology, and conformist societal

relations, thus preventing civilian leaders from escaping the war paradigm. By the 1960s, militarization had become a powerful image, one exploited as much on the homefront as abroad. Presidents raised militarization to new metaphorical heights by launching wars on poverty, drugs, and, implicitly, on outgroups such as minorities and gays. The past thirty years revealed a militarization fix, although policy often degenerated into the “simple militarism” (p. 340) of narcissistic preening and repression at home. Sherry hopes that the post-Cold War Clinton years have ended the inward turn of militarization, which sapped the nation of creativity, resources, and inspired leadership for six decades.

Sherry’s gift for deflating myths and pointing out ironies is manifest in this book. The Korean and Vietnam wars, for instance, were hardly limited conflicts, as realists argued. The boundless viciousness of the air and ground wars contradicted that view very clearly. How ironic, furthermore, that in the 1970s, America regretted its allies’ abandonment of militarism when before World War II the United States had criticized this very ideology followed by the Nazis and Japan. Sherry even takes to task the gay community, a frequent victim of state oppression, for not overcoming class differences and identifying with such persecuted brethren as the poor and minorities. Who won the Cold War? The author gives Ronald Reagan his due, for even hypocrisy and overblown rhetoric had “unintended consequences” (p. 409). The image of George Bush and Dan Quayle storming to the nominating platform in 1988 as proponents of traditional family values, while music from *La Cage aux*

Folles played in the background, is delightfully devastating. Likening the Little Rock civil rights battle of 1957 to Cold War tactics of troops deployed, summit meetings, and tests of nerves is brilliantly effective in connecting militarization at home to foreign policy. The arrogance of power is nowhere more clear than in Lyndon Johnson's characterization of ancient Southeast Asian societies as "young and unsophisticated" (p. 251). And some of the most moving, and acerbic, narrative arises in descriptions of the injustices of sexual and gender relations in the military, the supposed laboratory of integration and equality.

If anything, Sherry is consistently critical. There are very few individuals who look good, whether American or foreign. Some do not deserve friendly treatment, such as red-baiter J. Parnell Thomas. But every president, and most world leaders, are faulted. An erratic German chancellor Helmut Schmidt criticized Jimmy Carter's softness on the Russians at first, and then lamented the president's trigger-happy mentality later. Bush is bashed as an effete wimp, undignified opportunist, superficial sloganizer, and a hypocrite in the Gulf War. If Saddam Hussein was really a Middle Eastern Hitler, Sherry asks, why did Bush not recognize this earlier or destroy the Iraqi leader during the war? Carter, meanwhile, did at least try to lift foreign policy out of its militarization framework, although he was trapped (like his predecessors and successors) by its very ideology. Much of this analysis is accurate. And to be sure, Sherry does not stoop to political hatchet jobs; he levels assaults on everyone.

That might be why, as he reveals in the acknowledgments, funding agencies were not forthcoming in backing his project at the outset, "perhaps because reviewers thought the book too 'ideological.'" While his powerful descriptions of the nature and impact of militarization are persuasive within his interpretive framework, they are, essentially, negative ones. His treatment of diplomacy is one major example. While world events are mentioned, there is scant analysis of key diplomatic flashpoints such as Yalta. Instead, Sherry pays more attention to the feminization of neutrals, as if that issue is more important than U.S.-Soviet negotiations. In-depth, useful discussions of the madness of nuclear theory predominate in the book. But the Berlin crises, Cuban Missile crisis, and Vietnam do not get sufficient coverage. Sherry has not set out to write a diplomatic history, but he does give the impression that America blindly overreacted to overseas threats. Such a claim fits his history nicely into the militarization model, but represents, at best, a very soft realist, and at most, a revisionist ideological bias that funders

probably did not fail to notice.

Terrible oppression, not to be condoned or overlooked, should, nonetheless, not totally overshadow the positive sides of the American experience. Militarization fueled the highway system, thereby ruining the inner cities and railway transport network. But what about the growth of suburbs prompted by the ease of commuting, and the safe, prosperous life in these places? It is, of course, fashionable to criticize suburbia for its vacuousness, but there were benefits. Furthermore, as a moral and rich global leader, the United States launched major reforms and, perhaps most important, exhibited a capacity for self-criticism. Yet the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, the resiliency of the democratic system during and after Watergate, antiwar protesting, and the *Roe v. Wade* decision receive only cursory treatment. Likewise, immigrants surely encountered much prejudice, as Sherry shows, but they still flooded through the Golden Door. And noting that Martin Luther King was an adept manipulator of military symbols is fascinating and perceptive, but surely an injustice to the thought and accomplishments of this nonviolent leader. A pollyannish history is not required, just some balance.

