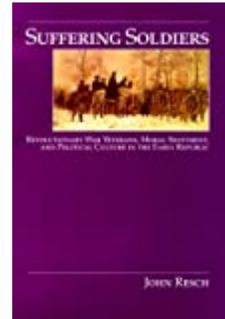




John Resch. *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. xiii + 319 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-232-5.



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Images of Veterans in (Early) American Society

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Over the past few decades, an impressive body of scholarship has emerged on America's war veterans and their impact on the nation. One particularly fruitful field of inquiry has been the role of veterans in the development of the American welfare state. A worthwhile addition to the literature on veterans, politics, and social programs is *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* by John Resch of the University of New Hampshire. Focusing on the veterans of Peterborough, New Hampshire, Resch traces the origins and development of pensions for Revolutionary War veterans.

Resch argues that Congressional passage of the 1818 Revolutionary War Pension Act marked an important shift in American political culture. Antimilitary sentiment, the author notes, was prevalent in post-revolutionary America. In the popular mind, the revolution was "a people's war won by a virtuous citizenry" (x) serving in militia units. The ranks of the Continental Army, in the view of many Americans at the time, were filled with society's dregs and led by an anti-republican

officer corps. Such portrayals were inaccurate, contends the author. His study of Peterborough's veterans suggests that Continental Army soldiers in fact represented a cross section of that town's population. The prospects for veterans' pensions in the years after the war were dim. Not only was the nation in poor economic condition, but Revolutionary Americans also perceived pension programs as "aristocratic and vice-ridden institutions that undermined civic virtue" (ix). Before the War of 1812, Revolutionary War veterans received little in the way of readjustment assistance.

But after 1815, according to Resch, Americans now "conceived the war as a people's war won by the Continental Army" (x). Key to this shift in public opinion, claims the author, was the image of the suffering soldier. By the 1810s, army veterans had grown old, frail, and frequently impoverished. Such popular images had a basis in reality. Resch points out that Peterborough's army veterans were generally poorer than those of militia service or those who had not served at all. Empathy for the aging veterans, combined with the nationalist feeling that swept the nation after 1815, changed the

public memory of the war, and thus the political culture. Rather than viewing pensions as symbols of privilege or the fruits of corruption, Americans began to see them as a proper and necessary way to repay the debt of gratitude the nation owed to those who had fought and suffered to create it. So strong was public support for pensions that the program even weathered a serious scandal in 1820. In the end, more than 20,000 Revolutionary War veterans received pensions.

Suffering Soldiers is an important contribution to the historical literature on American veterans. Resch examines the personal lives of Peterborough's ex-soldiers and demonstrates how the social and economic circumstances of their lives promoted and influenced landmark legislative action. Being the first generation of veterans in the nation's history, the public response to these men established precedents for soldiers returning from later wars. The author's focus on Peterborough allows him to

provide an intimate and insightful portrait of ordinary veterans, but the focus on just one community might be too narrow. A study of several communities, in different states, would have provided further documentation of the veterans' problems, underscored regional differences in Americans' views toward the pension, and ultimately provided a more complete account of a fascinating issue of great historical importance. *Suffering Soldiers* will be of interest to scholars of military history, political culture, and those who study the development of social welfare programs in the United States.

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