Introduction

The years immediately following the armistice in the United States have generally been characterized by massive labor unrest, cultural and class tension, ethnic turmoil, isolationist tendencies, nativism, and racial prejudice—forces that dominated public concern and threatened the core of national unity.' Permeating this ubiquitous discontent was the lingering malaise produced by an ambiguous war, exacerbated by America’s failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles or join the League of Nations.

Efforts to unite this fractured society were reinforced by President Woodrow Wilson’s appeal to democratic ideals as a primary justification for bringing the country into war. However, attempts to portray a unified nation with a common purpose did not end with the armistice, or with Wilson’s efforts to take his cause to the people during a cross-country tour. Instead, they fueled the politics of remembrance in the aftermath of the First World War, which resulted in a story that remains essentially untold, of exploitation and experimentation in the name of honor to America’s war dead.

This book explains why the United States commemorated the war as it did and emphasizes the degree to which that course was so remarkable. It re-creates the specific, grounded, textured, and complex political and cultural environment in which the corresponding policies were made, thereby illuminating the character of American politics and culture in the aftermath of the First World War in new ways.

The first mass war of the twentieth century brought abrupt change to the United States as its citizens adjusted to expansive new technologies, a massive surge in their industrial development (and the vast immigration this sparked), the rapid growth of their cities, and a political democracy that became increasingly more centralized and bureaucratized. These broad, wrenching powers of modernization forced Americans to revise former concepts of collective identity and reconsider their obligation to the nation. A modern American ideology emerged, one intent on
cohesiveness, in which racial, religious, and ethnic differences were overlooked in favor of national unity. In the process, collective identities were exchanged for the benefits of citizenship.

As the social and political culture of the United States altered, so too did public aspirations concerning former commemorative patterns and symbols. Americans were searching for a fresh vocabulary for mediating grief, one that reflected current points of view, rather than the conventional practices of old-world Europe. Former symbols of mourning were cast aside in favor of expressions that more closely represented a progressive, forward-looking society with its needs based in the present. Their quest led to a modern, secular variety of mourning that attempted to transform grief into glory.

Historically, America’s commemorative path had evolved from the nation’s responses to previous wars, which had established precedents that influenced practice by 1918. Its distinctive character was also motivated by other aspects of the country’s culture: its institutions, its ethno-cultural mix, the legacy of slavery, the evolving role of women in public life, the rise of Jim Crow, and the increasing power of organized interests within an inimitable democratic mass culture. These forces were often in conflict, making it extremely difficult for policymakers to meet the expectations of all groups.

The Great War demanded a revision of former practice since the past could not be relied on to guide future policy. By involving itself in the international conflict at such a crucial juncture, injecting men and resources that ultimately provided a decisive Allied victory, the nation forever altered its global status.

Comforting, well-established traditions that had evolved over several decades, such as the unrestrained erection of monuments and the unquestioned return of the war dead, were abruptly threatened by radical revision. Graves scattered across Europe and the United States, and remains that lay unidentified or simply no longer existed, complicated efforts to collectively mourn the dead just as distant battlefields and government restrictions prevented cooperative efforts to mark the war in a personal and meaningful way.

Nevertheless, the United States joined the international community in the creation of rituals of remembrance after the war with the dedication of a tomb for the Unknown Soldier, the construction of local and regional memorials, the designation of a national day of remembrance, the establishment of cemeteries on former battlefields, and eventually organized
pilgrimages. Yet ambivalence and delay marked America’s postwar commemorative effort, in which a diverse population, unprepared for war and then late into the conflict, sought to commemorate the experience that led to its new world role. The introduction of these modern practices during the immediate postwar years of instability, debate, and uncertainty made their acceptance all the more difficult.

Attempts to commemorate at home reflected the ambivalence felt within the nation toward this war that seemed to have gained nothing, as efforts to maintain a sense of wartime harmony and social unity dissolved in the postwar determination to reinterpret the past. In this climate diverse partisan factions sought to create war memories that would lend meaning and restore purpose to this tragic ignoble event. Dialogue ensued between the various participants who attempted to negotiate their version of war memory, such as the state, civil society, social groups, and individuals. Women and veterans became especially vocal, particularly as their associations grew in strength and numbers; however, efforts by the state to appease this democratic society merely fostered further conflict.

Heated disagreements raged between isolationists and internationalists, confusion reigned over the ideal path to world peace, and to the majority of Americans, menacing fears over insidious alien forces such as Bolshevism proved to be more pressing concerns than national commemoration. These circumstances contributed to mass indifference toward the memorialization of a war that served such questionable aims, particularly toward plans that involved overseas constructions.

