Airmen during World War II as precedents, and race continued to play a decisive role in Cold War medicine. State welfare workers targeted African American and Native American girls for sterilization as an anti-poverty measure, but how did such abuses help to fuel the civil rights movements? Race itself as a scientific category also seems to be excluded from the authors’ thinking: radioactive experiments at one school involved “six negroes” and “one Caucasian” (p. 149), but did experiments contribute to discussions about identity formation? Similarly, the pervasiveness of popular culture in media also warrants greater discussion. The 1950s witnessed a surge of public interest in medical/psychology-oriented cultural products. Films such as The Snake Pit (1948), Suddenly, Last Summer (1959), and The Manchurian Candidate (1962) contributed to the Cold War atmosphere and themes of behavior-control. Incorporating recent scholarship such as Susan Carruthers’s Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing (2009) would help place these isolated experiments within a larger public discussion concerning medical practices.

Although the experiments have rarely been discussed in traditional historical accounts, the effects continue to surface decades after the fact. A young Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) participated in these experiments, and the authors posit that his later one-man war against academic and industrial institutions may have stemmed at least in part from his victimhood as a child. On a less sensational level, the surviving children harbor a deep mistrust of doctors and the medical profession that left them and their families scarred. The gaps in the book’s account should serve as an enticing invitation for scholars to dig more deeply into Cold War medicine. Hornblum, Newman, and Dober provide an admirable first cut at a long-overdue examination of the Cold War’s impact on America’s most innocent victims.


Reviewed by Alex Souchen, Royal Military College of Canada

Military Waste by Joshua O. Reno is a book that will appeal to anyone interested in the material traces of militarization and militarism in the United States, as well as the political, economic, environmental, and social legacies of the Cold War. Reno is an anthropologist by trade, so the book is based on a diverse range of theoretical and ethnographic approaches to the topic. Each of the book’s six chapters focuses on a type of military waste or a theoretical framework for understanding military waste as a byproduct of permanent war readiness.

The first three chapters are the book’s strongest elements because each is grounded firmly in the materiality of waste. Chapter 1 explores the waste generated in the military-industrial complex. Through interviews with current and former employees at defense contractors in Binghamton, New York, Reno shows the centrality of waste within the defense economy and how the scientists engaging in research
and development interpret the waste they create. Reno concludes that waste is understood as an engineering problem and byproduct of technological progress and high procurement costs. That is, it is an inevitable consequence of new technologies replacing inferior weaponry or mechanical decline as military assets reach the end of their lifecycles.

Chapters 2 and 3 (both coauthored with Priscilla Bennett) explore the afterlives of specific weapons systems and the multilayered meanings and legacies embedded in their reuse and re-appropriation. In chapter 2, the authors discuss the fate of surplus aircraft stored at the “Boneyard” (Davis-Monthan Air Force Base) near Tucson, Arizona. Aircraft boneyards serve important roles in supply chain logistics, which is why the base was established after World War II to stockpile old planes and parts. Over time, the base spawned a cluster of museums that specialize in displaying the technological sublime through the medium of obsolete technologies. The “Boneyard” attracts tourists, veterans, and aircraft enthusiasts seeking authentic restorations and reproductions of aeronautical history, but, as the authors astutely point out, not everyone values the aircraft as aircraft. Instead, some junked planes gain new meanings when artists reuse them as canvases for art displays.

The tensions between authenticity and reuse are further explored in chapter 3, which focuses on the scuttling of the USNS Vandenberg transport ship and the creation of a new tourist attraction for scuba divers in Key West, Florida. Reno and Bennett interviewed those responsible for creating the artificial reef, detailing the obstacles they overcame and the ways they recast the derelict ship’s history as a sunken treasure. Rather than scrapping the vessel, the hulk was cleaned and deployed to expand the local economy. Taken together, the two chapters elucidate some pervasive legacies of the Cold War. By reimagining and reusing the remnants of America’s Cold War military, the vestiges of militarism and militarization are converted to decidedly unmilitary purposes. The so-called peace dividend, therefore, becomes the tourist economy surrounding the Boneyard and Vandenberg, as people are drawn to both the glorification of military pasts and the peaceful reinvention of military wastes.

In the final three chapters, Reno shifts from the materiality of waste to theoretical constructions about military waste. In doing so, the book loses sight of waste as a collection of things and commodities governed by value regimes and instead conceives of military waste as a byproduct of militarism with many social, environmental, and colonial implications. This shift is not without merit, but the decoupling of waste from its materiality detracts from the argument’s persuasiveness. For example, in Chapter 4 Reno explores space junk and the militarization of science. This is a novel approach. Few people realize how connected the U.S. military is to orbital debris, but Reno fails to narrow his inquiry to a specific object, such as the development of a Cold War-era satellite. Without this Vandenberg-like anchor, the narrative does not follow a coherent story about the military-industrial-academic complex or demonstrate how advanced technologies can turn into space junk over time.

In Chapter 5, Reno casts the rise of mass shootings in the United States as an unintended consequence of militarism and gun ownership. This is another innovative
and provocative argument about U.S. society, one that has a great deal of traction when considering the psychological consequences of militarized masculinities. However, it remains unclear how the firearms used in mass shootings can be considered waste when they are valued by perpetrators for their main purpose. More importantly, Reno ignores another type of “domestic blowback” connecting the materiality of waste with popular culture and identity politics. From war trophies and memorabilia, to old uniforms and reenactments, he had a prime opportunity to explore the Cold War as the golden age of military surplus disposal. Yet the veneration of military waste as souvenirs in civilian hands is missing from Reno’s narrative, almost as conspicuously as his sparse treatment of police militarization and government disposal policies. The fact that the research for this chapter was conducted primarily in 2001 and 2002 is a major drawback in light of recent tensions over police violence and allegations of systemic racism.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Reno discusses the environment and demonstrates how the U.S. government has created national wildlife reserves to suit imperialistic and militaristic objectives. Reno’s narrative stretches across vast distances and geographies, covering the Guano Islands, Diego Garcia, and the Pacific Remote Islands National Marine Monument, to recount how military and economic necessities led to the displacement of local populations and the degradation of environments. However, Reno covers too much territory and should have focused more closely on Johnston Atoll. Decades of military occupation, nuclear tests, and chemical weapons storage turned this remote place into a literal wasteland long before it became a hub of demilitarization. In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. military established the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System to incinerate more than 400,000 obsolete chemical weapons. Reno missed the opportunity to explore how and why weapons of mass destruction, a foundational element of permanent war readiness, evolved into hazardous wastes.

Nevertheless, Military Waste is essential reading for scholars studying the legacies of war in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although it will be of particular appeal to scholars in anthropology, history, political science, and sociology, it should receive a wide readership in material culture and discard studies.


Reviewed by Vojtech Mastny, Independent Scholar

Taking stock of history’s longest-lasting alliance at ten-year intervals has been a regular but increasingly daunting exercise for scholars focusing on the North Atlantic