

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Audra Jennings. *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 296 pp. 55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4851-7.

Reviewed by Beth Linker (University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-Disability (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

The recent twenty-fifth anniversary of the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has sparked a new interest in disability history, with many disability studies scholars looking to the past to explain both the triumphs and limitations of disability rights today. Most accounts of disability rights in the United States locate the historical origins of the movement in the late 1960s, when activists such as Fred Fay (1944-2011) and Ed Roberts (1939-95) fought for accessibility on college campuses and beyond, paving the way for more widespread legislative gains later in the century. Such accounts hew close to the wider scholarship on the civil rights movement and women's rights movement, seeing disability activism as an important part of the larger push toward social justice in the 1960s and 1970s. Historian Audra Jennings offers a very important corrective to this conventional telling of disability activism in the United States, showing how a generation of World War Two-era disabled citizens pushed for equality and self-determination much earlier, making possible the achievements of the more recognizable and celebrated activists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although the volume's title may lead readers to assume that it is a study primarily of disability policy geared toward returning World War Two military veterans, the book is far more ambitious in scope. Jennings centers her story on the 1940 establishment and subsequent twenty-year career of the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped (AFPH), a nonprofit educational and beneficent organization founded to fight against disability discrimination (especially in the workplace) and push for expanded federal-state rehabilitation

programs. To date, the AFPH has been little more than a footnote in disability history, largely because no central collection of the organization has been archived or preserved. Through her shrewd and tenacious mining of the Congressional Record, presidential papers, and AFPH newsletters and magazines recovered from multiple sites, Jennings has salvaged an incredibly important chapter in US disability history. A highlight of the book is Jennings's use of congressional hearings on the Subcommittee to Investigate Aid to the Physically Handicapped (1946-48), which resulted in thousands of pages of testimony from disability activists, employers, governmental officials, physicians, social workers, and labor leaders. Unlike other disability policy scholarship, *Out of the Horrors of War* brings the work and demands of disabled historical actors to life, demonstrating that their previous invisibility in the written record is a matter of scholarly choice and not a reflection of historical fact.

What set the AFPH apart from other contemporary disability rights groups was its insistence that all people with physical disabilities should work together to bring about social justice. Most other contemporary disability rights groups defined themselves either by a particular condition or by other exclusionary identifiers (i.e., the Disabled American Veterans Association represented only military disabled, and the National Federation of the Blind only those with visual impairment). Paul Strachan, founder of the AFPH, believed the "natural jealousies" between disability organizations to be counterproductive and envisioned instead the coming together of all physically disabled men and women, civilian and military, wheelchair users and hearing impaired under one um-

brella (p. 111). Strachan's own life embodied a blurring of disability categories. Having survived childhood diphtheria that left him hearing impaired and later a fatal car accident that permanently damaged his spine (he walked with a cane the rest of his life), Strachan described himself as "85 percent physically disabled" (p. 25). Strachan attributed his career in activism to his own personal experience, as someone who, because of his physical disabilities "was cast upon the human scrap pile, despite a fierce and intense desire to live, to work and to achieve." Despite this self-portrayal, we learn from Jennings that, since his early adulthood, Strachan had become an expert in the nation's military veteran entitlement programs—he worked for the Bureau of War Risk Insurance (the predecessor of the Veterans Administration) during World War One—and later, in workplace safety and labor legislation as a lobbyist for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Drawing from the lessons he learned during the interwar years, Strachan believed that advances in disability policy would only occur when the "horrors of disablement" from the Second World War were fresh in people's minds (p. 9). Thus, in 1940, the AFPH was born.

The AFPH immediately went to work proposing legislation that would bring about greater rights to the physically disabled, broadly defined. Strachan's tactic was to build on previous legislative achievements, namely in the area of rehabilitation and vocational education. The Industrial Rehabilitation Act of 1920, otherwise known as the Smith-Fess Act, mirrored the new entitlement programs adopted during World War One for disabled veterans, providing medical and vocational education services for nonmilitary disabled. But the act was limited in reach: "women, people of color, and people with the most severe disabilities were typically excluded, with the average rehabilitation recipient being a thirty-one-year-old white man" (p. 6). The bulk of Jennings's book is thus devoted to charting the legislative career of the AFPH's two-pronged agenda.