The emergence of the country’s new power, wealth, and prestige brought changes to the political realm, affecting foreign policies that marginalized the rights of citizens as guardians of their nation’s war memory. But a compromise was deemed necessary since the nation could no longer remain isolated from world affairs; U.S. wealth, global expansion, and military power now demanded a more ambitious diplomatic presence abroad to protect American interests and investments.

Internationally, governments struggled on behalf of their citizens to interpret meaning from the vast death tolls, while simultaneously developing practical measures for coping with remains of the deceased. The decisions reached by nation-states regarding the sensitive issue of the war dead seldom gained the support of their citizenry since negotiations over the rights and ownership of the deceased had never previously taken place. Yet on a personal level the sacrifice of life needed to be fully justified and then mourned and remembered in an honorable way.
Much was at stake in the ensuing debates that raged between governments and their people over the war and its remembrance, primarily the glory of warriors, the grief of the bereaved, the image of the nation, and the needs of the state. These factors influenced the construction of the myth of the war experience by those most concerned with the image and unity of the nation. This sociocultural process was designed to “draw the sting from death in war and emphasize the meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice.” The myth relied on the cult of the fallen soldier “with the aim of mak[ing] an inherently unpalatable past acceptable, important not just for the purpose of consolation but above all for the justification of the nation in whose name the war had been fought.” This myth was not unique to the United States since all thriving nation-states require warriors prepared to sacrifice their lives for a cause greater than individual life. However, in a democratic society, this process became a negotiable one whereby special interest groups affected by the war expected a tangible return for their sacrifice.

Invoking the memory of the war dead promoted solidarity while instilling a willingness to die for an abstract cause; thus, the deceased were imbued with a unique purpose beyond that which their sacrifice had served. But as a valuable and meaningful commodity, the dead required new levels of protection, care, and preservation. In the aftermath of war, a sanctioned memory evolved on heritage landscapes composed of national cemeteries and commemorative battlefield sites.

With few domestic guidelines in place, policymakers looked to the imperial designs and rituals of the former European powers for a precedent. When these processes combined with American commemorative apparatus dating from the mid-nineteenth century, the result was nothing short of a spectacular compromise.

Continuity (or pedigree) is at the very heart of what civilization is. It is the means by which a culture maintains its identity. In the absence of centuries and even millennia by which the life of a culture is usually measured, a young nation thrust into the role of world leader must construct its own identity. In the era of discontinuity ushered in by the First World War, when forces of the old and new worlds ruptured, Americans became alienated from their past. This tendency continues as national innocence is increasingly replaced with “a materialistic creed that celebrates transience, and an electronic faith that worships the present to the exclusion of all other dimensions of time.”

This book follows the American response in three chronological stages: “Repatriation,” which explains the process of democratic choice regarding
the disposition of remains; “Remembrance,” the construction of commemorative symbols abroad by a select group of politically motivated individuals; and “Return,” which explores the lavish state-sanctioned battlefield pilgrimages in which the full impact of American and European cultural approaches unfolded.

The investigation benefits from this three-pronged methodology that identifies distinct stages within the U.S. commemorative process, whereby each phase impelled the next. Part 1, “Repatriation,” explores the roots of historical memory based in previous American wars that still held tremendous influence over the nation in 1917. With Secretary of War Newton Baker’s promise of 1918, public expectations were raised that the government would provide a home burial to all who died in its foreign service. In the absence of a firm prewar policy, this promise resulted in a massive operation that cost the government millions of dollars and firmly established a national paradigm that has endured. Despite this extraordinary undertaking and the disruption caused when families were offered an opportunity to decide the burial place of their deceased, the unprecedented exercise remains an obscure event in America’s past.

Evidence indicates that repatriation of the dead from overseas battlefields was the catalyst that drove American First World War commemoration. Yet the democratic burial options offered to families, initially proposed to assuage their grief, also contributed to a massive diffusion of memory. Since most of America’s war dead lay buried in scattered graves throughout the United States, interest in overseas commemoration was undeniably diluted.

In part 2, “Remembrance,” the investigation turns to the establishment of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) in 1923 and the mounting tension that occurred within an increasingly diverse society, as a result of the group’s policies. ABMC efforts to wield political power into grand schemes of commemoration beyond American borders contributed instead to a state of cultural amnesia. I address the causes that led to this unfortunate outcome by first considering how American commemorative practices were shaped by events preceding the First World War.

As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that national commemorative traditions evolved along a historical path rooted in the western frontier, the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War. Each conflict contributed to the establishment of exceptional practices that eventually influenced post–World War remembrance. Yet America in the 1840s was a very different place from the America of the
1920s. The nation’s political democracy became more centralized and bu-
reaucratized through this period as authority moved from local to state
and then to federal government. The American Battle Monuments Com-
mission, the military, and civil society all had their own interests and
dogmas, and this is a feature of the rise of the modern state. Tracing the
story of remembrance between the 1840s and the 1930s, with particular
reference to the period after the war, offers an opportunity to probe all
these broad, wrenching forces of modernization.

