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World War II's Lessons

Reading Sean McMeekin's provocative and jolting essay "Goodbye to the Good War" (Summer 2025) on the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II summons forth Harry Jaffa's remark that "history is too important to be left to the historians." McMeekin's essay is very different in character from what the *CRB* published in 1985 on the 40th anniversary of the war's end: Harold Rood's "Win a Few, Lose a Few: World War II Remembered." A gunner in General Patton's Third Army in 1944-45 before becoming an influential teacher of strategy, Rood cites some of the same facts and unwelcome circumstances as McMeekin but to very different moral effect.

If McMeekin's main purpose is to support a contemporary paraphrase of John Quincy Adams's famous statement that America "goes not abroad in search of Hitlers to destroy; she is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all; she is the champion and vindicator only of her own," I could largely agree. I made a related argument a few months ago when disputing President Trump's critics who hysterically scream "Munich!" about his approach toward the Ukraine war, angering most of my few remaining neoconservative friends in the process.

But if the point is to criticize postwar American hubris, it isn't necessary to embrace a revisionist account of the Second World War's moral meaning and lessons, nor does it automatically follow that the mistakes of American power since then derive from a defective or false self-understanding of the war. What's more, in the course of trying to debunk the "abstractions," "half-truths," "polite fictions," "white lies," and the way we "perfume the story" of the war, McMeekin recycles criticisms that stretch back to the time of the war itself, or misinterprets facts that no one disputes. It is as if he took Arthur Koestler's line from 1943 that "in this war we are fighting a total lie in the name of a half-truth," and decided either to switch the positions of the antagonists or to reject the importance of any distinction between regimes. Although McMeekin can justly be considered the Edward Gibbon of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, here he falls short of being the Thucydides of World War II.

McMeekin's selective method could just as easily be applied to our understanding of the Civil War, which most people (other than die-hard Southern partisans) understand as the war to end slavery. But it didn't begin as a war to end slavery, and for at least the first year, if not longer, was a war to preserve the Union with slavery intact if necessary. Does the gradual transformation of war aims, by degrees settling on the unconditional capitulation of the South by the end of 1864—not unlike the demand for unconditional surrender in World War II—somehow discredit the larger meaning of that war? Did the abortive Reconstruction, like our many postwar mistakes after 1945, discredit the moral purpose or outcome of the Civil War, or suggest that we should think poorly of President Lincoln's zig-zag course? With this parallel in mind McMeekin's revisionism of World War II starts to remind us of the "unnecessary war" school of thought with regard to the Civil War, which the Claremont Institute has always stood foursquare against. In other words, McMeekin's World War II revisionism parallels the same kind of Civil War historical revisionism that moved Jaffa to write *Crisis of the House Divided*.

The same approach might even be used for the American Revolution, which commenced well before the Declaration of Independence, but which is understood—thanks again to Claremont scholarship—to have the principles of the Declaration as its highest and central purpose. But following McMeekin's method, one could easily argue against that understanding by pointing to Captain Levi Preston, a veteran of the battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775, who was asked by historian Mellen Chamberlain decades later why he fought for independence:

> Mellen Chamberlain: "Maybe it was the words of Harrington, Sydney, or Locke?"
> Levi Preston: "Never heard of 'em."
> Chamberlain: "Well, then, what was the matter? And what did you mean in going to the fight?"
> Preston: "Young man, what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should."

McMeekin likewise dismisses the claims that we fought "against fascism" or "against Nazi aggression" by noting that we were late to the scene and by mentioning many of Franklin Roosevelt's ham-handed machinations ("skullduggery") to draw us closer to the war. To be sure, FDR risked impeachment with many of his questionable actions. But then McMeekin supplies his own corrective of this view later in his article: "it was only after the U.S. was attacked overtly, *and public opinion was aroused*, that this country went to war" (emphasis added).

Understanding of the tensions between the constraints of popular consent and prudence in democratic regimes is frequently absent from the work of historians, and this is especially the case with McMeekin's rendering of FDR, not to mention his summary restatement of John Charmley's 30-year-old prosecutor's brief against Winston Churchill. I'll pass over McMeekin's comparison of Churchill with Mikhail Gorbachev in his relationship with America, along with the related issue of how to think about our wartime alliance with the Soviet Union—long the main criticism of Churchill from old America-First conservatives like Henry Regnery and the young William F. Buckley, Jr. Regarding that awful compromise born of prudence, historian John Lukacs had it right: Churchill understood that "one half of Europe (especially the western half) was better than none," which foregoing alliance with the USSR would likely have entailed.

