The Los Angeles poet, columnist, short story writer, and novelist Charles Bukowski has gained a cult following for his tales of heavy drinking, womanizing, gambling on the horses, and dead end jobs. In the 1960s he gained notoriety as the ñDirty Old Man,ò and in 1987, Hollywood made a movie about him called *Barfly,* for which Bukowski wrote the screenplay. Those who pick up Bukowski for the first time will probably not be impressed by the level of political discourse in those pages. Not initially, anyway.

Bukowski believed the daily struggles of men and women, rich and poor, were more timeless, and far more universal, than taking on politics. But Bukowski could not avoid writing about the important political events of his day, including the biggest war of his generationð indeed, any generationð World War II.

Although he was of prime draft age when the United States entered the war, Bukowski did not serve in any branch of the service. The U.S. government eventually declared him 4-F, which means the military considers you unacceptable for physical, psychological, or moral reasons. Of his wartime experiences, Bukowski would later write that

while other men became war heroes, he was living in Philadelphia, where he had sex with a 300-pound prostitute who broke all the four legs of his bed during their love making.

In his autobiographical novel *Ham on Rye*, Bukowski would write about WWII: ñI had no desire to protect the life I had or what future I might have. I had no freedom. I had nothingé As far as I could rationalize, I had nothing to protect.ò Bukowskiôs status as a 4-F was what we might think of as the antithesis of heroic, but his wartime experiences in many ways changed his lifeð just as much as many of the men who served in the military were changed by the war. Bukowski did not fight, or even wear a uniform during the war, but the period was no less a formative one for him. As a 4-F, Bukowski traveled the country, from New Orleans to Atlanta to Philadelphia. And it was also the time when he published his first short story.

And yet, even if he never got near combat, Bukowskiôs experiences during WWII were unusual and interesting. And he had something important to say about that conflict. The experiences of a 4-F are certainly not well represented in American pop culture. Hollywood,

for one, doesnôt usually depict the wartime experiences of men who werenôt drafted. The only instance I can think of is in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* in which the hero, George Bailey, is declared 4-F on account of his deafness in one ear. Bukowski wasnôt physically unfit, but, as I will discuss, he definitely had the wrong ideas about the war.

Bukowski, who identified more with skid row than political parties, often liked to say he had no politics. In his collection of stories *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, in response to a reader who asks why he never writes about politics, Bukowski says there isnôt any point because, as he puts it, ñeveryone knows the bacon is burning.ò Of course, Bukowski then goes on to talk about politicsðalbeit negativelyðfor some length in that essay. Among his many observations, he says that the only difference between a dictatorship and democracy is that in a dictatorship, you donôt have to bother voting.

The apolitical Bukowski is part of the Bukowski myth. After all, when Bukowski said he had no politics, that in itself a political statement, just as saying ñno commentò is in itself a comment. Throughout his career, Bukowski tried to set himself apart, or even

above, politics. He distanced himself from other poets of his generation, such as Allen Ginsberg, who commented upon injustices in America in his poem ñHowl,ò and who later protested the Vietnam War. Bukowski, in contrast, thought it was futile to fight the political system, at least in the way others chose to do it. In any given election, he didnôt see much difference between candidates. Nor did he see much difference between Right wing and Left wing once they seized power.

Bukowski was in a sense, conservative, though he certainly wasnôt conservative in the sense we think of that term today, with Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. He might have been conservative in the more classical sense: he didnôt like change; he wanted to be left alone. He comes from a long line of authors who didnôt care much about the political establishment, so long as it left them alone to write. One thinks of Soren Kierkagaardôs embrace of the Danish monarchy, or Dostoevskyôs deep Russian orthodox beliefs and pro-Tsarist views. Or maybe Jean Paul Sartre, who said he was never freer than under the German occupation of Paris. At the height of 1960s radicalism, Bukowski took a view similar to that of Albert Camus, whom Bukowski

admired. In his book *The Rebel*, Camus argues against the French Revolution and radical movements in general. As Bukowski once put it, most Americans would rather be the CEO of an oil company rather than burn down the neighborhood gas station.

