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Introduction: America and the Second World War 80 Years On – Impacts and Legacies at Home and Abroad

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On 10 September 2025, the United States Senate passed a resolution to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War and to honour the American veterans who took part. The bi-partisan resolution proposed by Richard Blumenthal (D – CT) and Mike Rounds (R – SD) asked Americans to

commemorate the 80th anniversary of the signing of the Instrument of Surrender aboard the USS Missouri (BB-63) on September 2, 1945, as a day of appreciation for the members of the 'Greatest Generation' who, through their sacrifices both in the Armed Forces and on the home front, preserved liberty for future generations.¹

The resolution was endorsed by a number of organisations and legacy groups, including the National World War II Museum, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion. The commemorative events that followed took many forms across the United States.

President Donald Trump marked the anniversary of VE Day with a proclamation that described it as 'one of the most epic victories for forces of freedom in the history of the world,' thanking 'every patriot that made up the Greatest Generation.' He followed this with a statement on 14 August marking the Japanese surrender, once again stressing the 'unmatched courage, grit, and sacrifice of the fearless patriots of

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¹'S.Res.383 - A resolution commemorating the 80th anniversary of the conclusion of World War II with the surrender of Imperial Japan and honoring veterans of both the Pacific and European theaters.' Effective September 10,

<https://www.congress.gov/bills/119th-congress/senate-resolution/383/text>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

the United States Armed Forces.¹² In the way that commemorative acts provide insights into contemporary uses of the past and their socio-political contexts, Trump's comments were infused by the preoccupations of his administration that emphasise an all-conquering sense of 'America First' patriotism, as well as visions of his own political legacy. At the same time, they were echoing previous anniversaries whereby the conflict has been remembered nostalgically and frequently as a 'Good War' and for the sacrifices of a special generation that overcome an evil enemy, and the period of relative stability that followed.³

Remarkably, veterans in their 90s and even 100s were present at many commemorative events around the country. According to the National WWII Museum, around 45,000 veterans were still alive in 2025.⁴ Several took part in ceremonies at the World War II Memorial in the Washington Mall to mark V-J day. Others were present at the Battleship Missouri Memorial in Pearl Harbor on 2 September marking the official surrender of Japan 80 years earlier.⁵ At the former, veterans such as Dave Yoho and James Quinn were interviewed, highlighting the emphasis on honouring the memories of the remaining survivors while still possible. Some events focused on reconciliation and contemporary relations of former enemies, such as the program of remembrance involving Japanese Shinto priests and veterans'

²President Donald J. Trump, 'Victory Day for World War II, 2025: a Proclamation,' Issued 8 May 2025,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/victory-day-for-world-war-ii-2025/>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

³Neil A. Wynn, "The 'Good War': The Second World War and Postwar American Society." *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 3 (1996): pp. 463–82: p. 463. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261016>

⁴'WWII Veteran Statistics,' *National WWII Museum*, accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/wwii-veteran-statistics>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

⁵'80th Anniversary Commemoration of End of World War II,' *C-Span*, accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/80th-anniversary-commemoration-of-end-of-world-war-ii/664991>. Accessed 7 May 2026;

'Commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the End of WWII will be held at the Battleship Missouri Memorial in Pearl Harbor on Tuesday, Sept 2., with 25 WWII Veterans Attending,' *Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum*, accessed 31 October 2025, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/commemoration-of-the-80th-anniversary-of-the-end-of-wwii-will-be-held-at-the-battleship-missouri-memorial-in-pearl-harbor-on-tuesday-sept-2-with-25-wwii-veterans-attending-302543028.html>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

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organisations at the Long Island Museum of American Armor.⁶ While these forms of remembrance demonstrate the dominance on the military aspects of the conflict, these events also highlight the complexity of the American contributions to the War effort. For instance, Navajo 'Code Talker' Thomas Begay was present at the V-E Day commemorations at the Washington Mall on 8 May, providing an indication of the 'greatest generation's' ethnic and racial diversity. African American veterans and their relatives also took part in events that emphasised their contributions to the war effort, as well as reminding audiences about the obstacles they faced in order to do so.⁷ 102-year-old veteran pilot Daniel Keel returned to Molise in Italy – where the famous Tuskegee Airmen were stationed – to take part in eightieth anniversary events.⁸ This remarkable reunion is illustrative of the complex transnational experiences which that characterised the war for different Americans, as well as their long-term legacies.

