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WORLD WAR II AND ITS MEANING FOR AMERICANS

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When America went to an all-volunteer force in the 1970s, many predicted that a gap in outlook would arise between the military and civilian worlds. To counter the growing gap that has indeed arisen, military history and subjects like World War II need to be taught more widely.

Understanding World War II—the decisive passage of twentieth-century American history—requires a background, rudimentary knowledge of the concepts and terms of military history. To neglect military history in our schools and on our campuses would indeed amount to an “erasure of national memory” that we can’t afford. Amnesia about the wars of American history undermines Americans’ ability to reach the informed decisions about military affairs that, as citizens and taxpayers, they are obliged to reach.

Understanding the story of WWII begins with knowing the stories and views of those who fought in it. In June 1984, President Reagan began his remarks at the U.S. cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy with extensive quotations from correspondence between Lisa Zanatta Henn and her late father, a First Division soldier who landed with the first wave at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. Only after quoting Private Zanatta extensively did President Reagan venture his view of Normandy’s lasting meanings: that the landings there had opened a phase of a victorious Allied campaign that would win the war in the West and secure freedom there for the indefinite future. President’s Reagan’s view seemed bold at the time, but it was to be vindicated by the sudden end of the Cold War several years later.

Twenty years earlier, in an interview with Walter Cronkite filmed at the same location, Dwight Eisenhower had been more cautious. The Allied victory over the Nazis, he told Cronkite, had not solved the problem of peace in our time but had given the Allies a “chance to do better” in the decades to come. Separated by twenty years, these differing assessments had one thing in common: both presidents agreed that the victory in WWII had had a positive and lasting result.

WWII AND WWI

The meaningful outcome of WWII seems to set it apart from most major events of the twentieth century. It is evident here at the First Division Museum and the mansion of WWI veteran and newspaper owner Robert McCormick that McCormick saw his participation in the First Division battle at Cantigny as one of the most important events in his life. Yet two decades after Cantigny, McCormick emerged as the foremost champion of “America First,” opposing war against the same enemy he had fought at Cantigny. About the terrors and waste of war, McCormick arrived at a number of conclusions shared by a majority of Americans of his day, conclusions shared in part by Franklin Roosevelt, McCormick’s great nemesis in the “America-First” debate.

In the summer of 1999, my father, John, who was completing his book *Yanks: The Epic Story of the American Army in World War I* (2001), invited me to accompany him on his final research trip to France. We went for a week of research and touring in the Argonne-Meuse and St. Mihiel sectors.

Our itinerary was a repeat of the tour of the same area that Dad’s father had taken him on 70 years before. At that time, Major Dwight Eisenhower was finalizing his work on a guidebook he was compiling for the American Battle Monuments Commission and General Pershing. Major Eisenhower’s ABMC guidebook is as useful as ever—Dad and I relied on it in 1999. In nearby Verdun I picked up a second guidebook, published by the French-German Verdun Foundation that maintains that battlefield, scene of the epic 1916 battle for control of the high ground north of the city which claimed 1 million French and German lives. The preface explains that the Foundation is “dedicated to maintaining the Verdun battlefield eternally so that future generations can visit and consider the question—how it was that our two governments could ever have permitted this to happen.”

Histories of the Great War tend to suggest that it was a meaningless conflict. Yet in hindsight, we can appreciate that meaninglessness on the scale of the Great War could not fail to generate meanings--and malevolence--on a commensurate scale. In any event, WWII, unlike WWI, ended in clear-cut victory with enduring positive effects. If the Great War brought an end to an established way of life, WWII opened doors to a new and better way of life.

WWII AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Granddad was generally reluctant to discuss any aspect of the war. But he felt sure that in an eventful century, WWII had been the decisive event. The twentieth century was a time of unprecedented innovation and progress, haunted throughout by tremendous dislocations, the Great Depression, and the two world wars and their aftermath. Born in the horse and buggy era, by the time Eisenhower was a teenager automobiles had appeared in great numbers and the Wright brothers had pioneered flight. Aviation and mobility transformed warfare by 1941 and transformed America into an economic, military, and industrial superpower. His military career spanned it all--the era of horse drawn artillery and the slow and noisy tanks making their appearance in WWI, the era of air fleets and modern naval ships, the atomic era. During his presidency, America entered the computer age, the television age, and the space age. America prevailed in all of these new departures, none less so than in war.

