



Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America

by Audra Jennings.

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Despite her book's broad title, historian Audra Jennings (Western Kentucky Univ.) concentrates very specifically on one important group of advocates for the disabled—the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped (AFPH)—whose founder and leader, Paul Strachan, strove to raise the nation's awareness of the plight of the disabled following World War II. Jennings emulates historians of a “long civil rights movement,” who have placed the origins of the disability rights movement in the wartime period, not the 1970s as conventional wisdom would have it. She meticulously details the policy battles that surrounded disability politics of the Second World War and postwar eras, with an emphasis on the vital role of disabled people in advocating for their own rights: “World War II catalyzed disability activism by facilitating the dramatic influx of people with disabilities into the workforce, fostering a sense that individual rights were at the heart of American identity, and linking war work and volunteer activities on the home front to victory” (8).

In this context, workplace accidents and the influx of returning wounded veterans spurred the nation and its leaders to emphasize legislation regarding disability issues with a new urgency. Working with labor unions and sympathetic governmental leaders, the AFPH promoted vocational training for the disabled during and after the war. Strachan and his group drew on ideals espoused during the war to justify the inclusion of the disabled in the fight against tyranny. They “drew upon the patriotic fervor of the war to justify their demands, highlighting notions of freedom, justice, national defense, and victory, casting disability rights as imperative to the moral and actual survival of the nation” (23). Such language reframed the issue of disability rights as one of citizenship and American notions of freedom during the war.

Beyond fulfilling their duties as equal citizens in a time of war, disabled activists sought funding for educational and vocational training. Time and again, they demanded that government agencies and advisory boards include disabled persons as well as therapists and other medical professionals. Thanks to these efforts, the AFPH rapidly grew from a handful of members in 1942 to two thousand by 1945. As Jennings shows, their personal stories demonstrated why the group appealed so strongly to these Americans who endured intense discrimination in their attempts to secure an education, employment, or even well-fitting prosthetics. AFPH members' tireless advocacy paid off in 1946, when a congressional subcommittee on federal disability policies issued a report recommending dramatic changes.

Jennings also discusses the difficulty of implementing postwar rehabilitation programs for the disabled. The limitations of the Veterans Administration's efforts led many disabled ex-soldiers to form organizations of their own to lobby for their rights. The AFPH was put in the difficult position of highlighting the need for a broad approach to disability services, while yet recognizing that veterans occupied a special place, owing to their patriotic sacrifices for the nation: “in seeking veterans' membership and assistance, the AFPH undermined its own claims about the universality

of the disability experience and the need for the federal government to consider disabled people as a single group” (110). The group also clashed with organizations like the National Association of the Deaf, who, being concerned with the needs of people with specific difficulties, eschewed the AFPH’s universalist approach. This sort of conflict hindered the group’s efforts more than race, class, and gender divisions.

Though it gained an important voice in governmental policy discussions, the AFPH began to lose influence by the early 1950s. Jennings points in particular to the medicalization of disabled policy: experts in medical rehabilitation and vocational training led the way in shaping federal legislation:

As physicians, counselors, and a range of new experts redefined rehabilitation, people with disabilities increasingly became the subject of expert scrutiny, marked as patients in need of care and correction, and serving as the means by which these professionals asserted their expertise and authority. (125)

Jennings recounts the failure of the 1950 Douglas bill, which sought a middle ground between care provided by medical experts and the jobs and education programs for the disabled supported by the AFPH. Strachan, incensed at the bill’s perceived watering down of vocational efforts, urged his contacts to kill the legislation. While the AFPH had admirably tried to convince the American public that programs for the disabled need not be a drain on the nation’s economy, in so doing it ceded policy formation to medical and rehabilitation experts whose training gave them an authoritative voice in policy deliberations.

Further complicating matters was Strachan’s belligerent style as a negotiator, which abruptly ended the group’s relations with crucial allies in the federal government and organized labor. In 1958, the AFPH was disbanded after months of losing influence. Still, Jennings notes, many members continued to advocate for disabled rights long after its demise. Further, the organization’s early advocacy of institutional reform had set the stage for the better known disability rights’ battles of the 1970s.

Students of military history will find that Audra Jennings has proven that the Second World War was a pivotal moment in the evolution of disability activism and related policy formation. But *Out of the Horrors of War* focuses less on the story of wounded veterans than on all disabled Americans. Nor does Jennings spend much time on the cultural symbolism of the disabled veteran in, for example, advertising campaigns or postwar Hollywood films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946; dir. William Wyler). Instead, her painstakingly argued, richly detailed history cogently shows that the AFPH, by setting new agendas for debates over policy, played a critical part in the history of disability activism.