


---

THE  
JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

---




THE GREATEST  
GENERATION  
IN A  
GOOD WAR?:  
A NEW LOOK AT  
WARTIME AMERICA

THOMAS W. ZEILER  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER

FAU<sup>TM</sup>

---

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
Florida Atlantic University



# ABOUT THE JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

In the spring of 2004, a group of senior citizen students at Florida Atlantic University paid tribute to John O'Sullivan, a beloved professor of history who died in 2000, by establishing a Memorial Fund to support an annual lecture in his honor.

In keeping with John's commitment to teaching, research, and community outreach, the mission of the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lectureship is to broaden and deepen public understanding of modern U.S. history. The Memorial Fund — which is administered by the Department of History — sponsors public lectures and classroom seminars by some of the most distinguished scholars and gifted teachers of American history. The lectures typically focus on topics relevant to Professor O'Sullivan's specialties in 20th Century U.S. history, including: World War II, the Vietnam War, the nuclear age, the Holocaust, peace history, political and diplomatic affairs, and other topics.

JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

THE GREATEST  
GENERATION  
IN A  
GOOD WAR?:  
A NEW LOOK AT  
WARTIME AMERICA

BY THOMAS W. ZEILER  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER

Department of History  
Florida Atlantic University  
2009

# T he Greatest Generation in a Good War?:

## A New Look at Wartime America

THE AMERICAN MASTER SATIRIST, Kurt Vonnegut, certainly saw his share of the ravages of World War II as prisoner of war held captive underground during the horrendous bombing of the historic city of Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945. Ever since, historians have debated whether Dresden was an innocent bystander in a vicious air campaign ordered by the British commander, Arthur “Bomber” Harris, who supposedly had no regard for human life (much less the cultural treasures of the city), or whether the city was a deserving target because of its 127 factories and position as a service and transportation hub for Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich.

My intention in bringing up Vonnegut is not to engage in that debate – not yet, at least – but to employ his observations on war (and specifically the Second World War) to make a point about Professor John O’Sullivan’s scholarly interests, which also touch on my argument regarding the so-called “good war.” Vonnegut described the experience in Dresden in *Slaughterhouse Five*, although he returned repeatedly to the themes of carnage and destruction – unfathomable and incomprehensible unless one had lived through it. Even then, he noted, the horror of war was surreal at best. In his last work before his death, *A Man Without a Country*, published in 2005 as a spear thrown at the Bush administration for its war in Iraq, Vonnegut expanded on the nature of military conflict by stating that “another reason not to talk about war is that it’s unspeakable.” I think the namesake of this lecture series would agree, for Professor O’Sullivan’s research on conscientious objectors revealed that, as he and his co-editor put it in their 1996 oral history entitled “*We Have Just Begun to Not Fight*”, a significant number of Americans “said no to this war.” They disagreed that World War II was a good, just, or necessary war, and



offered “principled opposition” by serving in various capacities. Many objected to war on religious and moral grounds; Professor O’Sullivan cited one person who explained that his stance was based on the simple biblical message “Thou shalt not kill.”

Pacifists clearly thought the war evil, but my focus is on the mainstream, as it were, or those who embraced World War II as a necessary and just war. Military histories offer a story of heroism and cooperation, calamity and loss, calculation and luck, and production and destruction. They also beg for an injection of realism to counter the mythology that this was a so-called “good war.” The mainstream has forgotten the quotation marks around the term that originally was used to question the positive spin on this epic conflict.

From 1937 to 1945 the world witnessed a succession of savage military policies, innovations, and actions on the field, in the water, and in the skies that resulted in butchery of over fifty million people. It was the most destructive event in human history – I can find nothing that comes close to its scope and scale in the past 6,000 years of recorded history. Whole armies, cities, and nearly entire ethnic groups were exterminated; millions of others were decimated by the carnage. The necessity of defeating great evil *explains* the violence but does not justify it. The Second World War brought us closer to Armageddon than ever before.

