

made endless comic use of the stereotyped suburban women who controlled their husbands, henpecked them, and shopped away their earnings.

While seeing through the magazine's implication that racism afflicted only faraway primitives, Corey makes a sort of reverse version of the same error. Time and again she doggedly unearths the "paradox" or "contradiction" in some piece of reportage without seeming to entertain the possibility that the piece's author, way back in the benighted 1950s, might not only have been aware of the paradox but was actually seeking to illuminate it. Some of this reflects tone-deafness to the different genres that make up a magazine's mosaic. A Talk of the Town item about a misspelled note from the maid probably does betray unconscious anxiety about having servants, as Corey contends, but a Peter DeVries short story about the identical episode is likely to be drawing attention to that anx-

iety. Likewise, the author engages in lengthy and flatfooted analysis of Edmund Wilson's two-part article, published in 1949, about the Shalako, a religious ritual held on the Zuni Indian reservation. In mapping its conflicting messages about the white man's depredations and the ambiguous role of the (white) journalist in reporting them, Corey seems oblivious to the fact that these conflicts are the meat of Wilson's exquisite irony.

Despite its analytic weaknesses, *The World through a Monocle* offers plenty of enjoyable and valuable cultural history. It is perhaps best read in tandem with one of the many memoirs about the magazine, such as Brendan Gill's *Here at The New Yorker* (1975), which remind the reader that this was not merely an abstract social "text" but a living endeavor produced by real and idiosyncratic people.

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Warfare by the Numbers

THE PITY OF WAR:
Explaining World War I.

By Niall Ferguson.
Basic. 563 pp. \$30

by Andrew J. Bacevich

Soldiers, statesmen, and scholars have long shared a common conceit: that, given sufficient effort and the right analytical tools, they might one day fully decipher the nature of war. As to where that understanding would lead, though, these groups part company. The soldiers and statesmen imagine bending war to their will and employing military power more effectively. The scholars, in contrast, dream that a full understanding would halt the military miscalculation, slaughter, and pointless destruction that have constituted so much of contemporary history. This impressively researched and highly original but uneven book falls square-

ly in the latter tradition.

The subject of *The Pity of War* is World War I, arguably the most pointless and destructive conflict in the bloody century now coming to a close. Rather than offer a grand narrative of the war, Niall Ferguson, who teaches modern history at Oxford University, takes aim at a series of myths that, in his view, have clouded our understanding of the so-called Great War. Above all, he intends to refute the view that the war somehow qualifies as tragedy, its origins, conduct, and outcome the product of vast and uncontrollable forces. He argues instead for seeing it as a series of monumental blunders result-

ing from the recklessness, stupidity, and cowardice of specific individuals.

Ferguson's self-consciously revisionist book, which stirred a great deal of controversy when it was published in Britain last year, covers a wide range of topics. Revisiting familiar terrain, the author examines the war's origins and probes the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, on which Germany's hopes for quick victory in 1914 hinged. But he also ventures onto less traveled ground, addressing matters such as propaganda, the will of men to fight, and the complexities of surrender under the horrific conditions of the trenches.

Addressing these topics, Ferguson employs an idiosyncratic methodology. Memoirs, official reports, battlefield testimonials, and eyewitness journalism provide the very stuff of history for the typical specialist in military affairs. These Ferguson disdains as self-serving or biased, useful only to erect straw men for subsequent demolition. In place of such traditional sources, he offers data. Indeed, his achievement in amassing and analyzing data is nothing short of phenomenal. This hefty volume contains nary a map, yet it is festooned with dozens of graphs and tables, quantifying everything from "Total military personnel as a percentage of population for the five great powers, 1890–1913/14" to "British and German food consumption as a percentage of peacetime consumption, 1917–1918." In essence, Ferguson views World War I through the lens of political economy.

Applied to issues of grand strategy or the macroeconomics of war management, the technique yields important insights. Ferguson effectively argues, for example, that British and German strategic interests were by no means incompatible before the outbreak of hostilities. He skewers Sir Edward Grey, Britain's Germanophobic foreign sec-

retary, who, partly for the sake of domestic politics, insisted on dispatching the British Expeditionary Force to France in 1914—an action that condemned his countrymen to a needless war and ultimately cost them their empire. Similarly, the author makes a compelling case that, despite their efforts to subject Germany to a Carthaginian peace, the supposed victors ended up bearing the brunt of the war's costs.

