



BOOK CLUB CONVERSATION STARTERS

Italian Prisoners of War

1. At the outset of World War II, America seemed determined to offer its prisoners of war humane treatment and unprecedented respect. Was it a wise policy? How does that policy compare to modern American treatment of its POWs?
2. In several communities, white American soldiers were upset that many American girls became enchanted with Italian prisoners. At the same time, black American soldiers were sometimes upset that Italian prisoners seemed to enjoy greater freedom and status. Were either of these concerns valid and/or defensible?
3. Tens of thousands of Italian and German prisoners were housed on American soil, yet only a very few Japanese prisoners were kept in the U.S. Why the difference? Do those differences offer any insights to modern treatment of POWs?

African-American soldiers

4. During World War II, African-American inductees were disproportionately assigned to non-combat positions. How might that disparity have been either an advantage or a disadvantage to black soldiers?
5. At Fort Lawton, African-American soldiers' barracks were segregated in a relatively remote section of the post. What effect might that policy have had on the morale and performance of black soldiers? Of non-black soldiers?
6. Skin color was not the only distinguishing feature among those who served at Fort Lawton. Do you suppose race was a more divisive characteristic than one's military rank? Than one's level of education? Than whether one's upbringing was rural or urban?

White soldiers and officers

7. Leadership skills were in high demand during World War II. How likely were highly qualified and competent commanders to be assigned a post located in Seattle during a worldwide war?
8. In general, the Army wanted its best soldiers on the front lines. Rather than discharge all soldiers who proved inadequate, the Army often assigned "problem" soldiers to duty as military policemen on domestic posts like Fort Lawton. Was that necessarily a bad decision?

Riot and lynching

9. Drinking, gambling and carousing were widespread the night before soldiers were to head overseas. Was such behavior necessarily either bad or unexpected?
10. Like all soldiers heading to combat zones, members of Fort Lawton's all-black port companies had been taught to defend each other when under attack by the enemy. Did such training explain or excuse the decision of those who entered the Italian area upon hearing that one or more comrades had somehow been wounded?
11. Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto was lynched. If the murder weapon had been a knife or brick or stone instead of a rope, would it have made a difference in the way Americans viewed his death either then or now?

The Press

12. During wartime, news reporters are encouraged or required to withhold certain information for reasons of national security or military necessity. If reporters in 1944 had known what we know today about the Fort Lawton riot and lynching, how much of it might be appropriately censored to protect American interests?
13. When news of the Fort Lawton riot first broke, newspapers assigned police beat reporters to the story. When the court-martial began months later, papers assigned different reporters to cover the trial. How might coverage have differed if the papers had not switched reporters?
14. How might the outcome of this trial have been different if it had been televised in an age of 24-hour cable news?

The Trial

15. Across the world, tens of millions of people perished during World War II, an average of many thousands of casualties every day. Even so, the US Army spent two months investigating—and another five weeks prosecuting—the death of a single Italian private and the wounding of a couple dozen Italian prisoners. Why, do you think, were so many resources devoted to such a relatively small event?
16. Decades later, one of the convicted defendants said his biggest regret was agreeing not to testify at trial on his own behalf. His lawyers had advised most defendants not to risk cross-examination against the brilliant Leon Jaworski. Ultimately, who might have been right?
17. In a 2006 interview, Leon Jaworski's grandson (author Robert Draper) said, "The conclusion that I drew about my grandfather a long time ago was that he was a great man but also greatly flawed. And that's probably the only kind of great man there is." Do you agree?

The Aftermath

18. On October 26, 2007, the Army Board for Correction of Military Records ruled that the convictions of the Fort Lawton defendants "should be set aside, and all rights, privileges and property lost as a result of the conviction should be restored" to each soldier or his estate. Is this an appropriate remedy?