The conceptual architecture of my global military history on World War II reminds readers of Vonnegut’s unspeakable nature of war. This is especially relevant for students and a general public who tend to romanticize the “Big One” as a war in which they would have gladly enlisted because it seemed like such a noble, heroic crusade. It seemed such a *necessary* war, as filmmaker Ken Burns convincingly argued in his 2007 documentary *The War*, even though Burns himself tried to debunk the “good war” mythology that had become standard sentimental fare ever since Tom Brokaw, Stephen Ambrose, and others consecrated veterans as hallowed American treasures. Of course, these soldiers were, and still are, and we should never - ever -forget their great sacrifices. But the utter destructions tends to get lost in the memorializing - the everyday suffering that showed human beings at their inconceivable worst. (Burns captured some of this gruesome detail by depicting

atrocities committed even by Americans but his point got largely lost in his focus on a grander narrative of local experiences told by love-letters and other “Ken Burns’s effects” that resulted in adding to the standard iconography of the “Big One.”) In reality, I argue, the Second World War must be grounded in what the eminent military historian Russell Weigley called a “strategy of annihilation,” a framework linked by other scholars to the idea of a “war of annihilation” on the Soviet-German or Eastern front.

Regardless of varied contexts and time periods, the concept of merciless, purposeful annihilation of civilians alongside conventional military action was exemplified in every theater, and, most important, by every major participant, in World War II. That goes for Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and Great Britain, Communist Russia, Fascist Italy, the democratic United States, and others. The “war of annihilation” thesis includes, by definition, what we would might consider criminal behavior today, such as saturation strategic bombing campaign mentioned before and certainly systematic genocide.

Let me be clear. By no means do I seek to denigrate, belittle, or even criticize the sacrifices made by Americans and others to winning (and by others on the Axis side, in losing) this conflict. While tens of millions died, tens of millions more fought, worked, and led to end malevolence and create a permanently safer and prosperous world. This so-called “Greatest Generation” deserves our thanks. But a dose of reality, of an historian’s sobriety perhaps, is needed as we commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of European war’s outbreak and remember its meanings. We need to recall, above all, *how* the war was fought. Second World War veterans were notorious for not speaking about their experiences as their successors, say, Vietnam. We should take their silence, in part, as a cue that they understood the horror of their experience. It is to honor their courage, then, and to let them step down from the public pedestal of media adoration, and show them to be the most human of human beings, that I offer a critique of the military history of World War II.

This consummate war of annihilation had its strategic roots deep in the previous century. American Civil War General William Sherman noted in 1864 during his devastating advance through the state of Georgia that “we are not only

fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as the organized armies.” This was what historian Mark Grimsley has referred to as a “hard war” policy to undercut “the enemy’s will to resist” by “subjecting the civilian population to the pressures of war.” It spoke to the ability of the United States to destroy the enemy’s military capacity rather than erode it by attrition. Although American in origin, the strategy of annihilation was adopted by all sides in World War II – immediately by some (such as Germany and the Soviet Union on the Eastern front, Italy in Africa before the war, and Japan in China, Burma, and the Philippines) and gradually by others (the United States and Japan in the Pacific, and Anglo-American forces in the skies over Europe). The waging of an unlimited war that targeted civilians equally with militaries explains the strategies and tactics of both Axis and Allied forces.

The strategy of annihilation led to destruction of such scope and intensity that World War II must be seen as a unique conflict. The First World War witnessed immense slaughter but evolved into attrition warfare. Its successor represented a “total war” of expansive war aims, mobilization of resources by government and society, and the blurring of combatants to include civilians as well as the military. The overall purpose of victory whatever the cost, and an utter obliteration of the enemy in ways unlimited by economic, diplomatic, or (on the whole) moral constraints, defined the World War II strategy of annihilation.

Of course, a marked differences existed between Axis war aims, strategy, and behavior and that of the Allies, so much so that although every theater experienced the horrors of annihilation there is no moral equivalence between Nazi extermination policies and, say, Allied strategic bombing. The Nazis sought to annihilate an entire people (the Jews), and entire nation (the Soviet Union), and other undesirables. The Japanese tried to eliminate China as an entity and Italy sought to erase Ethiopia. The U.S., Britain, and their allies, too, took aim on their enemies’ ability to make war by attacking civilians. No doubt the Allies crossed moral thresholds – Dresden, Hiroshima, taking human war trophies on Pacific islands, shooting German and Italian prisoners, and a host of state-sanctioned Soviet atrocities so numerous and unbelievably repellent that this is not the place to discuss them – but the Allies did so

to speed the end of the war. The Germans, Japanese, and Italians, on the other hand, sought to annihilate whole populations as their purpose of the war itself. That actually became the Russian objective toward Germany as it perpetuated an orgy of absolute war guided by, scholar Chris Bellamy writes, “primordial violence, hatred and enmity.” Looked at another way, the Allies knew that their surrender meant their liquidation but they largely did not hold genocidal war aims. They did gradually adopt a strategy of annihilation to prevent the Axis powers from effecting theirs.