Worse still is how difficult it becomes to distinguish McMeekin's interpretation from that of Patrick Buchanan, David Irving, and Darryl Cooper in

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wondering "whether Churchill's ultimate decision to fight on after the fall of France in Britain's 'finest hour,' rather than parley with Hitler, led to the best outcome for his people," because it resulted in economic ruin and the loss of empire. Aside from Churchill's own speeches on the matter, one thinks of Leo Strauss's answer to this question in his 1941 lecture on "German Nihilism," that honor and nobility sufficed as the highest reason to fight on even in the face of a likely lost cause, not to mention Strauss's observation at the time of Churchill's death that "the contrast between the indomitable and magnanimous statesman and the insane tyrant—this spectacle in its clear simplicity was one of the greatest lessons which men can learn, at any time." To be sure, McMeekin allows that Churchill "clearly saved Britain's honor," but a reader gets the sense from the overall tone and weight of his essay that he regards honor much as Falstaff in *Henry IV*: "What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning.... Honour is a mere scutcheon."

I'll conclude with McMeekin's downgrading of the Holocaust as a factor in our moral understanding of the war. He writes that "the Holocaust had little to do with how or why the war was fought," and that "it is historical malpractice to claim that [the Jews'] suffering was the cause that inspired the U.S., Britain, the USSR, or other United Nations to fight Germany." Who, exactly, ever said it did? Although Hitler's anti-Semitism was well known before the war, the scale of the extermination was only slowly recognized well after the war began. McMeekin fails to note that the Allies didn't even learn the exact location of Auschwitz until the early summer of 1944, when Allied commanders were rather preoccupied on the western front after D-Day, but asserts that "neither the British Royal Air Force nor U.S. Army Air Forces attempted to disrupt logistics by bombing rail lines leading to Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz, or the death camps themselves," and adding that the U.S. War Refugee Board formed in early 1944 "accomplished little."

I would have thought Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* had offered the definitive balanced refutation of this crabbed point of view. In fact, Allied commanders repeatedly considered attempts to bomb Auschwitz or its rail lines, but between scarce air resources, the camp's location at the far reach of bombing range, doubts about whether it could succeed at all (individual rail lines are easily repaired, which is why Allied bombing always tried to target urban marshalling yards which promised more disruption), whether such raids might kill more Jews than it saved—and thus hand the Germans a cynical propaganda tool—the air chiefs concluded that concentrating on industrial targets would end the war sooner rather than diverting bombers on an uncertain mission. It is easy to second-guess or deplore these decisions in light of everything learned subsequently, but to dismiss the Holocaust as a factor in how we understand the stakes of the conflict is historical malpractice.

Allied air attacks accidentally did still bomb Auschwitz and a few other camps when targeting adjacent industrial sites, and the bombing of the marshalling yards in Budapest in July 1944 disrupted and helped end the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, saving 150,000 Jews scheduled for transport. Subsequent Allied threats to the Hungarian government about postwar repercussions helped deter the resumption of deportations, along with stepped-up help in protecting and extracting Jews by the War Refugee Board.

Was it the Holocaust that belatedly brought into focus the moral meaning of the war or added to the justification for unconditional surrender? Was it the Holocaust that threw into sharp relief the fundamental distinction of regime types that was obscure or confusing to prewar American leaders, and that subsequently became the ground of our long Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union? I'll give the last word here to Harold Rood, taken from his *CRB* essay 40 years ago and derived from his eyewitness experience of coming upon the death camps:

> The least reflective of us could wonder at the terrible barbarism that had for six years ravaged Europe. The unforgettable signs were those dreadful concentration camp uniforms hanging like shrouds on the bodies of the dead and near dead. If the war had not made much sense before, it did now.

It is unfortunate that Sean McMeekin's dismissal of this simple and accessible judgment—a dismissal gaining too much purchase on the right just now—should appear in the *CRB*'s pages.

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Sean McMeekin replies:

I am heartened that Steven Hayward seconds my criticism of

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what he calls "postwar American hubris." I, too, wish that more U.S. statesmen would follow John Quincy Adams's eloquent warning.

What seems to have offended Mr. Hayward is that, on the 80th anniversary of World War II's conclusion, I did not offer the same "moral meaning and lessons" as Harold Rood did in his essay on the 40th anniversary.

But a lot has happened in the past 40 years, not least the implosion of Soviet Communism and the opening of archives in Russia and the Eastern Bloc. To take just a few examples, the Venona decrypts and Soviet files have exposed the astonishing penetration of the U.S. and British governments by Soviet spies and agents of influence before and during the war, who had their hands in shaping Anglo-American policy on everything from overall war strategy to the United States's ultimatum to Japan in November 1941 to withdraw from China and Indochina, as well as the OSS helping Ho Chi Minh conquer Hanoi in 1945. We have learned about the horrors that took place at Katyn and across the eastern front behind the lines of our Soviet allies, including the murder of Soviet (and non-Soviet) war prisoners sent back into the USSR by the U.S. and Britain. We have learned of the role of Soviet agents in convincing Winston Churchill to abandon the Chetniks fighting for the Yugoslav Exile Government in London in order to arm instead Josip Tito, a Communist who committed horrific war crimes, including in the Kočevski Rog massacre of May 1945. We have learned about what happened in Poland after the Soviets sealed it off from British and American observers, not least the hunting down of Polish Home Army patriots by Stalin's henchmen in regifted American Lend-Lease vehicles. We have learned, above all, how differently the war and its legacy are viewed in countries like Poland—a country that has still not received reparations from either Germany or Russia after being jointly invaded by them in 1939.

