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Olivier Burtin, *A Nation of Veterans: War, Citizenship, and the Welfare State in Modern America*

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- 1 *A Nation of Veterans* is a political history of the veterans' movement in the United States from the Second World War to the early 1960s. It focuses on the three biggest and most influential veterans' associations, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans. A synergetic relationship between veterans' associations and the state is at the heart of the text, seen through Congressional lobbying and representation, relations with the Veterans' Administration, and occasionally other direct contact with the rest of the executive branch. This relationship is placed in the context of American wars and broader American political and social changes, especially in the construction of the welfare and warfare states in the mid-20th century.
- 2 The book seeks to be a history of the American state in society through the history of the "Big Three" veterans' associations and their interactions with the state, with three central arguments. First, as a group, veterans represented a social movement who deserve study. This is particularly urgent as they were one of the most effective of the mid-20th century. Indeed, their success has meant that they have been overlooked by historians, who have focused on less privileged groups and their movements, and by a tendency to mythologize the past by viewing it through the present.

- 3 Second, the construction of the US welfare state has been particularly shaped by veterans. This includes the veterans' welfare state, a specific form of social welfare containing education and housing loan assistance in the GI Bill, hospitals, public housing, and retirement pensions. It also includes how the separation of veterans' benefits from other welfare was at the center of midcentury social policy debates. As Burtin argues, the connection between veterans and the welfare state was obvious at the time, but it has generally been forgotten, along with the very real fights veterans' associations had for the benefits that are today taken for granted.
- 4 Third, veterans fought for a specific vision of society, which Burtin labels "martial citizenship". As it was argued that veterans' benefits were part of the cost of war, their payment upheld a sacred social contract, which made veterans distinct from other recipients of public assistance. The state depended on its heroes, as opposed to charity cases, who received "welfare" and were dependents of the state. Throughout the book, the specific fights for separate (and greater) veterans' benefits are shown to have pitted this broader vision of martial citizenship against the "breadwinner liberalism" driving the development of the rest of the US welfare state from the progressive era to the 1960s. Although they shared certain characteristics, especially in terms of assumptions about race, gender and sexuality, martial citizenship successfully embedded itself in American public policy alongside and often in place of breadwinner liberalism.
- 5 *A Nation of Veterans* is organized chronologically by the veterans' associations' major fights. In the first half, a background chapter covers the interwar years with the essential experiences of organizing for the creation of the central executive branch department for veterans, the Veterans' Administration, fighting against the Economy Act, which sought to cut benefits, and building the mass movement for the Bonus. It then follows the culmination of the veterans' movement through the inclusion of World War II GIs and the passing of the GI Bill, the divisions in the movement over housing assistance, and the defeat of the First Hoover Commission's economy-minded proposals. The second half of the book traces a comparative decline, as the fervent anticommunism of the American Legion weakened its position, support for expanding the Korean War to China further damaged its reputation even while it secured some more limited benefits for this third generation of veterans, and the veterans' movement divided over old age pensions for World War I veterans in the late 1950s, all the while being able to block the Second Hoover Commission and the Bradley Commission. This second part illustrates how tenuous symbiosis with the state can be, as it can easily slip away if groups move out of the mainstream (as was the case during the Korean War) or if the mainstream moves away from the group (which occurred when the country moved on from the second red scare). Still, this was only a relative decline. The veterans' movement gradually diminished in importance because martial citizenship became so engrained and its benefits so certain – embodied in the VA, independent committees in the House and later Senate, and continued GI Bills (even if their benefits were slightly reduced with each successive war) – that there was little controversy to fight.
- 6 In addition to centering on the main veterans' associations' primary evolution and political activities, Burtin is careful to include consistent discussion of groups that were not represented by the Big Three, notably women and Black veterans, who were consistently excluded from leadership positions and often barred from participating at the local levels of these federally structured organizations. The author also makes the

case that even influential veterans did not represent a monolithic movement. Congressman Teague, a disabled veteran who resisted the League's lobbying in several cases, illustrates this point well throughout the last two chapters.

- 7 *A Nation of Veterans* is at its strongest when explaining the veterans' groups direct political campaigns, such as the push for a unified department in the 1920s or the GI Bill during World War II. Here a clear historical narrative demonstrates all the central arguments: the depth and breadth of veterans' associations, the symbiotic relationship between the broader social movement and the government, how direct efforts impacted legislation and how the government shaped the goals and features of the veterans' movement. The different players – all three of the main associations as well as some smaller ones at times, presidents and their executive departments, the legislature, other influential nongovernmental groups like the American Medical Association, the press, and the overall public – come together to create an effective political history backed up by a solid documentary record. It also shows how the veterans' movement fit into larger transformations in society.
- 8 The book is also driven by an internal narrative about the American Legion, which frequently stands in for the veterans' movement more broadly. In these sections of each chapter, the broader societal context recedes somewhat, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans are mentioned as either following the same trajectory or providing limited contrast. Part of the discussion clearly applied less to these other associations. This is particularly the case for the generational fights about the inclusion of World War II GIs and later Korean War veterans in a group originally created for World War I doughboys, which was not as divisive when membership was defined by service abroad or disability rather than participation in a particular war. The Legion was also simply the most important association as it was the largest and most influential in American politics. However, as Burtin explains in his introduction, the Legion's superior archives and the limited record keeping of the other associations has forced the book to make the best of available sources. In the fight over housing assistance in chapter 3, for example, the Legion's divisions over the issue understandably occupy a central place given the association's role in the book (and the veterans' movement). However, they came to the fight for housing later than the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and while this is explained, the reader regrets that there is less record of the other associations' work on this and other issues. Disabled American Veterans is even more frequently sidelined, surely in proportion to its smaller size and influence, and to limited archives.
- 9 *A Nation of Veterans* will interest a range of scholars of US history, politics, society, and defense. It offers a unique close look at institutions and actors at the heart of important transformations in midcentury America, it gives attention to a major social movement which has been eclipsed only by its own success, and it offers a perspective on too-forgotten history of the politics of defense spending (broadly defined) and civil-military relations clearly relevant for their contrast to debates today that they largely shaped. In all, this work goes a long way in replacing myth with history about veterans in American society and the construction of the welfare state.

AUTHORS

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Michael Stricof est Maître de conférences en civilisation des États-Unis à Aix-Marseille Université. Spécialiste d'histoire politique, il conduit des recherches sur le développement des budgets militaires et le rôle de la défense dans la politique étrangère. Il a co-dirigé avec Isabelle Vagnoux *U.S. Leadership in a World of Uncertainties* (Palgrave, 2022).
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