Indeed, Dwight Eisenhower regarded his wartime service as more important than his two terms as president. My favorite story illustrating this was told to me by my great-uncle Milton. In 1954, when Milton was president of Penn State University, his brother, President Eisenhower, agreed to deliver the commencement address. Penn State is huge, and just as the hour for the outdoor ceremony approached, the rains came and the event had to be transferred indoors, a massive logistical undertaking. A slightly panic-stricken Milton apologized to Ike for the pandemonium and the makeshift arrangements, whereupon Ike smiled. "Milton, since June 6, 1944, I've never worried about the rain."

WHAT WWII TEACHES ABOUT AMERICANS

The study of WWII illuminates many positive aspects of America and of Americans: their adaptability to change, their innovativeness, their keen sense of citizenship. Americans do not routinely reflect on positives about themselves. If books and newspapers are a guide, Americans are accustomed to going about their lives in a state of earnest concern about the manifold problems that public figures insist are all around us. Americans live with constant reminders of social, political, and cultural divides, reminders that America is a 50-50, red-blue nation, reminders of battles being lost and promises to keep. American history is routinely presented as a story of unfulfilled promises, not as a story to be celebrated but as a legacy to be redeemed.

It is fair to ask how many Americans have NOT lived--if informed critics are to be believed--under the most corrupt government in our history. How often can we pause and say that American policies are NOT on the point of bringing ourselves and others to the brink of disaster, discredit, and the apocalypse? Our recent history, including WWII, can be chronicled as a long series of setbacks and mistakes,

punctuated by stunning and complete victories which seem to catch informed Americans by surprise. Yet the truth is that Americans are fortunate and know it. They are creative, restless, hopeful, and optimistic, unwilling to exchange places with anyone anywhere.

This paradoxical truth--an outwardly self-critical bent, on the one hand, contrasted with America's steady record of growth and progress on the other--will in my opinion interest historians well into the future. Five hundred years from now, historians will perhaps look back on America in the 1940s and speculate about the origins of globalization, which began to emerge in the war's immediate aftermath. In mid-twentieth century America, they may trace the origins of patterns of government, commerce, and society prevailing centuries from now. However they feel about America, the lessons of American dynamism will certainly be explored.

In the context of WWII history, the facts of American dynamism can be summed up by a single fateful strategic and military fact. Looking back to 1943-44, whereas a German invasion of England across the 25-mile-wide Channel proved to be beyond Germany's capabilities; whereas a Russian, German, Japanese, French, Chinese, or even British military move in strength aimed at any place in North or South America would have been unthinkable, Americans thought little of mobilizing 16 million men and women, transporting them across the seas, and hurling them against the finest armies of Eurasia. Would it not be ironic--even tragic--if these key facts about us that will be so apparent to future historians were to be obscured or missed by us?

Today's foreign policy news mostly features the latest problems, the ongoing erosion of our wartime and postwar partnerships, the malaise of NATO, America's estrangement from the UN, the problem of working out exit strategies to salvage what a sizeable number of people see unfolding in Iraq as yet another Vietnam. Yet we are committed to the idea of making things better and to the study of history as a guide and so shouldn't we, as a practical matter, study success as well as failure? Shouldn't Americans have a full appreciation of the possibilities opened up and demonstrated by the record of American successes?

Maybe the slump in interest about the war has something to do with the dynamics of historical memory. Among history's lessons is that considerable time passes before history's verdicts take hold. As a boy in Gettysburg, I well remember the summer of 1963, the centennial of the battle of Gettysburg, when the state of Alabama--the last state to do so--finally contributed a monument to the Alabamians. On hand for Alabama's dedication ceremony was Governor George Corley Wallace of Alabama, who would go on to wage bitter end resistance to the plain lessons of the Civil War for yet another twenty years, before finally, and sincerely, seeing the light.

We are still some 35 years shy of the WWII centennial. Maybe then the positives of the war, which have now been on display for over sixty years, will be even more fully appreciated: American dynamism, the practical benefits of democracy, along with the possibilities demonstrated for fuller international military and political cooperation and reminders about citizenship.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The possibilities opened up for future international cooperation is one of the war's most important legacies. As one who knew Dwight Eisenhower as a grandfather for 21 years, I can't help reflecting on the unlikelihood of this aspect of his career, given his background and expectations. In 1911, when he left his home town of Abilene for good, embarking for West Point and a career that would send him to 30 duty stations around the world, the last thing on his mind was the idea of achievements that would symbolize international understanding. He first wanted a free education and second a military education. Several summers ago, my wife, Julie, and I and our youngest daughter drove through Abilene again, to be reminded once again that there are few places in America more remote from the cosmopolitan centers of the seaboards and cities overseas where Eisenhower and his wartime colleagues would perform their greatest service.

What Eisenhower and other Americans discovered is that people everywhere are pretty much the same. Like people everywhere, Abileners go about their daily lives, they strive, they pursue personal goals and interests, they raise families, make friends, they want change for the better and the chance to lead meaningful lives.

