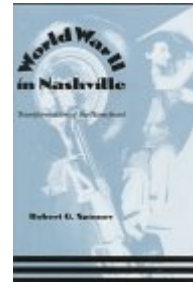


Robert G. Spinney. *World War II in Nashville: Transformation of the Homefront.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xiv + 209 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-004-7.



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The Illusion of Transformation

This is an intriguing book, which reflects the tensions within the interpretive field of World War II home front history. Much of the literature on the impact of World War II on the home front argues that the war transformed the home front, and much of the literature argues that it did not. Professor Spinney argues both in such a way as to leave the reader uncertain of how much transformation actually occurred. Although the title stresses transformation, the actual text sometimes tugs the reader in both directions, both toward and away from transformation. So has the literature in this field of homefront historiography. If we could place books and articles by John Morton Blum, Marc Miller, Lynn Johnson, Arthur Verge, Carlos Schwantes, Gerald Nash, Roger Biles, Spinney, and myself on a spectrum, they would range from strong agreement to strong disagreement, with some hedging in between.

Professor Spinney believes that the war transformed the political culture of Nashville and the U. S. According to Spinney, the country has gone through a fourfold evolution in the acceptance of government in the United States. "First, professionals and public officials overcame an unwillingness to work with each other...Second, both state capacity...and the ability of professionals to admin-

ister state policies matured. Third, public antistatist sentiment dissipated...Fourth, the state itself took the initiative in creating a demand for its increasingly esoteric services." (p. 141) To Spinney, World War II contributed greatly to the process that resulted in the acceptance of Big Government in the United States, that is, stage three. World War Two in Nashville was crucial to this outcome by providing Nashvillians with an example of how government at the local level could operate efficiently in addressing various wartime problems.

The theory is both engaging and plausible. The problem is that the book does not present as much evidence to support the theory as one would hope for. According to Spinney, the creation and operation of the Nashville Housing Authority and its activities before, during, and after the war showed Nashvillians that government could work effectively in their interest and thus undermined preexisting biases against the state. These activities culminated in a massive urban renewal project that greatly improved downtown Nashville. That in turn was tied to the wartime growth of suburbs, which greatly outpaced center city growth. At the same time, much of the downtown continued to decay, and thus the growing attractiveness of the suburbs and the growing sleazi-

ness of a portion of downtown made civic Nashville fear that the city was becoming less attractive to people than the suburbs. Therefore, war-induced suburbanization set the stage for a huge postwar urban renewal project that gussied up the center city to the satisfaction of its citizens. That in turn proved to them that government could be effective in pursuing important projects. Thus, the decline of anti-statism. Spinney also cites government campaigns to wipe out venereal disease, sexual promiscuity, juvenile delinquency, etc., and the operation of the Nashville Housing Agency during and after the war as further examples of the war's beneficent influence. However, venereal disease, sexual promiscuity, and juvenile delinquency were not wiped out, and the conditions at the temporary war housing administered by the Nashville Housing Agency were deplorable, according to the author's own account. His argument that wartime conditions helped city planners gain legitimacy with the business community is more persuasive. However, if one is to measure the decline of anti-government attitudes and the growth of pro-government consciousness, one would hope for a few more areas of analysis.

Spinney also cites the performance of the national government as further proof that anti-statist attitudes declined, because Washington organized the victory in the war. That is a plausible hypothesis, but for every Washington success in the war, one can find at least another failure and for each success in the war, one can find many claimants. For example, air power greatly aided the victory, both by destroying such key resources as railroads, bridges, and refineries and forcing the diversion of German resources to protect these assets together with urban populations. But is that feat attributable to the state, or to FDR's proclaiming ever higher plane production quotas, or is this success attributable to the production efficiencies of the private aircraft industry? In shipbuilding, private yards produced miracles, but so did the public Navy yards. It would seem that some kind of credit sharing is in order. The government cannot take all the credit for winning the war. Moreover, it surely must take some of the blame for wartime failures, especially those in its direct purview. For example, the government never whipped the housing shortage, inflation, the manpower shortfall, the environmental side effects of war, the black market, strikes, the day care crisis, and so forth. GIs often voiced their anger at the way the war effort was run and once the war ended, they rioted at home and fumed abroad at their inability to get home. The government piled up a lot of demerits along with the merits that Spinney claims for it. Some wag once compared wartime Washington to a madhouse where the inmates were in charge. That might

be a stretch, but whether anti-statist feeling declined because of Washington's war effort is very much debatable.

Still, one must not end on a negative note. The book has many strengths. If the author believes that the war changed Nashville's and America's political culture, he does not believe that this transformation carried over into many other realms. The social and economic life of the city certainly were not transformed, because Nashville's population did not grow markedly and the city was not a Detroit- or Los Angeles-style war production center. Spinney's meticulous qualifications in this regard are a welcome relief from some of the rhetoric concerning the war's effect. Thankfully, the author did not just assert this position; he documented it with statistical chapter and verse. The tables in this book alone are a valuable contribution to a subject often dominated by impressionistic assessments. Professor Spinney provides other novel and very useful discussions. His assessment of civil defense not only takes that endeavor seriously, but finds important postwar consequences emanating from it. He also adds to a small but important literature on the impact of the war on suburbs, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated. In addition, the author provides a rare, but very interesting discussion of city politics during the war. He effectively ties this discussion to the growing suburban crisis. Finally, there is a solid discussion of blacks and Jews, their relationships with each other and with the larger society. I missed a discussion here of the impact of the calamitous fate of European Jews on Nashville Jewry, but maybe it did not have one. Possibly, like many other Americans, they knew little of the situation until the end of the war.

In short, this is a very useful book. Pending further evidence, I am withholding agreement with his argument that the performance of local government eroded local anti-statist attitudes, and the argument that the war eroded anti-statist attitudes toward Washington still strikes me as problematical. However, both are possible and this book encourages us to tackle this important question with more vigor than we have done heretofore. I don't believe that the war transformed America or the South or the West, but we still need more research to be certain. And even if we don't agree with Spinney's conceptualization, it is a highly serviceable hypothesis that can be tested in many other realms.

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