

**H. Bruce Franklin.** *Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War.* War Culture Series. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. 384 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-978800-91-5.

**Reviewed by** Amy Rutenberg

**Published on** H-War (August, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

H. Bruce Franklin's latest book, *Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War*, is the kind of book I wish I could deliberate on with colleagues before reviewing. It demands to be discussed. Franklin—a social activist, former target of a COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) investigation, and the John Cotton Dana Professor of American Studies, emeritus at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey—has written a book that is one part memoir, one part history of the United States between World War II and the Vietnam War, and one part meditation on the effects of militarization in the US. It is simultaneously thought-provoking and maddening.

The first half of the book sparkles. Franklin grew up in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, a de facto segregated space, full of both opportunity and contradiction. His eclectic experiences include working as a cook at a desegregated summer camp, batchworker at a photofinishing lab, supervisor at a corrupt Redhook manufacturing company that contracted with the US military, and mate on a Pennsylvania Railroad tugboat on the New York-New Jersey waterfront. Along the way, he came in contact with communists, Quakers, Puerto Rican laborers, profiteers, longshoremen, neighborhood strongmen, and at least one dead body. It was not until he was commissioned into

the US Air Force, however, that he began to question the world as it had been presented to him.

Between 1956 and 1958, Franklin served as a navigator on KC-97 tankers, refueling B-47 and B-52 bombers over the North Atlantic and Canadian Arctic for Strategic Air Command (SAC). He also served as his squadron's intelligence officer. In these roles, Franklin realized that the American government did not tell the whole truth to the American public. "By mid-1958," he notes, "I had more or less deduced from classified documents that the Soviets did not have the means to deliver a nuclear attack" (p. 131). Meanwhile, SAC had been testing a "provocative" maneuver in Soviet airspace that simultaneously nettled the USSR and stressed the welds holding the wings to the planes (p. 141). Franklin realized the extent of the problem after one B-47 exploded in midair directly behind his tanker. Thirty others disintegrated that year, a fact that Franklin witnessed the air force downplay in the media. He concluded that the US was secretly "bearbaiting" the Soviet Union, which (at that time) could not retaliate, and then lying about the results of its provocation (p. 126).

The second half of the book simultaneously outlines Franklin's early academic career and his political awakening. It is also much less satisfying than the first half. In 1959, he began his PhD in English literature at Stanford, where he remained

as a professor (except for a one-year stint at Johns Hopkins) until the university fired him for political activity in 1971. While in California and Baltimore, he and his wife, Jane Morgan Franklin, helped organize community efforts for civil rights and against the Vietnam War, including through their attempts to end the production of napalm. While affiliated with a Stanford study-abroad program in France, contact with the French workers movement and Vietnamese students further radicalized the Franklins. After that, the story becomes fuzzy. Stanford revoked Franklin's tenure and fired him. He drifted for a few years, and then the Rutgers campus in Newark came to his rescue, hiring him as a tenured full professor in 1975.

My biggest wish for this book is that it was longer. Despite its subtitle and cover photo of President George W. Bush, for all intents and purposes, Franklin ends his volume in 1981. His observations about how the forces of militarization affected him and the nation up through the Vietnam War constitute the most interesting and thought-provoking element of the book. An epilogue on the dangers presented by the continued militarization of America from 1980 to the present would have been a welcome addition. More contextualization of the post-Vietnam War world also would have framed more completely his conclusion that we, as Americans, cannot "find our way out of the Forever War," until we understand "how our nation could have simultaneously produced both as shameful an abomination as the Vietnam War and as admirable an achievement as the decades-long movement that helped defeat it" (p. 274). Given all that has happened since 1973, how and why did the Vietnam War become his touchstone?

Perhaps my need to ask this question—whose answer is clearly obvious to Franklin—is the result of his most puzzling choice. He chose not to describe the incidents that led to his firing at Stanford or any of his more revolutionary activities.

He mentions his involvement in Venceremos, "a militant left-wing organization that advocated urban guerrilla warfare," in only one sentence on page 208, and then only in relation to someone else.<sup>[1]</sup> To a reader unfamiliar with his history, this decision places his prose somewhere on the continuum between incomplete and disingenuous. It was certainly Franklin's prerogative as a memoirist to include only those pieces of his story that he wished to share and exclude the rest. But for me, as a historian reading this work, I wanted to better understand the lens through which he wrote as a way to evaluate the argument he seeks to build.

At heart, this is a fascinating book and well worth reading, but it also needs to be evaluated and discussed. It would make a fine addition to a seminar on the US since 1945. I would love to see what conclusions my students would reach once they contextualized this book with other scholarship about the period.

#### Note

[1]. Arvind Dilawar, "From Conservative Patriot to Communist Vanguard: An Interview with H. Bruce Franklin," *Pacific Standard*, August 29, 2018, <https://psmag.com/news/interview-with-h-bruce-franklin>.

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

**Citation:** Amy Rutenberg. Review of Franklin, H. Bruce. *Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53269>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.