

Arsenal of World War II: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1940–1945. By Paul A. C. Koistinen. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiii + 655 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, figures. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-300-70060-8.

Reviewed by Mark R. Wilson

For students of the history of American military-industrial relations, the work of Paul A. C. Koistinen has long been required reading. His remarkable doctoral dissertation, a study of the military and labor during World War II, appeared four decades ago. (It was published unaltered in 1979 as *The Hammer and the Sword*.) Subsequently, while writing several influential articles and book chapters on the history of the military-industrial complex, Koistinen embarked on what became a projected five-volume series that would trace this history from the colonial era through the cold war. *Arsenal of World War II*, the fourth book in the series, is likely to be seen as the most important single work in Koistinen's opus.

Given its significance, the American economic mobilization for World War II has been the subject of remarkably few histories that are both wide ranging and deeply researched. Koistinen is not exaggerating when he claims that this book "is the first comprehensive analysis of economic mobilization for World War II" to appear since 1947 (p. 6). But to what extent can any single book comprehend a mobilization project that developed over several years and eventually consumed close to half the output of the world's largest national economy? In *Arsenal of World War II*, Koistinen chooses to organize his history of this project by concentrating on the agencies charged with coordinating mobilization, including the National Defense Advisory Commission (NDAC), the Office of Production Management (OPM), the War Production Board (WPB), and the Office of War Mobilization (OWM).

As Koistinen himself admits, this book is "long, detailed, and demanding" (p. 10). Indeed, the first half of the book, which performs a useful service by describing the organization and development of the mobilization boards, will likely strike some readers as dull and repetitive. They should persevere, however, to the book's second half, in which Koistinen hits his stride by discussing the war economy as the object of struggles

among a variety of powerful groups and individuals. Drawing on original research in a number of large archives, he offers fascinating accounts of battles over the balancing of military and civilian needs, efforts to manage the national labor force, and industrial reconversion. Throughout, Koistinen shows that the American economic mobilization, however impressive its material output and military results, did not occur without considerable strife.

In this contest over power and resources, there were clear winners and losers. Koistinen argues that large industrial corporations mostly had their way and reaped substantial benefits from the war economy. The military, bent on maximizing output of materiel, proved to be a good friend to big business and ranked as another winner. On the other side, losers included New Deal liberals, organized labor, and millions of civilian households. Donald Nelson, the former Sears, Roebuck & Co. executive who came to head the WPB, serves in this story as a tragic hero. One of the few top mobilization officials who tried to temper the demands of the armed forces and business by considering the interests of civilian workers and consumers, Nelson was ultimately defeated by the corporate-military alliance. Other representatives of big business on the mobilization boards, including William Knudsen of General Motors and Charles Wilson of General Electric, served the military and the corporations rather than the public at large. Most military professionals, such as General Brehon Somervell, treated noncorporate civilian interests as secondary. Perhaps most irresponsible, in Koistinen's view, were those public officials who lacked direct ties to the military or corporations but nonetheless deferred to them at almost every turn. These men, who included Secretary of War Henry Stimson, OWM chief James Byrnes, and President Franklin Roosevelt himself, figure in this book as willing participants in the wartime dismantling of the New Deal agenda.

Thanks in part to the influence of Koistinen's own earlier works, many historians and political scientists have already accepted one version or another of this story, in which New Deal liberalism is crushed during World War II by the military-corporate alliance. *Arsenal of World War II* stands as an especially well-documented articulation of this narrative. But not all readers will be entirely convinced. One of the curious aspects of this book is that Koistinen is both highly critical of the military-corporate domination

of the American mobilization effort and quite pessimistic about the possibility of any other arrangement. Roosevelt may have had “no alternative” but to accept military-corporate leadership of the war economy, he suggests at one point (p. 100). While other nations maintained more civilian authority over procurement, in the United States this option was “unrealistic” and “all but impossible” (p. 504). The long-run development of American military institutions and political economy, Koistinen concludes from his extensive knowledge of this subject, practically guaranteed the outcomes that emerged during World War II. While there is surely some truth to this argument, the book may err on the side of underestimating the potential of the New Deal as a nonmilitary administrative model, the possibility of serious conflict between private enterprise and the Army and Navy, and the degree of contingency in the day-by-day development of the war effort.

It is no slight to suggest this book should be seen as an essential starting point, rather than the final word on this subject. While it has a great deal to say about the coordinating boards in Washington, *Arsenal of World War II* does not tap the surviving records of military contractors or midlevel procurement administrators. Future studies that draw upon these sources, which will better explain how the war economy actually worked, may also end up modifying Koistinen’s portrait of overwhelmingly friendly relations between the military and business. Equally welcome would be original comparative studies of two or more national war economies, which might provide new answers to the question of why military control over procurement remained unusually firm in the United States. In any case, it is clear that much of the new scholarship in this field will continue to stand on Koistinen’s shoulders as it builds on the impressive achievements of this book.

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