But we should acknowledge Allied annihilation intentions all the same. What do I mean, exactly, by the practice of the strategy of annihilation? Some examples, however grisly, helps make the point about the horrendous violence. Let me give a non-American example first.

Launching the world war in Asia, the Japanese rolled through eastern China without precedent of brutality. The nearly four-month vicious battle for Shanghai destroyed an area of three square miles; this famous (and believed to be staged) photo, published in the popular pro-Chinese *Life Magazine*, hints at the destruction that the world watched in horror. Half the Chinese military forces and some 270,000 people became casualties. The world has since fixated on the infamous massacre in Nanjing, our ally Chiang Kai-Shek’s seat of government. If genocide is construed to mean massive killings sponsored by government, than the events in Nanking (and elsewhere in China, where estimates range to approximately ten million Chinese war dead) certainly qualify the Japanese, at least, as engaged in indiscriminate slaughter bordering on ethnic cleansing. In the two months after Nanking fell, 200,000 Chinese died at the hands of Japanese Army. Europeans and Americans fled or died in panic.

The steamrolling Japanese formulated principles for a settlement with China but their military doctrine aimed for “pacification.” This so-called “three alls” policy of “kill all, loot all, burn all” was used in province after province from 1938 to 1945. For civilians, the outcome of the “three alls” approach was horrendous. The Japanese brutalized the population into submission. The Imperial Army even practiced surgery on captives; vivisection was common, as patients – oftentimes farmers – were strapped to gurneys, drugged, and had their limbs and inner organs dissected before being killed. Mass graves throughout cropped up in North China



and “people reducing kilns” burned bodies of the victims. It was official Japanese policy – a strategy of annihilation - to depopulate the countryside and punish those who lived.

I would argue that although atrocities were much higher and in greater volume on the Axis side, we should not forget that Soviet behavior was equally terrible. And the Americans and British also engaged in the destruction of civilian populations. Important to note is that annihilation preoccupied all sides but it was not in play all the time. The strategy emerged throughout the war in the Allies’ march to victory. Sometimes attrition warfare characterized many battles and campaigns. Annihilation as a driving force did not always appear in every issue of the war, although it was a constant, and emerging, phenomenon throughout the conflict.

A vicious approach to war indicated the way the conflict was fought and how armed forces were maintained in the field. The objectives might have been the same as General Sherman’s but the process was immensely expanded in World War II. The global scope of this conflict – logistical, technological, and geographical (along with the enormity of the killing) – was a striking aspect. Herculean efforts by all nations placed in battle the destructive power of new offensive and defensive weaponry – from ships and submarines to guns, tanks, and airplanes. Belligerents fueled their efforts by stockpiling a tremendous amount and wide array of resources acquired from home-grown or conquered labor. They produced killing tools in large numbers and sent them into battle. Huge bureaucracies and expensive research centers developed weapons and organized other methods of fighting - from atomic bombs to intelligence decoding operations. Drawing on protective ship convoys, aircraft transport, and overland hauling by machine and animal, delivery systems were devised and personnel deployed around the world.

Enter the Allied (Anglo-American) strategic bombing campaign. By 1942, British military advisors justified area bombing at operational and tactical levels, and gave strategic and psychological rationales as well. The bombers might change the correlates of power away from German and Soviet ground armies to the air, and give Anglo-American forces means of winning the war from above and at sea rather than

by land (as the Soviets labored on the Eastern front). The Commander-in-Chief of British Bomber Command, Arthur Harris, enthusiastically embarked on a plan to carry out this theory. Harris had observed incendiaries during the Blitz destroy much of London in 1940 and thus decided that burning, rather than high explosives, would be most effective against Germany. Upon his appointment to Bomber Command in February 1942 he set out to prove the point by fire-bombing raids on Lubeck and Rostock. Initially he had only 300 planes at his disposal, fewer than existed in 1940. The problem was that his superiors balked at increasing bomber production. Harris set out to give them a good reason.

