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Mary Dudziak. “You didn’t see him lying . . . beside the gravel road in France’: Death, Distance, and War in American Politics.” *Diplomatic History* 42:1 (2018): 1-16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx087>.

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Review by **Steven Casey**, London School of Economics and Political Science

The question underpinning Mary L. Dudziak’s SHAFR presidential address is a familiar one: what has made the United States different from other countries? Her answer is both novel and compelling. “American civilian isolation from the war experience,” Dudziak argues, has been a critically important distinguishing characteristic (2-3).

Dudziak’s principal focus is World War II. Unlike civilians in other belligerent countries, home-front Americans experienced this conflict vicariously, through the accounts produced by war correspondents such as Ernie Pyle. These reporters, Dudziak rightly observes, did a great job trying to get U.S. civilians “to feel war as if they could know it—to enable those who lacked a first-hand experience to believe that they knew what it was like to be there” (3). Pyle, for example, saw his task, as he explained at the time, “to make the reader see what I see” (6). He excelled in providing moving descriptions of battle scenes, or the death of individual soldiers like Captain Henry T. Waskow. At the same time, however, Pyle and his colleagues sought to protect their readers from the war’s gorier aspects. Even the most skillful war reporters also lacked the tools to truly convey the full horror of what they had just seen. They could “describe the tactile feel of war,” Dudziak writes, “but could not reproduce it. This sensory divide was simply unbridgeable” (10).

Dudziak’s argument is both timely and significant. After decades of neglect, a number of studies have recently appeared on the World War II war correspondents. But most remain firmly in the mold that characterizes so much of this literature—presenting heroic accounts of a courageous band of reporters, who, as the subtitle of one recent book puts it, “risked capture, torture, and death to cover World War II.”¹ As such, these works are more interested in the correspondents’ compelling back stories than their actual published stories. They also

¹ Ray Moseley, *Reporting the War: How Foreign Correspondents Risked Capture, Torture and Death to Cover World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

ignore the crucial point that is at the heart of Dudziak's argument: the impact of war reporting on the home front.²

Apart from the Vietnam experience, where the claim is often made that biased reporting helped to turn the public against the war, historians have invariably shied away from trying to establish a causal link between media accounts and home-front attitudes. This is unsurprising. Although we have opinion polls for all the wars since 1941, the earlier data is sketchy. Even where it exists, historians are right to be cautious about making claims that any one variable—in this case, battlefield reporting—was the central cause for a shift in opinion. My own work has explored the combat stories that appeared during World War II, connecting these to the surveys commissioned by different parts of the government, in order to show that at moments such as the Anzio stalemate or the Battle of the Bulge senior policy makers feared that domestic support had become surprisingly brittle.³

In her address, Dudziak takes a different approach. Her aim is to explore the longer-term trajectory in American attitudes toward war, from the “republic of suffering” during the 1860s, when the proximity of the Civil War fighting helped to create a “broad engagement with the work of war death,” to the modern apathy that characterizes a nation constantly fighting wars to which its civilians pay little attention. Dudziak argues that World War II was a mid-way staging point in this long journey, since it saw the start of a “fractured” polity, “as some Americans saw war up close, and other could not,” while war reporters struggled valiantly to bridge the gap (5).

Dudziak's approach should be warmly welcomed. For too long, historians have neglected the war experience. Inside the academy, military history (like political history) has been pushed to the margins by social and cultural historians. The spate of recent books on war reporting has been largely produced by independent scholars and ex-journalists writing for a popular audience. And even when tenured academics have focused on selling war, they have invariably looked at the activities of the civilian branches of government operating inside the United States whose ideological exhortations are deemed far more important than the images of death and destruction being relayed by the media and military from distant battlefields.⁴

² Recent popular accounts that revolve around the individual heroics of the war correspondents include Timothy M. Gay, *Assignment to Hell: The War Against Nazi Germany with Correspondents Walter Cronkite, Andy Rooney, A.J. Liebling, Homer Bigart, and Hal Boyle* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2012), and Mosely, *Reporting the War*. Scholarly works include Steven Casey, *The War Beat, Europe: The American Media at War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Philip Woods, *Reporting the Retreat: War Correspondents in Burma* (London: Hurst, 2016), Richard A. Fine, “Edward Kennedy's Long Road to Rheims: The Media and the Military in World War II,” *American Journalism* 33 (2016): 317-339, and John McCaullum, “U.S. Censorship, Violence, and Moral Judgement in a Wartime Democracy,” *Diplomatic History* 41 (2017): 543-566.

