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Remaking Memory or Getting It Right? *Saving Private Ryan* and the World War II Generation.

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Steven Spielberg's highly acclaimed World War II epic, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), follows a small group of American soldiers led by Tom Hanks' Captain Henry Miller on a unique mission during the Normandy invasion of June 1944. Their mission: to find and bring home safely Private James Francis Ryan, whose three brothers have died in the war within days of each other. They do save him, he gets home, and the movie concludes with Ryan returning to Normandy as an old man, tortured by his memories and contemplating the significance of it all. Spielberg portrays World War II combat in gruesomely realistic terms, especially in the twenty-minute D-Day Omaha Beach opening sequence. The movie was both a box office hit and mostly a critical success, winning the Golden Globe for Best Drama and an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture; Spielberg won the Oscar for Best Director.

The film also garnered much commentary and divergent assessments from movie critics, opinion columnists, and professional historians alike. Many applauded its relentlessly realistic portrayal of the horrors of war. But others thought it did not go far enough, leaving out, for example, the horror of *killing* as well as dying. Some considered it a fairly standard addition to the World War II combat film genre, enhanced only by computerized special effects and highly graphic depictions of violence. Some thought that violence made the film an antiwar statement, but many more felt it honored the sacrifices of the World War II generation. A handful called it pro-America propaganda, a "sentimental 'flag-waver.'"¹ My intent here is to identify where *Saving Private Ryan* fits into the memory and history of the World War II soldier's experiences and motivations.

Dominating American memory of World War II has been the notion of the "The Good War." In the words of historian David Kennedy, "Americans remembered World War II as a just war waged by a peaceful people aroused to anger only after intolerable provocation, a war stoically endured by those at home and fought in far-away places by brave and wholesome young men with dedicated women standing behind them on the production lines...."² Of course, some take exception to the "Good War" designation, pointing out that World War II meant something very different to racial minorities, especially segregated African Americans and interned Japanese Americans. And historians have also questioned the aptness of the good war label in light of the (lack of) women's rights, atrocities in combat, the morality of dropping the atomic bomb, the alliance with the Soviet Union and the disintegration of that alliance, and the incomplete peace that led to the Cold War.³

1. Frank P. Tomasulo, "Empire of the Gun: Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and American Chauvinism," in Jon Lewis, ed., *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (NY: NYU Pr, 2001) 118. See also Krin Gabard, "Saving Private Ryan Too Late," *ibid.*, 131-38, Louis Menand, "Jerry Don't Surf," in Charles L.P. Silet, *The Films of Steven Spielberg* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Pr, 2002) 251-56, Marouf Hasian, "Nostalgic Longings, Memories of the 'Good War,' and Cinematic Representations in *Saving Private Ryan*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001) 338-58, Paul Fussell, "The Guts, Not the Glory, of Fighting the 'Good War,'" *Washington Post* (26 July 1998) C1, A. Susan Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002) 249-82, Frank J. Wetta and Martin A. Novelli, "Now a Major Motion Picture': War Films and Hollywood's New Patriotism," *Journal of Military History* 67 (2003) 861-82, Albert Auster, "Saving Private Ryan and American Triumphalism," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30 (Sum 2002) 98-104, Eliot Cohen, "What Combat Does to Man: Private Ryan and Its Critics," *National Interest* (Win 1998/99) 82-88, Lawrence H. Suid, "Review of *Saving Private Ryan*," *Journal of American History* 85 (1998) 1185-86, and John Bodnar, "Saving Private Ryan and Postwar Memory in America," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001) 805-17.

2. David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II: Freedom from Fear*, Pt. 2 (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1999) 431.

3. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 427-33, Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America in World War II* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1994), Paul Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (NY: Modern Library, 2003), and Studs

Largely ignored in the discussion of the memory of the good war is the American soldier's memory of the war and his purpose in fighting. The topic is complicated for a number of reasons and the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Still the general consensus is that soldiers fought for their buddies in a strong spirit of comradeship. In the words of veteran and scholar Paul Fussell, "men will attack only if young, athletic, credulous, and sustained by some equivalent of the buddy system—that is, fear of shame."⁴ The soldiers themselves insisted they were not fighting for the "four freedoms"⁵ or democracy or patriotism or any other great cause. Instead they put their efforts in more banal terms—they just wanted to finish the job and come home. General Eisenhower himself acknowledged the prevalence of that view in the spring of 1945, when American units began to overrun German concentration and labor camps: "We are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting against."⁶

During the war and for four decades afterward, the American popular notion of World War II soldiers rarely deviated from the image of the tired and dirty grunt fighting for buddies and the chance to go home. A few cinematic exceptions prove that rule. Howard Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941), starring Gary Cooper, ostensibly a biopic of First World War hero Alvin York, is really a propaganda vehicle to rally Americans for the impending war with Germany. In the film, York overcomes his religious pacifism to become a soldier only after he is inspired by the greatness of America and American principles. Similar themes are evident in *Wake Island* (1942; dir. John Farrow) and *Bataan* (1943; dir. Tay Garnett). In retrospect, these early films seem jarringly heavy-handed in delivering their message.

Later combat movies, especially about World War II, look and sound very different from the early films. Certain themes recur regularly: for example, the so-called ethnic platoon, consisting of some mixture of American ethnic, religious, and regional groups: for example, Jews and Italians from New York City, Scandinavians from the upper Midwest, Irish from Boston, Poles and Greeks from Chicago, Detroit, and other large cities, Hispanics from California or Texas, farm boys from the Midwest, pious sharpshooting southerners, and so on.⁷ Another constant is a clear detachment of the American fighting man from any of the causes of the war. Whatever their plots or major themes, the films paralleled the consensus historical view of weary but wisecracking men fighting reluctantly, unconcerned with abstractions like the four freedoms, trying to get the job done and return to their homes.

This stereotype, apparent already in films like *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944; dir. Mervyn LeRoy), spread quickly after the war, and is explicit or implicit in such diverse films, often based on memoirs of observers or participants, as *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945; dir. William A. Wellman), *A Walk in the Sun* (1946; dir. Lewis Milestone), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946; dir. William Wyler), *Battleground* (1949; dir. Wellman),

Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (NY: New Pr, 1984). One of the better discussions of World War II memory in America is G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington: Smithsonian Inst Pr, 1995) 126–53.

4. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 4. See also Samuel A. Stouffer, et al., *The American Soldier*, vol. 2: *Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1949) 108–9, John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (NY: Scribner's, 1980) 319, Elliot D. Cooke, *All But Me and Thee: Psychiatry at the Foxhole Level* (Washington: Infantry Journal Pr, 1946) 137, Victor Hicken, *The American Fighting Man* (NY: Macmillan, 1969) 402, Lee Kennett, *GI: The American Soldier in World War II* (NY: Scribner's, 1987), Edwin P. Hoyt, *The GI's War* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1988), Gerald F. Linderman, *The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War* (NY: Free Press, 1997), John McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1998), Gerald Astor, *The Greatest War: Americans in Combat 1941–1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1999).

5. Of speech, of religion, from want, from fear, as enunciated by FDR in his speech of 6 Jan 1941.

6. Michael Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 1995) 91–92. For samples of statements from soldiers along these lines, see Charles E. Kelly, *One Man's War* (NY: Knopf, 1944) 4, Russell Cartwright Stoup, *Letters from the Pacific: A Combat Chaplain in World War II* (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2000) 157, and Nancy Disher Baird, "An Opportunity to Meet 'Every Kind of Person': A Kentuckian Views Army Life during World War II," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 101 (2003) 37.

7. Critics have ridiculed this convention, but it was and is a reasonably accurate portrayal of the makeup of most units in the American military in World War II. Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2000) 144–45, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2001) 204–6. On the diversity of the World War II Army, see Thomas Bruscino, *A Nation Forged in War: How World War II Taught Americans to Get Along* (Knoxville: U Tennessee Pr, 2010) 47–82.