His campaign created a new epoch of annihilation in which the battlefield was potentially infinite. Tinkering with the ratios of high-explosive bombs and incendiaries, the British sent new Lancaster and Halifax heavy bombers to drop enormous payloads and ignite self-perpetuating firestorms that sucked the oxygen out of the air and consumed all forms of life. The raids began on Cologne on May 30, 1942. Some 1,050 planes dropped 1,455 tons of bombs which caused fires to burn across 600 acres of the city for two days. Reconnaissance photographs showed 20,000 homes destroyed or damaged and 1,500 commercial properties leveled. Remarkably, the historic cathedral was spared. Five dozen factories closed and communications and rail links were interrupted for two weeks. About 500 died or were hurt and a half million left homeless. Harris was disappointed by the results, especially after 44 planes did not return. Two nights later, Essen was hit by 956 aircraft which dropped their payloads on targets illuminated by flares. On June 25 it was Bremen's turn. Harris sent 1,006 bombers, of which 49 were lost – the British casualties showed that a strategy of annihilation could also backfire on the aggressor.

Although German morale did not crumble, Harris would not let up. He returned to the industrial areas of the Ruhr, Saar, and Rhineland time and time again. The air offensive was like the sea campaign in that both registered large rate of casualties. Counting civilians, however, it far surpassed the battle of the Atlantic in numbers of people injured, killed, and missing.

The Americans now tried their hand. Due to training and doctrine they first focused on daylight bombing to allow for precision hits on targets rather than

British-style area bombing that strayed from factories to residences. Such was the thinking of Lieutenant-General Ira Eaker, the head of the Eighth U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) based in England, who led the first U.S. bomber raid in Europe on Rouen, France on August 17. Eaker preferred daylight versus Harris' night-time bombing. The tactics might differ but the Americans endorsed an air war of annihilation when, in early 1943, FDR and Churchill approved his idea for a Combined Bomber Offensive along the lines of the massive Cologne attack.

This "Operation Pointblank" certainly aimed for military and political targets, such as German submarine pens on the Atlantic and Italian cities (to unseat Mussolini), but it also ushered in an era of sheer devastation that transcended the notions of acceptable levels of warfare. Bomber Harris actually called a halt to the campaign after his own forces suffered appalling losses. In the battle of the Ruhr, some 1,000 Allied planes went down with 7,000 of their crews, although many aircrews survived to become prisoners of war. No matter how sizable, however, these losses were military ones and thus within the rules of the game.

Not so in the major port city of Hamburg in July and August 1943. Harris focused on Hamburg's wooden town center once again. Conditions were perfect for destruction; visibility was clear and the weather hot and dry. In raids coded Gemorrah, over 3,000 RAF planes unleashed area bombing raids, alternating explosives with incendiaries. Delayed-action bombs also rained down on the city to hinder the fire-fighters who were stuck on the north side of town responding to the first bombs. The British struck the night of July 24/25 and the Americans attacked each of the next two days although they lost an entire squadron to German fighters. The RAF (and Canadian Air Force) returned before midnight on July 27/28.

The first man-made firestorm of the war swept an area of Hamburg 8.5 square miles in size. Huge lumber yards fueled the inferno. Temperatures hit 1,000 Fahrenheit. "The air was actually filled with fire," recalled a warden, and then "a storm started, a shrill howling in the street. It grew into a hurricane" that sounded, recalled another resident, like "the devil laughing."

One had two choices: either exit a shelter and risk the firestorm, or stay behind in cellars filling with smoke and rising in heat. In this urban "pan of a

gigantic oven,” victims burned alive as they were sucked into a windstorm of fire that blew at upwards of 300 miles per hour. Others suffocated in shelters deprived of oxygen or were baked by the raging street fires above them. Thousands were never found - turned to ashes and blown away by the wind. Fire-fighters could do little but rush to various spots as over 44,600 civilians and 800 servicemen died. With half the city reduced to rubble, two-thirds of the survivors were evacuated. Mercy-killings persisted for days. Fires lasted for two days and then the RAF returned to bomb the unaffected parts of the city. On the last night, August 4, the weather turned so cloudy that only the Lancasters made it through to drop another 1,400 bombs on the ruins. Hamburg had become a city of the dead.