Having not done primary research (except for speeches), Sherry can merely speculate about the impact of militarization on leaders and society. The rhetorical "imagination" exists, but did people really experience militarization? Did they even care about foreign threats? The author finds "teasing evidence" of militarization in the New Deal's mobilizing phrases and in King's use of military terms. Homophobia and male chauvinism flourished all the way to the White House, as Sherry explains. But were these products of militarization, or just plain prejudice that persists regardless of war ideology? Surely, tyranny against lesbians, gays, women, and minorities, moreover, preceded the 1930s, and thus the era of militarization. The battle of the sexes between tennis stars Billy Jean King and Bobby Riggs could be seen as silly entertainment (which Sherry calls it), rather than as an indication of a war on feminism. In short, how do we know that words represent cultural bellwethers, and not just self-serving politicking or image-making on the part of leaders?

And then there are the liberals. The Cold War consensus certainly converted many, though not all, liberals into confrontational enemies of the Soviet Union. They were not above race and gender bias, and often neglected social justice crusades. But Sherry's liberals are realist tough-guys who led us into conflict abroad and milita-

rization at home. Liberals, never adequately defined as Democrats, leftists, or some combination, used national defense goals even more than conservatives, he argues, and opposed only the excesses (McCarthyism) but not the thrust of militarization. Witness John Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam, Carter restarting the Cold War, and even dove George McGovern, who is depicted as an over-cautious reformer constrained by war ideology. Communist and radicals champion racial equality, writes Sherry. Liberals, captives of southerners in the Democratic Party, do not. Actually, the best the Democrats can find for a hero in this book is sexist conservative Sam Ervin. Liberals do not even support their own president, according to Sherry. Carter suffered desertions in arms control talks, as Democrats rolled over to (and many supported) Reagan's defense buildup. One wonders if a liberal agenda ever even existed!

Surely not all liberalism or liberals can be placed under the rubric of militarization. They should get some credit for the end of legal segregation, greater rights for gender groups, and anti-poverty programs. Liberals (Democrats?) were not all racists like John Sparkman or defense-minded types like Sam Nunn. There were social justice activists, such as Pat Schroeder and even, one could argue, LBJ. Sherry's imagination seems, at times, to run wild. Equating Douglas MacArthur with Truman on Korean War goals, or comparing Barry Goldwater with liberals who shared a disgust with America's flaccid leadership when firmness was needed in the Cold War, or noting Reagan's attraction to pacifist liberals who agreed with the president that the military should be used sparingly, Sherry relishes the times when liberalism converged with militarization. In fact, he hardly makes a distinction between the two.

And in doing so, he unfairly downplays liberal efforts to change aggressive policy at home and abroad. For instance, neoconservatives are emphasized, even named,

in a section on nuclear arms. Meanwhile, the nuclear freeze movement gets brief attention, with no mention of Ted Kennedy or Mark Hatfield by name as sponsors of freeze legislation. And freeze advocates are described as rather moderate in their aims, especially when compared to foreign protesters. There is always a negative, even for reformers. Furthermore, a reliance on rhetoric perhaps causes Sherry to overlook a crucial fact. Liberals had to say tough things, even if they did not believe them or privately hoped to pacify Americans (Kennedy's rhetoric comes to mind), in order to stay in office during the Cold War.

Such posturing is, of course, a major part of Sherry's militarization thesis, which serves as a useful umbrella to cover history since the 1930s. Other paradigms, however, might be just as suitable. My top choice is simply the impact of World War II, which loosens the interpretation from the ideological strictures of militarization. From the subordinate roles played by women in the space program to the gestapo mentality of Watergate henchmen to the disgusting story of homosexual oppression in the military, World War II was a "touchstone" (p. 286) in history. Sherry does not quarrel with this assumption. But at the same time, the gains made by racial groups, the middle class, labor, women, and internationalism can be placed next to the negative images and impact of militarization by using World War II as a touchstone.

In any case, despite its accusatory thrust, this book is a thoughtful, provocative, and worthy survey of American history, and merits our close attention.

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