

One Nation, Under Adjustment: How World War II Subverted American Individualism

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As the Angeleno Motorcycle Club rumbled past his hotel, the proprietor Joel Bleeker viewed the spectacle with suspicion. Their flanking columns reminded him of vehicular formations he had witnessed while on his European tour of duty during the Second World War. The ex-lieutenant colonel “had always hated the way men surrendered their individuality to attain perfection as a unit. It had been necessary during the war but it wasn’t necessary now.” What good, he wondered, could possibly come of this “private Army”? In 1953 Hollywood translated this short story of a provincial California town raided by bikers to the big screen as *The Wild One*. But the film jettisoned the perspective of the skeptical proprietor in favor of the club’s surly leader, Johnny Strabler, played by Marlon Brando. Still, both the movie and the short story portray a common struggle to resist unity and retain individuality. My book maintains that the war and the memories of war were not incidental to this struggle. Rather, they were essential.

“One Nation, Under Adjustment” analyzes the cultural conflict over individuality from the beginning of the Second World War through the early 1970s, with an epilogue that discusses recurring bouts of the conflict down to our present day. Americans have had a longstanding aversion to societal coercion. Yet by all accounts they were especially sensitive to the encroachment on individuality during the mid-twentieth century. Why? Why during these particular middle decades? Was the fixation, as the “myth of the 1950s” would have us believe, simply the by-product of consumerism, anti-communist witch-hunts, and suburban sprawl? One clue comes from the fictional Bleeker’s comment, that the source of his antipathy to conformity was rooted in his military service.

Another popular expression of this postwar white, middle-class unease comes to us in the classic 1950s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Again, the protagonist, Tom Wrath, is a veteran, a man who seems entirely capable of carving out a decent, middle-class existence after returning from the European Theatre. Yet Wrath—as the name was intended to convey—is far from content. What is the source of his malaise? When he daydreams he does not linger in his mind over the latest model of Chrysler on display in the local car dealer’s

showroom. He does not long for more acreage. As the pressures of suburban life mount and his thoughts wander, he returns to the passion and *frisson* of war.

How can war serve as both the source of conformity and of the longing for difference? Can we reconcile Bleeker's, Wrath's, and Strabler's perspectives? As the saying goes, no two experiences of war are the same. Does the Second World War, a truly global war, merely prove the aphorism? That all three characters used their experiences of the war as a measuring stick for their postwar lives suggests that the war itself holds the keys to all of these overlapping questions. A decade's worth of research has led me to the conclusion that were it not for the Second World War and the militarization of American society the "crisis" of individualism would never have reached the fevered pitch that it did. Indeed, the existence of the obsession evinces a national culture that was so profoundly altered by the war that even the most probing and learned of Americans struggled to grasp the totality of its effects. My revisionist reading of the 1950s does not deny that post-war affluence, McCarthyism, consumerism, and the middle class's expansion nourished the crisis. But by tracing Bleeker's, Wrath's, and Strabler's disquiet back to the early 1940s—back to the lived experiences of a citizenry engaged in total war—"One Nation, Under Adjustment" holds a very different story, one that promises to recast mid-twentieth-century society and culture.

Consider Bleeker's complaint that surrendering "individuality to attain perfection as a unit" was required *during* the war but "it wasn't necessary" *after* the war. The distinction at first glance may not appear to mean all that much. Yet it was absolutely crucial. Bleeker's comment suggests two things. First, Americans were cognizant of what they were doing. They knew they were sacrificing their individuality, or at least some of it, to help win the war. Not everyone sacrificed equally, to be sure. Nor, certainly, were people expected to relinquish autonomy with enthusiasm; Bleeker's character disliked the whole affair. Nevertheless, the forfeiture was incumbent upon the great majority, cultivating a cultural pattern of communal sacrifice that entrenched itself as the war deepened and lengthened. In 1941 the director of the Selective Service System Lewis B. Hershey admonished

his fellow Americans, “A place for everyone and everyone in his place is the ultimate in organization. It is a pattern for unity of action—for teamwork.” Given the context of his remarks, and the monumental task he faced, of procuring men for war, few Americans would have taken great umbrage at his comments. “No part may pursue a course toward an individual or a selfish end,” he continued. “No part may live for itself alone.” *Teamwork* was indeed the watchword of the day. While tens of thousands of Americans failed to comply with their Selective Service System orders, many millions of men in fact did, which leads to the second observation.