Sands of Iwo Jima (1949; dir. Allan Dwan), *The Naked and the Dead* (1958; dir. Raoul Walsh), and *The Young Lions* (1958; dir. Edward Dmytryk). The most acute critic of the genre wrote that these films “bring the war down-to-earth, removing the ‘why we fight’ propaganda of the war years and treating those who fought it like fallible human beings who are rising to the occasion out of instincts of survival.”⁸ A note should be added here: the movies are remarkably grim. They do not, as a rule, sugarcoat war—they focus far more on the sacrifice of the dead than the meaning of that sacrifice. The same is true of the more epic-scale war films of the 1960s and 1970s—*The Longest Day* (1962; dir. Ken Annakin et al.), *Battle of the Bulge* (1965; dir. Annakin), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970; dir. Richard Fleischer et al.), *Patton* (1970; dir. Franklin J. Schaffner), and *Midway* (1976; dir. Jack Smight). Nor do the more ironic or independent World War II combat films like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967; dir. Robert Aldrich) or *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970; dir. Brian G. Hutton) make the common fighting man a crusader for a grand cause.

The history and the memory of the soldiers’ war had seemingly been settled, and by the late 1970s, the World War II film began to fade as a genre.⁹ Obviously, movies are not the only index of collective memory, but even in other popular media, including television and comic books that glorify wartime violence, one is hard pressed to find American soldiers expounding the justness of their cause.¹⁰

But is this the whole story? It is worth taking a closer look at the lives of World War II veterans to answer this question. The first thing to remember is that the vets came home and got on with their lives. With some notable exceptions, their country, having learned its lesson from earlier wars, rewarded their efforts—most famously with the GI Bill, but also with home loans and job benefits. The veterans did not need to explain what they had done to merit such compensations. They got married, went to work, bought houses, and had kids. They did not generally vote as a block. They hardly organized for anything as veterans. In general, too, they did not tell war stories in public venues, and produced few memoirs or oral histories in the first few decades after the war. When vets told war stories, it was usually within their families, or, most commonly, at unit reunions. Many refused to talk about the war at all. Over time, the war faded from the popular imagination, and the weary and wisecracking G.I., detached from the great causes of the war, became entrenched in memory.¹¹

The Vietnam war changed things. World War II veterans had an ambivalent relationship with their children and Vietnam. On the one hand, they had fought a war so their sons would not have to. On the other, they had fought a war, so why shouldn’t their sons fight theirs, and as willingly as they had? There a problem emerges. If members of the World War II generation had not believed in some noble cause, why had they fought so willingly? Vietnam made many of the World War II veterans ask themselves just that question. They did so quietly, because the culture of 1960s and 1970s America was not one that favored open discussion of the country’s past great causes.¹²

8. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1986) 157. See also Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Pr, 1982) 145–48, and Michael D. Gambone, *The Greatest Generation Comes Home: The Veteran in American Society* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2005) 159–64.

9. Basinger (note 8 above), Bodnar (note 1 above) 805–17, Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), Thomas P. Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1993), and Stephen E. Ambrose, “*The Longest Day* (U.S. 1962): ‘Blockbuster’ History,” in John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert, eds., *World War II, Film, and History* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1996) 97–106.

10. Of the rare memorials Americans built to commemorate the war, few delve into troop motivation: Piehler (note 3 above) 126–53, and Nicholas Mills, *Their Last Battle: The Fight for the National World War II Memorial* (NY: Basic Books, 2004).

11. In the two years after the war, some lag in the job and housing markets led to widespread discontent among veterans, but those problems quickly faded. See Bruscino (note 7 above) 151–76, Mark D. Van Ells, *To Hear Only Thunder Again: America’s World War II Veterans Come Home* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), Richard Severo and Lewis Milford, *The Wages of War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989), Keith W. Olson, *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1974), Davis R.B. Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses: Politics and Veterans during World War II* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1969), Michael J. Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1996), and Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

12. This paragraph is based on impressions gleaned from a number of sources, including the World War II veteran questionnaires at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, the surveys in the Cornelius Ryan Collection at Ohio University, and several books, includ-

