**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Jennifer Keene – Coming Home** (20m 1s)

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**3 speakers** (Announcer, Libby O'Connell, Jennifer Keene)

**[0:00:11]**

**Announcer**: Welcome to the How World War I Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Welcome everyone, this is Dr. Libby O'Connell with our podcast topic today of Coming Home, and we're thrilled to be talking to Jennifer Keene. Dr. Keene is the Dean of Wilkinson College, Professor of History at Chapman University. She's going to be talking to us about legacies and coming home from World War I. Welcome, Jennifer.

**[0:00:47]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Thank you. Pleased to be here.

**[0:00:50]**

**Libby O'Connell**: There are a lot of aspects of World War I that just are sort of hazy to most Americans, but this one I think the veteran's experience in coming home is particularly poorly recognized. Like Europeans, Americans sought to memorialize those who had fought and died during World War I, can you tell us about what the debate was in America? What should these commemorations look like?

**[0:01:15]**

**Jennifer Keene**: It's interesting that almost immediately at the end of the war, Americans had this sense that they had participated in a historic world event, something that needed to be remembered and was significant. I only point that out because now we seem to, we try to recapture our notion that the first World War mattered and was important for American society. And so, we see almost immediately a drive on the local community level and also on the national level to memorialize the war, and this process of creating this memorials and making the decisions about what to put up and why to put it up. This was also really the process of creating a collective memory of the war, of making a declaration about why this event had been significant for American society. In the end, we get about 10,000 memorials across the United States dedicated to those who had fought and died. So clearly the generation that lived through the war considered it a singular event that they indeed expected to be long remembered and to cast a long shadow over the 20th century, so that's one really important thing to point out. But what we also saw was that the different decisions that were made also began to reflect some of the debate that was occurring over what the war had meant. So, on the community level, we see a memorialization drive that really seeks to honor the common Doughboy, the common soldier who fought. Very rarely are there statues to great leaders or to political figures, it's really to the Doughboy. And this was on a brand new trend in American commemorative practices, we'd seen similar things in the Civil War, but in the first World War it really dominates. So we see their action of these mass produced Doughboys statutes, for example, in town squares often accompanied with plaques that lists the name of the dead. And we also see a lot of schools, for example, or organizations where they'd had significant numbers of men who had served and died, listing the names of the men who had fell. But the world war generation on the local level also took another tact, which was to focus on building sort of functional living memorials. And what I mean by that, these were meant to be edifices not just that were statues in public squares, but they added to the civic life of the community, they were things that people could use. And this fit with the progressive era notion of generally trying to improve civic culture. And here we still have a lot of these things, these edifices, these buildings, fields, stadiums, but we just have lost our sense that they were connected to the first World War. So these would be things like concert halls, athletic stadiums, high schools, parks, community buildings, I mean this was really popular as well, we have some famous examples of that. I'll bet there's few listeners who realize, for example, that Soldier's Field in Chicago, which was built in 1918, in 1925 was renamed as Soldier's Field, and this was a specific way to honor the men who had served in the first World War. And the L.A. Coliseum is another good example on the west coast. And then finally we could see throughout local communities the newly created American Legion, which creates posts throughout the country, and specifically names as posts after men who had fallen. And so, these become ways that throughout communities, even to this day, our commemorative landscape on the community level is really saturated with the memory of the first World War.

**[0:04:44]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So beyond the physical memorials and the built structures and the statues, what about the cultural impact of memorialization in music or in literature?

**[0:04:54]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Yes, so here we have an interesting kind of dichotomy, I'm talking about this notion that we have different interpretations that are being given to the war. The ones on a community level are really, in a sense sort of honoring duty, patriotism, victory in many respects. When we think about the literary tradition, which is probably the most long lasting of attempts to memorialize the experience of the great war, we really think primarily of the literature of the so called lost generation, people like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and also artists that are connected to the Harlem Renaissance. We have a huge outpouring of, not just literature, but music, art, that is also evoking the meaning of the first World War experience. And in these genres we see a much more critical memorialization, these are less commemorative and they are definitely more interrogative of criticizing the war's slaughter, seeing the failed promise of Wilsonianism, and often really pointing out American society's unrelenting racism and also xenophobia at the time that is very prevalent, and certainly the anti-radicalism, the Red Scare, the fears of any radical political beliefs. And so these become more critical testimonials to the work. And then I just might also add that there on the national level and international level, there was a commemorative effort which was also significant, and this was on what to do with the actual physical remains of soldiers that fell. And the government decides to create a series, eight actually, overseas cemeteries, which they hoped initially would house all of the war dead. These cemeteries in the government's mind would really elevate the commemorative practices to have ongoing symbolic and political significance in the geopolitical range. So not just in the community level, not just in terms of thinking about the cultural arena, but now also thinking about, how could the war dead continue to be utilized to solidify America's new role in international politics? I mean, so they create these beautifully landscaped cemeteries, this makes the war dead very visible, this reminds Americans of their commitment to keep world peace, it reminds the French and British of the sacrifice that America had made, and this is really the kind of narrative that government hopes to advance. The problem is that few families wanted to keep their loved ones overseas, and in the end, over 70% of families will elect to bring their relative home, and so that means we do have these cemeteries, but they actually only contain 30% of the American war dead.

