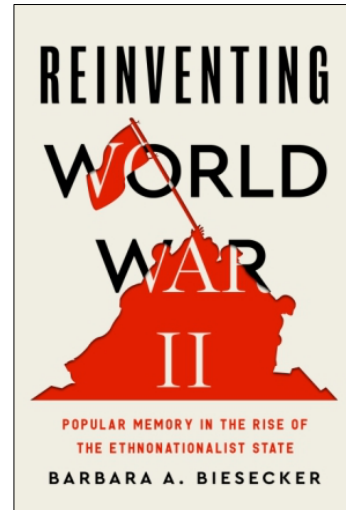


Barbara A. Biesecker, **Reinventing World War II: Popular Memory in the Rise of the Ethnonationalist State**, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024, 178 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover).

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The story of the “Good War” has plenty of historical works documenting the lead up to, the battles during, and the new world order after the war. The historical significance of WWII cannot be understated; however, the symbolism of the event is not static, self-evident, or without rhetorical construction. The discourse surrounding WWII over the past three decades memorializes the commitments and sacrifices of the United States to advance a campaign to establish a revitalized national identity. By understanding the ways in which remembering WWII supports the construction of an ethnonationalist state fantasy, readers recognize the rhetorical strategies for contemporary (counter)narratives that fuel culture wars.



Barbara A. Biesecker’s **Reinventing World War II: Popular Memory in the Rise of the Ethnonationalist State** examines well-known texts for their rhetorical effects, privileging in certain cases the negotiations authorizing *appropriate* state messaging. Museums, responses to artifacts, and popular culture serve as sites for rhetorical analysis. Biesecker calls on history, critical theory, and psychoanalysis to provide readers with an important look at how WWII was (re)made over the past few decades and why we must pay attention if we want to begin to understand and, perhaps, change political divisiveness in the United States.

The book offers rhetoricians (scholars and students) an excellent methodology for conducting a rhetorical analysis using “that sizeable assemblage of *popular memory* practices, texts, places, and events that, over [1985–2005], helped cultivate the ‘new’ hegemonic response” to instill national unity (p. 5). Biesecker’s introduction lays out a clear overview of her scope. Readers will appreciate the accessible discussion of psychoanalysis for identifying the goal of creating a state fantasy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, thus, the end of the Cold War’s apocalyptic dis-ease as a unifier. The difficult concept of sublimation is not obfuscated through dense Lacanian block quotes but astutely presented through Joan Copjec’s work (pp. 97–100). Other important theorists, such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, lead to Biesecker’s justification for using “[rhetoric] to designate the requisite finessing (condensation and displacement) of *différance* that inaugurates every textualization” and “that no textualization can be justified absolutely,” but we can begin to discuss the rhetorical situation (p. 23; emphasis in original). Additionally, the introduction identifies the works Biesecker will examine and offers additional contextual situations to remind readers about the politics of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, including the culture wars that continue through today.

After the introduction lays out the ambitious scope of the book, Biesecker provides three chapters to examine how WWII was used to attempt to create an ethnonationalist state fantasy. The first chapter examines the controversy surrounding the proposed 50th anniversary exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 Superfortress that delivered the atomic bomb to Hiroshima in 1945. The controversy centers on the concern of commemorating the end of WWII with a display that suggests American technological power might lessen attention on the fact that the aircraft represents massive destruction. The chapter discusses how various constituents responded to the original exhibition and its cancellation. Biesecker explains that “progressive scholars and public spokespersons” interpret the controversy as “a powerful alliance of institutionally supported and well-funded Conservative forces . . . promot[ing] the ‘patriotic orthodoxy’ by suppressing documents, visual images, and artifacts that, together, constituted a compelling and competing historical account” (p. 45). Using key responses of the controversy, Biesecker does not aim to conclude that the *truth* of the *Enola Gay* was suppressed, distorted, or incomplete; instead, she argues that the most important outcome was that “the conservative alliance was” able “to deauthorize a competing mode of truth telling that it doggedly described as audacious, radical, revisionary, un-American, and above all out of touch” (p. 46). Ultimately, this chapter prepares readers to recognize how public consciousness of the meaning of WWII arose in the 1990s—when identity politics emerged as a cultural flashpoint—and offered the essential value of sacrifice, the unrepayable gift, as the “obligation on all those who are its beneficiaries” (p. 53).

