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## World War II, the “Good War” and D-Day: Part I

### **Objective:**

Students will consider the “Good War” narrative and its relationship to popular American memory of World War II.

### **Background:**

The excerpt below is from President Bill Clinton’s remarks on the 50th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy. Clinton gave this speech as part of a larger commemoration of D-Day to an audience composed of dignitaries, veterans and the families of veterans. The full speech can be found here:

<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3438>

### **Directions:**

Read each of the articles below. Then, respond to the questions that follow.

#### **I. “Remarks at the U.S. National Cemetery” by Bill Clinton on June 6, 1994 at the US National Cemetery at Normandy Beach.**

In these last days of ceremonies, we have heard wonderful words of tribute. Now we come to this hallowed place that speaks, more than anything else, in silence. Here on this quiet plateau, on this small piece of American soil, we honor those who gave their lives for us 50 crowded years ago.

Today, the beaches of Normandy are calm. If you walk these shores on a summer's day, all you might hear is the laughter of children playing on the sand or the cry of seagulls overhead or perhaps the ringing of a distant church bell, the simple sounds of freedom barely breaking the silence, peaceful silence, ordinary silence.

But June 6th, 1944, was the least ordinary day of the 20th century. On that chilled dawn, these beaches echoed with the sounds of staccato gunfire, the roar of aircraft, the thunder of bombardment. And through the wind and the waves came the soldiers, out of their landing craft and into the water, away from their youth and toward a savage place many of them would sadly never leave. They had come to free a continent, the Americans, the British, the Canadians, the Poles, the French Resistance, the

Norwegians, and others; they had all come to stop one of the greatest forces of evil the world has ever known.

As news of the invasion broke back home in America, people held their breath. In Boston, commuters stood reading the news on the electric sign at South Station. In New York, the Statue of Liberty, its torch blacked out since Pearl Harbor, was lit at sunset for 15 minutes. And in Newcastle, Pennsylvania, a young mother named Pauline Elliot wrote to her husband, Frank, a corporal in the Army, "D-Day has arrived. The first thought of all of us was a prayer."

Below us are the beaches where Corporal Elliot's battalion and so many other Americans landed, Omaha and Utah, proud names from America's heartland, part of the biggest gamble of the war, the greatest crusade, yes, the longest day.

During those first hours on bloody Omaha, nothing seemed to go right. Landing craft were ripped apart by mines and shells. Tanks sent to protect them had sunk, drowning their crews. Enemy fire raked the invaders as they stepped into chest-high water and waded past the floating bodies of their comrades. And as the stunned survivors of the first wave huddled behind a seawall, it seemed the invasion might fail.

Hitler and his followers had bet on it. They were sure the Allied soldiers were soft, weakened by liberty and leisure, by the mingling of races and religion. They were sure their totalitarian youth had more discipline and zeal.

But then something happened. Although many of the American troops found themselves without officers on unfamiliar ground, next to soldiers they didn't know, one by one they got up. They inched forward, and together, in groups of threes and fives and tens, the sons of democracy improvised and mounted their own attacks. At that exact moment on these beaches, the forces of freedom turned the tide of the 20th century.

These soldiers knew that staying put meant certain death. But they were also driven by the voice of free will and responsibility, nurtured in Sunday schools, town halls, and sandlot ballgames, the voice that told them to stand up and move forward, saying, "You can do it. And if you don't, no one else will." And as Captain Joe Dawson led his company up this bluff, and as others followed his lead, they secured a foothold for freedom.

...

Now the question falls to our generation: How will we build upon the sacrifice of D-Day's heroes? Like the soldiers of Omaha Beach, we cannot stand still. We cannot stay safe by doing so. Avoiding today's problems would be our own generation's appeasements. For just as freedom has a price, it also has a purpose, and its name is progress. Today, our mission is to expand freedom's reach forward; to test the full potential of each of our own citizens; to strengthen our families, our faith, and our communities; to fight indifference and intolerance; to keep our Nation strong; and to light the lives of those still dwelling in the darkness of undemocratic rule. Our parents did that and more; we must do nothing less. They struggled in war so that we might strive in peace.

We know that progress is not inevitable. But neither was victory upon these beaches. Now, as then, the inner voice tells us to stand up and move forward. Now, as then, free people must choose.

Fifty years ago, the first Allied soldiers to land here in Normandy came not from the sea but from the sky. They were called Pathfinders, the first paratroopers to make the jump. Deep in the darkness, they descended upon these fields to light beacons for the airborne assaults that would soon follow. Now, near the dawn of a new century, the job of lighting those beacons falls to our hands.

To you who brought us here, I promise we will be the new pathfinders, for we are the children of your sacrifice.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

**Questions to consider:**

1. Summarize the first author's argument about America's "Good War" narrative. In doing so, explain not only what that narrative is, but why it is significant to contemporary Americans. Also explain the author's take on the usefulness of this narrative.
2. Summarize President Clinton's retelling of the events of June 6, 1944. In the summary, be sure to highlight his explanations for American success in D-Day and in the war as a whole.
3. How is Clinton's retelling consistent with a "Good War" interpretation of American involvement in World War II? Explain.
4. Based on your own experience with television, movies, video games and other types of media, do you think Americans do remember World War II as the "Good War"? Explain.