It was a matter of advancing technology, war fatigue and war-thickened skins, and the ever-stronger notion that war was hell (as well as hatred) that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki emerged logically from the destruction of Hamburg. Non-combatants had always died in war, and would continue to do so. Bomber crews over Hamburg noted two years later the “acre upon acre of lifeless ruins,” and one flyer “was more than glad that no one could point the finger and say where my bombs had fallen. It was one thing to bomb in the heat of battle and another to see one’s contribution against the background of a defeated enemy.” There was obvious discomfort with this “morale bombing” or “terror bombing,” as it became known.

The Combined Bomber Offensive remains controversial. Some accused the British of inhumane behavior because of the area-bombing tactic as opposed to the American precision attacks that targeted factories rather than civilians. It is hard to disagree, but the Americans soon turned to indiscriminate killing as well. Tens of thousands of innocents perished, including 150,000 French and Italian civilians and 100,000 foreign workers in Germany under U.S. attacks. Cities in Europe and Asia were wiped off the map. The campaign of aerial annihilation could not be rationalized by just or good war theory, in which all means to defeat the evils of fascism absolved the Allies of sin. In truth, area bombing ranked with genocide as a war crime. The sole difference is that victor’s justice labeled the Axis behavior as criminal and their own as a military necessity. But deliberate bombing of civilians

not engaged in the war effort, many of whom were children or elderly, represented the lowest form of ethical standards.

The point is to remind us all that war is worse than hell, and this one was the worst. To be sure, the ground campaigns inflicted more suffering than the bombs from the air. Total deaths from bombing amounted to about a million people, less than the Germans caused in the siege of Leningrad. Yet the Luftwaffe killed over 60,000 British civilians in reprisal raids as well as the battle of Britain and over 100,000 USAAF and RAF crewmembers died. The campaign absorbed about 20% of the Allied military budgets. Might not the effort have gone to more use elsewhere - on more or better weapons or to aid the partisans and resistance fighters against Nazism? Perhaps, but the bombing proved crucial to the Allied victory as well as assuring the Soviets that, barring a landing in western Europe, their allies were doing all they could to help defeat Nazi Germany before a western invasion was feasible. Yet when all was said and done, the air war did not topple the regime. Annihilation came up short.

This total war touched almost everyone in the world in mostly negative ways. German submariners, American seamen, British bombardiers, Japanese kamikazes, Finnish sharpshooters, French resistance fighters, Chinese communists, Polish flyers, infantry from a host of nations and colonies in the British empire, convoys in the Arctic, aircraft carrier mechanics, Burmese and Indian scouts, and Russian artillerymen all sought to wipe out their enemy. The battles were horrendous affairs; Kasserine Pass, Kursk, Myitkyina, Alamein, Leyte Gulf, Narvik, Anzio, Guadalcanal, Stalingrad, Dresden, Dunkirk, Crete, Falaise, Hollandia, Okinawa, and Hurtgen Forest joined the rolls of death and destruction along with many more in the war of supply at sea, strategic bombing campaigns, blitzkrieg, tank battles, carrier and battleship fights, and amphibious landings. And, of course, there were such gruesome reminders of civilians at war as the Holocaust - the murder of over six million Jews - of which a third were children.

World War II was so devastating because it exposed people in every corner of the world to anguish and barbarism as a normal course of events. While 28 nations fought in the First World War, 61 participated in the Second. Some



homefronts were removed from battle, as in America, but commonly the warzone and home were indistinguishable. While about five percent of civilians accounted for the deaths in the Great War of 1914-18, over two-thirds of the dead were civilians in the 1937-1945 conflict. In Belgium, China, the Soviet Union, Norway, Poland, and Greece more non-combatants died than did military personnel. That the war involved the most industrialized battle and technological sophistication ever seen greatly augmented civilian casualties. Bombing from the air proved devastating but so did premeditated, systematic murder by gas and modern weaponry. The strategy of annihilation extended the battlefields to cities, towns, villages, and farms as leaders believed that victory could be achieved by exterminating populations by military force. As a result, as Hugh Strachan has written, total war “was far worse than prewar figurings; reality had outstripped imagination.”

