In his most recent publication, historian John Bodnar examines the various attitudes informing World War II remembrance, highlighting why the war has become known as “the Good War.” Well-researched and clearly written, the book’s scope includes memoirs of families and veterans, various films, and several memorials. With this material, Bodnar constructs a political, social and cultural history of World War II remembrance, arguing that American memory “recast the war as an opportunity for Americans to assume a position of dominance in the world” (4). Ultimately, he posits, the remembrance of the “good war” led American politicians to wrongly appropriate the “virtuous remembrance” of World War II to “bring clarity to the chaos” of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 (243).

In his introduction, Bodnar outlines three concepts of memory: humanitarian, critical, and traditional, a three-pronged approach that is valuable for students and scholars alike. By exploring the three concepts of memory, which are often enmeshed, Bodnar shows the importance of war remembrance relative to the myth of American exceptionalism and national identity. Humanitarian memory, he suggests, stresses that Americans fought the war for “righteous, compassionate ends” (6). While humanitarian memory evolves from the idea that the interests of the United States would lead to a better world for all of mankind, Bodnar states that the concept was only pertinent to the immediate postwar era. He argues that humanitarian
memory was, in fact, less effective than traditional memory for its failure to “valorize the nation and to enhance its sense of privilege” (7). Over time, the humanitarian concept did not resonate with Americans, who “preferred to retain a sense of how dissimilar they were from the mass of people with whom they shared the planet” (7). Critical memory, Bodnar observes, was perhaps more honest, as it “look[ed] to undercut such myths and keep alive a legacy of misdeeds and complaints” inherent in war (6). But according to Bodnar, the most successful remembrance of World War II, evolving from conservative values and American insistence on exceptionalism, has been traditional memory. Traditional memory turns “violence into virtue . . . and restores faith in governing bodies and leaders that called for war in the first place” (4).

The book traces many debates brought forth by the three memory approaches, from the sentimental culture and propaganda characterizing the internationalism and liberalism of the Roosevelt administration; to changes in social standing, race relations, and moral values on the home-front; to the actual experiences of the men at war. Bodnar importantly draws attention to the fact that, during the war’s course, Americans were not unified in their reactions. He shows how people disagreed with the war, tracing these objections through time, and he presents especially exciting material in “Monuments and Mourning,” which includes examples referring to almost all of the eleven black and white illustrations of the book. Recognizing that “dead bodies have symbolic and political power” (99), Bodnar insists that “most citizens did not seem to connect the sacrifices of the dead to the ideal of human improvement” (100). By studying people’s attitudes through materials like epitaphs published in newspapers, Bodnar effectively argues that, more often than not, families of dead soldiers were resentful and never forgave the government for the loss of life. This is why, he suggests, the majority of the families (seventy percent) requested that the bodies of their loved ones be repatriated back to the United States rather than remain buried in foreign territory.

One of the more interesting tensions that he outlines is the traditional-versus-humanitarian debate, an opposition in which militarism and anticommunism are on the one side, and cautious ideals of peace on the other. To exemplify traditionalism, Bodnar considers the American Legion, an institution distinguished by its “militant brand of national identity and patriotism” (84) and which kept an ever-watchful lookout for any enemies. He observes the ways in which the groups countered conservativism, like the American Veterans Committee, which he describes as propelled more by goodwill than by insecurity (84). To punctuate the struggle between traditionalist and humanitarian memory, Bodnar presents the Truman-MacArthur power struggle, in which the former president removed the popular general from command for insubordination. While MacArthur “remained
a symbol of the traditional remembrance of World War II that celebrated
honor over tragedy, the idea of total victory, and personal devotion to the
defense of the nation” (78), Bodnar demonstrates that Americans overall
preferred Dwight Eisenhower, “a man who reaffirmed their dream that
Americans need not be obsessed with victory marches and the cant of being
ready to fight again” (84). Eisenhower came to symbolize “more moderate
forces in the Cold War . . . those who came away from the experience of
World War II with a sense of caution regarding the need to fight again” (81);
despite traditionalism’s hold over American memory, most Americans, like
citizens of other nations, were unwilling to die for the sake of humanity (7).

Bodnar addresses critical remembrance with equal attention, and
here his analysis is refreshing for its insight. Memoirs written by soldiers
are the most poignant and effective argument for critical war memory, il-
lustrating how many soldiers felt they “were stripped of their individuality
and pushed into the depths of a moral vacuum” (32). Chapter Two, “Soldiers
Write the War,” explores soldiers’ memoirs as a prototype that works to
“subvert attempts to mythologize” war (35). According to Bodnar, soldiers
exerted harsher judgment in general of the character of the Americans and
their political and military leadership. He analyzes works by twelve veteran-
authors, highlighting a trilogy by James Jones and works by others such as
Joseph Heller, Paul Fussell, William Manchester, and E. B. Sledge. Bodnar
suggests that these works “nearly obliterated the frame of high-minded lib-
eralism that Franklin Roosevelt had identified before the war began” (57),
effectively demonstrating the tensions between critical and humanitarian
memory, as one almost wiped out the other.

Due to its breadth of scope and material, Bodnar’s narrative some-
times wanders and seems disconnected. Although he occasionally relies too
heavily on secondary resources that take vague stances, such as his analysis
of ceremonies of anniversaries at the Pointe du Hoc and D-Day in France,
his footnotes generally provide a wealth of knowledge for the reader con-
cerned with detail. One sometimes wonders what selection criteria was for
study—for example, why did he study the World War II memorial dedicated
in 1995 in Omaha, Nebraska over other perhaps more interesting cases
such as the 2006 Visitor’s Museum on Omaha Beach in Normandy by the
American Battle Monuments Commission, which presents material about
individuals who died during the Battle of Normandy—but Bodnar’s choices
in material always support his thesis, that Americans were more conflicted
about World War II than our current patriotism would leave us to believe.
He concludes the book by suggesting, “a true record of modern warfare—
even in America—would make it clear that men and women everywhere
were capable of unimaginable acts of brutality as well” as heroism (242).
Overall his insight and expertise make this book an outstanding contribu-
tion to memory studies and American culture.

—Kate Lemay, Brigham Young University