Unlike other governments, U.S. policymakers were accountable to a
public that held unique assumptions regarding commemorative practices
intended to honor its war dead. By the close of the Civil War in 1865,
Americans expected national cemeteries for those who chose not to bring
their dead home; they also anticipated an unrestrained right to erect mon-
uments on former battlefields. Moreover, the public had traditionally held
their government and military leaders responsible for the care of their de-
ceased to the extent that they presumed the use of modern funereal pro-
cedures and advanced search and identification methods. These diverse
expectations made the task of commemorating the first modern, interna-
tional war of the twentieth century an intrinsically complicated one.

Adding to the confusion was widespread disillusionment over Ameri-
can participation in a war that seemed to lack any obvious gains. President
Woodrow Wilson’s references to democratic objectives as a justification
for war had only added to the ambivalence many Americans felt toward
another foreign military conflict. Congressional rejection of the League of
Nations also reinforced the public’s resolve to avoid future entanglements;
consequently, many turned their backs on the past, reverting instead to
isolationism or detached self-interest. Much of this disenchantment was
reflected in an ideology based on what was good for the individual, not
the community. This tension between the individual and the collective ap-
ppears to have increased when exposed to uncertainties regarding the ap-
propriate remembrance of such a questionable and costly pursuit.

Political officials, the military, and even the public were caught unpre-
pared for the new role America would play in postwar international affairs.
ABMC members were equally confused as to how a world power should
most effectively memorialize its military role, which had contributed to
a decisive Allied victory. In the absence of a suitable policy, the govern-
ment improvised by constructing a modern solution with ties to historical
convention. Since individual states and local communities had attempted
to pursue their own commemorative plans, national remembrance readily
merged with broader foreign objectives. National cemeteries became instruments of public diplomacy, as did monuments, designed to win sympathy and induce a sense of awe and obligation abroad. This political action soon proved divisive at home and abroad as ABMC commissioners promoted grandiose schemes of commemoration beyond American borders.

The ABMC’s part-imitative, part-innovative initiatives represented a radical departure from convention. Their project cost the nation millions of dollars but was thought to reflect more accurately the burgeoning prestige and influence held by the United States. It included impressive national cemeteries resembling landscaped gardens that beckoned tourists while advocating a “forgetting” of painful sacrifices for those seeking resolution of their grief. And whereas the federal government had traditionally consented to a fairly unrestrained approach to public commemoration by Americans, in the wake of this war, the state deviated from convention. Grand edifices were erected to the nation’s glory on distant battlefields instead of in the United States, where they might have served to remind the nation of its participation and the war’s cost. The extent to which this decision altered collective war memory is considered in detail.

Part 2 concludes with an investigation into the responses of those people most affected by the war and by America’s policies. In Britain and its dominions, government restrictions prohibited the repatriation of the war dead. Instead, the state chose on behalf of its people to construct national cemeteries near the former battlefield. In doing so, the government faced dissension and angry protest at this imposition of state authority, yet it ultimately preserved a comparatively more dignified and enduring symbol of remembrance. By contrast, the war dead of France and the United States were subjected to a macabre process that involved the mass consolidation of remains into national “Fields of Honor.” U.S. practices caused further chaos in France by triggering dissent among a grieving population that demanded the state acknowledge their sacrifices in a similar manner.

One of the most striking contrasts between the American experience and that which occurred in other nations is the degree to which the U.S. military and political elites were expected to respond to mass opinion expressed through newspapers and organized groups. In this regard, the investigation considers civil society’s role as agent of memory, specifically, that of the American Legion and the Gold Star Mothers. These collectives offer a rich, multidimensional model of ethnic, cultural, economic, and religious diversity prevalent in America during the interwar years while
providing scope for exploration into racial, gender, and political issues within the context of national mourning.

Perhaps in response to the limitations imposed on group participation in overseas commemoration, civic affiliations within the United States of women, war veterans, and African Americans proliferated in the immediate postwar era. These groups claimed a stake in the nation’s victory and expected something in return for the sacrifices they had made. As civil societies, they were practicing their democratic right to unite as enfranchised units that wielded greater authority in a nation increasingly dominated by group politics. Together, they forged a common voice that exalted their unique contribution to war’s official memory.

By the late 1920s, Britain and the United States had nearly completed a massive phase of commemorative construction, primarily in Belgium and France. This triggered the third integral part of remembrance: the battlefield pilgrim, the focus of part 3, “Return.” For Americans, an ocean and thousands of miles separated them from the cemeteries and monuments erected on behalf of their nation and its heroes. As a consequence, only the more affluent could afford the long voyage to Europe. Yet ABMC commissioners were certain that generations of Americans would make the pilgrimage across the sea. The fact that this mass exodus never materialized disturbed those people most determined to ensure a lasting memory of the war: veterans and families of the deceased.

