

Struggling to Find That 'Greatest Generation' Sequel

Here's some interesting and revealing news: "To Stand Out, the Army Picks a New Uniform With a World War II Look." That was a [headline](#) in *The New York Times* on May 5, and it speaks to the fact that World War II, more and more, is the historical and civic touchstone of American life.

The Army uniform in question was known as as "[pinks and greens](#)"; the jacket was a greenish-brown and the trousers were gray with a slight pinkish hue. As the *Times* put it, the U.S. Army "is hoping that reintroducing an iconic service uniform from the days of the Band of Brothers and Rosie the Riveter will help reframe its public image."

We could add more broadly that the Army wishes to link itself to memories of the Good War, the Greatest Generation, General Dwight Eisenhower, and, yes, the unifying leadership of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Indeed, both of those presidents were plenty controversial in their days, yet seven decades later, a sort of secular halo surrounds them. They did, after all, lead the nation at the apex of its power.

Of course, as with any great historical event, the memory of World War II has gone up and down. Immediately afterward, controversies concerning the conflict – starting with the precise circumstances of Pearl Harbor – rumbled through the culture. Yet the nation as a whole was not going to turn its back on what the nation as a whole had just accomplished. As one tiny measure of the ubiquity of memories, we might note that a photograph of the Marine flag-raising at Iwo Jima found its way inside a conference room of the Truman White House's Council of Economic Advisers. The beaux arts Executive Office Building was a long way from Mount Suribachi – yet not far

from the hearts even of bureaucrats.

Then the Vietnam Wars put the Good War's memory on the down escalator – way down. In the minds of many, the fabled arsenal of democracy became the hated war machine. And thus it was that Senator George McGovern, the dovish Democratic presidential nominee in 1972, deliberately chose to downplay his war heroism: he had piloted or co-piloted [35 B-24 bomber missions](#) over Hitler's Europe, yet nobody knew it. Thus it was, too, that Archie Bunker, the fictional antihero of the CBS sitcom *All in the Family*, which premiered in 1971, was made into a World War II veteran, as well as, of course, a bullying buffoon; even his war injuries were [played for laughs](#).

From such a nadir, it was inevitable that opinion over the war would be revised upward. President Ronald Reagan's trip to Normandy in 1984, on the 40th anniversary of D-Day, was indeed a signal moment. Nobody watching TV back then forgot the Gipper's [speech](#) on a now-silent bluff, the chill Atlantic at his back, the president gesturing toward the graying Rangers in front of him: "These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war."

A newsman accompanying Reagan on that Normandy trip, Tom Brokaw, was so inspired by what he saw that he wrote *The Greatest Generation*, an ode to 1940s America. It was a moniker that stuck.

Today, World War II stands not only as the ultimate example of the struggle between good and evil, but as a reminder of the power of the can-do spirit. Saikat Chakrabarti, for instance, top aide to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, routinely cites U.S. [war-production figures](#) from the 1940s as proof that the ambitious goals of the Green New Deal are attainable.

Yet perhaps most of all, World War II hearkens back to the spirit of national unity – a togetherness that’s so obviously missing today. Fans of Turner Classic Movies may well have seen the 1943 film *The Human Comedy*, depicting life on the home front – complete, sadly, with the [terrible telegram from the War Department](#).

Yet amid the tears and travail, one cheerful scene stands out. Aboard a troop train, Van Johnson pulls out an accordion and a crusty old soldier asks him to “play a song...something we all know and used to sing as kids.” So Johnson plays the Christian hymn “[Leaning in the Everlasting Arms](#),” and most of the soldiers, knowing the words, happily join in the singing.

In point of fact, World War II wasn’t always that ecumenical. Yet even then, events had a way of melting Americans into a common pot. At Iwo Jima, where nearly 7,000 Americans died in just five weeks of fighting, the commanding chaplain assigned Lieutenant Roland Gittlesohn, [the first Jewish chaplain in the Marines](#), to deliver the eulogy for the fallen. Yet the Protestant and Catholic chaplains protested, and so, in the end, three separate services were held.