The anniversary therefore provides an opportunity to reflect on the war's varied effects. The Second World War triggered profound social, economic, and ideological shifts in the United States. While the reorganisation of the country on to a war footing affected most Americans across the social spectrum, the political implications for the country had profound consequences domestically and internationally for many decades. Millions of American military personnel were stationed abroad, and came into contact with different peoples and cultures. Often occurring in extraordinary circumstances, these encounters could function as catalysts for affirmations of as well as challenges to established notions of identity. The diverse racial and ethnic make-up of the American military was the focus of Thomas Guglielmo's *Divisions: a New History of Racism and Resistance in America's WWII Military*.⁹ This book, which examined the experiences of different Americans, as well as the nature and effects of the racial politics that permeated the military, challenges some of the dominant assumptions of unity and togetherness that emanate from much of the recent commemorative

⁶'On 80th anniversary of the end of WWII, a program of remembrance as Americans and Japanese reflect on VJ Day,' *Patch.com*, 1 September 2025, accessed 31 October 2025,

<https://patch.com/new-york/longisland/80th-anniversary-end-wwii-program-remembrance-americans-japanese-reflect>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

⁷'"Black Uniform:" Film Screening and Discussion,' *Veterans Breakfast Club*, accessed 31 October 2025, <https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/event/black-uniform-film-screening-and-discussion/>. Accessed 7 May 2026.

⁸'US WWII Airman aged 102 returns to fly over Molise skies,' ANSA, accessed 31 October 2025, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2025/04/24/us-wwii-airman-aged-102-returns-to-fly-over-molise-skies_29bb6570-908a-4958-8a7b-c73603017df4.html Accessed 10 May 2026.

⁹Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

activity. Guglielmo not only demonstrates the various ways Americans from different racial and ethnic backgrounds navigated and challenged the racialised operations of the American war machine, but stresses the various costs of race-based decision-making in terms of efficiency, potential loss of life and the longevity of the war itself. While remembrance activity tends to prioritise simplistic 'Good War' narratives, historians such as Guglielmo, Brooke Blower, Andrew Buchanan, and Ruth Lawlor among many others, have been working to unpick such narratives by considering the more complex nature of the conflict for the United States. This has also entailed appreciating the more transnational and globalised nature of the conflict, which has included a much more internationalised historiography.¹⁰

Guglielmo's book was the subject of a keynote address at the Historians of the Twentieth Century United States (HOTCUS) Winter Symposium held at the University of Gloucestershire in February 2025. Entitled 'The United States and World War II: Impacts and Legacies at Home and Abroad,' the event brought together established and emerging scholars to consider the significance of the conflict for different groups of Americans in and outside of the military during the war and beyond. Given the clear militaristic emphasis of commemorative events, the symposium sought to interrogate the wider social, political, and cultural significance of the conflict for different groups of Americans, including women, African Americans, Japanese Americans, marginalised groups and even 'new' Americans that arrived to the United States as a result of wartime marriage. It also invited scholars to consider the significance of the war in terms of American politics, economics, and foreign policy, particularly in relation to the nation's shifting role in the world. The articles present in this special edition of the *British Journal of Military History* deal with issues of gender, race, sexuality, religion, and the agency of women, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and peoples that were intending to become American. They also consider the effects of the War on education and the role of scientific progress.

A common theme in the collection is the diverse experiences and effects of the incarceration of different Americans at home and abroad. Caleb Woodall's article focuses on the role of religion and labour in the actions of conscientious objectors and their challenge to the state's championing of freedom at abroad while and seemingly abandoning it at home. The notion of freedom and identity was also imperative to Japanese Americans confined to internment camps during the War as a result of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, as Maddie Hale examines. Her analysis of camp newspapers produced predominantly by women sheds light on previously underexplored voices, and how they understood their own American identities. The War also provided various opportunities for African Americans to

¹⁰See for instance Andrew Buchanan and Ruth Lawlor, eds. *The Greater Second World War: Global Perspectives*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2025).

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challenge inequality and discrimination, while contributions to the war effort allowed them to demonstrate and validate their own American identity. Simona Tobia's article on the memories of African American POWs not only highlights an underappreciated aspect of the War, but also centres on the long-term legacies of their experiences as a minority group by demonstrating the ways in which their memories were continuously reshaped in the years afterwards.

As Samantha Lanevi's article on the 'Bride Schools' in Japan discusses, aspiring Americans in the form Japanese women, needed to be *made* Americans. By examining the manner in which the schools prepared women for lives as American wives, Lanevi argues these institutions were a form of 'pre-assimilation' that reflected broader notions of American identity as well as occupation and immigration policies. For existing American women, the War had other implications. As Katie Marshall discusses via the fascinating example of Esther Herbert and Marvyl Doyle in the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the movement of women across military sites also allowed lesbians to meet and connect. While not without significant problems, Marshall's article adds to scholarship on the development of a lesbian scene within the military by exploring the personal experiences of Herbert and Doyle. In our final contribution, Rebecca Stone examines the War's effects on the perception and changing value attached to scientific progress, particularly in relation to emergence of the Cold War. Stone focuses on the way college students could avoid selective service as a means of measuring the new patriotic significance of scientific advancement in the post-war years.

At the time the authors were writing the articles for this special edition, the globe has been experiencing the various effects of military conflict in which the United States has played a central role, whether in the Middle East, Ukraine, or Venezuela. The political, social and economic ripple effects of these contemporary struggles are reflective of the ways in which war and conflict always have tangible as well as hidden consequences that go significantly beyond the battlefields. As the articles in this edition explore, this was as true for the Second World War as it is today.