Hayward does not address the central theme of my article, namely the ARCADIA resolutions in the wake of Pearl Harbor, which downgraded the Japanese war behind "Germany first" and assigned first priority to Stalin's needs on the eastern front ("assistance to Russia's offensive by all available means"). Nor does he mention how the resolutions, along with Franklin Roosevelt's even-then controversial unconditional surrender policy (and FDR's refusal to support, or even allow the U.S. press to mention the existence of, the German anti-Hitler resistance), shaped the course of the war and the future of postwar Europe, China, and northern Asia. Hayward's substantial letter does not contain a single mention of Japan or China. The war's outcome in Asia, where the U.S. cut off Chiang Kai-shek in 1943-44 (and again in 1946) and supplied Stalin's Far Eastern armies with exorbitant Lend-Lease aid, which helped midwife Mao Zedong's victory in the Chinese Civil War, doesn't easily fit the narrative of the Good War.

Hayward focuses instead on defending Churchill, about whom I say many positive things in my essay. (I am far harder on Roosevelt than Churchill, taking the former to task for how brutally he treated the latter.) Is it really shockingly "revisionist" to point out that Churchill's decision to fight on after the fall of France in 1940—the key moment in his career, for which he has been lionized ever since—led ultimately to the bankruptcy of the British Exchequer and the disintegration of the British Empire? I should think, far from diminishing Churchill's stature or reputation, pointing out his devotion to the empire he sacrificed elevates his story to the realm of epic tragedy. The only pushback I offered to Churchill's "finest hour" was pointing out that it was not an *American* tragedy, but a British one, and it remains strange that so many of Churchill's American admirers miss the irony that it was their country that inherited the empire, in part by bullying their hero in Britain's moment of desperation.

The only aspect of U.S. policy that comes up in Hayward's letter is my mention of President's Roosevelt's "skullduggery" in trying to get the U.S. into the war, to which he says I provide my own "corrective" in observing that by the time the U.S. *did* enter the war, it did so after "public opinion was aroused," i.e., by the Pearl Harbor attack. The point I was making was that the long-maligned "America First" movement, by holding Roosevelt's feet to the fire to the extent that he had to hide and at times disown his own interventionist policies in public, helped to discipline the White House so that Roosevelt's skullduggery *did not* drag the country into war *before* public opinion was aroused and Congress actually declared war. Since then, American presidents have chosen instead to fight myriad undeclared wars. The larger point is that we can learn from the example of America First (rather than dismissing it and other skeptics of foreign military entanglements as "isolationists" or "Nazi apologists") and ask questions about NATO and U.S. security commitments abroad today that may draw us into war.

Strangest of all is that Hayward kicks up a fuss about my point that at the time the Holocaust "had little to do with how or why" the Second World War was fought—a point he apparently agrees with. "Who, exactly," he asks, "ever said it did?" A half dozen or more big-budget movies made about World War II in recent decades, nearly every history textbook assigned today in our schools, a whole shelf of high-profile nonfiction bestsellers and novels, the entire academic discipline of Holocaust studies that, with the disappearance of military history from the curriculum, has all but taken over the teaching of the Second World War. If today's college students know anything about the war, it is the Holocaust and basically nothing else. Hayward suggests that "history is too important to be left to the historians." I think, however, that historians can and should push back when they can against misleading or anachronistic readings of history.

Surely, we are far enough removed from the conflict to evaluate dispassionately the wartime decisions made in our name by our elected leaders, and the consequences of those decisions, both good and bad, for Americans and the millions of Europeans and Asians whose lives were affected.

Anarchy in the U.K.

Christopher Caldwell's essay "Land's End" (Summer 2025) discusses several factors that have contributed to the growing radicalization now palpable among the British. The essay is an urgent, powerful, and sobering critique of the Labour and Conservative parties, both of which have acquiesced to multiculturalism, resulting in the complete elimination of border enforcement on this small island nation. During the last six years of Conservative rule, over 150,000 undocumented migrants crossed the English Channel. The BBC reported that 36,816 migrants entered Britain via this route in 2024, and more than 50,000 have arrived since Labour won the election last July.

