



Crash Course: From the Good War to the Forever War by H. Bruce Franklin.

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Cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin (Rutgers Univ.) decided to write this book because

when I awoke one day back in 2014 to discover with amazement that I was eighty-years old, I remembered that since my early childhood America's wars had been defining the historical periods of my life. But living in the Forever War, it was getting harder and harder to tell one war from another, or even to count the number of ongoing wars, much less figure out when they began. (1)

Unfortunately, his attempt to "figure it out" suffers inconsistencies of content, style, and organization. In terms of genre, it is not one book but three: memoir, essay, and history. However, serious students of foreign policy will learn from the author's evolution from a patriotic young American who cheered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and served in the US Air Force in the Cold War to an anti-war activist and opponent of the Vietnam War and US foreign policy more generally since World War II.

Crash Course starts as a typical revisionist critique of military decisions and assumptions, beginning with the belief that dropping the atomic bomb was the only way to end the war with Japan. Franklin stresses that, in summer 1945, the Truman administration ignored signals that the Japanese government was willing to begin negotiating an end to the conflict.

Turning to Vietnam, he argues that US involvement there began not in 1965 but in the month before VJ Day, when Truman agreed to support the French attempt to re-colonize Vietnam. This action prompted what Franklin considers the first American protests against US involvement in Vietnam: specifically, when military personnel aboard ships arriving off the coast of Vietnam in 1945 signed a petition against American collusion with the French.

The US military engagement in Vietnam, and particularly the use of napalm, quickly changed Franklin from trusting patriot to political revolutionary.

Looking back, I realize that I cannot understand how I became the person I am today without mentally recapitulating the stages of my metamorphosis during the napalm campaign, a campaign that incinerated the remaining cocoon of illusions within which much of my consciousness had been formed. (196)

In 1966, while Franklin was a faculty member at Stanford University, he learned that the United Technology Center in nearby Redwood was producing napalm; he organized protests against its use by the US military, believing that "the war seemed so blatantly irrational and immoral" (194) that organized protest would quickly bring it to an end. When it did not, he embraced a Marxist critique of contemporary capitalistic society after his stint as a faculty member in the Stanford-in-France program (Sept. 1966–Mar. 1967). In Paris, he joined demonstrations against the war, worked with communists, and became convinced that radical actions, including violence, must be considered to end the conflict. While in jail for protesting against Hubert Humphrey during the vice president's visit to Paris, Franklin came to agree with self-proclaimed revolutionaries' assessment of the immorality of the war and American moral hypocrisy at home.

Back in the states, Franklin joined the Venceremos Brigade, a revolutionary group inspired by the Cuban revolution and the rhetoric of Fidel Castro. He assisted in the disruption of the Oakland Military Induction Center and joined national protests against the Dow Chemical company. He also urged Stanford students to shout down speakers who worked for or supported the Lyndon Johnson administration. Such activities made both Franklin and his wife targets of an FBI investigation and led to his dismissal by Stanford in 1972. (He remains the only tenured faculty member fired by the university.) Though he claims his political beliefs, not his actions, triggered his firing, the fact that he brought a picture of Stalin to his hearing, while his wife came with an (unloaded) rifle, did little to strengthen his defense. After three years as, Franklin claims, a black-list victim, he was hired in 1975 by Rutgers University, where he worked till his retirement in 2016. He maintains that

Vietnam became not a people or a nation, and not even a war. "Vietnam" became something that happened to us. America became the victim of "Vietnam," which was some kind of crippling addiction or disease, or to use Reagan's term, a "syndrome." ... The POW/MIA myth and the myth of the spat-upon veteran thus turned "Vietnam" into the cultural foundation of the Forever War. (13-14)

But evidence is thin that the Vietnam war foreshadowed or precipitated later military engagements in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Rather, a pervasive Cold War mentality influenced much of American foreign policy after Vietnam.

This synopsis of Franklin's political evolution does not reflect the book's organization. Three of its first six chapters concern Franklin's boyhood, including his work in a photofinishing shop in summer 1951. Fifty pages are devoted to his six months working at a furniture store and on the docks of Red Hook, NY. These passages add little to any historical assessment of American diplomacy and do not follow logically from the arguments introduced in chapters 1-2.

On the other hand, Franklin's dismissal by Stanford gets only two brief mentions that provide little context by which to judge the university's decision.¹ Nor does the author acknowledge that, like many of his age cohort, he benefited from opportunities unavailable to previous generations, including a scholarship to attend Amherst College and G.I. Bill funding of his graduate work at Stanford. Franklin now lives with his wife in retirement and continues to take out his sailboat on a weekly basis. This does not, of course, vitiate his criticisms of US foreign policy but it does suggest an uneven assessment of life in post-World War II America.

1. See, further, Kenneth Lamott, "In the Matter of H. Bruce Franklin," *NY Times Magazine* (23 Jan. 1972) 12-26.