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FIRE

*How World War II Changed Our
Social and Sexual Attitudes*



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already taking place in courtship, marriage, family life and the interrelationship of the sexes. These changes, though rapid and disrupting, do not necessarily mean 'breakdown.'

Even the French, who had prided themselves on their country's liberality in sexual affairs, succumbed to postwar moral fervor. With impeccable Gallic logic, the forces of reaction set about changing the law, to make brothels illegal. Led by the formidable campaigner Madame Marthe Richard, the challenge to the "*maisons tolérées*" quickly drew public support with charges that the brothelkeepers had profited from collaboration during the German occupation. By 1946, the ancient trade that had helped make Paris the erotic capital of Europe was proscribed, and the brothels were obliged to close their doors forever.

The call to put back the moral clock had been started in the United States a full year earlier when ex-President Herbert Hoover had warned that "the moral life of America is in danger," in April 1944. "We must accept the fact that total war relaxes moral standards on the home front and that this imperils the whole front of human decency," he wrote in a magazine article that drew attention to the emptiness of a military victory if not accompanied by a "moral victory."

Military victory, however, had been won only by millions of American and British citizens sacrificing the trappings of a civilized morality. Moral and social taboos, once broken, were not too easily restored, especially when the traditional patterns of life had been disrupted for so many for so long. It was beyond even the propaganda resources of governments to recondition the wartime mass psychology overnight. The brutalizing and dislocative effects of war had left many individuals reacting to the cessation of hostilities as another interruption in the transient pattern of existence to which they had become accustomed. Millions of demobilized servicemen had grown used to an adventurous existence that did not reach beyond tomorrow. It took months and even years for many of them to accustom themselves again to a routine civilian existence — this was especially hard for those who had entered the services straight from school and to whom the mundane world of everyday work was as much of a shock as joining the army had been.

The extent to which the attitudes of servicemen had been deeply affected by the war was to become apparent only in the decade

after 1945, when a new generation of American writers, led by Norman Mailer, James Jones, and Irwin Shaw, began chronicling their experiences with a force and conviction that shocked the literary establishment. Unlike the English war novelists who tended to romanticize the rather more genteel experience of the officer, *The Naked and the Dead*, *From Here to Eternity*, and *The Young Lions* were drawn with the brutally honest and often sexually explicit language of the enlisted man. The instant success and huge sales achieved by these semiautobiographical chronicles of World War II were in no small measure because they found a huge market among the millions of servicemen who could identify with the experience.

It was not just the immediacy of the war experience that made these books — and their subsequent imitators — perennial best-sellers, but also the way in which their authors had boldly portrayed the relationship between violence, sex, and the role of the individual in a mechanistic war. Combat was presented, according to the author's viewpoint, as either the sublimation of sexual energy or as direct sexual release. The characters battled their way through the pages of these books in search of an emotional catharsis on the field of battle, making their choices between heroism, wanton butchery, or cowardice. Homosexuality was dealt with both candidly and unsympathetically in what was a reflection of the not insignificant part that it had played in their respective author's military life. In another echo of their military conditioning, male potency was usually equated with an individual's prowess as a warrior — and comparisons were frequently drawn between a soldier's ungovernable sexual impulse and the war itself.

The pattern for World War II fiction became established with the 1948 publication of *The Naked and the Dead*. Despite the protests of the moral reformers, there were sufficient readers who believed that modern warfare was not to be romanticized as it had been in the past. Not only did these books play an important part in preparing the public for a more open and explicit discussion, but one of their main themes — the confrontation between the final human citadel of sexuality and man's technological capacity for self-destruction — was to become the focus of much contemporary literature.

Many wives, mothers, and girlfriends were to discover that the