



Mark Brilliant, David M. Kennedy. *World War II and the West It Wrought*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 256 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-1287-7.

Reviewed by Carter Jones Meyer (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

Published on H-Diplo (March, 2021)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

For the past forty years or so, historians of the American West have rallied around the view that World War II served as a watershed event for the region. The war, they noted, caused the West to experience greater social and economic change than any other region of the United States: the population soared, particularly in urban areas, and the economy flourished, the result of unprecedented investment in manufacturing, scientific research, education, and infrastructure. In the immediate postwar decades, a diverse array of westerners enjoyed more prosperity than at any other time, and this encouraged greater racial and gender equality. The West was no utopia, of course—there were, for example, environmental issues to contend with as a result of the prosperity—but in general, World War II and its aftermath marked an extraordinary new era of growth and opportunity for the region, enabling it to become the “pacesetter” for the nation.[1]

While the essays in *World War II and the West It Wrought* provide abundant evidence to support this interpretation of the post-World War II West, they also provide important evidence to revise it. They point out, for example, that some social, political, and economic trends that are typically associated with the postwar period actually developed in the prewar years; at the same time, developments that historians have frequently associ-

ated with the war itself are more a product of the Cold War. Taken together, as eminent western historian Richard White notes in his thought-provoking afterword, the essays argue convincingly that World War II should be considered more a “western water project than a watershed,” one that “captured, redirected, and accelerated older flows and put them to new purposes” (p. 179). The war, from this perspective, was not so much a break with the past as it was an extension of it, a catalyst for change as much as a transformational event in and of itself.

The seeds of this fresh new interpretation of World War II in the West can be traced to a conference held at Stanford University’s Bill Lane Center for the American West in 2016, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of America’s entrance into the war. The subsequent collection of essays, written by a distinguished group of scholars, some of whom are noted for their work in western history but others whose work extends well beyond the field, map out important new directions for research on the war and its aftermath in the West.

The volume opens with Jared Farmer’s excellent “Executive Domain: Military Reservations in the Wartime West,” which ties together the histories of expansionism, conservation, and militarism to examine President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (FDR) conscription of Great Basin lands, including

some Indian reservations, for military use during World War II. Farmer traces the roots of this practice to President Theodore Roosevelt's conservation efforts in the West, which depended on bold executive action to withdraw public lands for wildlife refuges and national monuments, like that of the Grand Canyon. FDR built on this precedent, only now, during World War II, the land withdrawals were for military use and were far larger in magnitude than anything Theodore Roosevelt had undertaken. At the time, they were considered a continuation of earlier prewar withdrawals and were meant to be temporary. But following the war's end, and the emergence of the Cold War, Farmer notes, this rationale gave way to permanently militarized land withdrawals, now in the name of national security. Air Force bombing ranges, navy gunnery ranges, and army training grounds in the arid West continue to this day, having "existed in perpetual wartime" since FDR's presidency (p. 9). As long as the United States is committed to an "action-ready" military and nuclear and aerial supremacy, he argues, millions of acres of federal land will remain militarized parts of the executive domain (p. 9).

The theme of conscription continues in chapter 2 with Daniel J. Kevles's fascinating study of the role of the West's major research laboratories—at California Institute of Technology and the University of California at Berkeley—in the transformation of the region's high-tech industry from the pursuit of basic knowledge to national defense. The leaders in this transformation, physicist Ernest O. Lawrence at Berkeley and aerodynamicists Theodore von Kármán and Frank Malina at Cal Tech, managed through public and private patronage to establish a world-class reputation for their laboratories even before World War II. But innovations during the war, fueled by von Kármán and Malina's jet engine and rocket programs at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Lawrence's cyclotrons and nuclear science research, led to the development of the A-bomb and ensured federal funding during the Cold War. All these labs flourished as a

result, their leadership in science and technology contributing in significant ways to the growth and economic transformation of the postwar West.

Gavin Wright's "World War Two, the Cold War, and the Knowledge Economies of the Pacific Coast" builds on Kevles's chapter by examining the institutional and economic evolution of knowledge economy clusters in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area, Seattle, and San Diego. He convincingly argues that these clusters, composed of private businesses, research universities, suppliers, and educated professionals, were made possible not necessarily by pre-World War II economic developments, such as those in aviation and shipbuilding, but rather by massive Cold War-era military spending that transformed the West into the nation's economic pacesetter, with Silicon Valley and Seattle emerging as high-tech capitals. He notes that this technology-oriented funding was unprecedented in scale and quite different from wartime patterns, as it favored West Coast business firms and research universities and fostered the growth of an enduring regional infrastructure. With the end of the Cold War and deep cuts in defense spending, however, these clusters were forced to shift to civilian technologies and commercial markets with varying degrees of success. Although Wright does not examine the human toll of this shift, he does note the rise of economic inequality as a consequence. Succeeding chapters in the book examine this inequality more fully.

