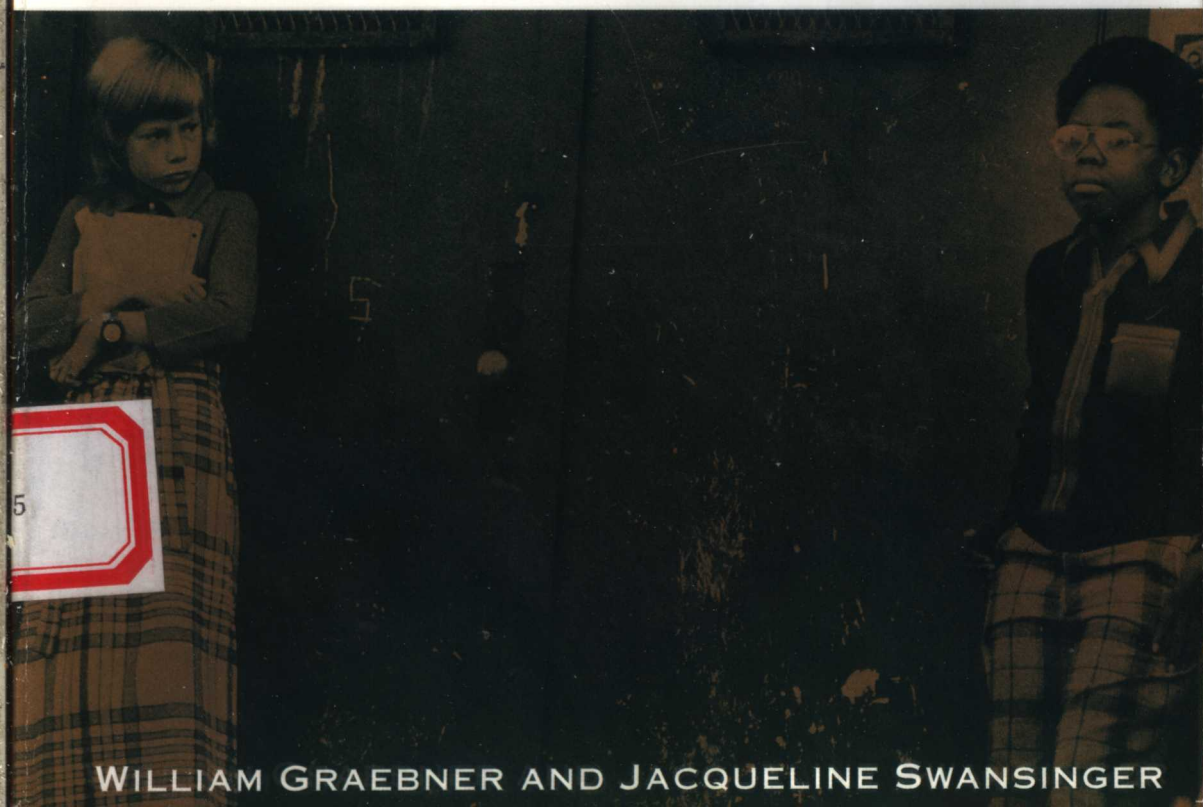


THE AMERICAN RECORD

IMAGES OF THE NATION'S PAST

SINCE 1941



WILLIAM GRAEBNER AND JACQUELINE SWANSINGER

The American Record: Since 1941 Images of the Nation's Past

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**THE AMERICAN RECORD: SINCE 1941
IMAGES OF THE NATION'S PAST**

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About the Editors

WILLIAM GRAEBNER is Professor of History at the State University of New York at Fredonia. He received the Frederick Jackson Turner Award from the Organization of American Historians for *Coal-Mining Safety in the Progressive Period: The Political Economy of Reform*. Another book, *A History of Retirement: The Meaning and Function of an American Institution, 1885–1978*, was published in 1980. He is also the author of *The Engineering of Consent: Democracy and Authority in Twentieth-Century America* (1987); *Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Postwar Era* (1990); and *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (1991). His latest book is an edited collection, *True Stories from the American Past* (1993). In 1993, he was Fulbright Professor of American Studies at the University of Rome. He currently serves on the editorial boards of *American Studies* and *The Historian*.

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Preface

The American Record: Since 1941 is indebted to the very successful approach to studying and teaching history worked out in several editions of *The American Record: Images of the Nation's Past*, edited by William Graebner and Leonard Richards. That approach combines scholarly essays, primary sources, and a rich variety of visual materials. Throughout, we have attempted to incorporate materials with *texture*: documents that are not only striking but will also yield more than one interpretation; photographs and media stills that invite real examination and discussion; tables and graphs that have something new and interesting to contribute; and essays, such as Stephanie Coontz's account of self-reliance and the American family, Kenneth J. Heineman's analysis of the 1960s anti-war movement, William L. Van Deburg's cultural perspective on the black power movement, or Ronald P. Formisano's history of Boston busing, that are at once superb examples of recent historical scholarship and accessible to undergraduates.