Most Americans believed the sacrifice to be temporary. Wartime citizens who were asked why the U.S. was fighting often enough replied, “to bring the boys home.” It was a common refrain, reflecting a widespread belief that *ending* the conflict was a perfectly suitable goal of the struggle—victory for victory’s sake. America did not need to make the entire world safe for democracy. Another catchphrase, “when Victory comes,” likewise captured the mood of many Americans who wanted the war to be over as soon as it had begun. This mentality infused the many exhortations of communal sacrifice, that sacrifice was necessary but only for the duration of the conflict. As the historians Mark Leff and the late Alan Petingy have argued, Americans at the end of the war were eager to renounce their collective renunciation. Consumers staged buyers’ strikes. Women and men protested all manner of rationing. Price controls became anathema. Families wrote plaintively to their congressmen when, months after V-J had been declared, sons and husbands still found themselves stuck overseas. After all, the war was over. In one year alone, 1946, labor staged some five thousand strikes. Still, as the conflict between Bleeker and Strabler indicates, certain wartime habits died hard. Some did not die at all. Teamwork in the 1950s expressed itself in new forms—in white-collared commutes, shared Parent Teacher Association responsibilities, and the cultivation of consumer tastes and habits. But none of these endeavors seemed as meritorious as protecting a comrade from an incoming barrage. Finding the “moral equivalent of war”—to

invoke the pragmatist William James—eluded the Tom Wrath generation, even as the pressure to adjust mounted.

The widespread desire to renounce the strictures of war, to trade khakis and dress whites for civilian garb, not only dyed the memories of Americans who lived through the war; it has also molded the ways in which historians speak of the twentieth century's middle decades. The proximity of these events and the people who lived through them certainly has something to do with the proclivity to divide the century at 1945. We still live with the voices and memories of the generation that fought, supported, and endured the war, thanks especially to the herculean efforts that have gone into recording their oral histories. And yet, this alone does not explain why historical accounts of the 1950s disassociate the crisis of midcentury conformity from the forfeitures of wartime individuality. As a matter of habit, historians continue to rely heavily on accounts of conformity that were written *during* the 1950s, as the crisis of individualism was mounting—one book in particular, the social scientist David Riesman's witty, best-selling critique of 1950s adjustment, *The Lonely Crowd*, which was first published 1950. As I began this project, I myself turned often to Riesman's analysis as a guide to postwar American culture. I reckoned I was in sure hands. After all, the book helped to launch the field of American Studies.

Yet the more time I spent researching this period and the war and wrestling with novels such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the more I found myself perplexed by an omission in the book's analysis. Riesman and his co-authors Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer had remarkably little to say about the Second World War. They too had renounced renunciation. Indeed, the war simply does not factor into their thinking, as one of reader astutely observed in a letter written to Riesman. "[T]o speak bluntly," he wrote, "I found it shocking that, as far as I could see, you left out entirely the combat experience of the American people. For that kept together the American soldiers and made of them an army was exactly that spirit of team-loyalty, devotion to one's buddies (or one's peers, if you like) that you analyze so admirably through your investigation." Like others, Riesman

had put the war behind him and in his book attributed this spirit of team-loyalty—what he called “other-directedness”—to population stagnation. While other chroniclers of conformity, such as William H. Whyte Jr., dropped demography, they all tended to follow his lead, castigating organizations, outfits, and professions that promulgated the ideals of social adjustment: progressive schools, “big business,” planned communities, so on and so forth. Riesman’s and Whyte’s stock rose not simply because they were lively writers or because their books were well crafted. Books like *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organization Man* confirmed the widely held supposition that adjustment, the spirit of team-loyalty, made sense during the war but not after the war.

“One Nation, Under Adjustment” seeks to repair the breach between the Second World War and its enduring legacy. It analyzes how the spirit of team-loyalty took hold during the war then continued to animate social experience and cultural patterns beyond the secession of hostilities. To help bridge this historical divide, the book focuses on the term “adjustment” itself. Adjustment gained wide currency during the war to encourage martial teamwork. After the war promoters of the ideal found myriad additional applications. Recall that the G.I. Bill, as it was popularly known, was titled the “Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944.” The country established myriad readjustment initiatives intended to help newly minted veterans reacclimatize to civilian life. However well intentioned, these initiatives served to perpetuate the precept of “a place for everyone and everyone in his place”—an ethos of teamwork that proved its worth in ensuring Allied victory and promised to solve a host of other social ills. The future was brimming with promise. Critics and scholars have disparaged the coerciveness of this ethos, for bullying midcentury housewives, schoolchildren, the mentally unwell, and white-collar workers. Yet it is part of the legacy of the Second World War, for better or ill.