In 1927 thousands of veterans from the powerful American Legion and its auxiliaries paraded through Paris to mark the tenth anniversary of the war. Away from the United States, the group’s zealous marching bands, lavish colorful costumes, and uproarious performances appeared to European observers as a mockery of war’s memory. These events, dedicated to the celebration of victory rather than war’s painful losses, bore a marked resemblance to the behavior of Civil War veterans during their annual encampments at Gettysburg.

Although the Legionnaires’ pilgrimage appears to have warranted a place in several contemporary historical accounts, the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages have remained in relative obscurity. These women, named for the gold star they were urged to display on armbands and service flags in their homes, were accorded greater recognition for having lost loved ones in the war. Many people believed these mothers and widows deserved an opportunity to see the graves of their sons and husbands overseas. So between 1930 and 1933, with much of the nation experiencing severe economic hardship, these pilgrims enjoyed a luxurious voyage to Europe as
guests of the U.S. government. However, African American women invited to participate in the pilgrimage did so on the same segregated basis as their sons and husbands who had fought and died.

The Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages emerged from a decade-long struggle marked by effective political lobbying by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant women's organizations that had largely supported President Wilson's early war effort. As auxiliary units of the American Legion, they benefited not only from experience gained in earlier women's reform movements but also from their elevated position within society as "sacrificial mother." This status was reinforced by an ideology that perceived blood ties as the fundamental basis for reckoning kinship, which excluded adoptive mothers and widows. That kinship also excluded black mothers, who had hoped to employ motherhood as a means of building a coalition with their white counterparts.

Whereas white women used gender to their advantage, exploiting stereotypes in a way that gave them greater power, African Americans had no power. Yet black outrage at the treatment of African Americans during and after the war, and then in response to the segregated pilgrimages, hints at a kind of cultural assertiveness that was also evident in the contemporary phenomenon of the Harlem Renaissance. In that sense, the reaction of blacks to the pilgrimage discrimination prefigured the civil rights movement that burgeoned after the Second World War.

Gender and ethno-racial fissures ran throughout American life, not just between black and white but also between Christian and Jew. Despite this disparity, the pilgrimages, like the newly constructed monuments overseas and the segregated veterans' groups, were presented to the world as symbols of American solidarity and classic democratic egalitarianism.

Organized pilgrimages represent a point of intersection between individual loss and national community. Ideally, they can serve to unite groups and their nation in remembrance, while offering an opportunity for participants to come to terms with grief, thus consigning the dead to memory. The Gold Star pilgrimages were crafted by Congress, the military, and some of the more politically savvy "pilgrims" into a mission with political and diplomatic aims that misconstrued their original intent. As such, their value as an instrument of closure for grieving mothers and widows is questionable.

I have pieced together what I believe to be an accurate account of this epic journey. References from private collections, mothers' diaries, and letters animate the vivid memories of numerous participants. In tandem,
logistical and administrative documents from public archives highlight the elaborate detail and expense the government incurred to ensure smooth, efficient sailing. Occasionally, the sparks flew from pages of confidential documents revealing the hidden uneasiness ignited when motherhood and the military establishment collided.

Why did these women choose to leave their loved ones buried overseas? Why were they so emotionally restrained when they knelt at their loved ones’ gravesides? Had they felt their sacrifice to have been worthwhile? After sifting through all the rich material left behind, the answers soon became clear.

Despite their ability to influence domestic policy, veterans and other postwar organizations were unable to alter the nation’s commemorative strategy overseas. Instead, civil society was essentially prevented from participating in the overseas remembrance process to the extent that they were discouraged from attending the dedication ceremonies held in the 1930s. While those most affected by the conflict struggled against rapidly fading memories, others grew increasingly indifferent.

Today, most Americans are likely unaware of the repatriation work of the army’s Graves Registration Service, the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages of 1930–1933, and perhaps even the presence of First World War overseas monuments and cemeteries. Yet the military’s mission to search for, recover, identify, and return American soldiers killed in war continues, funded handsomely by U.S. taxpayers. This effort emerges as one of the key historical legacies stemming from America’s approach to commemorating the first major war of the twentieth century.

Offered here is a rich and fascinating story featuring a remarkable range of characters who animate an enormous body of historical data drawn from numerous international sources. The result is a faithful depiction of the complex political cultural environment in which the policies of American commemoration were shaped and the quirky irony that results when governments respond to the current wishes of its citizens.

It is my hope that this book will highlight the lasting significance of the war’s aftermath on the nation, the dangers facing a society that ceases to remember its past, and the process by which a democracy remembers war.