We have tried to bridge the gap between the old history and the new, to graft the excitement and variety of modern approaches to history onto an existing chronological and topical framework with which most of us feel comfortable. Most of the familiar topics are here: the mid-century Red Scare, the Kennedy presidency; the Vietnam war, the counterculture, the siege mentality of the 1970s, the Reagan revolution, the cold war, and today's "new world order." But we have also chosen to take a topical approach to areas that we thought deserved special attention, including welfare and the family; the emergence of a new African-American consciousness; the Nixon-led white backlash; the "culture wars" of the 1980s; the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992; and the aesthetic of postmodernism. The role of the media in postwar life is a regular motif, presented here through materials that deal with television's early years, the 1960 presidential debates, TV families, late-night talk-show hosts, and the Reagan mystique.

Culture—high and low, popular and elite—is prominently featured, so that students may begin to appreciate the connections between rock 'n' roll and the civil rights movement or between the 1964 World's Fair and the hubris of JFK, feel the irony and cynicism of the mid-1980s in a postmodern building designed by Michael Graves, or think about why the National Air and Space Museum had so much difficulty presenting

an exhibit on the dropping of the atomic bomb, a half-century after the event took place. In addition, every chapter concludes with a suggestively annotated list of films and popular songs that bear on the broader themes under discussion. Like its predecessors, this book teaches the skill of making sense out of one's whole world.

From the beginning, we realized that our approach to American history would require some adjustment for many students and teachers. It was one thing to expect a student to place an address by Harry Truman in the context of the widespread anxiety produced by World War II, the use of the atomic bomb against the Japanese, and the knowledge of the Holocaust, yet quite another to expect that same student to do the same with Mickey Spillane's crime novel, *I, the Jury* (1947). For this reason, we have offered a good deal of guidance. Introductions to primary and secondary materials are designed not just to provide basic background information, but to suggest productive avenues of interpretation. Interpretive essays and questions are intended to create a kind of mental chemistry in which students will have enough information to experience the excitement of putting things together, and yet not so much guidance that conclusions become obvious. We hope the book contains what we have tried to bring to our students over the years: a sense of the incomparable richness of the past, and of the very real pleasures of studying history and of acquiring historical knowledge.

William Graebner
Jacqueline Swansinger

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CHAPTER 1

The Age of Anxiety

When older Americans reflect on the 1940s, they recall the decade in halves: the first half, dominated by World War II, a difficult time when men and women fought for democracy against the forces of tyranny; and the second half, remembered as the beginning of a long period of prosperity and opportunity that would reach into the 1960s. There is much to be said for this view of the decade. Although Americans had been reluctant to go to war (the United States remained formally neutral when France was invaded by Germany in 1940), the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought a flush of patriotism that temporarily buried most remaining doubts. A Virginia politician announced that “we needed a Pearl Harbor—a Golgotha—to arouse us from our self-sufficient complacency, to make us rise above greed and hate.” Vice President Henry Wallace was one of many who revived Wilsonian idealism. “This is a fight,” he wrote in 1943, “between a slave world and a free world. Just as the United States in 1862 could not remain half slave and half free, so in 1942 the world must make its decision for a complete victory one way or another.” When the United States ended the war in the Pacific by exploding atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many Americans considered the act appropriate retribution for the attack at Pearl Harbor by a devious and immoral enemy.

In many ways, the war justified idealism, for it accomplished what the New Deal had not. Organized labor prospered. The name “Rosie the Riveter” described the new American woman who found war-related opportunities in the factories and shipyards. Black people—segregated by New Deal housing programs, injured as tenant farmers by New Deal farm policies, and never singled out as a group worthy of special aid—found skilled jobs in the wartime economy. They also received presidential assistance—in the form of the Fair Employment Practices Committee—in their struggle to end racially discriminatory hiring practices. A growing military budget in 1941 produced the nation’s first genuinely progressive income tax legislation. Despite a serious and disruptive wave of postwar strikes that was triggered by high unemployment, for the most part the prosperity and economic growth generated by the war carried over into the late 1940s and 1950s.

Yet this *good war/good peace* view of the 1940s leaves too much unexplained and unaccounted for. It does not explain that the very patriotism that made Americans revel in wartime unity also had negative consequences. For example, on the Pacific Coast, more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans, including many American citizens, were taken from their homes and removed to distant relocation centers, where they remained for the "duration." *Good war/good peace* does not explain that the effects of combat lasted long beyond the formal end of conflict, as the Mickey Spillane excerpt in this chapter demonstrates. Nor does it reveal how thoroughly the war disrupted existing gender and race relations, setting the stage for the silly and absurd things postwar Americans did to restore the prewar status quo. And *good war/good peace* does not explain the popularity between 1942 and 1958 of *film noir*, a gloomy black-and-white film genre that pictured a world in which ordinary, decent people were regularly victimized by bad luck.

