

Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century. By Mary P. Ryan. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 376. Illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$27.50.)

At the end of the twentieth century numerous social commentators have criticized Americans for their retreat from public spaces and expressions of public solidarity. Suburban "gated communities" spatially reflect this sense of isolation, and politics of exclusion and divisiveness do so socially. Before rushing to judgment, however, these social commentators should first read Mary P. Ryan's fascinating new book on public life in the nineteenth-century city. In so doing they would learn that social and political isolationism is far from recent; for more than a century Americans have steadily removed themselves from the public arena and into more homogenous social groupings and spatial settings.

Concentrating on three representative cities—New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans—Ryan presents this argument by tracing the evolution of public life in the mid-nineteenth century. She sees three distinct phases in this evolution. First is the period 1825 to 1850, in which Ryan finds public life and democracy in its fullest (relative to the other two periods) expression. In this period political, economic, racial, and gender debates were carried on (generally) peacefully in public spaces—open markets and squares, public buildings, and, most important for Ryan, on the streets during parades. In the second section Ryan turns to what she calls the "interregnum," the period 1850 to 1865. Here, Ryan argues that the Civil War was actually the conclusion of a longer history of "civic wars" fought in American cities during the 1850s. As issues of race and ethnicity dominated American cities, earlier peaceful methods for debate began to be replaced by violence, vigilantism, and militarism. In the final section Ryan shows how public life had moved far from its original meaning, as class identity and social isolation replaced earlier, more inclusive displays of the "public."

Ryan's analysis is compelling and draws on a range of historical source material. She also writes clearly and is not averse to throwing in occasional editorial comments. If her analysis lacks anything, it would be in the absence of a critical examination of religion as a social variable. Throughout the book Ryan treats religion as a by-product of ethnicity—Irish Catholics against the Anglo-Protestants, for example—rather than as its own phenomenon with distinct sources of tension. Similarly, an analysis of the black church would have enhanced the discussions of black-white racial tension. Given the black church's role in modern civil rights battles and as the "public face" of the African-American community, it surely played an important part in nineteenth-century racial politics. The other quibble concerns the absence of maps. So much of the book—the central theme,

in fact—treats “urban space,” yet apart from a few early street maps, the book lacks any geographic signposts. In several instances, for example, when Ryan describes a Fourth of July parade route or a neighborhood’s social composition, a map would have enabled this reader to “locate” the goings-on more easily.

Although the book does not discuss Indiana or its cities, local readers will nevertheless find much value in Ryan’s enjoyable and informative work that should contribute to the continuing social analysis of public life in the coming years.

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Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan. By J. Samuel Walker. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. Pp. xiii, 142. Illustrations, notes, essay on sources, index. Clothbound, \$34.95; paperbound, \$14.95.)

Beautifully designed and printed, lucidly written, this little book covers the usual ground. It relates the White House meeting of the joint chiefs of staff with President Harry S. Truman on June 18, 1945, in which the decision was taken to invade the southernmost Japanese home island, Kyushu, on November 1, 1945, with invasion of Honshu, the Tokyo plain, scheduled for April 1, 1946. After the test of the plutonium bomb on July 16 (a warning went out from the Potsdam Conference on July 26, which the Japanese government spurned), the bombings on August 6 and 9 ended the war on August 14. One of the best things about this book is the author’s willingness to say that it was the second bomb, not Russian entry into the war the preceding day, that persuaded the Japanese military to go along with the civil members of the cabinet and surrender.

Unfortunately, the author, a historian in the Nuclear Regulatory Agency, is not as evenhanded as he seems, and the unhappy debate among historians and political scientists over use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki will go on—with sides taken frequently out of emotion, ignorance, or memory of the Cold War (Gar Alperovitz opened the debate in 1965 with his book contending that the United States dropped the bombs not to end World War II but to impress the Russians). The first evidence of J. Samuel Walker’s point of view is his use of the word “myth” to describe the argument that President Truman did not face a stark choice between invasion of the Japanese home islands and use of the bombs. A second appears in his assertion that scholars agreed in deploring cancellation of the proposed text for an exhibit at the Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., displaying the nose of the *Enola Gay* and showing Japan