The encomiums that Mark Greif’s *The Age of the Crisis of Man* has received since its spring 2015 publication speaks to a groundswell of support for scholarship that repairs this “historiography of neglect.” He observes:

The 1940s, the initial center of gravity for this study, are often just treated in American intellectual history as interim years of war (as if thought stopped during the largest single cataclysm of the century), or as a divided period, a wishbone that goes half to the “thirties” and half to the “fifties.” ... The war’s massive mobilization, and the period of consumer abundance and yet intellectual anxiety and doubt after the war, get taken up into the Cold War and the “adjustment,” “consensus” and “conformity” that define the stereotypes of the decade of the fifties and the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower.¹

Historians of neo-conservatism, such as Darren Dochuk and Kevin Kruse, have been attending to this neglect in recent years by showcasing the appeal of libertarianism across these decades. Also, the historiography of twentieth-century social movements—the civil rights movement in particular—has long appreciated the continuity of protest and the long shadow of the 1930s across these middle years. Still, Greif’s defense of the 1940s as intellectually meritorious, as having made substantial contributions to American social thought *because* and not in spite of war, has struck a resonant chord.

Elegant as *The Age of the Crisis of Man* is, it still traffics in the realm of ideas and ideology. “One Nation, Under Adjustment” addresses this historiography of neglect by grounding the history of adjustment in social experiences and institutional prerogatives. Toward this end, my book adds a chapter to what has been described as the “new” military history. Last year the Society of Military History issued a white paper, entitled “The Role of Military History in Contemporary Academy,” that makes a persuasive case for the inclusion of military history in the liberal arts. “We see our realm as encompassing not only the study of military institutions in wartime, but also the study of the relationships between military institutions and the societies that create them; the

origins of wars, societies at war; and the myriad impacts of war on individuals, groups, states, and regions,” wrote the white paper’s authors Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino² (1-2). Drew Gilpin Faust, Gregory Downs, and James Marten have served as inspiration for my own scholarship. What they have done for the Civil War by showing the pervasiveness of its shadow across the remainder of the century, my book seeks to do for the Second World War, by telling the story of how citizens were turned into soldiers then into veterans—and also into fathers, workers, and civic leaders.

To anchor this history of adjustment in social practices and institutional structures, the first third of the book is devoted to analyzing the ways in which the War Department sought to inculcate this ethic among its millions of new citizen-soldiers. In the first chapter of my manuscript I detail the work of the Selective Service System, which oversaw the legally incumbent draft, observing not only the patriotism but also the ambivalence of many young registrants. The next two chapters devote themselves to War Department efforts to adjust conscripts and enlistees to military life. Soon after the draft’s commencement, for instance, it created an in-house social and behavioral sciences Research Branch (originally called the Morale Branch). Supported by the future head of the Army Services Forces, Brehon Somervell, and shepherded by the exceptionally well-connected Frederick Osborn, the Research Branch supported and augmented Army personnel training, produced propaganda and news broadcasts, helped entertain and educate the troops, and eventually conducted social science surveys of approximately half a million personnel—all with the goal of creating a more engaged, efficient, modern citizen-soldier Army.

Reading over those survey results, I was surprised by the tenor of the answers. The social scientists and psychologists who designed the surveys provided a blank, ruled sheet of paper for participants to record their thoughts on a variety of subjects. Soldiers wrote, often with great passion, about the Army’s caste system, about discrimination, the perceived lack of merit-based advancement, inefficiencies, and poor leadership. Yet they also documented their self-aware

desire to work *within* instead of against the system. They wanted not only to advance the Army's effectiveness but also their own ambitions, with keen eyes set on future financial security and more desirable occupations. Army personnel, soldiers, and Research Branch personnel shared the desire to make the organization more efficient and effective, more equitable and just. Other scholars have written about the Branch and these social science surveys, most recently the military historian Joseph Ryan. A multi-volume analysis of the surveys, published after the war under the supervision of the Branch director Samuel Stouffer, entitled *The American Soldier* has been acclaimed as one of the most influential social scientific studies of the century. Yet to date historians have hardly scratched the surface of what these half million respondents revealed to the surveyors. Studies of war morale and the Branch typically concentrate on the official reports and Stouffer's voluminous postwar publication. My study mines the uncensored "free comments" of survey respondents and compares these with other sources—educational materials, pamphlets, films, etc.—to investigate the institutionalization of adjustment as it was solidifying.

The concept of adjustment holds the narrative of my study together as the book transitions from the war to the postwar era. Methodologically, I employ intellectual history methods, closely reading and comparing behavioral and social scientific publications that promoted social adjustment, as well as critiqued it. This analysis has been augmented with archival research in the personal papers of key scholars to illuminate their methods and intentions. For instance, Chapter Seven focuses on David Riesman and the writing and reception of *The Lonely Crowd*. The chapter uses Riesman's personal papers to reconstruct a short biography. "Fan letters," also contained within his personal papers, are also analyzed to show how the public responded to his critique. This chapter is not simply an exegesis of the text, but attempts as well to flesh out the author's intentions, social and personal context, readers' responses, and the cultural effects of the critique. In the remaining chapters, the book becomes a more definitive cultural history, shifting the perspective of the reader from the veteran as a person and as a social type to the veteran as a cultural icon.