Beneath the surface of 1940s America was a pervasive anxiety. Some of this anxiety was economic; those who had experienced the great depression could never quite believe that another one wasn't around the corner. But far more important were anxieties linked to the use of the atomic bomb on the Japanese, the killing of 6 million Jews by the Nazis, the war-related deaths of 60 million people worldwide and the increasing seriousness of the cold war. These extraordinary facts and events created the most elemental form of insecurity: the knowledge that any human life could end senselessly and without warning. And many thoughtful Americans began to question—in a way they had not even during the great depression—whether history was still the story of civilization and progress, or a sad tale of moral decline. The concepts *good war* and *good peace* remained vital to Americans' understanding of their world, but they could not encompass the haunting feeling, so much a part of the late 1940s, that something very important had gone wrong.

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Coming Out Under Fire

Allan Bérubé

*There is a school of thought that holds that almost every significant social change in the late twentieth century can be traced to World War II. In this view, the civil rights activism of the late 1950s and early 1960s was set in motion by changes in the wartime economy; the feminist movement of the late 1960s was spearheaded by the daughters of women who had experienced the war as a field of opportunity; and the campus protests of the Vietnam war era were led by young people raised in the shadow of the atomic bomb or (in a claim that appeals to conservatives) by spoiled brats brought up under the permissive, democratic child-rearing regimen popularized by Dr. Benjamin Spock in his 1946 *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, itself a product of the war.*

Allan Bérubé's account of how the nation's gay community was affected by, and responded to, government policies during and after the war fits that model in some respects. Like the stories of blacks and feminists, it is the story of an emerging community (or communities), and it is a story anchored, like the others, in wartime events and experiences. In this case, what was it about the war—and about the status and claims of the veteran—that contributed to social change? It is also a story about repression, and the intensity and character of that repression needs to be described and understood. Was the military, and later the Senate and President Dwight Eisenhower, really concerned about homosexuals? Or was the attack on the gay community a way to achieve some other purpose? Why were Americans—or their public officials—so anxious about questions of sexuality?

The massive mobilization for World War II propelled gay men and lesbians into the mainstream of American life. Ironically the screening and discharge policies, together with the drafting of millions of men, weakened the barriers that had kept gay people trapped and hidden at the margins of society. Discovering that they shared a common cause, they were more willing and able to defend themselves, as their ability to work, congregate, and lead sexual lives came under escalating attack in the postwar decade.

Long before the war a chain of social constraints immobilized many gay men and women by keeping them invisible, isolated, silent, ignorant, and trivialized. As young people they learned to hide their homosexual feelings in fear and in shame, helping to perpetuate the myth that people like them didn't exist. Locked in a

closet of lies and deceptions, many people with homosexual desires mistakenly believed that they were the only ones in the world, often not even knowing what to call themselves. Isolated from each other and kept ignorant by a "conspiracy of silence" in the media, they lacked the language and ideas that could help them define themselves and understand their often vague feelings and desires. When publicly acknowledged at all, they were caricatured as "fairies" and "mannish" women, freaks whose lives were trivialized as silly and unimportant, so that many lesbians and gay men learned not to take themselves or each other seriously. Such insidious forms of social control worked quietly below the surface of everyday life through unspoken fears and paralyzing shame, coming into view only in sporadic acts of violence, arrests, school expulsions, firings, or religious condemnations.

Ironically the mobilization for World War II helped to loosen the constraints that locked so many gay people in silence, isolation, and self-contempt. Selective Service acknowledged the importance of gay men when it drafted hundreds of thousands to serve their country and broke the silence when examiners asked millions of selectees about their homosexual tendencies. The draft, together with lax recruitment policies that allowed lesbians to enter the military, placed a whole generation of gay men and women in gender-segregated bases where they could find each other, form cliques, and discover the gay life in the cities. Classification officers assigned even the most "mannish" women and effeminate men to stereotyped duties, recognizing that these previously marginal people were useful and even indispensable to the war effort. Officers confirmed the competence, value, and courage of gay soldiers when they sent many into combat, some to die, even after they had declared their homosexuality.

Changes in policy brought about similarly dramatic effects. Military officials intensified the significance of homosexuality by building a special bureaucratic apparatus to manage homosexual personnel. In the process, they inadvertently gave gay inductees and soldiers the option to avoid compulsory military service by coming out. Psychiatrists, as the military's pioneer experts on homosexuality, gave soldiers as well as military officials a biased but useful new language and set of concepts—such as the word *homosexual* and the idea of a "personality type"—that some did use to categorize homosexuals, understand homosexuality, and even define themselves. During purges interrogators terrorized suspects into breaking their protective silence, forcing them to describe their homosexual lives, to make confessions, and to name their friends and sexual partners. Officers who aggressively rooted out homosexuals and exposed them to their draft boards, company mates, and families further destroyed their ability to hide in the closet, forcing them to lead new lives as known homosexuals. As these soldiers were thrown together into psych wards and queer stockades, they endured the same hardships together in small groups, better able to perceive themselves as compatriots who were victims of the same persecution. When they were discharged as undesirables without benefits and without having been charged with any crime, gay men and women gained a cause, a target to attack, and new avenues of appeal to defend their rights as gay GIs and veterans.

Disrupted and exposed by the war, gay life in the postwar years seemed to be growing at an unprecedented rate. Gay men and lesbians often saw this growth as a