³ Casey, *The War Beat*, 192-200, 300-311.

⁴ See, for example, the essays in Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank, *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century* (Gainesville: University Press of America, 2010).

In short, then, like all great presidential addresses, Dudziak's hits on an important subject that is in desperate need of further research. In the spirit of opening a dialogue about how such research might progress, I would like to offer the following observations:

First, Dudziak is correct to single out World War II as a moment when the American experience of war underwent a profound shift. But I think that World War I also offers a number of fruitful avenues for further inquiry. It was in 1917, after all, that the U.S. military first established its template for dealing with the media, which revolved around accrediting a small number of correspondents who had to agree to submit their copy to censorship, while in return the army provided accommodation, transport, and communications.⁵ This template had a profound impact on the development of military-media relations during the next war. More immediately, it also shaped how the home front experienced the horrific battles during the fall of 1918, when the U.S. Army suffered 122,000 casualties in the fighting at Meuse-Argonne, of which more than 26,000 were killed in action. Because the censorship regime was so stifling, this staggering toll, as I have argued elsewhere, "struck the home front not with an earth-shattering crash but rather with a dull muted thud."⁶

Not until after the guns fell silent in November 1918 did Americans slowly come to grips with the full horror of what had happened in the trenches. This was partly a product of the growing disillusionment with the Versailles Treaty, but, as John M. Kinder has shown in an excellent study, it also stemmed from a more macabre legacy.⁷ Almost a million ex-doughboys applied for disability benefits within five years of the war's end. More than 200,000 remained permanently disabled. Historians have long placed memories of the trench carnage at the heart of deep-seated isolationist impulse that dominated American politics during the interwar period; indeed, this is one obvious caveat to Marilyn Young's argument, cited by Dudziak, that "the aftermath of every U.S. war 'was marked by . . . efforts to erase the experience of war itself' (12). Far from blotting out the experience, it was omnipresent. Kinder is particularly good at showing how, after 1918 returning disabled veterans were crucial to the unfolding isolationist impulse—how, alongside the glitz and exuberance of the Jazz Age, all forms of popular culture, from novels and movies to newspapers and magazines, "continued to prime the public imagination with searing portraits of disabled vets."⁸

Second, I think it is important to understand how changing technology has shaped the home front's experience of war. Dudziak rightly observes that, to most Americans, a major battle like D-Day was a sketchy, distant event. Initially, the civilians on the home front learned about it only from press releases rewritten by

⁵ Nolan to Chief of Staff, "Arrangements for accredited Correspondents with the U.S. Army," 5 July 1917; Palmer to Nolan, "Regulations for War Correspondents," 7 July 1917; both in Entry 240, box 5913, RG 120. "Organization of Correspondents' Camp," 25 September 1917, Entry 239, box 6212, RG 120, NARA II.

⁶ Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29-33.

⁷ John M. Kinder, *Paying With Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015),

⁸ Kinder, *Paying With Their Bodies*, 107.

reporters based at military headquarters in London or Washington. Yet there was one exception. At 11:30 p.m. on June 6, 1944, the main U.S. networks interrupted their programs to relay a broadcast recorded earlier in the day by the radio correspondent George Hicks. As listeners gathered around their sets, Hicks recounted a fight between Allied ships and German planes. “They got one,” he announced to the sound of cheers in the background, “they got one. A great blotch of fire came smoldering down just off our port side in the sea. Smoke and flame there.”⁹

Because of the difficulty of hauling cumbersome radio equipment around a fast-moving battlefield, Hicks’s broadcast marked the first time the home front had actually heard the sound of a European battle since the fall of 1941, when Edward R. Murrow had used the BBC’s facilities to relay live reports of the German blitz on London.¹⁰ Hicks’s radio reportage was, therefore, a highly significant moment. And it would not be the last. Over the coming months, new technologies would allow Americans to both hear and see more of the war in a timely fashion. Take photographs, for instance. Dudziak points out that on D-Day “Americans at home longed to see, to have a visual picture of what had transpired” (6). Less than nine months later, they did finally get to look at a combat picture on the same day it was taken—Joe Rosenthal’s shot of U.S. marines charging “over a crest on Iwo Island”—which the *New York Times* heralded as marking one of “the miracles of modern transmission.”¹¹