**[0:07:48]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Tell us about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, how does this Memorial fit into the larger picture of what was going on at the time?

**[0:07:58]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So on November 11th, which is Armistice Day, 1921, so this is three years after the war ends, the U.S. Follows in the footsteps of Britain and France by burying an unknown soldier in Arlington Cemetery. Britain and France had done this in 1920, so we're sort of following up a year later. And this is initially a memorial to the missing of the war, hence the terminology, the unknown soldier, and America had about 4,500 missing men whose bodies remains had never been found, and so this was meant to give them a symbolic final resting place. And so, the body of one unknown soldier was placed in this crypt, and it was quite a tremendous ceremony. The body lay in state, in the Capitol, I think there are over 100,000 visitors to pay their respects. And then the process of taking the casket, actually to Arlington was in itself quite ceremonial, with a horse drawn caisson that proceeded down Pennsylvania Avenue with a procession that included the entire government. So, you have to imagine a scene where we have the president, Congress, the Supreme Court, state governors, and even at that point, he's now the ex president, but Woodrow Wilson is also in the procession momentarily. They try to make it inclusive for the time, it's actually something to note that they did include in the procession, members of the NAACP there at the ceremony, at Arlington cemetery there was also a rabbi and a leader of the Crow Indian Nation, who had some role to play. The crypt in Arlington was is lined with soil from France, and then the nation observes two minutes of silence to honor the unknown soldier. So you can see that was a very elaborate and intentionally grandiose ceremony to really show a nation that it was making a homage, and also mourning the death of this symbolic figure. And for a long time the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier really served as the national memorial to the war because it was the only thing that the country had that really spoke to the entire conflict. I'll just say a few more things about the tomb, because what you see now is not what people saw in 1921. So initially it was just a crypt but it was buried in the ground and there was a slab over the top, and the things that we have now associated, if you go to Arlington cemetery and you visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the two things that are going to stand right out to you are the fact that there are armed guards. Many people go to watch that changing of the guards, and then also there's a sarcophagus that has etchings on it with allegorical figures of peace, valor and victory. And these things were not initially there and they were things that came later on. One problem almost immediately with the unknown soldier is that it wasn't distinctive enough. And so Legionnaires who went to visit and pay their respects, became very offended when they saw people sitting on the slab or having a picnic on it, and so they lobbied the government to begin posting uniformed sentinels, which started in 1926. And then they also felt that again, it was just sort of a slab in the ground, it wasn't enough of a testimonial to the victory of the World War I generation, and so then the sarcophagus is later added as well. And so, there is some evolution of the tomb over time in terms of what it physically looks like and the kind of role that it begins to play as a sort of site of pilgrimage, not just for the World War I generation, but for subsequent generations, especially as additional unknown soldiers are added to the crypt. So now we have one from World War II, Korea and Vietnam ,that makes it less of a distinctive World War I memorial, and one that sort of honors the unknown soldier from several 20th century wars. Of course we will no longer have unknown soldiers, I guess they are all able to be traced through their DNA now.

**[0:11:52]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Exactly. In fact the remains of the soldier from Vietnam were later identified and that body was removed.

**[0:11:58]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**[0:11:59]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So tell us about Armistice Day and how the observance of Armistice Day changed over time, how does it evolve?

**[0:12:07]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So Armistice Day begins as an almost unofficial day of remembrance and mourning. The first government observance of Armistice day is in 1919, so just a year after the ending of the conflict on the Western Front. And this is really a solemn moment, there's a brief moment of silence at 11:00 AM just to remind people that the Armistice had gone into effect on November 11th at the 11th hour. So, this was the moment of the Armistice, so it was commemorated at 11:00 AM with a moment of silence. And there were often parades and speeches and maybe wreath laying at memorial sites, it really was a day of remembering the fallen. It does become a national holiday, a legal holiday in 1938. It's still just associate it with the first World War, still called Armistice Day, it doesn't last, but it's not until 1954 actually that President Eisenhower changes the name to Veteran's Day. And once again, just like in the case of the unknown soldier, we see something that was initially seen as a perpetual distinctive memorial to the great war, becoming kind of subsumed into a memory of all of America's 20th century wars. And so, now the new name is Veteran's Day and this is meant to honor all the living and fallen veterans of all American Wars, and so clearly it loses its distinctive connection to the first World War.