The sheer bloodthirstiness of the Red Army as it invaded eastward to avenge its homeland in 1944-1945 exemplified that point by itself. But such scourges as rape were not the Soviets’ creations alone. German, Japanese, American, British, and other armies also brutalized women. In contrast to the heroic “good war” image of the U.S. soldier, some were executed for rapes in Britain and France, although none got death sentences for violence against Germans. The youngest recorded rape victim by an American was three years old. That deviant behavior could be explained as an individual choice driven by pathological sex criminality or hatred. In the case of the Soviet Red Army, mass raping served as an official tool of the strategy of annihilation and even considering the tendency to politicize atrocities the treatment of civilians on the Eastern front was simply inhuman and the scale of violence unimaginable. But Americans committed atrocities, too, and many returning veterans certainly had memories (never revealed) of both heroics and shameless brutalities committed by their brothers in the field.

So, was this really a “good war?” The impulse to glorify it has enshrined World War II in the pantheon of great events and thereby cast the period from 1937 to 1945 in a nostalgic light. This is often the case on tours of military battlefields or lectures by relatives of those who fought in the war. People at the time knew how terrible the war was and we have since acknowledged its horrors. Justice must also

be done to the immense sacrifice of soldiers and civilians and the leadership of statesmen and military commanders. Nobody died in vain. Undeniably, the war was an essential fight against the aggression and genocide perpetuated by fascism and militarism. Revisionists of the war have argued that the global conflict was the unnecessary result of blundering diplomacy, especially on the part of the British. Perhaps, but for my purposes, the value of such criticism is that they expressed a healthy dose of cynicism toward the ingrained, almost worshipful, approaches to the Allied cause. Others have begun to demythologize a conflict portrayed in a half century of retelling the war as a holy crusade - a paragon of justness in which even questioning the greatness of Allied leaders like Winston Churchill attracts scorn from a majority who venerate the winning effort.

Other nations are not immune from confusing heroism with reality, and means with ends. For its part, the Soviet Union mythologized the deaths of tens of millions of people as the “Great Patriotic War.” The Russians even downplayed their huge sacrifices in a strategy designed to deceive the West into believing Moscow was fully prepared to confront capitalism after the war. Britain went into steep decline but proudly upheld its leadership, stalwart suffering of its population, and democratic impulses during the war as evidence of backbone developed by decades of grand imperial rule. Japan never fully placed itself in the category of aggressor and has not entirely acknowledged its guilt for war crimes in China and elsewhere; nationalists hold that their nation shaped the destinies of others while confronting the white western imperialists. Meanwhile, the Japanese viewed the “good war” as a means of converting from pernicious militarism to the stunning economic miracle of the postwar years.

Succeeding generations of Americans have selectively memorialized certain aspects of the war but forgotten its cardinal destructive characteristic. For the United States, the war was the launch-point to global preeminence. The victory clearly showed a well-meaning and determined nation mobilized to defeat evil and then establish a world order based on democracy, stability, prosperity, and justice. The notion of a “good war” emanates largely from American audiences who look on World War II as a just crusade won by a just nation.

This “good war” thesis is no straw man but a powerful idea based on myth, arrogance, and a sanitizing of the record. For Americans in particular, it justifies the nation’s postwar foreign and war policies by invoking the sad lessons of appeasement and the necessity of confronting aggression immediately wherever it arises. Surely, Americans did the right thing by entering the war (finally) and should be as ever-vigilant as our World War II-era ancestors (although it took 2 ½ years for the U.S. to go to war due to lamentable isolationist sentiment). In light of the postwar U.S. preponderance of power, the term does raise the issue of why and how the nation fought.

