



D-Day Remembered: The Normandy Landings in American Collective Memory by Michael R. Dolski.

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Review by Christopher Fischer, Indiana State University (christopher.fischer@indstate.edu).

In *D-Day Remembered*, military historian Michael Dolski (Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency) explores the shifting meanings and contexts of D-Day in American society. He sees it as a metonym for the American experience of World War II.

Over time, D-Day came to symbolize supposed American values. The battle seemed to indicate a unique American regard for freedom, the efficiency of American combat arms, and divine sanction for an American quest to confront evil. Implicitly, wartime glory produced national greatness, led to good times, and ensured liberties at home and abroad. (3)

While the central tropes have remained fairly constant, their resonances have shifted over time. Dolski seeks to capture the waxing and waning prominence of D-Day's place in American society by analyzing three genres of commemoration: presidents' speeches and participations in memorial events, especially decennial anniversaries, popular culture (especially film), and the growing role of veterans' organizations in promoting D-Day celebrations.

The book's early chapters trace how the key perceptions of the war emerged. Franklin Roosevelt's prayer and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's speech on 6 June 1944 emphasized the nobility of the American mission. Journalists like Ernie Pyle highlighted the role of common soldiers, another leitmotif of D-Day commemorations. Yet during the rest of the war and the following decade, the need to achieve victory, cope with losses, and rebuild the country relegated its commemorations to some early monuments and postwar films and books. The outbreak of the Korean War and subsequent election of Eisenhower to the presidency generated greater, though still sporadic, interest in D-Day. Thematically speaking, the invasion was a turning point marking a moment of perceived "American martial prowess and moral certitude" (49).

The first major step in the elevation of D-Day's significance is embodied in war correspondent Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day*¹ and the popular film based on it.² Both book and film drew on earlier narratives of the war as did a series of 1960s documentaries like Walter Cronkite's *D-Day plus Twenty: Eisenhower Returns to Normandy* and a range of new books. This was a time of renewed activism by veterans groups, as seen in the Cantigny Museum,³ dedicated to the 1st Division (the "Big Red One"), and celebrations by victor powers on 6 June 1964. Yet, while providing a clarity about America's role in the Cold War, the subsequent tumult of the Vietnam War and social and economic struggles of the 1970s often clouded commemorations of D-Day in the late 1960s and early 70s.

1. 1959; rpt. NY: Library of America, 2019.

2. Dir. Andrew Marton (1962).

3. In Wheaton, Illinois.

The 1980s and 90s, Dolski argues, were a critical period in fixing D-Day's place in American public memory. He interweaves analyses of how presidential speeches—most notably Ronald Reagan's on 6 June 1984—gave renewed meaning to the sacrifices and nobility of the American mission. This political framing of the operation spawned a veritable cottage industry of writings acclaiming the American war effort and the war generation itself, including bestselling works by Stephen Ambrose and Tom Brokaw.⁴ Steven Spielberg's acclaimed film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) stressed both the horrors of war and the nobility of the common soldier; the same is true of the epic 10-episode 2001 television miniseries based on Ambrose's novel. At the same time, more and more veterans were promoting efforts to commemorate D-Day. They organized memorials, spoke out in favor of new monuments, published their memoirs, and, in retirement, engaged in commemorative tourism.

At their heart, D-Day celebrations bespeak Americans' love of liberty, pride in military strength used only when necessary, respect for rank-and-file soldiers, and the nation's special sense of mission. Dolski suggests that D-Day has come to epitomize "good" wars, as opposed to the problematic ones of the twenty-first century. He also observes that, while the conception of D-Day has remained consistent over the years, contingency shaped its resonance as well. Thus, while the Vietnam War dampened enthusiasm for D-Day, Reagan's 1984 celebration speech set a particular tone for most of what followed in the 1980s and 90s.

Michael Dolski has written a most engaging and persuasive study of the changing uses of D-Day. He notes early and often that he is solely concerned with the American experience, and hence with Omaha Beach, not the broader story of the Normandy campaign. Local histories and perceptions of D-Day in the United States are mostly eclipsed in favor of national moments and broader cultural trends. Within the American national context, D-Day has become *the* iconic symbol of the US experience of World War II, the standard against which later military actions have—for better or worse—come to be judged.

4. Respectively, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992) and *The Greatest Generation* (NY: Random House, 1998).