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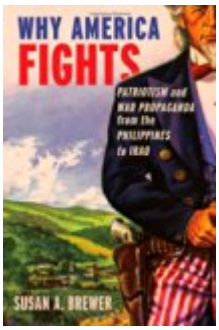

Susan A. Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 342 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-538135-1.

Reviewed by H. Matthew Loayza

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Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

The concluding chapter of Susan A. Brewer's *Why America Fights* begins with a quotation from the climactic scene of the 1992 film *A Few Good Men*, where Marine Colonel Nathan Jessep (Jack Nicholson) contemptuously dismisses the right of prosecuting attorney Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) to weigh in on national security matters. When the furious Jessep roars "You can't handle the truth!" to Kaffee, he echoes the verdict that U.S. policymakers have customarily rendered upon the American public for over a century. In *Why America Fights*, Brewer explores the U.S. government's use of overt propaganda to handle, manipulate, and advance specific versions of the truth to convince the public that the wars that they are asked to fight are worthwhile and virtuous.

Brewer guides the reader through the major U.S. conflicts of the past century in an engaging narrative that analyzes how various presidential administrations devised and conducted propaganda campaigns to rally public support for the Philippine War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003). Devoting separate chapters to each of these conflicts, she finds that the government's "strategies of persuasion" follow a general historical pattern featuring a narrative that cast the president of the United States in the lead role of a Manichean drama where the United States reluctantly took up arms to defend liberty, democracy, and civilization against a relentless and barbaric enemy who threatened not only U.S. interests, but also the very existence of American society (p. 12).

The decision to send troops to fight overseas invariably provoked public debate about both the wisdom of going to war and the extent to which the purpose and conduct of the war lived up to national ideals. To contend with dissent, potential and actual, U.S. officials have managed the news in varying ways in order to better define and settle disputes on their own terms. To this end, the state has taken advantage of its role as the source of official information and its power to censor the news. The mass media, the author finds, has historically abetted rather than impeded government propaganda campaigns. In some cases, the

media found the state's dramatic narratives depicting heroes and villains too compelling and marketable to pass up. In others, the government simply imposed restrictions to prevent journalists from conveying unwanted truths to the public, such as the official ban on using the word "retreat" in reporting during the Korean War (p. 162).

The Second World War, according to Brewer, temporarily diverged from the general pattern when the Roosevelt administration originally defined the target audience for wartime propaganda as an educated, informed citizen who needed to be persuaded of the viability and righteousness of Uncle Sam's plans. However, this idea neither survived the war, nor was it resurrected in subsequent conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. These limited conflicts, unlike the total mobilization of 1941-45, required relatively fewer contributions or sacrifices, and as Brewer observes, less civic participation. Indeed, the author advances a compelling, if disturbing argument that since 1945, civic participation in wartime has declined to the point where citizens are asked to serve only as spectators and cheerleaders. The mass media, she contends, has usually failed to challenge the official line in any meaningful way until discrepancies between the official narrative and reality became so evident (as occurred in both Vietnam and Iraq) that sticking to script would be to indulge in fantasy.

Although examining the propaganda campaigns of six major wars over a hundred year period is a daunting task, Brewer's clear, concise, and engaging prose enables her to synthesize an extensive body of scholarship and archival materials, resulting in a work that effectively places the various propaganda campaigns in their respective historical contexts. Brewer has an excellent eye for lively and revealing quotes, which are drawn from an extensive and varied body of sources. In addition to mining the National Archives, presidential libraries, and regional archives, she consults newspapers and such mass-circulation magazines as ***Time, Life***, and ***The Saturday Evening Post***, as well as Hollywood films and such genre-oriented periodicals as ***Rolling Stone*** and ***The Onion***. The author supplements the text with a number of photographs and compelling poster art that attest to the importance of visual media in propaganda and thereby enrich the work.

Why America Fights capably demonstrates how U.S. officials have sought to manipulate public sentiment while the country is at war. Rather than portraying propaganda as a monolithic, static body of ideas, the author shows how policymakers developed, disseminated, and modified messages and arguments according to their specific needs. The success of their efforts, argues Brewer, depended on "the legitimacy of the policy being promoted," the extent to which events conformed to the official narrative, and the ability of policymakers to prepare the public for postwar realities (p. 282).

What is sometimes unclear, however, is precisely ***why*** various presidential administrations were able to persuade the public to the extent that they often did. Here, the work could have benefited from a more extended discussion of when and why the public (or perhaps more precisely, ***publics***) questioned the legitimacy of wartime policies. Doing so would have enhanced an already solid chapter on Vietnam, a conflict during which public dissatisfaction with the government's conduct of the Vietnam War reached arguably historic levels. For example, one opinion poll taken shortly after the 1969 Tet Offensive showed "doves" outnumbering "hawks" by 42 to 41 percent.[1] Yet while such indications of anti-war (and antiadministration) sentiment are indeed striking, the number of self-described hawks is even more startling given mounting evidence by this time that Washington's policies in Vietnam were ineffective and bankrupt. Even allowing for the Nixon administration's skillful redefinition of

wartime aims, troop withdrawals, and recasting the United States as a victim by manipulating the prisoner-of-war issue, the extent of support (or at least acquiescence) for Richard Nixon's calls for "peace with honor" in Vietnam is nevertheless surprising and worthy of further study.

In its appraisal of public responses to wartime propaganda, the work might have devoted greater emphasis to the role of nationalism. Brewer's work shows that successful propaganda campaigns tapped and exploited deep cultural beliefs rooted in national identity and national mythology. Although the work implicitly raises the issue of nationalism in its analysis of patriotic symbols and notions of American exceptionalism, the topic merits closer scrutiny, especially given Brewer's observation that propaganda won over the hearts and minds of the public by telling them what they wanted to hear about their own society. World War II information campaigns, she notes, offered Americans a potent cocktail that mixed both fact and belief, "blurring what was true with what people wanted to believe was true" (p. 89). We need to know more about what the American people wanted to believe was true, and why some Americans, as war correspondent Malcolm Brown observed during the Vietnam War, prefer "cheering the home team" over "honest reporting" (p. 228). As Brewer demonstrates, Brown's remarks are not exclusive to the Vietnam War. Although the historical context, figures, and events of American wars are unique to themselves, Americans appear to have a remarkable capacity for receiving wartime propaganda, filtering the message that they want to hear, and minimizing or ignoring the rest.

Why America Fights is a well-researched, provocative, and convincing work that makes an important contribution to our understanding of how the government constructs and disseminates rationales for initiating and sustaining armed conflict. Both academic and public libraries are advised to acquire it, as professional historians, graduate and undergraduate students, and interested general readers alike should benefit from reading and considering Brewer's work.

Note

[1]. Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 249.

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