Such miracles, of course, proceeded apace in the post-war world, culminating in Vietnam, which, as everyone knows, was the first televised war. The impact of television on home-front attitudes toward Vietnam has often been exaggerated, but, I would argue, media representations of the battlefield have, under certain conditions, become much more graphic in recent decades. This is not just a product of ever-improving technology. Media coverage of combat death, especially during the first phase of the Iraq War in 2003-2004, focused much more on the personal stories of American casualties. Whereas during the two world wars, Korea, and Vietnam, the home front was bombarded with statistics about the dead, the wounded, and the missing, in the first months of the Iraq War they learned much more about the lives and loves of every individual who had fallen. At the start of most days, ABC’s *Good Morning America* listed the names of the confirmed dead; later, NBC’s *Nightly News* focused “its casualty coverage on in-depth reports about individuals and their families.” On one occasion, CBS’s *Early Show* ended with “a four-minute display of the names, ages, and photographs of all the casualties in order of their deaths.”¹²

The Internet helped to intensify this focus on the individual. On their web pages, newspapers compiled portraits of every person from their state killed in Iraq, or had links to pictures of the dead, next to which they

⁹ Hicks, D-Day Report, 6 June 1944, Call: RWB 7547 B4, NBC Radio Archives, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ On radio coverage of the European war, see Casey, *War Beat*, 204-206, 233-234.

¹¹ “Marines Charge Over a Crest on Iwo Island,” and editorial, “Picture Miracle,” *New York Times*, 21 February 1945. The impact of new communications on war coverage is a main theme of my forthcoming book, *The War Beat, Pacific: The American Media at War against Japan*.

¹² Wilgoren and Nagourney, “While Mourning Dead, Many Americans Say Level of Casualties is Acceptable,” *New York Times*, 8 April 2003. This point is developed further in Casey, *When Soldiers Fall*, 216-219.

placed moving tributes detailing their careers, “from training to their deaths to the final journey home.”¹³ Arguably, this personalization of American battlefield losses meant that as the actual number declined from the staggering levels of the Meuse-Argonne, their impact was magnified. Yet this has not been the only recent development. The Internet has also created an echo chamber in which facts are contested, preexisting opinions are reinforced, and unifying mediating voices find it increasingly difficult to obtain an audience. This development has further fractured the American polity. Even before the Internet age, political parties had frequently politicized all aspects of war, including the meaning of combat deaths. During the two world wars, Korea, and Vietnam, Democrats and Republicans were quick to accuse the other of a variety of sins, from wasting American lives to lying about the casualty totals to suit their own agenda. But the partisan mudslinging about combat death became particularly vicious during the final years of George W. Bush’s presidency.¹⁴

Despite these pressures pushing toward the personalization and politicization of wartime death, Dudziak is still correct to claim that Americans have become “insulated from seeing and sensing the violence of their wars,” which has in turn bred a “profound political apathy” (16). The reasons for this tension are a final subject worthy of research. It stems partly, I think, from the changing nature of war. The initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 was very much a conventional operation, with echoes of World War II, given that more than six hundred accredited correspondents accompanied U.S. forces on the march to Baghdad. As the fighting transformed into a messy counter-insurgency struggle, so media interest waned. By September 2006 there were only eleven correspondents embedded with the military in Iraq, down from 114 a year before. As well as the difficulty of covering the increasingly unpredictable and vicious fighting, editors faced severe financial pressure in the new Internet age. With a U.S. reporter in Iraq costing about \$30,000 a month, most news organizations increasingly operated “largely through inexpensive stringers,” who lacked the name-recognition to get their stories onto the front page.¹⁵ More recently, media attention has also waned as political and military leaders have switched to the use of technowar, symbolized by the growing use of drone strikes, and reporters have struggled to find compelling ways to cover combat in which there is no substantial American ground-troop presence.

How the media might cover a big conventional war in the future remains to be seen, but the omens are not good. Both American politics and the U.S. media are becoming ever more fractured, fractious, and fragmented. Unifying voices like Ernie Pyle, who appeal across the various divides, are at a premium. There is a distinct likelihood that, in the future, the mediating institutions in the polity will distort, rather than bridge, the chasm that exists between the battlefield and the home front. Just how we have reached the stage requires historians to focus on subjects that have too often been neglected. Mary Dudziak’s excellent presidential address provides a much-needed starting point that ought to encourage historians to pay more attention to war, media, and politics.

¹³ Casey, *When Soldier Fall*, 219.

¹⁴ Casey, *When Soldier Fall*, 229-234.

¹⁵ Kesler, “Is the Press Covering the Iraq War on the Cheap?”, “The ‘Peculiar’ Disappearance of Iraq Coverage,” and “Number of Embeds Drops to Lowest Level in Iraq,” *Editor and Publisher*, 25 April 2005, 29 July 2006, and 10 October 2006; Casey, *When Soldiers Fall*, 230.

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