As was common in Bukowskiôs life, in the early 1940s, he confronted the situation in Europe in a typically extreme way. Politically, Bukowski was an isolationist, and as a student at Los Angeles City College, he made it known, in a rather clownish way, his admiration for Adolf Hitler. It is debatable how seriously Bukowski took the Nazis, but in his defense, at the time, few Americans knew how murderous the Third Reich would become. As Bukowski put it later, in the 1930s, Hitler was merely a Charlie Chaplin-like character.

Bukowskiôs flirtation with Nazismð if we can call it thatð was in part simply a cartoonish way of expressing a pro-German view based on his German lineage. Bukowski was born in Adernach, Germany, just after World War I, to an American soldier father and a German mother. He had a lifelong love of all things German, from the music of Mahler and Beethoven to the writings of Nietzsche. One of Bukowskiôs first

stories was about the ñRed Baron,ò the WWI German fighting ace. And later in life, Bukowski liked to hang a WWI era Iron Cross from the mirror of his car.

Bukowski had German roots, to be sure, and there were fascists in America in the 1930s, but Nazism also appealed to Bukowskiôs natural desire to shock, to offend, to go against the grain of American culture. Disregarding his obnoxious embrace of Nazism as a college student, Bukowskiôs isolationism was not that unusual for its time. Isolationism is as old as American politics. George Washington warned against foreign entanglements in the 1790s, and Ron Paul has preached it in 2012. And there were many Americans who wanted the U.S. to stay out of WWII. The U.S. had already been involved in one World War that, up to that time, cost the country more lives than any conflict other than the Civil War. One of the most famous American isolationists of the 1940s was Charles Lindbergh, whose America First Committee believed that the U.S. was unprepared for war and did not need to get involved. In June 1941, Bukowski apparently saw Lindbergh speak in Los Angeles at the Hollywood Bowl.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor killed not just 2,000 Americans, but American isolationism. Americans wanted revenge against Japan. In his novel about his youth, *Ham on Rye*, Bukowski is drinking with his friend, Becker, a Marine, when the attack on Pearl Harbor is announced on the radio. At one point, Becker says to him, ñJoin up. Itôll give you something to write about.ò Bukowski, not impressed, replies, ñBecker, thereôs always something to write about.ò So much for Bukowski volunteering!

Bukowski depicts the news of the attack as a time when Americans instantly came together. But the reason for their solidarity restsð as historian John Dower has shown in his book *War without Mercy*ð on a desire for revenge. In *Ham on Rye*, a man stomps by Bukowski, vowing he canôt wait to kill the Japanese. As Bukowski saw it, the American tribe was threatened, and it was time for payback. Bukowski, however, paints this picture of American jingoism with dispassion. The war was something he had no interest in fighting. In contrast to everyone else, seemingly, Bukowski was unfazed by the Japanese sneak attack. This is especially noteworthy considering he was in California, which was

nearer Japan than most states, would see tens of thousands of Japanese American citizens removed to internment camps.

In looking at Americansô desire for war, Bukowski saw a shocking lack of ideological motives. It was not about fighting for freedom or democracy. In essay in his 1969 collection *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, Bukowski wrote about a supervisor at one of his dead-end wartime jobs. In the story, itôs not long after the Pearl Harbor attack. While they work, Bukowskiôs boss confides in him that he had been drafted. What the man was most concerned about, Bukowski tells us, is that once in the army, his boss wouldnôt be able to have sex with his wife. Bukowski is appalled. ñWas he worried about being killed?ò Bukowski asks us. ñThe meaning of war? the unmeaning of war? what it meant to be split into pieces by a lob of mortar?ò No, instead we see a man with much baser concerns on his mind. And his wife, apparently was not sympathetic. ñGo into the army and be a man,ò she told her hesitant husband.

