In 1994, to mark the 50th anniversary of the American landing at Normandy, President Bill Clinton attributed victory "in the face of mayhem" to the "confident clarity born of relentless training," the "democratic fury" of G.I.s and "the guiding light of a just cause."

The end of World War II in Europe, Clinton concluded, could come only when free men came together "like the stars of a majestic galaxy" to turn "the pain of loss into the power of redemption." Four years later, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw gave these soldiers a name that would stick: "the greatest generation."

John Bodnar, a professor of history at Indiana University, claims that these celebrations of World War II as a victory over evil forces by exceptionally virtuous Americans are part of a "romantic myth" that obscures as much as it reveals. Through an analysis of films, novels, memoirs, and public monuments, he argues that during and after Pearl Harbor the meaning of the war was often contested: "There were always those who could never forget the suffering war had brought, who were never really comforted by patriotic rhetoric, and who resented the fact that they had to relinquish some of their most basic rights to liberty and life."

Bodnar demonstrates that most Americans associated World War II with the sorrows of families and the brutality of combat. When they attached panels and photos with the names and images of loved ones to statues, he indicates, survivors delivered a rebuke of sorts to commemorations focused more on victory and martial valor than on carnage and individual sacrifices. The decision of playwright Tennessee Williams to make Stanley Kowalski - the brute in "A Streetcar Named Desire" - a master sergeant in World War II was a "complete reversal of wartime myths."

And, Bodnar suggests, those myths never completely erased the legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: that Americans were "efficient killers."

As he emphasizes that American memories were "more personal and less tied to precepts of national destiny," Bodnar acknowledges that "this is not to say that local people would not be ready to defend their nation." This very assertion, however, provides some subtle evidence that "The 'Good War' " rests, in no small measure, on a false dichotomy. Americans were (and are) fully capable of declaring that war is hell and mourning the loss of sons and lovers even as they are celebrating the courage, compassion, and conviction of the men and women who fought a just and justified war.

Although Bodnar finds it too sentimental, Ken Burns' 14-hour PBS documentary, "The War," it seems to me, gets pretty close to the truth about a conflict which the United States entered for all the right reasons. Burns sees World War II as "necessary." He gives the critics a few innings, and introduces a veteran, E.B. Sledge, who was plagued by nightmares when he came home. And he
celebrates the "quiet dignity" of Americans who supported the war effort.

No war, John Bodnar reminds us, is "good." But World War II comes pretty darn close, doesn't it?

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Associate Images:

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