The second chapter is a curation of texts that demonstrate how WWII in public memory eschews victimhood as a place of authority for a neoliberal authorization of memorializing texts. Biesecker discusses a range of texts, including the World War II Memorial, *Saving Private Ryan* (p. 59), *The Greatest Generation* (p. 65), and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. The World War II Memorial’s literal placement “on the National Mall was symptomatic of an ongoing effort to rearticulate the relation of the citizen to the nation” (p. 57). Biesecker explains that the 1990s seemed to need a cultural touchpoint to unite a nation that was splintering into identity groups. WWII, the “Good War,” emerges in popular memory as an event to celebrate and unify the nation. Specifically, Biesecker explains that “*Saving Private Ryan* functioned rhetorically . . . as a vehicle for the production of a new national sensibility predicated on retooling the category of citizenship” (p. 60). The film allows audiences to witness the carnage of WWII, making real the sacrifices of soldiers and demanding the audience pay attention to the bookending scenes that reveal that Private Ryan did earn being saved. Next, Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* (1998) does the cultural work of instilling the importance of WWII in popular memory. Specifically, Brokaw “shifts [WWII] from being an event in the past, about which we might still try to make sense, to a mode of sense making in the present” (p. 66). This text mainly chronicles the lives of participants after WWII and often presents their struggles as obstacles overcome, including racism and sexism, which, although not ignored, are mitigated in order to privilege the messages of “self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice” (p. 68). The chapter ends on an analysis of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial (WIMS). The site presents women’s contributions as inevitable and always part of American history, which fits the campaign to deny victimhood as a privileged position and advocates “a new version of normative US identity: service to the nation is the arche and telos of what it means for any American” (p. 76).

The third chapter analyzes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and locates how it also contributes to the creation of a state fantasy. Biesecker’s careful and astute

approach to USHMM—a museum that requires several hours to navigate—is the book’s crowning achievement. In addition to the rhetorical analysis, Biesecker expertly takes readers through the museum while commenting responsibly on the subject. Using secondary observations of USHMM’s exhibits, Biesecker uncovers the difficulty in representing the Holocaust as well as the potential goal (intended or not) of another text that asks audiences to bear witness of the devastation of WWII. The sheer volume of artifacts in USHMM makes a singular or all-encompassing interpretation incomplete. For instance, the patron-subject can embrace the position of liberator and reaffirm the idea that only Nazis are evil. Biesecker draws on psychoanalysis to describe how self-negation operates in this haunting space through recognizing (via Joan Copjec) the body in relation to retheorized “drives” from Freudian-Lacanian concepts. Then, the chapter thrusts readers through a description of the finale of the exhibit that is best described as a crescendo-like prose haunted by a recounting of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising that identifies life in this collective. This well-paced, wonderfully written chapter responsibly manages USHMM’s rhetorical strategy in the broader construction of WWII being used to construct a patriotic national identity.

The final chapter culminates in an analysis of the antinomy of *The 1619 Project* (p. 109) and *The 1776 Report* (p. 115). These texts do not seem to follow the book’s theme because of “WWII’s near complete absence from or negligible presence in both documents” (p. 122). However, readers should understand that this scholarship is not about WWII *per se* but rather a rhetorical analysis of how popular memory of WWII privileges a concept of national identity that is patriotic and, regardless of its success or failure, wants unifying principles. This book is not a catalog of WWII in popular culture. It, using an eclectic and rational set of theoretical perspectives, explains how the United States arrived at the current moment of deep political division over the past few decades. This chapter offers the most traditionally understood methodology for “rhetorical analyses” and even comments on the prose styles of the two works. Instead of analyzing the texts for historical fidelity or accuracy, Biesecker explains how the works are “rhetorics in the general sense and . . . partisan pedagogies of American citizenship for the twenty-first century” (p. 121). The works’ (re)presentation of history has to be considered in the context of Black Lives Matters activism and backlash to the movement. Biesecker’s conclusion underscores the incompatibility of the two works: *The 1619 Project’s* “African American popular counter-memory” (p. 124) challenges *The 1776 Report’s* insistence of the “truth” of America’s founding principles (p. 126). The book prepares readers to consider how WWII’s rhetorical construction helps us understand the politics of division today.