

Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government

James T. Sparrow

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 344 pp.

In 2008, many Americans feared another Great Depression had begun. Amidst all the gloom and doom, however, Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama's incoming chief of staff, sounded more hopeful: "Never let a serious crisis go to waste. What I mean by that is it's an opportunity to do things you couldn't do before." There is no greater example of that mantra in American history than World War II, a time of unprecedented government spending and unsurpassed government control over daily life. In *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*, James T. Sparrow demonstrates how, in a crisis, the government can increase its reach into Americans' lives by promising an ever-expanding set of rights and benefits.

Sparrow, an associate professor of U.S. history at the University of Chicago, begins by describing how Franklin D. Roosevelt transposed his language of freedom and rights from the New Deal to the war effort. In Herbert Hoover's wake, the Roosevelt administration promised economic security through government action. The "financial titans" and "princes of property" had brought ruin to the country, according to Roosevelt, and it was up to government to protect individuals' rights from the oligarchs' thievery. Such programs as Social Security, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Works Progress Administration, and many others gave citizens tangible personal benefits. As the likelihood of war grew (and his New Deal programs came under increasing scrutiny), Roosevelt substituted the villains of industry and business with the international "gangsters" of Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and fascist Italy. Their rise, Roosevelt intoned, indicated that the entire world needed a New Deal; the United States would have to fight not only for its own security but also to ensure the spread of freedom to all peoples. Roosevelt reminded Americans that during the forthcoming struggle, the federal government would provide for their needs and would "ask no one to defend a democracy which in turn would not defend everyone in the nation against want and privation." With such rhetoric, writes Sparrow, Roosevelt helped to create the expectation that government would indeed provide all that the people wanted.

The ideological basis for that expectation is unclear, however. The substantial quantity of polling and surveys that Sparrow draws upon belies his contention of public support for Roosevelt's agenda. For example, of the individuals polled in July 1942, only 35 percent had ever heard of the Four Freedoms articulated by Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union address despite the fact that two of those freedoms are coincident with the First Amendment. Only 5 percent had heard of the other two, freedom from fear and want. Sparrow excuses that ignorance as a labeling issue and claims that Americans were nevertheless familiar with the substance of Roosevelt's ideas. His evidence for that assertion is a quote from a report by Roosevelt compatriot Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, who reported that his study of public opinion showed that "the Four Freedoms . . . have a powerful and genuine appeal to seven persons in ten."

While Americans may have felt some affinity for the broadly liberal aims of the war, they hardly supported a global welfare effort, Roosevelt's rhetoric notwithstanding. Americans supported the war generally because of a fear, certainly amplified by the government, of Nazi and Japanese domination. Once the war had ended, public patience for demobilization was short in the face of the government's state-building goals, as Sparrow himself later details. Domestic benefits from government programs, on the other hand, were more readily continued because they provided personal gain, not because they were part of a grand liberal plan. Whether or not average Americans believed in Roosevelt's ideals, Sparrow's research shows that they did not hesitate to invoke them whenever they felt it would help them get their "fair share" from the government.

Sparrow devotes the second half of the book to the myriad government intrusions in the economy and the labor force, as well as the government's molding of the modern GI. Sparrow excels in describing those programs and analyzing their introduction to American life. For example, chapter 4 focuses on what Sparrow calls mass fiscal citizenship and provides a fascinating picture of government efforts to persuade Americans to buy billions of dollars of government bonds and submit to extraordinary tax increases. Government propaganda frequently sought to connect the average citizen's efforts to the fate of the American soldier, delivering the message that without their bond purchases and taxes, he (the GI) could die. Sparrow finds that message of guilt in nearly every facet of the government's efforts to

influence the country to give of its money, labor, and young men. In return, the government pledged to provide all the rights and benefits of the New Deal. As thousands of Japanese-Americans discovered, however, when the government is the source of our rights, those rights must bend to the priorities of the government.

Despite that danger, government involvement in our daily lives persists because Americans continue to realize personal and class ambitions through government bureaus. Sugar quotas, green energy subsidies, affirmative action, industrial protections, healthcare, and more are bought with the grant of government power. It is the habituation of that political transaction that Sparrow is ultimately describing. His reasons for why Americans agreed to that exchange are occasionally thin. The absence of any reference to Robert Higgs' *Crisis and Leviathan* is glaring, especially in the sections on ideology. But Sparrow's story of the mechanisms of government growth is useful to any study of the era and offers an engaging narrative of how the welfare state led to the warfare state and vice versa.

Charles Zakaib
Cato Institute