The political and social impacts of World War II on the West are the focus of Matthew Dallek's insightful chapter, "The Politics Wrought by War: Phoenix, Seattle, and the Emergence of the Red-Blue Divide in the West, 1939-1950." Dallek examines the effect of wartime mobilization on the distinctly different political cultures of Phoenix and Seattle. He notes that there were differences long before the war. Seattle, for example, tended to be industrial, racially and economically diverse, and progressive in its politics. Phoenix, by comparison, remained underdeveloped, reliant as it had be-

come on distant businessmen associated with the extractive economy. During World War II, however, massive federal investments in these cities acted as “speed ramps” that accelerated political divides (p. 100). By the late 1940s, Seattle could be clearly identified by its “blue” politics, based on an industrial economy, a well-developed labor movement, racial diversity, and civil rights initiatives. Phoenix, on the other hand, assumed a distinctly “red” political profile. Anglo businessmen, the city’s manufacturing elites, dominated politics, reinforced racial segregation and inequality, opposed labor rights, and adopted a strong anti-Communist posture, all of which the federal government would not challenge. As Dallek concludes, the red-blue divide that characterized Phoenix and Seattle in World War II and beyond may help us understand the roots of our current political divisions in the US.

Geraldo L. Cadava provides a previously little-known perspective on the roots of western conservatism in his excellent chapter, “The Roots of Hispanic Conservatism in the Wartime West.” Cadava examines the southwestern founders of the national conservative Hispanic movement of the late twentieth century to determine what motivated their turn to the right, especially as other Hispanics embraced liberal Democratic policies. He contends that these individuals—Benjamin Fernandez, Manuel Luján, Fernando Oaxaca, Martin Castillo, and Francisco Vega—all identified World War II as a pivotal experience that provided them lessons in patriotism and service to country. They pointed to the opportunities that came to them as a result of the war, including education through the G.I. Bill and employment in private industries that boomed in the postwar economy. They embraced upward mobility as a hallmark of a capitalist system that was fundamentally good and that must be defended and protected against Communist threats. In politics they organized a grassroots conservative movement that reflected their values, but they also allied themselves with the rising western stars of the Republican Party,

such as Senator Barry Goldwater and Presidents Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. They shared a belief in free enterprise capitalism, right-to-work laws, and military interventions in countries allegedly threatened by Communists. Their movement became national in scope because of these shared beliefs, but by the 1980s it began to show cracks, the result of disagreements over immigration policies in the Reagan administration and the rise of Cuban Americans within the Republican Party. That their political influence waned does not make them any less significant, however. As Cadava convincingly argues, the conservative Hispanic movement of the post-World War II era offers us an important, if lesser-known, narrative about the legacy of World War II for Mexican Americans and the West.

Rebecca Jo Plant, in “‘No Private School Could Ever Be as Satisfactory’: The Fight for Government-Funded Child Care in Postwar Los Angeles,” turns her gaze to another lesser-known narrative of the postwar West, in this case the debates surrounding childcare in Los Angeles, a vital hub not only of wartime production but also of the most extensive network of childcare centers in California. Plant notes that Los Angeles had a history of progressive childcare policies in the three decades before World War II, notably tax-based nurseries in public schools located in impoverished immigrant communities. As the city’s population exploded during the war, the result of job opportunities in the burgeoning wartime industries, working mothers and their allies demanded federally funded childcare centers. These centers proved to be very popular, so when the federal government announced that it would cut funding just one week after the end of the war, working parents protested. They argued that childcare centers were a social good that should be supported by the state, local communities, and public schools. This was especially the case in the immediate postwar years, with a rising cost of living, severe housing shortages, uncertain employment, and veterans’ struggles to readjust. By the mid-1950s, however,

support for publicly funded childcare waned. Plant notes the gradual retreat from wartime egalitarianism as one reason for it, but fiscal conservatism and competing priorities on the state and local levels played a role as well. Ultimately, Plant sees this as a cautionary tale for those today who seek publicly funded childcare as a social right and part of the “American way of life” (p. 160).