Bukowskiôs status as a mere observer of the war came to an end in 1942 when he was arrested in Philadelphia for evading the draft. As Bukowski tells us in his story ñDoing Time with Public Enemy No. 1,ò

he had not been evading the draft. He had registered in St. Louis, but apparently the paperwork had not been done properly. Bukowskiôs depiction of his time in jail is rife with irony. He lives well, even enjoys it. He eats far better than was on the street. And no one in there seems concerned that he wasnôt in the army.

Bukowski eventually goes before the army psychiatrist who asks him if he believes in the war. No, Bukowski tells him, but he says he would fight if forced to. For the U.S. government, this clearly is the wrong answer. The army declares him 4-F and Bukowski spends most of the war wandering America.

Bukowski might have enjoyed his brief stay in prison. And the war for him was a time in which he drank and befriended strange women. But he couldnôt deny the social stigma of not serving in the army.

One short story, ñThe Life of Bum,ò depicts the perils of a man named Harry (clearly meant to be Bukowski). The story is set in 1943. Harry is of draft age, but is not in uniform. The suicidal Harry sits on park bench next to an older man as a convoy of soldiers passes by. They notice Harry is not in the service. They proceed to ridicule Harry. They

hiss. They boo. They curse him. They call him an SOB, a slacker, a coward. They insult his manhood. To add to the humiliation, the man sitting next to him on the park bench declares he is a veteran of World War I and will beat Harry up. The soldiers laugh and cheer him on.

When Harry asks the man for a cigarette, he refuses, saying, ñYou like Hitler, donôt you?ò Harry offers to go for a drink with the older man and is again refused.

Harry leaves the park bench and walks past a group of 4-F men playing softball. Itôs obvious the men were 4-F due to old age, and so Bukowski knows they would not be friendly to him. ñThe energy of their anger dominated,ò he tell us.

Anger also dominates the poem, ñThe Soldier, His Wife and the Bum.ò In it, Bukowski is playing classical music in his room. A soldier next door shouts at him to shut the radio off. Bukowski does so, explaining that the soldier ñwould soon be going over there to protect me from Hitler, so I snapped the radio off.ò The explanation seems meek, but under the surface is the classic Bukowski sarcasm. Bukowski didnôt really care if the man fought Hitler. He felt no obligation toward

the soldier. The point is that the soldier confronted the situation with a degree of anger that Bukowski always found perplexing. And when the soldierôs wife protests her husbandôs rude behavior, he only gets ruder. He curses Bukowski through the wall.

These writings about what Bukowski called ñbumsò encapsulate his view on the war. It wasnôt a war to save democracy necessarily, but a chance for the masses to act out their aggression, an aggression that could turn as easily against other Americans as the enemy. Bukowski always hated the idea that a group of people left alone one day could become a vile enemy the next. Today it was the Japanese or Germans. Tomorrow it might be the North Vietnamese or the Arabs.

Bukowskiôs perspective certainly runs contrary to the notion of the conflictð as put forth in Studs Terkelôs oral history of the subjectð a ñgood war,ò or as one book by historian Stephen Ambrose written for children has called it, a ñgood fight.ò Few people would deny the goodness of the United States defeating Germany and Japan during the Second World War, though we might have some issues with how the

United States conducted itself. But more debatable is the extent to which American have embraced an uncritical look at the WWII generation.

Tom Brokawôs term ñthe Greatest Generationòð applied to those that survived the Depression and defeated fascismð has become a cliché since Brokaw published the book in 1998. But Brokaw alone isnôt responsible for the lofty praise lavished on the World War II generation. Brokawôs book appeared the same year as the blockbuster Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan,* based on the popular writings of Stephen Ambrose.