By the 1980s, the atmosphere began to change in reaction against the 1960s and 1970s mentality of American self-criticism. The country became more open to the idea of past greatness, a trend personified in President Ronald Reagan, who went to great lengths to celebrate America's historic successes, particularly during World War II. This is best exemplified in his "boys of Pointe du Hoc" speech given in Normandy to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of D-Day. Both anniversary and speech helped spark a renewed interest in the war. At nearly the same time, historians began practicing the new military history, which highlighted the lives and experiences of common fighting men. Historians, archivists, librarians, museum curators, journalists, and history buffs started collecting questionnaires, interviews, and oral histories from thousands of World War II veterans, all to better understand the war they had fought. These efforts accelerated in the 1990s, as the war's fiftieth anniversary approached.¹³

Most importantly, as members of the World War II generation have neared the end of their lives, long years of reflection, experience, and history have caused them to reexamine what it all had meant. They desperately want to tell their stories—hundreds of oral histories put together by Stephen Ambrose and his crew end with the vets thanking Ambrose for the opportunity to talk about their war—and to understand their place in the war. They do not manufacture memories—the vets are known for their uncompromising honesty about their experiences—so they do not retroactively ascribe allegiance to great causes to young minds that never thought of the war in such terms. But they have begun to intimate that they always silently believed in what they were doing and that their war consisted of more than just finishing a job and going home. The popular image of the World War II American soldier was not exactly wrong, merely incomplete.

Compelling evidence undermines the popular stereotype and supports the idea that World War II soldiers were in fact sustained and motivated by a firm belief in the justice of their country's cause. Even during the war, there were hints of a deeper meaning beneath their outward stoicism, something Ernie Pyle, the fighting man's reporter, and S.L.A. Marshall, a great student of men in battle, both recognized. Pyle called it a "plain, unspoken, even unrecognized, patriotism."¹⁴ Marshall opined that "ideas and ideals" caused men "to accept a discipline and to hold to the line even though death may be at hand.... Those who respect history will deem it beyond argument that belief in a cause is the foundation of the aggressive will in battle."¹⁵ Sociologists at the time, including the team that drew on many troop surveys to compile the seminal multivolume study, *The American Soldier*, came to similar conclusions.¹⁶ Recently, historian Peter Kindsvatter has shown that, in cases where American soldiers have lost faith in the cause, as in Vietnam after Tet, they often lose their motivation, despite small group cohesion. That never happened in the Second World War.¹⁷ Stephen Ambrose, after analyzing thousands of veterans' accounts of the war, put it this way: "They knew they were fighting for decency and democracy and they were proud of it and motivated by it. They just didn't talk or write about it."¹⁸

Therein lies the difficulty: for various reasons, they did not talk or write about their motives, especially at the time. For one thing, by the 1920s and 1930s, the national memory of the motivations of soldiers from

ing Terkel (note 3 above), Kornbluth and Sunshine, eds., *Now You Know: Reactions after Seeing Saving Private Ryan* (NY: Newmarket, 1999), and Richard M. Stannard, *Infantry: An Oral History of a World War II American Infantry Battalion* (NY: Twayne, 1992).

13. The best discussions of these trends are Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Point du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion* (NY: Morrow, 2005) passim, and Mills (note 10 above) passim. See also Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (NY: Random House, 1998), Frederick Painton, "Daisies from the Killing Ground" and Lance Morrow, "June 6, 1944," both in *Time* (28 May 1984).

14. *Brave Men* (1944; rpt. Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2001) 5.

15. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978) 161–62.

16. I am heavily indebted here to Peter S. Kindsvatter's paper, "Fighting for Comrades or Country? Looking Again at Small Unit Cohesion," *Democracy in Arms: The American Soldier in World War II Symposium*, Dole Institute, University of Kansas (8–9 April 2005).

17. Kindsvatter, *American Soldier* (note 4 above) 136–54.

18. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 14, 473.

the Civil War and World War I—what those earlier generations had supposedly fought for, as captured in films, fiction, memorialization, and textbooks—led to the World War II generation growing up in a culture that dismissed or even disdained the idea of great causes inspiring American soldiers to fight.¹⁹ For another, they did not need to talk about it—they all believed in the justness of their cause, as even self-professed cynics (and veterans) like Paul Fussell and Norman Mailer acknowledged. Kindsvatter observes that “There was nothing to discuss or debate. To a far greater extent than in any of America’s other wars, the soldiers were convinced of the justness of America’s cause and the evil of the enemy’s.”²⁰

