

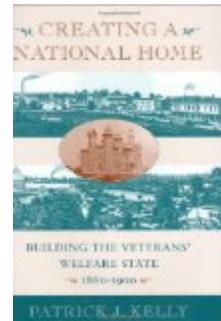
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick J. Kelly. *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860-1900*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. viii + 250 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-17560-0.

Reviewed by Dora L. Costa (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Published on EH.Net (January, 1998)



Union Army veterans and the programs that benefited them have received considerable attention of late. This reviewer has used the wealth of records generated by the Union Army pension program to study the evolution of retirement, taking advantage of the peculiarities of the program for statistical identification. The most common focus, however, has been not on the veterans as data, but on why veterans' programs developed in the first place and the ramifications of this development for the twentieth century welfare state. Thus, Theda Skocpol, among others, has argued that disgust with veterans' pensions delayed the development of state-provided old age pensions.

In this book Patrick Kelly (Department of History, University of Texas at San Antonio) traces the development of veterans' homes from their origins in the efforts of local women's philanthropic organizations to a federal system consisting of four regional branches by the 1870s and eight by the end of the nineteenth century. He documents the initial resistance to veterans' institutions arising from the fear that these would foster dependency and from the conviction that pensions were a better (and cheaper) way to compensate veterans. When it became clear that there would always be some veterans unable to take care of themselves even with generous pensions, he describes how the political alliance between Republicans and veterans led to the creation of a National Asylum. This National Asylum then turned into a National Home, as managers of the veterans' Homes sought to avoid the stigma of the poorhouse and the asylum by using the rhetoric of domesticity. But, they avoided the stigma of the poorhouse not just through their choice of rhetoric. The sites for homes were chosen for the beauty of their grounds (the first site was a bankrupt resort) and

the architectural plan of the most successful branch (the Central) combined the characteristics of military installations with those of Utopian communities and included workshops, libraries, and chapels. The kitchen provided generous portions of the artery clogging food of the era. The homes, although located outside of cities, were easily accessible via rail and were integrated into the public life of the neighboring community. Veterans spent their pensions in town (often, much to the managers' chagrin, in saloons, gambling establishments, and brothels); passing theater groups provided entertainment; city residents used the grounds of the home as a public park; and the homes organized entertainment for the entire city for Decoration Day (now known as Memorial Day) and the Fourth of July.

Although veterans' homes did not have the stigma of the poorhouse, they were institutions nonetheless. The men wore uniforms resembling their Union Army uniforms, slept in barracks with 40 or even 100 other men, needed a pass to leave the home, and were awakened by a bugle call, called to mess by a bugle call, and sent to bed by a bugle call. The veterans who entered the homes were too sick to support themselves, too poor to pay for care within their own homes, and had no family members who were able to support them.

For anyone working with Civil War veterans as data or for anyone working on nineteenth century institutional care, Kelly's book will be a useful reference. However, Kelly is not content to tell a straight history. He argues that his study of veterans' homes has much wider significance because the National Home prepared the way for the later expansion of both the United States welfare and warfare states. Because the National Homes

were highly visible tourist attractions, Kelly claims that they helped insinuate the state into the common life experience of post-Civil War Americans. Given the paucity of evidence, I found these claims excessive. Kelly presents no evidence that the attitude of Americans toward the federal government underwent a profound change. Even if it did, could we attribute this to veterans' homes? Although Kelly points out that the homes had assisted 100,000 Union veterans by 1900, this sum pales in comparison to the number of pension beneficiaries. In

1900 alone almost ten times as many pensioners were on the Union Army pension rolls. Even more striking, until the advent of the New Deal the basic welfare institutions of the United States remained unchanged and until World War II the small peacetime army could hardly lead anyone to talk of a "warfare" state.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://eh.net/>

Citation: Dora L. Costa. Review of Kelly, Patrick J., *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860-1900*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1615>

Copyright © 1998, EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3309). Published by EH.NET.