The film, which used Ambrose as a historical consultant, did not challenge the conventional wisdom of WWII as a ñgood war.ò While its pyrotechnics represented a dramatic break from previous Hollywood war films, the movie emphasized traditional notions of duty, comradeship, honor, and sacrifice. *Saving Private Ryan*, despite its technical brillianceð especially in its opening scene depicting the D-Day invasion of Franceð presents a conventional portrait of a geographically mixed World War II platoon battling a ruthless enemy. In terms of its

message, *Saving Private Ryan* doesnôt differ much from the John Wayne movie, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*.

Itôs interesting to note that neither Studs Terkel nor Stephen Ambrose nor Tom Brokaw fought during WWII. Terkel, who was in his thirties and suffered from a bad ear (just like George Bailey!) remained stateside. Ambrose and Brokaw were just children. Itôs also interesting to note that the writings of those who did not fight are often very different than those who served in combat. One only has to read Eugene Sledgeôs graphic memoir of the Pacific War, *With the Old Breed,* to understand what Sledge called the ñwaste of war.ò Sledge certainly did his part against Japan, but he did not glorify the conflict, or exalt his generation.

Nor did the many novelists that emerged from WWII. Anyone who has read Joseph Hellerôs *Catch-22*ð based on Hellerôs experiences fighting in Italyð or Kurt Vonnegutôs *Slaughterhouse-Five*ð about his capture during the Battle of the Bulge and surviving the firebombing of Dresdenð will read of events that put the Greatest Generation in an

unflattering light. Heller and Vonnegut offer a bizarre, absurdist take on the warð a view that Stephen Ambrose certainly did not embrace.

Had he lived long enough, Bukowski, who died in 1994, would have laughed at tom Brokawôs notion of the ñGreatest Generation.ò To be fair, when he spoke about World War II, Bukowski did not focus on the men who did the fighting. He had admiration for men of action, like the young Hemingway. Bukowski certainly was no pacifist. Nor was he necessarily anti-military. After all, had participated in ROTC during high school. Rather than talk about men in combat, Bukowski focused on the mindset of Americans as they went to warð a mindset Bukowski found perplexing at best and repellant at worst.

Long after WWII, Charles Bukowski said that in the early 1940s, he was anti-war in a time of pro-war. He was a hippie before hippiesð a Beat before there were Beats. But Bukowski was no hippie, nor did he see himself as a true Beat writer. While being anti-war was no popular in the 1940s, it was in the 1960s, when Bukowski became popular. His Bohemian audience certainly didnôt want to read pro-war writings, and they certainly didnôt want to read about Bukowskiôs brief embrace of the

Nazis. Bukowski thought it better to avoid talking about politics, which he was not always successful in doing despite himself.

When it came to a world view, Bukowskiôs ideas might best be described as a Hobbesian ñwar against all.ò People didnôt need war, as Bukowski was fond of saying, because they were always fightingð for money, for resources, for sex. Their real enemies were not people thousands of miles away in other countries, but bosses, landlords, wives and lovers, freeway traffic, bad TV, and the ugly faces in the crowd. One of his poetry collections, after all, is titled *War All the Time*.

One should always be careful to separate the man from the myth, the writer of fiction from the writer as historical actor. However, everything Bukowski wrote about WWII suggests a consistent viewpoint: Bukowski felt he had little stake in the conflict and wanted to have no part of it. And it is part of Bukowskiôs larger worldview that when the people are most united, they are usually at their most threatening. One can only imagine what he would have thought of the seemingly never-ending ñWar on Terror.ò Even if they feel Americans are fighting for freedom, Bukowski shows us, they viciously attack those

who disagree with them. As a man who never had a desire to run for office or be accepted by bourgeois society, Bukowski felt no shame about his 4-F status. He didnôt feel he owed Uncle Sam anything.

ñAre there good governments and bad governments,ò Bukowski asks us in *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. ñNo, there are only bad governments and worse governments.ò Bukowski didnôt like his life being put in the hands of those he thought were idiots ñNow if youôll forgive me, dear readers,ò he goes on to say, Iôll get back to the whores and the horses and the booze while thereôs still time.ò