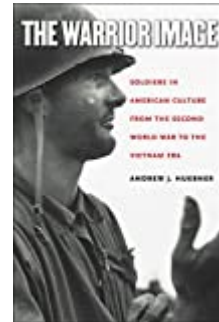


Andrew J. Heubner. *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. x + 371 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5838-7.



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Popular Portrayal of American Soldiers

In *The Warrior Image*, Andrew J. Huebner offers a new perspective on American attitudes towards war in the twentieth century. Conventional wisdom holds that Americans saw World War II as the paradigmatic “good war,” and only became cynical about war as a result of Vietnam. Huebner’s book suggests otherwise.

By examining movies, novels, photo exhibits, and print journalism, Huebner demonstrates that representations of soldiers began to change over the course of World War II. In the early years of the war, the imagery of soldiers and warfare was fairly celebratory. It conveyed the message that while soldiers might suffer hardships, these would ultimately make them better citizens. Soldiers were ennobled by their participation in a cause larger than themselves, and while they might be transformed by the effort, such transformations would be positive.

Gradually, less sanitized portrayals of army life surfaced in the media, particularly in the works of Ernie Pyle and Bill Mauldin. Both men came to portray World War II soldiers as victims of uncaring officers and of larger bureaucratic and geopolitical forces. By the end of the war,

social scientists of various stripes also began to express concern about the process of reintegrating soldiers into civilian life, and suggested that there might be a host of readjustment issues, ranging from psychological distress to housing shortages. Such concerns were reinforced by more ambiguous portrayals of the war and its aftermath in the media, and in novels such as Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

The Korean War further complicated American attitudes towards war. Over the course of the conflict, newspapers and magazines offered “increasingly skeptical reporting” (p. 100), and printed vivid photos of the hardships soldiers faced and the wounds they incurred. Mainstream publications like *Life* and *Newsweek* challenged traditional notions of bravery when they published photos of soldiers crying, and, consequently, Huebner maintains, by the end of the Korean conflict, martial imagery had changed substantially. While during World War II, reporters, writers, moviemakers, and photographers had celebrated the “stoic citizen-soldier” who was “part of a vast, democratic effort” and who epitomized masculinity, by the end of the Korean War, journalists portrayed

soldiers as experiencing a “greater degree of discouragement, sorrow, agony, and fear,” and thereby “widened the definition of the masculine, American fighter” (p. 130). Rather than play down the suffering of soldiers, the media often emphasized it.

Journalists, novelists, and filmmakers also injected new realism into their depictions of G.I.s, showing them as isolated—from home, each other, and human values—and functioning in antagonistic relationships with their commanding officers. Already visible in the film and print culture of the 1950s was a sense of disenchantment with the Cold War, anxiety about the military-industrial complex, concern about the effects of warfare on individuals, and fear of future—possibly nuclear—conflicts.

Vietnam, then, did not create a wholly new national perspective on war, so much as it sharpened and magnified existing viewpoints. Overall, coverage was less sanitized than in previous conflicts, but many of the topics journalists wrote about had been of concern and interest to their predecessors for the last two decades. Particularly interesting is Huebner’s treatment of Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW), and their various publicity campaigns and events. He shows how they worked not only to end the war but to demonstrate how the Vietnam conflict victimized soldiers. Responses to the trial of William Calley for the My Lai massacre likewise emphasized the idea that war brutalized men, and damaged them. According to this perspective, Calley and other soldiers like him were not merely perpetrators. They too were victims—victims of government, authority, and flawed foreign policy, which had wreaked havoc on their lives and psyches. Huebner also provides an anal-

ysis of the movies and television programs of the era, from *M*A*S*H* (1972-83) to *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and shows how a deep sense of disillusionment with government, warfare, and military brass rather quickly permeated mass culture.

Huebner makes a compelling argument that the images of soldiers as victims and war as brutalizing, and the cynicism which undergirded such images, did not emerge with Vietnam. They first appeared during the final months of World War II, and gained traction over the course of the Cold War. *The Warrior Image* provides a rich discussion of how these images circulated in books, articles, movies, and novels. It makes an intriguing point that as disillusionment with war and government increased, so too did sympathy for soldiers. To that extent, it shows some of the effects that this imagery had on the population at large. What is missing is an in-depth discussion of how soldiers themselves received and reacted to these portrayals of warfare. Did such portrayals affect their sense of identity? Did soldiers alter their conduct and attitudes in the face of such images? If Huebner could show how the changing representations of soldiering affected everyday Americans, and in particular, G.I.s, he would be able to demonstrate the larger social consequences of the transformation that he so carefully charts. That said, *The Warrior Image* is a fascinating book—meticulously researched, extremely well written, and important because it successfully challenges conventional narratives about the meaning of war in the twentieth century. In tracing the evolution of martial imagery in popular culture, Andrew Huebner has made an important contribution to both cultural and military history.

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