Methodologically, I read a variety of cultural texts—film, novels, artistic creations—such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, to map discourses of anti-adjustment and to show how the public “read” the veteran for new meaning—especially the New Left as they protested the war in Vietnam.

Research undertaken at the Rockefeller Archive Center will doubtless improve this book project. Indeed, while reading through the records of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation, I uncovered files that challenge how historians and scholars to date have framed the history of an interdisciplinary school of thought that contributed much to the discourse of social adjustment, namely, “Culture and Personality.” Although interdisciplinary from inception—with contributors hailing more prominently from sociology, anthropology, and psychiatry—culture and personality has been long assessed according to its career in but one of these disciplines, anthropology. The historian Peter Mandler’s most recent book, *Return from the Natives* (2013), a collective biography of key players in the culture and personality movement, centrally Margaret Mead, follows comfortably within this tradition. The “culture and personality” entry in the index encourages readers to “see anthropology.” Several years prior, in 2009, Dennis Bryson, relying extensively on the SSRC’s records that are located at the Rockefeller Archive, had tried to steer the historiography into broader paths, yet apparently to little avail.³ In the spirit of full disclosure, I ventured similar goals in two complementary articles that were published in the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* as well, in 2010 and 2011.

By so closely associating culture and personality with anthropology, scholars have forwarded a very precise interpretation of what was a disparate intellectual attraction. That reading boldly opens the historian Joanne Meyerowitz’s closely argued 2010 contribution to the *Journal of American History*. She wrote, “From the late 1920s into the early 1950s, a loose network of social scientists, known as the ‘culture-and-personality school,’ collaborated in an epistemic shift in social thought that reverberated through the rest of the twentieth century. They explicitly rejected biological theories of race and investigated instead how

different ‘cultures’ produced diverse patterns of human behavior.”⁴ The key, “Boasian” assertion is that the anthropological rejection of biological determinism revolutionized social thought by cultivating cultural pluralism. The political payoff of this line of thought seems rather patent. By eschewing biological racism, culture and personality scholars helped make America safe for “difference.” However admirable, is respect for heterogeneous identities the movement’s sole, or most significant, contribution to American thought? My research on the history of social adjustment and on the emergence of culture and personality from the vantage point of psychiatry and sociology led me to question what seemed—and still seems—a constricted reading of the movement and its impact on American social thought. When culture-and-personality social scientists spoke of social adjustment, they presumed that culture determined personality and that maladjustment was akin to a social disease that needed to be cured (which helps to illuminate the inclusion of clinical psychiatry in the movement). Scholars working under the inclusive tent of culture and personality did indeed foster tolerance for the “Other,” for difference. Yet the theory of adjustment and the application of the theory among practitioners constrained individual choice as well—just as it contributed to the Allies’ victory over Japan and Germany. The legacy of the “liberal consensus,” as it was expressed through the culture and personality movement, was as mixed as it was profound.

From Bryson’s article and from the historiography more generally, I had a good sense of what I might find in the SSRC’s Committee on Culture and Personality papers. But by perusing SSRC and RF records beyond the work of the Committee, I was able to substantiate and create new connections in my research. These invaluable findings will both challenge the scholarship on culture and personality and extend our understanding of the movement’s import for twentieth-century social thought. Outside this direct line of inquiry, I found some coruscating archival nuggets that will help to enliven “One Nation, Under Adjustment.” This includes a snarky series of letters penned by Robert Osborn to William H. Whyte that simply must find an airing somewhere in my manuscript.

In short: my research trip to the RAC was worth its weight in gold. I am incredibly appreciative of the thoughtful, attentive guidance of the archival staff.

¹ Mark Greif's *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, 2015), 15-16.

² Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino, "The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy," A Society for Military History White Paper (2014), 1-2, www.smh-hq.org/docs/SMHWhitePaper.pdf.

³ Dennis Bryson, "Personality and Culture, the Social Science Research Council, and Liberal Social Engineering: The Advisory Committee on Personality and Culture, 1930-1934," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45 (Autumn 2009): 355-86.

⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, "'How Common Culture Shapes the Separate Lives': Sexuality, Race, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Social Constructionist Thought," *Journal of American History* 96 (March 2010): 1057.

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