The final chapter, by Mary L. Dudziak, returns us to the theme of conscription introduced by Jared Farmer in chapter 1. In this case, however, Dudziak’s “How the Pacific World Became the West” examines the expansion of US sovereign power in the Pacific following World War II. She considers this expansion an extension of US expansion in the North American West in the nineteenth century, meaning that “US leaders viewed settled areas as empty spaces and occupied them. They required native peoples to migrate elsewhere or imposed military governance on their home territory” (p. 164). While there are many works on this imperial process in the Pacific, she points out that few have considered how power was simultaneously exercised and erased, which is the purpose of this essay. Drawing on the examples of Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, which became a nuclear testing site, and Guam, which developed into a strategically important location for US military bases, Dudziak demonstrates how law, cartography and historiography can be used to understand not only the forms of US sovereign presence but also the responses of island peoples themselves. There were differences in these responses, of course: Bikini islanders eventually rejected formal inclusion in the US while the Chamorros chose to pursue full US citizenship rights. The common denominator between them is that the US kept “these subjects of American power” at arm’s length, erasing them by denying them democratic governance. As Dudziak explains, “The country’s ultimate interest was not in the islanders, but in the use of their Pacific homes” (p. 164). In this sense, then, there are clear parallels to be drawn to the policies and practices of the US among indigen-

ous peoples of the North American West, and the Pacific World should be considered an extension of those policies and practices. The Pacific, in other words, has become yet another American frontier. The only way it can be disentangled from the history of the West, she concludes, is if erasure is reversed and the sovereignty of Pacific peoples fully acknowledged.

Some of the most thought-provoking ideas in this edited volume come from the afterword by White. Expanding on the volume’s themes, White asks readers to think more broadly about the postwar West as part of what John McNeil and Peter Engelke called the “Great Acceleration” in their 2016 book of the same title. They contend that the post-1945 period is an aberration in the history of mankind and its relation to the environment, marked as it is by massive global changes, including the steady rise in human-generated carbon dioxide, population explosions and the attendant growth in urban living, dam construction, water depletion, and per capita income and consumption. White sees the postwar West fitting neatly into this conceptual framework, though, as he notes, doing so may take away from some of the West’s uniqueness in this period. On the other hand, it may give the region greater importance, particularly as it relates to this volume’s themes, among them American economic and military supremacy in the postwar period, massive technological growth, and the development of a mass consumer society, all of which helped usher in the Great Acceleration.

White suggests that the Great Acceleration is not necessarily one continuous global process; rather, it should be separated into two distinct phases. The first phase, from the end of World War II up to the Vietnam War, was marked by economic growth and prosperity, and an accompanying decline in inequality. After Vietnam, however, there was a distinct decline in western hegemony and a “painful hangover,” as the editors of the volume refer to it (p. 7). For White, this “hangover”

can be seen in the rise of conservatism, economic inequality, and climate change, which have generated acrimonious political fights and the breakup of the liberal consensus, first in the West but then extending to the rest of North America as well as to Europe. There is no doomsday scenario predicted here, however; White chooses instead to accentuate the positive and to note the possibility of alternative narratives, arguing that the West is coming to terms with the consequences of the Great Acceleration produced by World War II. “For the moment,” he writes, “in its politics, its relative globalism, and its environmentalist leanings, it is either out of step with—or in advance of—much of the rest of the United States or Europe” (p. 184). What he wishes, in the end, is that the West of the present might reassert its uniqueness by ushering in the eventual end of the Great Acceleration.

World War II and the West It Wrought is a groundbreaking contribution not only to our understanding of the war and its lasting impact on the postwar West but also to our understanding of the region’s broader history. Its persuasively argued essays, skillfully contextualized by the editors, map out important new avenues of inquiry for scholars working on the historical significance of World War II. It no doubt will have value in the classroom as well, helping to facilitate among students of western history and post-1945 America deep discussions of the war’s complicated legacy. And as the essays in this volume make clear, that legacy continues to play out into our own time, seventy-five years after the guns of war were silenced.

Note

[1]. Gerald Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentiss Hall, 1973), 6.

Carter Jones Meyer, professor emeritus of history at Ramapo College of New Jersey, specializes in the history of the American West.

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

Citation: Carter Jones Meyer. Review of Brilliant, Mark; Kennedy, David M. *World War II and the West It Wrought*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55682>



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