

Click Here

Click Here



Domestic Politics

Economy

Foreign Policy

Justice

Military

Society & Culture

Also see:

Iraq in Transition

Living > Religion & Ethics

Monitor Breakfast

Excerpts from discussions between reporters and Washington newsmakers.

BLOG COOK'S CAPITOL

USA Stories:

for 06/10/2004

For Bush, a good week

Then and now: how

Reagan's stature rose

Bush team and the

limits on torture

What went wrong at

Abu Ghraib

Security precaution hits

subways: Is it too

much?

States take up their

own healthcare reform

Reading, writing,

and ... war?

USA > Society & Culture

from the May 27, 2004 edition

Not yet forgotten, the 'greatest generation' finally set in stone By Gail Russell Chaddock | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

WASHINGTON – Although World War II was the defining event of the 20th century, not many younger visitors to Washington's newest monument, to be dedicated this weekend, can identify the names on the marble, such as Anzio, Remagen Bridge, or the Battle of the Bulge.

"I'm looking at all these names, and I really couldn't tell you what they are. But I'm now curious," says University of Maryland senior Shannon Smith, standing alongside the soaring Atlantic Arch.

On the Pacific side of the monument, Will Hulings, the president of his eighth-grade class in Weston, Mass., recognizes Iwo Jima "because of the statue of people with the flag" but draws a blank other names. He and his classmates are stunned by the wall of 4,000 gold stars, 1 for every 100 Americans killed in the war. "I didn't realize how many people actually got killed. It's huge," he says.



More than 16 million people served in the US armed forces in World War II, but barely 1 in 3 showed up in the 2000 Census. That's why planners say they pushed so hard to complete the World War II memorial while there were still veterans of that war to appreciate it.

But the real beneficiaries could be those who aren't part of what's become known as the "greatest

ADVERTISEMENT

Products and services from our advertisers:

Mortgage, Relocation & Real Estate

- Moving
Moving Companies
Mortgage
Mortgage Calculator
Real Estate

Travel, Cameras and Flowers

- Hotels
Digital Cameras
Send Flowers



Work to Change the World
Organizations committed to making a difference

SUPPORT THE MONITOR

Make a donation

MONITOR ARCHIVE

Purchase articles from the Monitor Archive for as little as 15 cents each.

TREELESS EDITION™

[A remake without a cause](#)

XML [What is this?](#)

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Decision2004



[Empire Builders](#)



[September 11
One year later](#)



[Defining
Terrorism](#)



[Amtrak: All
Aboard?](#)



[My Fellow
Americans...](#)



[The Heart of a
High School](#)

[more projects...](#)

Most-viewed stories:
(for 06/09/04)

06/08/04

[Antidote to 'Iraq is
Vietnam'](#)

06/09/04

[What UN resolution on
Iraq will accomplish](#)

06/10/04

[For Bush, a good week](#)

06/09/04

[Democrats strike back
on faith issue](#)

06/09/04

[What is a kidney worth?](#)

generation" and who know very little about this war. "When people talk about how dangerous, difficult, and uncertain our own times are, or claim we have never been in a more ominous situation, it's because they don't understand how much we have been through in World War II," says historian David McCullough.

Recent surveys signal large gaps in what Americans who didn't fight the war know about it.

Only 2 in 3 graduates from the top 50 US colleges and universities knew that Italy, Japan and Germany were allies in that war, according to a 2002 study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the Roper Organization. Only 37 percent knew that the Battle of the Bulge, the last great German offensive of the war, was fought during World War II.

Similar gaps show up among US secondary school students. Only 7 in 10 12th graders could identify Germany and Japan as adversaries of the US during World War II, according to the National Assessment of Academic Progress, the most comprehensive national test. (Others cited Cuba, Vietnam, China, Iran, Korea, or the Soviet Union.) Some 20 percent didn't associate Pearl Harbor with World War II. Only half put wartime President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the right half century.

Dire days of 1942

Of course, knowledge of the past, whether about VE Day or Valley Forge, has always been a weak area for Americans, but historians say that such lapses are dangerous. "If people don't know who we are or how we got to who we are at what cost or struggle, then they are going to place much less value on it all," says historian David McCullough, commenting on these findings.