**[0:13:36]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So it'll sort of weaken the public memory of World War I, right, in a way?

**[0:13:42]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Absolutely. I mean, if you ask anybody, sometimes I joke around with my students and they'll say things like, "Oh, do we have Veteran's Day off?" And I say, "Oh, do you mean Armistice Day?

**[0:13:51]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Right.

**[0:13:52]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So it's our job to remind people why it actually is on November 11th.

**[0:13:58]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, speaking about young people and reminding them about World War I, you mentioned that there are 10,000 memorials in the United States dedicated to those who fought and died. How might young people today better understand these memorials or take a role in protecting them? What do you think? I mean, there must be some way we can help keep the memory of World War I alive and the story of coming home.

**[0:14:23]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Absolutely. I think that what's interesting about focusing on the memorials, is it really tells us that when we think about the first World War as this large global event, which was so transformative in so many ways, we can think about how we live in a world that was shaped by the war. To think about the Russian revolution or the defeat of Germany, or the failure of the U.S. To join the League of Nations, I mean, there's no doubt that all of these impacts of the war certainly affected the course of the 20th and 21st century. But really that's not why people built these memorials. People build these memorials because they were meant to evoke emotion, and to remember the young men and sometimes women who had sacrificed their lives for their nation, and that's one of the reasons why so many of these memorials list individual names. And to me, this is actually a way for us to continue to connect with these memorials, to really look at these names and to remember that these were young adults, and often not much older than high school students, whose lives clearly ended much too quickly. And that if we remember that each person's name is a unique story, and that in a sense we have an obligation to remember not just the war over all, but the individual stories of the people who fought, served and died, that were closer to understanding the reason why those memorials were built and what kind of emotions they were meant to evoke in future generations. And so to me, some of the really amazing projects that I've seen teachers be involved in and even communities involved in, which is to start looking at those names. And not just seeing them as names on a slab, but really interrogating who are these people, learn a little bit about their lives, and then suddenly you feel a personal connection that you might not have felt when you just kind of walk by and take a quick glance at a statute. So to me that's really where these memorials tell us how important it is to remember the people who participated and fought and sacrificed in this war, not just the larger political causes or consequences.

**[0:16:31]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I have another question for you, Jennifer, that may not be something that you expected, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what sort of services there were available for veterans when they came home from World War I. There were a lot of people who were wounded, people who'd been injured by the chlorine gases, for example, or just had terrible artillery injuries. What sort of services were there available for them?

**[0:16:56]**

**Jennifer Keene**: One of the problems for the United States with the ending of the war was that it came much sooner than the United States expected. America had entered the war late, and so we were really completely focused on building up our military and getting men overseas and contributing to the final, well we didn't know it was the final, but contributing to the massive onslaught on the Western Front. And so when the war ended in November of 1918, suddenly there had to be a sort of quick reverse in terms of thinking about, not building up a mass army, but now repatriating it. And obviously there were many new problems that wounded veterans were coming home with, that the government was not prepared to handle in terms of the numbers that existed, and so the services were very poor. There were some attempts to kind of create employment bureaus and there were attempts to very quickly create hospital services, but none of these things were working. We also had in 1918, the creation of the American Legion as a distinctly World War I veterans organization. And this was timely because it was the Legion that could kind of step up and really lobby for better services for veterans as they came home. And so, we saw the Legion also participating and kind of trying to be at an employment bureau, pressing the government to improve health care. We see the creation of a specific veterans hospital system, which did not exist in the United States previously. And also to begin to give legitimacy to new conflicts. Some problems that veterans developed were not immediately apparent in 1918, it took a few years, for example, sometimes for gas related tuberculosis to manifest itself. And some soldiers even in dealing with the mental stress and illness that often accompanied combat experiences, these were symptoms that were not immediately apparent in 1918. And so, it was the Legion that kind of pushed the government to recognize these as service-related illnesses and disabilities. And so, it was a learning process for sure and a lot of subsequent generations have benefited from the solutions and the institutions and the types of benefits that were created to help this World War generation.

**[0:19:13]**

**Libby O'Connell**: This is a great topic, I could talk to you all day about this. I just want to say thank you, Jennifer, this has been really interesting and I'm going to sign off. This is Dr. Libby O'Connell, and today our guest has been Dr. Jennifer Keene. Thank you so much for joining us, Jennifer.

**[0:19:29]**

**Jennifer Keene**: It's been great. Thanks for having me.

**[0:19:34]**

**Speaker 1**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the collaboration of the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, the Doughboy Foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History Day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

**[0:19:57]**