The AFPH's first goal was to extend the services provided under the Smith-Fess Act to all disabled Americans. Its second goal was to wrest control of the creation and enactment of such legislation from professional "experts" and instead put it into the hands of people who had a lived experience with disability. The first goal, while ambitious, was one that largely worked within the system. The AFPH did not challenge capitalist, market-driven notions of US citizenship. Strachan and other leaders of the AFPH, like their Progressive-Era predecessors, believed that employment was a defining feature of citizenship; they wanted jobs, not charity. Accord-

ing to Jennings, employment of disabled persons rose dramatically during the World War Two years. At the time, through the US Employment Service, over three-quarters of a million disabled men and women found jobs during the war, and "83 percent of the nation's factories had disabled workers on their payrolls" (p. 8). While these numbers would fluctuate over the next decade, by 1957 the Employment Service found work for well over 2.6 million disabled citizens through its vocational rehabilitation agencies. Wartime labor shortages helped the AFPH's cause, but as Jennings makes clear, the general postwar trend of higher employment rates among disabled Americans came about through the tireless political work of Strachan and his staff.

The AFPH's second goal—that of self-determination—proved far more difficult to achieve. While the 1946 congressional hearings made it clear that disabled Americans were just as hard-working as nondisabled employees, and that unemployment was largely due to employer discrimination, policymakers balked when the AFPH insisted that the solution needed to come about through social changes. Instead, Congress sided with rehabilitation experts who claimed that the best way to solve the problem of workplace discrimination was to "fix" the disabled. Policymakers sided with the 1943 Barden-La Follette Act, which created a new space for rehabilitation medicine within the program, housed in the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation under control of the Federal Security Agency (FSA).

To resist what Jennings calls the increasing "medicalization of disability policy" during the World War Two years, the AFPH developed strong ties with labor unions such as the AFL (p. 95). Labor, which at the time had not yet secured health insurance benefits, felt a strong kinship with the AFPH; leaders such as George Meany (1894-1980) liked to remind AFL members "just how little separated them from a work-related injury" (p. 157). Both the AFL and the AFPH wished to expand federal disability services through the Department of Labor (DOL), taking it out of the hands of university physicians in the FSA. A branch of government more associated with workers and the working class, the DOL seemed the logical place to fight for a broader vision of health and economic security for all laboring Americans. This vision, of course, was a hard sell in a nation hostile to communism, greater unionization, and labor unrest. Despite the AFL's and AFPH's repeated attempts to take control of vocational rehabilitation and place it within the DOL, by the mid-1950s a Republican-controlled Congress brought all hopes to an end when they passed a more medically

oriented Social Security Disability Insurance, signed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on August 1, 1956.

Although the AFPH did not entirely succeed in moving disability entitlement away from the medical model, it did make crucially important gains in broadening the vision of disability activism. Indeed, one of the striking features of the AFPH, as Jennings beautifully demonstrates, was that it attracted disabled women in large numbers. Mildred Scott (AFPH national secretary) and Margaret Nickerson Martin (AFPH vice president) offer some of the most stirring testimonies in the book. In her statement to Congress, Martin maintained that “in the past humanity has roughly divided into classes or categories: people, women, idiots, and the handicapped” (p. 54). The quest of Martin and other AFPH

advocates was to uplift everyone considered less than a person into full personhood. Jennings rightly points out, however, that the AFPH, for all of its rhetoric of unity, still operated within a disability hierarchy, privileging the rights of the physically disabled over those of the mentally and intellectually disabled, a problem that still haunts the disability rights movement today.

Out of the Horrors of War masterfully shows how disability is not merely “another” analytic category for historical analysis, but is rather a crucial part of US political and policy history in the twentieth century. In terms of social history, the AFPH grappled with intersectionality before that term came into use in the academy. Thanks to Jennings, we can appreciate anew just how long and incomplete the struggle for disability rights has been.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Beth Linker. Review of Jennings, Audra, *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48467>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.