Unfortunately, it emphasizes the notion of American exceptionalism in warfare, and thus does an injustice both to its soldiers who grinded it out on the fronts and to the historical complexities of the conflict. While their objectives differed from the fascists, Americans, in the end, were no different than other nations in conducting a vicious war and in exceeding the bounds of morality at times. Yet the quickening passing of the World War II generation and intervening postwar decades of questionable or ambiguous wars heightened efforts to memorialize the victors as special. This “good war,” argue proponents of the notion, was necessary, heroic, and even romantic when compared to the faceless nuclear age and brutal Third World wars after 1945. It had clear objectives and transformed life for hundreds of millions of people. But by placing World War II in a separate category from other conflicts, we tend to forget that tens of millions perished, and horribly so. The very approach of “unconditional surrender” insisted upon by the Americans, among other winters, meant that the war’s end depended on the complete defeat of the Axis powers. In other words, surrender without qualification encouraged the war of annihilation to its logical conclusion by using all the tools of total war at the Allies’ disposal. Barbarity reigned on the part of all belligerents. The “good war” argument presents an inaccurately antiseptic view of the Second World War. This was not a good war or even an honorable crusade, although honorable men and women fought it.

Readers and World War II hobbyists have simply missed the irony in the term “good war.” They have misinterpreted such book titles as Michael Adams’ *The*

*Best War Ever*, Studs Terkels' *The Good War*, or several (including one for youth by Stephen Ambrose) called *The Good Fight*, as sanctioning the conflict because it saved democracy, halted genocidal maniacs, and ended the Great Depression. Some long for this supposedly golden age of inspirational leaders who united people in a grand cause on behalf of future generations. Memorials to the passing of the World War II generation, however, as well as battlefield tours and video games, have glossed over and cheapened the real meaning of the Second World War. The objective was to kill - to eliminate the enemy threat physically, ideologically, and totally. Millions of soldiers and civilians perished, many of them in face-to-face encounters and more by technologically-driven mass death. Millions simply killed others, for that is the purpose of war. Nobody escaped the wrath of a war of annihilation. Soldiers saw no glamour in it. Nobody since should desire to fight in "the Big One," for World War II was a story, simply, of death, crime, and destruction.

The slaughter of civilians truly marked this war as one of annihilation and as the most catastrophic event in history. World War II was a relatively universal source of death. Men, women, and children killed doubled the number of military dead. About 44 million people died including over 12 million who succumbed in Nazi concentration camps and 2 million who died from strategic bombing in Allied and Axis countries. The Allies saw at least 35 million civilians die - 28 million of these were Russian or Chinese. Both nations claimed that even more perished. Three million people in the Axis nations were killed, although totals for both sides rise if the numbers for victims of oppression and military operations are fully counted.

While the war exempted nobody from its scourge, some suffered disproportionately. Perhaps here is the place to mention that Quentin Tarantino's recent Jewish-revenge film *Inglourious Basterds* might be satisfying as a fictional alternative to the end of the war, but it is fiction all the same. And it engages in a lustful celebration of violence. The 2008 film *Defiance*, though depicting a true story, is also misleading because it gives one the impression that Jews could strike back given the proper brutal, survivalist mentality, and some guns. The fact is that the Holocaust was a systematic killing machine that few were able to escape. There

was no “good war” for the Jews. They died at twice the rate of all Axis civilians. There were 34 million Poles before 1939 but 6 million died in the war. Another 8.5 million left Poland to die in camps or seek permanent exile. The country eventually was left with just 57% of its prewar population and virtually a non-existent Jewish population. The Nazis killed most of the Jews but peasants also had a hand. It is wrong to single out the Poles for such behavior, however. Lithuanians and Ukrainians massacred Jews well before the Final Solution. But blame for the genocide of this one group can be spread around.