"Recall what the world was like in the early months of 1942, when we had no air force, we had recruits drilling with wooden rifles, half of our fleet had been sunk at Pearl Harbor, England was on her last legs, Hitler's armies were nearly to Moscow, and there was no guarantee whatsoever that the Nazi war

WAR STORIES: World War II veteran Ken Oppermann (center) traveled from Wisconsin to Washington this week to see the newly opened World War II Memorial. He shared stories from his time in the European Theater with other visitors.
ANDY NELSON - STAFF

Related stories:

05/26/04

[Capture WWII
memories](#)

05/18/04

[Over the top over
World War II](#)

05/18/04

[WWII's Central Place](#)

E-mail newsletters

Get all of today's headlines, or alerts on specific topics.
[Subscribe for free.](#)

[E-mail this story](#)

[Write a letter to
the Editor](#)

[Printer-friendly
version](#)

[Permission to
reprint/republish](#)

New! [Subscribe](#) to the Treeless Edition!



SUBSCRIBE

→ [Free sample issue](#)

E-mail Alerts

→ [Terrorism &](#)

[Security](#)

→ [Ethics](#)

→ [Decision2004](#)

→ [More topics...](#)

Sign up now:

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

[Programs for
teachers
and students](#)



Company Store



**Buy Monitor
Photos online!**

[Click Here](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Click Here](#)

machine could be stopped. German subs were sinking our oil tankers off the coast of New Jersey and Florida within sight of people on the beach, and there was nothing we could do about it," he says.

"[British Prime Minister Winston] Churchill came over in late 1941 after Pearl Harbor and said, 'We have not journeyed all this way across the centuries, across the oceans, across the mountains, across the prairies, because we are made of sugar candy.' " he adds.

Critics blame teaching - or the absence of teaching - for such historical amnesia. None of the top 50 US colleges or universities now requires American history to graduate," says Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "So, the likelihood of the next generation of leaders having a full understanding of the World War II period is very small."

Moreover, the way the war is taught in contemporary textbooks often gives greater emphasis to Rosie the Riveter and the Japanese internment camps than to the epic struggle between democracy and fascism. Today's teachers and textbook writers tend to view World War II through the lens of the Vietnam War, says education historian Diane Ravitch, and it colors textbooks, test questions, and college courses.

"Many students never get to learn about the purposes of World War II. It's been reduced to coverage about race, class, and gender," Ms. Ravitch says. "The only strong image that many kids have of World War II from their textbooks is the [US] Japanese internment camps. They don't know about Pearl Harbor, Nanking, or the Bataan death march."

The Tom Hanks effect

Hollywood films, such as "Saving Private Ryan," substitute somewhat for what kids are not picking up in their textbooks. But even the big screen doesn't replace the power of living through the experience.

"People don't remember the historical importance of World War II, or that it was a great war for democracy. They remember it in terms of their personal experience: a man that was injured in North Africa or a wife that had to bring up the children alone," says Howard Schuman, research scientist at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center.

"I'm surprised anyone younger than 50 would know anything other than big events that are commemorated. That's why they're building the monument," he adds.

Collective forgetting

The focus of this study is on the importance of personal

experience: People tend to remember what directly affects them, and if it doesn't affect them directly it has much less of an impression. The most important time to be affected is, roughly, between the ages of 13 and 26, he says.

That means that, in addition to collective memory, there is also collective forgetting. Watergate, the cold war, and even the end of the cold war, are already sinking into oblivion in the minds of most Americans, he says.

"One of the most striking things is how few people have anything to say about the cold war or end of the cold war. It's almost forgotten, or probably will be in a very short time. The Berlin Wall for most young people is already ancient history, and unless they've specialized in history they're not going to know anything about it.

But the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks are shining a brighter light on World War II, he adds - a point he'll make in a survey to be published this summer in Public Opinion Quarterly. In 1985 and 2000, the Survey Research Center asked national samples to "name one or two national or world events that occurred over the past 50 years that seemed to you especially important." In 1985, World War II was at the top of the list for 30 percent - a number that fell to 20 percent in 2000.

But three months after the 9/11 attacks, 28 percent cited World War II. Schuman calls it "a resurrected event."

TRIBUTE TO A WAR, AND 16 MILLION WHO SERVED: The National World War II Memorial being dedicated May 29 stands at one end of the capital mall's reflecting pool, flanked by monuments relating to other conflicts from the Civil War (Lincoln Memorial) to Korea and Vietnam.



AP

SOURCES: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION



[E-mail this story](#)

[Write a letter to the Editor](#)

[Printer-friendly version](#)

[Permission to reprint/republish](#)

[back to top](#)

[Home](#) | [About Us/Help](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Special Projects](#) | [Corrections](#)
[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights & Permissions](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Today's Article on Christian Science](#) | [Web Directory](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2004 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.