The failure of Labour and the Conservatives to halt the rapid influx of illegal migration has resulted in a growing public disdain for politics. According to a recent survey from the National Centre for Social Research, 45% of peo-

ple never trust the government to prioritize the nation's interests, regardless of which party is in power. This figure has doubled in four years.

Caldwell focuses on Nigel Farage, the leader of the Reform UK party, and his rapidly growing popularity. Caldwell describes him as the "most influential" voice in British politics. For decades, Farage has been a thorn in the side of mainstream political parties in the United Kingdom; as the leader of the Brexit Party he was instrumental in pushing the referendum that resulted in Britain's exit from the European Union.

In September, Farage was in Washington, testifying before a congressional committee hearing, detailing Britain's troubling authoritarian speech codes. Caldwell cites in his essay the case of Lucy Connolly, a woman who posted an intemperate but soon-erased remark on X that resulted in a 31-month prison sentence. Just before Farage arrived in Washington, Irish comedy writer Graham Linehan was approached by five armed police officers as he arrived from Arizona at Heathrow Airport. Linehan was arrested on suspicion of "incitement" following a series of trans-critical social media posts. He was eventually released on bail.

Free expression has been on life support in the United Kingdom for many years. J.D. Vance was right to tell Keir Starmer during an Oval Office meeting in February that Britain has a free speech problem. Each year, over 12,000 people are arrested in Britain for posting offensive messages online. When pro-life activists silently pray outside abortion clinics, they are charged and arrested. Christian preachers are detained for criticizing transgender ideology, and pranksters face a two-year prison sentence for wearing "offensive" Halloween costumes.

Caldwell's essay highlights the issue of mass immigration. The arrival of tens of thousands of people from distant countries not only fragments societal unity but also fosters sectarianism. Muslim voters make up 43% of the electorate in Ladywood, central Birmingham, and politicians are ideologically captured by them. During the 2024 general election, Labour lost four seats to pro-Gaza independent candidates. In December 2024, Iqbal Mohamed, an independent M.P. for Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, spoke in Parliament in support of cousin marriage, a tribal custom common in Pakistan, the country of origin for many migrants to the U.K.

The public backlash to uncontrolled immigration has shifted the Overton window to the right. Gen Z males appear to be the key driving force behind this. After all, they are the generation that will inherit a country in shambles. Young men appear to be growing more right-wing, especially in Britain, where they are around 30% more conservative than women. It should not come as a surprise, then, that their support is going to the Reform Party.

Christopher Caldwell's assessment of the state of Britain is stark, proposing radical reforms to end the country's failed experiment with multiculturalism. This is a country steeped in the kind of history and tradition that form the foundation of a high-trust society. Importing an enormous number of people who refuse to assimilate and integrate goes against our distinctive, quaint way of life. And to assume that British people can be forced to observe a strict set of neoliberal/Blairite principles from the 20th century is oversimplified. Neither a love of cricket nor a Union Jack t-shirt can instantly transform you into a Brit.

Noel Yaxley
Norwich, England
United Kingdom

Originalism's Missionary

Bradley C.S. Watson has presented a readable and informed review of a biography of former Attorney General Edwin (Ed) Meese ("Meese on Scene," Summer 2025). In that role, Meese's "insights and efforts" in furthering the cause of an "originalist" interpretation of the Constitution, "largely absent from judicial chambers for much of the 20th century," as Watson writes, was second to none.

Starting with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the judiciary, once considered "the least dangerous branch of government," issued judicial ukase that went far beyond its limited role as interpreter of the nation's founding charter. Meese believed "the Supreme Court had gone off the rails." To counter that reality, he, with support of his acolytes at the Department of Justice and President Reagan, sought to restore constitutional order.

Of singular importance to achieve that goal was President Reagan's nomination of Judge Antonin Scalia to the High Court, and here, I believe, is what is missing in this review: if Ed Meese was the high priest of "originalism," its foremost missionary was the late Justice Scalia, for without his influence, originalism would not have made the comeback it has achieved today. What Saint Paul was to Christianity, Justice Antonin Scalia was to the originalism Watson describes. For three decades Scalia, through his opinions and now with a federal judiciary that includes his former clerks (Justice Amy Coney Barrett on the Supreme Court, Judge Joan Larsen in the 6th Circuit), who have made originalism the basis of their jurisprudence. That came about not through the influence of Reagan's attorney general but the man he nominated to the Court.

I once asked the late Justice Scalia how he heard of his nomination to the Supreme Court. He replied that he knew he "was on a short list," but when a phone call came late one Friday evening inviting (then) Judge Scalia to the White House, Scalia, with an impish grin on his face, said, "I didn't think President Reagan wanted to talk to me about the budget." And the caller: Attorney General Ed Meese.

Vincent Chiarello
Reston, VA

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