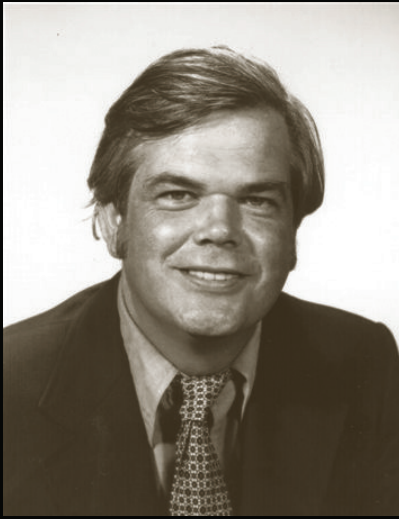
Furthermore, certain countries also bore the burden of dead, whether Jewish or not. The statistics are stunning, especially for eastern and central Europe. For every 1000 people in their countries 220 Poles and 116 Soviets died. By contrast, the dead in the Netherlands numbered 22 and in France 15 per 1000 people, while Britain suffered eight, Belgium seven, and America three deaths. Poland also can be singled out for losses. It lost 39% of its doctors, a third of its teachers and scientists, and over a quarter of its priests and lawyers. Of the nine million deaths in Asia, the Chinese represented a large share of the killings as did those Asians enslaved in work camps. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Japanese were killed from the U.S. strategic and atomic bombing campaigns. No country escaped the horrors of this total war of annihilation.

Should we attribute blame in a war of annihilation? Strategic bombing wrought atrocious results, but were these campaigns worse than Chiang’s deliberate drowning of tens of thousands of his own people when he blew up the Yellow River dikes in order to stem a Japanese advance? Was Stalin’s decision to starve children and the elderly to concentrate resources on the war fronts in 1942 worse than German sieges of Russian towns where tens of thousands perished, or famine in Greece perpetuated by vicious occupation and partisan warfare? Unlike Chiang and Stalin, in these cases the Germans did not kill their own people. Nazi and Japanese leaders were tried as war criminals but the Allied victors escaped the bar. But national consciences forever reproached the air combatants. Bomber Harris was denied the peerage granted to all other British commanders after the war. His aircrews did not receive a separate campaign medal. The British and to a lesser



extent the Americans refused to acknowledge that they had sunk to the level of their enemies' immorality yet they punished military men for not conducting this barbarous war more nobly.

In the end, the human cost should be the focus of any study of war and particularly of this conflict. The theme of annihilation – of destroying non-combatants and economies as well as militaries themselves in a total war - addresses the enormous casualties incurred by the belligerents, bystanders, and victims. Today we worry over such “collateral damage” of military actions as civilian casualties. This was not usually the case in the Second World War. Allies and Axis alike focused on destruction on the battlefield and of homefronts in the vast warzone. This was no war for the faint of heart or for those seeking a limited engagement. World War II simply spiraled downward into a mass slaughter, a maelstrom of annihilation on a scale never before witnessed. We would do best to heed the words of Kurt Vonnegut cited at the outset – war is surely unspeakable – but speak about the unmentionable we must.



# ABOUT JOHN O'SULLIVAN

John O'Sullivan was a gifted teacher and scholar who devoted his entire academic career to Florida Atlantic University. He came to FAU in 1971 after receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Since then he touched the lives of hundreds of FAU students with his brilliant and inspired teaching. An accomplished scholar, his publications included *The Draft and Its Enemies* (1974), *From Volunteerism to Conscription: Congress and the Selective Service, 1940-1945* (1982), *American Economic History* (1989), and *We Have Just Begun Not to Fight: An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service during World War II* (co-authored with Heather Frazer, 1996). Before his death in 2000, John was working on a book project related to Medal of Honor recipients and another book project with Patricia Kollander, also an FAU faculty member, on a World War II veteran. That book was published in 2005: *I Must Be a Part of This War: One Man's Fight against Hitler and Nazism*.

# JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURES

- 2004:** *Blind Spot: The Secret History of U.S. Counterterrorism*  
by Timothy Naftali  
Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library
- 2005:** *Religion and Politics: An American Tradition*  
by David Goldfield  
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- 2006:** *The Nazis and Dixie: African Americans, Jewish Americans, and Fascism, 1933-1939*  
by Glenda Gilmore  
Yale University
- 2007:** *Revisiting the Jazz Age*  
by Nancy F. Cott  
Harvard University
- 2008:** *Harry S. Truman, The Bomb, and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy*  
by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C.  
University of Notre Dame
- 2009:** *The Greatest Generation in a Good War?: A New Look at Wartime America*  
by Thomas W. Zeiler  
University of Colorado, Boulder

## Supporting the Lectureship

This lecture series is generously supported by donations from members of the community. If you wish to make a contribution, please contact Laurie Carney at 561.297.3606, or Kenneth Osgood, director of the History Symposium Series at 561.297.2816.