In a demonstration of statistical precision that is, depending on one's point of view, either awe inspiring or slightly loony,

he calculates that killing an enemy soldier cost \$36,485.48 for the armies of the Triple Entente, but only \$11,344.77 for the Central Powers. The gap between these two figures, according to Ferguson, holds enormous importance. Indeed, "the greatest of all paradoxes of the First World War is that, despite being disastrously disadvantaged in economic terms, the Central Powers were far more successful in inflicting death on

their enemies." He cites this gap (correctly) as evidence of the superior fighting power, soldier for soldier, of the German army. Further, he uses it to suggest that the Allied strategy of attrition was an abject failure. Indeed, he concludes that the Allies never really defeated the German army in the field.

With data so boldly auguring victory, what went wrong for Germany? Ferguson differs with interwar proponents of the notorious "stab in the back" theory only in the culprit he holds responsible. Rather than traitorous politicians, he fingers General Erich Ludendorff, whose famous loss of nerve after Germany's failed spring 1918 offensive set events in motion that culminated in an armistice by November. When Ludendorff's confidence in eventual victory faltered, according to Ferguson, the



morale of the troops under his command collapsed. Recalculating the costs of fighting on, German soldiers decided that the cause was no longer worth risking their lives. In ever-increasing numbers, they began throwing down their arms. The outcome of the war, according to Ferguson, thus reflected the common soldier's willingness to surrender, not the German army's capacity to kill. "It was Ludendorff who delivered the fateful stab," he writes, "and it was in the German front, not the back."

But in dealing with these inherently unquantifiable matters, Ferguson's certitude is misplaced. His explanation—the outcome of a great armed struggle not simply determined but effectively reversed by the momentary lapse of a single individual—is too pat. War, as Clausewitz wrote, lies in the realm of chance, its conduct shrouded by fog and complicated by pervasive friction, a contest pitting governments and armies and peoples against one another, with the verdict determined as much by moral factors as by

material ones. To pretend that a single factor explains the outcome of any conflict is as misleading as to imagine that, having cast the die for war, we can control its course. That was true during 1914–18 and it remains true in 1999, as the surprises and miscalculations of NATO's war against Yugoslavia attest. The closer Ferguson ventures to the Western Front—that is, to the real war—the less persuasive he becomes.

To reaffirm that war is slippery and elusive is not to suggest that soldiers, statesmen, and scholars should abandon their efforts to understand its nature. But we should be wary of reductive explanations that can foster dangerous illusions. Imaginatively conceived and well worth reading, *The Pity of War* makes an important contribution to the vast literature of World War I. But, inevitably, it does not provide the last word on this particular war, much less war in general.

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Contemporary Affairs

MYTHS OF RICH AND POOR:
Why We're Better Off than We Think.
By W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm.
Basic. 256 pp. \$25

Despite the booming economy, declining unemployment, and quiescent inflation, many commentators accentuate the negative. There is still poverty. (An emphatic yes, the worst fault of the American system.) Income inequality keeps growing. (Yes, but almost everyone is better off in today's less-equal system than in yesterday's, which was more equal at a lower level.) The information economy rewards the educated. (Yes, but the same system's prosperity now allows the country to offer higher education to almost everybody.) The economy has intractable and incurable structural problems. (Didn't we just hear that about the federal deficit?) Wall Street might collapse. (Sure, but that would be true even if the economy were weak.)

A few writers, among them Derek Bok, Robert Samuelson, and David Whitman, have

made the case that, for the majority of Americans, living standards—the most important overall gauge of the economy—keep rising. Joining this literature is the impressive *Myths of Rich and Poor*. Cox, an official of the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas, and Alm, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, set out to "provide an antidote to the prevailing pessimism" regarding the economy, and they deploy a profusion of facts and data in behalf of their cause.

Myths of Rich and Poor is strongest where it marshals evidence on the physical betterment of American life—bigger homes, safer cars, dramatically improved health care, abundant (perhaps overabundant) affordable food, easier access to higher education, greater retirement security. Baby boomers often sing the blues about how their parents had a better life in the 1950s, but measured by material standards, nearly everyone is much better off today.

The authors engagingly make this point by estimating how long a typical worker (that is, a