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Review of *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran* by John M. Kinder

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H-Net Reviews

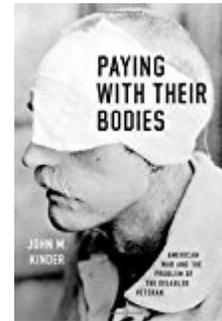
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John M. Kinder. *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran.* Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015. viii + 358 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-21009-4; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-42071-4.

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John M. Kinder argues that disability is a social construction, a theoretical and methodological concept that has been applied, it seems, to virtually every human condition studied by historians. Although on the surface it seems an awkward fit to disability—either you can or you cannot walk, work, support a family, or fulfill other adult responsibilities—yet the disabilities of war veterans are, indeed, shaped by attitudes toward war, the quality of medical care and technology, political considerations, and many other factors.

At one level, this is a straightforward and much-needed history of disabled veterans, a “counternarrative to the traditional story of American warfare” (p. 12). But Kinder’s real purpose is to explore cultural and political attitudes toward disabled veterans, especially those who survived the First World War and those fighting the United States’ current wars. He sees “the Problem of the Disabled Veterans” as a “lens through which to explore Americans’ attempts to come to terms with war’s inevitable human damage” and, by extension, their efforts to weigh the costs and benefits of waging war (p. 12).

The operative word to Kinder’s approach is “problem,” not simply in the sense that being disabled presents a host of physical and psychological challenges to people with disabilities, but because the presence of disabled veterans becomes a “problem” to the societies in which they live. They become emotional and financial problems

for their families, they become resource and management problems for institutions charged with caring for them, and they become moral and political problems for governments setting policies for them. These issues are especially acute when the wars in which they were injured are fought for ambivalent or unclear goals. Indeed, disabled soldiers can become foreign policy problems when the inevitability of thousands of young men becoming disabled enters the equation.

Each of Kinder’s evocatively titled chapters adds a layer of ambiguity by exploring discrete elements of the experiences of, and responses to, disabled veterans. The first chapter establishes the medical, moral, and political threads that emerged around disabled Civil War soldiers, ideas and attitudes that would shape the way disabled survivors of the Great War would be viewed, treated, and used in the twentieth century. Chapter 2 moves to the nature of combat during the First World War; Americans’ fascination with gruesome accounts from the Western Front prior to the United States’ entrance into the war; and initial reactions to the reality of the presence of disabled American soldiers, including the idea that war and its effects could be managed, the notion that there was a difference between “honorable” and “dishonorable” wounds, the suggestion that coping with grievous injury could actually improve the character of wounded men, and the determination of the US government to carefully limit public exposure to information about disabled soldiers unless it served their purposes.

The bulk of the book traces the diverse and often conflicting conditions, ideologies, and political approaches that shaped responses to the many thousands of disabled veterans of the war. Chapter 3 shows how the immediate postwar positivity toward the First World War and toward veterans—even the disabled—gave way due to political unrest, economic distress, the greater emergency of the worldwide flu epidemic, the myth of a veteran-fueled crime wave, and a souring of Americans' view of the war itself. Overlaying all of this by the early 1920s was a call for a return to "normalcy," which effectively ignored the needs of anyone having to deal with decidedly abnormal disabilities. Other chapters examine specific responses. Progressives, the medical establishment, labor unions, and business leaders—the primary subjects of chapter 4—led the "rehabilitation movement," which would eliminate disability as an effect of war through vocational training, educating families, and publicity. Plagued by racial discrimination and limited success—both because rehabilitation science was still rudimentary and because the public did not quite buy into the propaganda—this phase eventually failed to remove the problem of disability.

Chapter 5 focuses on the plethora of veterans groups formed after the war, particularly the Disabled American Veterans of the World War and the American Legion, which deployed an ideology of "100% Americanism" to build admiration for the veterans who had demonstrated extraordinary patriotism, but also to reinvigorate the "veterans' welfare state that rehabilitationists had tried ... to avoid" (p. 155). The onset of the Great Depression undercut the movement to provide special benefits to veterans and cast movements like the Bonus March in a poor light; hard-pressed civilians complained about the "Veteran Racket" (p. 176). Another thread of veterans' interwar efforts appears in chapter 6, which describes efforts by former soldiers and others to integrate the stories of disabled veterans into the public memory of the war, ranging from the selling of Memorial Day poppies to the "forgotten veteran" genre in popular culture. A darker effort to incorporate disabled veterans into war remembrance was inaugurated by the peace movement of the 1930s, which dominates chapter 7. Through photographic books and exhibits, poster contests, plays, and novels (Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* [1939], in particular), these activists aimed to prevent the slide toward war with the rise of Fascism. The peace movement failed to prevent war, of course, and critics (including Kinder) suggest that, in fact, it undermined any kind of thoughtful approach to disabled veterans in that it simply

exploited the old soldiers' ghastly injuries without offering solutions or benefiting them in anyway. Indeed, the campaign stigmatized disabled veterans even further by making them into unfortunate monsters and hapless victims.

Chapter 8 follows the story beyond the Second World War, which created hundreds of thousands of disabled veterans. But advanced methods of rehabilitation, the newly created (in 1930) Veterans' Administration, the GI Bill, economic prosperity, and the "victory culture" that followed the war ensured that disabled veterans of this war would not be seen as a "problem" (p. 258). Yet that superficially halcyon period for disabled veterans would be compromised during the "militarization" of the Cold War (with the nuclear arms race, constant tension, and hot wars in Korea and Vietnam). This led to Americans' rejection of casualties in wars they did not quite understand or of which they did not approve and the creation of a new version of the veteran "problem" in the 1960s and 1970s. A moving epilogue reflects on what is different, what is the same, and the nuances between those ends of the spectrum in our treatment of, and thinking about, soldiers disabled in current, never-ending wars.

This short review cannot do justice to this well-written, tightly packed book. Kinder features veterans and their supporters, not just as isolated victims or as bitter protesters (although some are) but as complicated people with their own motivations and agendas. The breadth of coverage and creative use of sources are impressive; Kinder ranges through politics and popular culture, foreign relations and finances, social movements and the welfare state, race and gender, war culture and antiwar ideology. The portions of the book that examine the many evolving meanings of disability are the strongest; the ways in which the disability "problem" might or might not affect the United States' choices about foreign policy and war are less clearly articulated.

"At its heart," Kinder writes, "this has been a book about fantasies and two in particular: the fantasy that the United States can remain a global military power without incurring the social, economic, and physical consequences associated with veterans' disabilities; and the fantasy that Americans will permanently reject war because of the risks to soldiers' bodies and minds" (p. 287). Neither fantasy came true, nor is ever likely to come true, of course, but this fine, thoughtful book offers many things to ponder about the United States' struggles to confront the inevitable tragedies of war.

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