Still, Gittlesohn’s words, delivered on [March 21, 1945](#), stand out for their encompassing generosity of spirit:

Here before us lie the bodies of comrades and friends. Men who until yesterday or last week laughed with us, joked with us, trained with us. Men who were on the same ships with us, and went over the sides with us as we prepared to hit the beaches of this island. Men who fought with us and feared with us. Somewhere in this plot of ground there may lie the man who could have discovered the cure for cancer. Under one of those Christian crosses, or beneath a Jewish Star of David, there may rest now a man who was destined to be a great prophet...to find the way, perhaps, for all to live in plenty, with poverty and hardship for none. Now they lie here silently in this sacred soil, and we gather to consecrate

this earth in their memory.

Interestingly, Gittlesohn lived long enough to give the benediction at the 50th anniversary of Iwo Jima in the shadow of the Marine War Memorial in Arlington, Virginia. And on that day, he eulogized the memory of *all* Marines.

Indeed, even during the war, inspiring and unifying moments were recorded and celebrated. One such incident occurred on February 3, 1943, when the USAT *Dorchester* was hit by a U-boat's torpedo. Aboard were [four chaplains](#), about to have their rendezvous with immortality. As the ship began to sink, the clerics proffered their life jackets to others and went down into the icy deep:

Through the pandemonium, according to those present, four Army chaplains brought hope in despair and light in darkness. Those chaplains were Lt. George L. Fox, Methodist; Lt. Alexander D. Goode, Jewish; Lt. John P. Washington, Roman Catholic; and Lt. Clark V. Poling, Dutch Reformed.

Posthumously, the Four Chaplains, as they became known, were awarded a decoration that Uncle Sam intended to be the equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

This week, of course, brings the anniversary of VE Day. Not longer after – on June 6, to be exact – comes the 75th anniversary of D-Day, and with it, we're sure to see a flotilla of specials and spectacles. Why, we'll likely also be reminded of [FDR's D-Day prayer](#), broadcast to the nation, which began: "Almighty God: our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity."

Admittedly, it's hard to see President Donald Trump playing the same inspiring and unifying role that FDR did in 1944, or

Reagan in 1984. Yet oftentimes, events prove to be larger than any personality, no matter how fractious.

Moreover, the impact of World War II was far more than just martial commemorations – there's also a distinctly left-friendly domestic political angle. It was notable, earlier this year, that Jeff Weaver, top advisor to one of Trump's would-be challengers, Senator Bernie Sanders, was seen sporting a [Roosevelt-Wallace campaign button](#). That recalls, of course, another chapter in Greatest Generation history: the victorious 1940 presidential ticket of FDR and Henry A. Wallace.

It was during that third Roosevelt term that the 32nd president delivered his intended domestic blueprint for post-war America, an [economic bill of rights](#). One who remembers that moment is Sanders, who said to a [CNN town hall](#) on April 22:

Franklin Roosevelt made this point...in 1944, in a State of the Union Address that never got a whole lot of attention, this is what he said basically. It was a very profound speech toward the end of World War II. He said, you know, we've got a great Constitution. Bill of Rights protects your freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and all that stuff, great, but you know what it doesn't protect? It doesn't protect and guarantee you economic rights.

By this reckoning, Sanders is more of a social democrat than a democratic socialist; that is, he stands in a strong tradition, reaching back to the greatest presidential vote-getter in American history. Yes, social democratic thinking has been in eclipse for the past few decades. Yet if the solidarity of World War II is making a comeback, then its domestic policy aspects, too, might be due for a comeback. (Of course, one might be forgiven for suspecting that Sanders is, in fact, well to the left of FDR. Moreover, it ought to be

remembered that Henry Wallace was dropped from the national ticket in 1944 for being too left-wing, and then went on to run as a pro-Soviet third-party candidate in 1948.)

So yes, World War II is a memory palace with many rooms. And speaking of one such room, we'll soon be able to see George Clooney's [TV miniseries](#) adaptation of Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, *Catch-22*. During the war, Heller flew 60 combat missions as a B-25 bombardier, and as such his literary work was boosted by authenticity, as well as satire and bitterness. Indeed, *Catch-22* might be thought of as anti-war, though war veterans loved it. This author well remembers one old bomber crewman – no dove and not much of a reader – who nonetheless read the novel 10 times.

So what will Clooney do in this new World War II picture? Will it be anything like, say, his earlier World War II shows, *The Monuments Men*, *The Good German*, and *The Thin Red Line*? We don't yet know. All we know is that he'll look spiffy in his pinks and greens.

But then, so do all American soldiers.

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