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Review of Keene's "Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America"

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Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America. By Jennifer D. Keene. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-8018-6592-1. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Sources. Index. Pp. xiv, 294. \$38.00.

In 1917 George M. Cohan wrote his greatest hit, "Over There." The song captured the American notion that the country's involvement in the Great War was a grand and noble effort, a crusade that would end, hopefully, in a just peace, and a world safe for democracy. Most histories of the American role in the war emphasize these altruistic ideas, along with American sacrifice, and, ultimately, victory. They also show how unprepared and unrespected our armed forces were. After the war, after the disappointing and ill-fated peace of Versailles, the American people became disillusioned with the war, and to a lesser extent, Europeans. Jennifer D. Keene's new book, *Doughboys, The Great War, and the Remaking of America*, speeds up the process of disillusionment for the Doughboys: she argues that America's citizen soldiers, in the midst of the conflict, are better understood as largely rejecting Cohan's war, army culture, and ultimately the federal government's claim that its obligation to them was finished when they were belatedly, at least in their minds, mustered out of the army. In demonstrating this rejection, Keene hopes to offer "a dramatically different paradigm for understanding the American experience in the Great War."

One might expect Dr. Keene to attack the old interpretation directly, pointing out its flaws and inadequacies. She does not; she ignores it rather like a literary version of the American island hopping campaign of the Pacific war with Japan. Keene attacks targets of her own choosing, apparently on the assumption that if she does not discuss the decisions and motivations of political and military leaders, their grand strategy, and the larger military operations, these cannot be of much importance. This approach is considerably less successful than American strategy in the Pacific war noted above. More specifically, Keene would have us believe that the American Expeditionary Forces were composed primarily of disgruntled radicals who cared little for the French and still less for the war. Keene's Doughboys, much to their officers' dismay, prefer the Germans, fraternizing openly with them. Yet the author herself admits that the American soldiers fought well, impressing their officers to the point that postwar army plans relied heavily on the citizen soldier. Still more telling, the fraternization claim is based on research concerning only three regiments of one division, and the incidents all occur near the end of the war. Officers who discovered the congenial rela-

tionship between the opposing lines were shocked, and the division commander was sent home. Yet Keene extrapolates that this antipathy for the French and friendship for the Germans “created serious problems in the postwar Franco-American relationship.” While scholars of the era have long known that many American soldiers preferred German culture to French, Keene offers no evidence that Woodrow Wilson, who often ignored his own advisers at Versailles, was moved to oppose French treaty demands because of Doughboy sentiments. Indeed, Wilson’s views on the nature of the peace for which the U.S. fought were well established before a single American soldier set foot on French soil. Consequently, the more traditional method of examining and emphasizing the policies and motives of the various leaders and nations involved in postwar negotiations offers a far better explanation as to why American and French political leaders were so at odds over the nature of the peace.

While Professor Keene’s larger purpose is far too grandiose, the book still has much to commend it. It is clearly written and magnificently researched. When Keene carefully interprets that research, her work makes a significant contribution to developing the complexity and utility of the old paradigm. While one cannot read this book in the hope that it provides a thorough view of the war as a whole, it provides important new insights into the nature of many of the citizen soldiers, and their impact on the American army and the federal government. In the book’s best passages, Keene’s Doughboys force the federal government to re-examine the relationship between itself and its citizen soldiers. The result was a more egalitarian army—at least for whites—and the Bonus Bill of 1924. That legislation established the federal government’s ongoing responsibility to the men whose military service interrupted their civilian lives. Still more significantly, Doughboy leadership, in the midst of a far more catastrophic conflict, would help expand that responsibility through the GI Bill. The author is quite correct in ending her work with the assertion that the GI Bill “played a key role in generating the unprecedented prosperity Americans enjoyed in the second half of the twentieth century.”

Jennifer Keene’s book provides a unique and helpful view of part of the American experience in the Great War and its aftermath. Those who desire a comprehensive understanding of that war should read it as a supplement to the more traditional interpretations.

Kerry E. Irish

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