Yet they must have said *something* for all so many observers and historians to conclude that a noble cause played some motivating role—some tangible indication that the men believed in what they were doing. And indeed there is relevant material in the questionnaires and oral histories gathered in the 1980s and 1990s. Bernard Feinberg, a practicing dentist when the war started, explained his reasoning for joining up as an Army private: “I was and am a very patriotic American and also a Jew who had no use whatsoever for that Nazi bastard Hitler and his overall plan of genocide for my people.”²¹ Robert Miller, a D-Day veteran, said “my flag is out on every anniversary of D-Day in Normandy.”²² Clayton Hanks, who served in the 1st Infantry Division, recalled, “I was raised very patriotically and I now have no regrets. Today many things have changed and if I had another chance, I’d think twice. War really is hell. My decision probably would be the same. I am proud to be an American.”²³ William Shiepe, when asked what he learned from the war, replied, “No matter what our background we will succeed when we get together for a just cause.”²⁴ In response to the same question, George Melochick said simply, “No flag waving. I love my county and its people.”²⁵ These are but a sampling of the hints, the muted suggestions forty or fifty years on that love of country had in fact kept them going.

So they did embrace the patriotic cause, but did not say so during the war or even denied it outright, only to admit it, in subdued terms, half a century later. This poses a quandary for filmmakers—and, not incidentally, historians—seeking to portray accurately the ordeals and motivations of World War II troops. How to create a full picture from the incomplete conventional image of the stoic GI? How to show that he truly believed without betraying the reality of the time?

Saving Private Ryan provides one solution: it links devotion to cause with memory. Critics of the film who find nothing new in its portrayal of Captain Miller’s squad are correct—it does evoke the mixed ethnic squads on lonely missions found in such classics as *A Walk in the Sun* and *Battleground*. Nor does the film break new ground in showing yet again that war is hell. Certainly it is more gruesome and graphic in its depiction of the violence, and Spielberg’s skill as a director makes all the deaths and destruction hit home. But these are differences in degree from earlier works, not kind. In this respect, *Saving Private Ryan*, however well crafted, is pretty standard fare.

Where the film departs from its predecessors is in the memory scenes, when the aged James Francis Ryan visits the American cemetery at Omaha. Critics who stress the thematic significance of patriotism are

19. Thomas Bruscino, “The Analogue of Work: Memory and Motivation for America’s World War II Soldiers,” *War & Society* 28 (Oct 2009) 85–103.

20. Kindsvatter (note 16 above).

21. Bernard Feinberg Oral History, Eisenhower Center [hereafter EC], University of New Orleans, 1. The motivation of stopping the Nazi persecution of Jews does show up from time to time among veterans, especially Jewish veterans. See Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2004). Stopping the Holocaust has in some ways entered American memory as a primary motivator for participation in the war. Interestingly, in *Band of Brothers*, the ten-part miniseries (2001) based on Stephen Ambrose’s book that Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks produced as a follow-up to *Saving Private Ryan*, the episode in which the American airborne company finds a camp is called “Why We Fight.” See further Piehler (note 3 above) 147–51, Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), and Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1995).

22. Robert Miller Oral History, EC, 5.

23. Clayton E. Hanks Oral History, EC, 6.

24. William Shiepe Questionnaire, Americal Division, U.S. Army Military History Institute [USAMHI], Carlisle, PA, 17.

25. George Melochick Questionnaire, 35th Infantry Division, USAMHI, 17.

also correct (if sometimes overzealous): these scenes do convey something of the meaning of the war. “Earn this,” Captain Miller’s dying admonition to Private Ryan, the elderly Ryan’s entreaty to his family to tell him he was a good man, and the shots of a sun-soaked, almost colorless, American flag that bookend the film suggest that American soldiers fought to secure the chance for a good life for everyone, a life free from the evils of Nazism. But it is only a suggestion, akin in tone and content to the statements of aging veterans recollecting their war.²⁶ In that sense, at least, *Saving Private Ryan* does not remake memory, it reflects it. In the process, by rewriting history, it has, for the most part, at last got it right.

26. Some have disagreed with this interpretation, arguing the movie portrayed “an army of Fussells”—Wetta and Novelli (note 1 above) 877.