
Reviewed by Cameron McCoy

Published on H-War (October, 2018)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The first edition of Michael C. C. Adams's short and enlightening *The Best War Ever* presented a new and unvarnished perspective of World War II, and while this second edition houses an additional chapter, Adams's position has not changed in more than two decades. Nevertheless, conventional US wisdom surrounding the storytelling of what journalist Tom Brokaw called “the Greatest Generation” hinges on the United States being an integral global player in the war effort prior to December 7, 1941 and—after officially entering the war—the harnessing of its domestic industry and economy into the world's most dominant military apparatus, resulting in VE and VJ-Day. Accordingly, the effects of the war ushered in an era that established America as a superpower whose actions influenced the fate of the rest of the world and set the foundation for a Cold War age. In this second edition of *The Best War Ever*, Adams has added greater complexity to this romanticized “golden era” of US history, which has also assisted in reshaping the popular consumption and traditional understandings of US strategies in persecuting a war for total victory.

Adams asserts that his reasons for first publishing *The Best War Ever* were to package and deploy a “balanced view of World War II that avoided the extremes of glorification and vilification,” especially since the book has marked its twentieth year of publication (p. xi) *The Best War Ever* emphasizes an American perspective of the central elements the war elicits, specifically those prominently captured in myth, or prone to be underrepresented in wartime narratives. For example, considering there are no easy answers in framing the war along a tight timeline, Adams seeks to clarify that the war was not as neat as merely defining combatant belligerents as “good” pitted against “evil.” Rather, the war was messy, at best, given the issues that “the war to end all wars” failed to resolve in 1919, specifically with a wounded, but sternly focused Germany on the mend; and, as a result, the Axis nations were essentially positioned as “have-nots.” In this section, Adams emphasizes there is no simple answer to how the war began. From the collapse of vast empires during the interwar years, issues with the Treaty of Versailles, and with the upheaval of the Great Depression came the unstable state of the world as it transitioned into the 1930s.

Adams then clears a path that enhances the reader’s knowledge of the conflict and the military patterns for the remainder of the war. He outlines strategic components such as German panzer division initiatives, the French default to the defensive, Japanese kamikazes, and the Allied island-hopping campaign in the Pacific. Further, he widens the scope of more substantial elements
of strategy like the Allies’ ability to supply and support forces, its superiority of industry and entrepreneurship, and the unyielding objective to achieve unconditional surrender. This initial section of The Best War Ever serves to dispel notions that the Allies dealt directly and swiftly with all conflicts. In fact, Adams illustrates that Axis and Allied forces experienced long periods of brutal fighting, with the initial control of the European and Pacific theaters in the hands of the Axis powers.

Adams’s discussion of the American war machine highlights the most critical piece in US strategic initiatives: the explosion of industry and the recovery from the Great Depression. However, Adams spares no room in clarifying the myth that all Americans were united in the cause. For example, Adams describes the home front’s ignorance of the reality of war, trouble in the army from micromanaging generals to ethnic and gender discrimination in domestic plants, and growing alienation between the soldier and the civilian. Despite US imperatives of altruism in the struggle to extinguish fascism and Nazism on foreign soil, the majority of white Americans held to notions of racial superiority, highlighting the country’s own hypocrisy. “I’d rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside a nigger on the assembly line,” a white worker expressed while on strike (p. 91). While it was a great era of prosperity for America, the nation was not as unified as it appeared. Discrimination against minorities was rampant, traditional behavior patterns broke down as women and children took on new wartime roles, people perceived a decline in family values, and little of the sacrifice made overseas seemed to be shared at home. These realities chipped away at a unifying armor for the American people, who proclaimed their determination to break the despotic stranglehold of the Axis powers.

This form of glorification, or absence of accuracy, has defaulted to a sanitized version of warfare and nationalism in many Americans’ impressions of the conflict. Adams, therefore, argues that the residual effects of combat were severe, leaving a variety of physical and psychiatric wounds. Conditions were far from ideal—contrary to traditional myths of the war that previously circulated. Those who served on the front lines often failed to receive needed supplies and sustenance, living conditions were far from sanitary, and the physical environment often mimicked, the determination and ferocity of the enemy. These conditions made the battlefield ripe for unspeakable atrocities—committed by Allies and Axis alike—distorting the realities of what made the war good and the traditional narrative of good versus evil that is popularly expressed in conventional works.

The world the war created, according to Adams, prominently features the Cold War because of the nature of the deteriorating relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union before the close of the war. Perhaps most important is Adams’s discussion of America’s postwar perception of itself as the hero who single-handedly saved the Allies and carried the baton to victory. America’s World War II notion of winning is arguably the chief reason it has found itself embroiled in multiple global conflicts since 1945. Overall, World War II came up short in bringing about genuine peace, leading Adams to close The Best War Ever with an argument surrounding the perpetuation of the myth narrative regarding the war. He argues that sanitized versions of warfare in literature and movies, overly optimistic views of the war (especially reducing our view of the Holocaust) that dilute reality, and combining praise of the war generation with criticism of later Americans have clouded US opinions of the war. Adams critiques historian Stephen E. Ambrose’s battle accounts for being selective in purposefully cloaking the negative aspects of the war until they faded from collective memory. Adams also observes that Ambrose’s work placed too much emphasis on D-Day and America’s role, and tended to oversimplify the nature of combat.
Adams further observes the public’s allergy to realistic depictions; instead they have favored glamorized versions captured in the artistic renditions of wartime advertisements. Adams concludes that myths mold real-world policies and are not merely stories; Americans have, so far, been unable to create a subsequent greatest generation, but Adams notes that for each generation theirs should be the best ever.

*The Best War Ever* plays a pivotal role in historical research considering its purpose to dispel the mythology surrounding the war. Adams peels back the layers of romanticization in literature and film to reveal the truth about armed conflict. *The Best War Ever* expresses the way Americans want to think of the war. Adams does well in tearing down the misconceptions about the so-called good war by revealing a candid history of war. Although Adams is American, his work does not champion the United States; in fact, *The Best War Ever* provides an ideal middle ground in depicting the realities of war, and will serve scholars of this period as well as undergraduate and graduate students in contextualizing this significant marker of time more accurately, with less emotion.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-war](https://networks.h-net.org/h-war)


**URL:** [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44294](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44294)

[Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us)