To be sure, Americans place the accent on "change," Dwight Eisenhower being an example. In fact there was no Dwight David Eisenhower raised in Abilene in the 1890's. Granddad was born and christened David Dwight Eisenhower. When he entered West Point in June 1911, he switched his first and second names because he liked the sound of "Dwight D." better.

Registering at West Point, he listed "Tyler, Texas" as his birthplace instead of "Denison," Texas, evidently because in those days it was considered better to be from Tyler. He also omitted the fact that he had played pro ball in the KOM league in the summers of 1909 and 1910, figuring West Point would be none the wiser and he would thereby be eligible for football. The idea was to get ahead, to change for the better. Many Americans of his era took similar advantage of the absence of precise public personal data records.

Parenthetically, Granddad held to the fiction of amateur athletic status all his life. In 1947 at a Dodgers-Giants game at Ebbetts field in Brooklyn, the Dodger publicist (Red Patterson) who accompanied him to the park asked General Eisenhower about the long-standing rumors that DDE had once played pro ball in the KOM league under the alias of "Wilson." It had been 1909-10, according to the rumors, but Patterson told Ike that league records indicated there were two Wilsons in the league. Which one was he? "The one who could hit," Ike replied.

Like so many nineteenth-century Americans facing the challenges of the wider world beyond, Ike felt he needed an edge. So he changed his name and birthplace, omitted a detail here and there, showing that America was--and should be--a place where it doesn't matter who you are, just what you become.

Dwight Eisenhower was as Kansan and American as they came, adaptable and open. He remained so as he advanced through West Point and his military career, striving to exhibit

"Duty Honor Country," West Point's motto. Eisenhower rose in the service of Douglas MacArthur and George Marshall, architects of the twentieth-century American military, becoming a military commander of the first order. Their main challenge, of course, was leadership in WWII, which marked the advent of revolutionary factors in warfare and international affairs. Significantly, the single most important strategic reality faced was that U.S. strategic objectives could not be achieved by American power alone. Coalition warfare was new for the U.S. but essential for success in the war. The American leadership was obliged to think in terms of allies, of harmonizing political and military aims within a diverse coalition, of building consensus beyond the letter of agreements, as something vitally necessary and possible. In the most destructive war in history, American, British, French, and Polish forces fought as a single army, in company with the Russian armies in the east. No one emerged knowing better than he the critical importance of international cooperation, or more profoundly aware of the possibilities of cooperation.

One of his favorite memories, which has been described in books, involved the King and Queen of England. On May 26, 1944 during the climactic final days of planning and preparations for Overlord, Eisenhower took time away from meetings to call on the royal family at Buckingham Palace. Eisenhower had nothing but reverence for the English royal family, which had honored him with friendship and hospitality. Yet he was apprehensive. The King, afflicted by ill health since youth, was notoriously quiet and shy and hampered by a speech impediment. Staff members remembered how the King and Eisenhower in Tunisia had once ridden together in a jeep for several hours in complete silence. But on this May day King George was gregarious.

Over lunch, served buffet style in an upstairs apartment, the three reminisced. The Queen told Eisenhower for the first time about something that had happened on a tour of Windsor Castle that had been arranged for him two years before. It turned out that the guide, Colonel Sterling, had forgotten that the royals were on the grounds. The couple were sipping tea in a garden when they suddenly heard Sterling, Eisenhower, and General Mark Wayne Clark approaching. Not wanting to intrude, they had knelt on hands and knees behind the hedge until the Americans and Sterling passed by. Eisenhower was delighted by the story and the three shared a good laugh.

Back at HQ, Eisenhower described the luncheon to his closest aide. During the dessert course, he did not notice that his napkin had fallen to the floor. Yet he felt no self-consciousness or embarrassment when the King had mentioned it to him. "It could have been like visiting a friend in Abilene," Ike remarked.

"Kinship among nations is not determined in such measurements as proximity, size, and age," Dwight Eisenhower said in June 1945, while accepting the Freedom of London in a speech at the Guildhall. "Rather we should turn to those inner things . . . those intangibles that are the real treasures that free men possess. . . . If we keep our eyes on this guidepost, then no difficulties along our path of mutual cooperation can ever be insurmountable."

Cooperation among nations did not mean adopting a new consciousness or a brand new view of human nature or shedding old identities rooted in family, community and

country. Nor was Eisenhower's wartime role merely one of a harmonizer of differing points of view, a mere compromiser. The strategy debates were as intense as the historical record implies and they left a deep mark on the conduct of the war and postwar politics. But strategy differences did not impede victory.

SUCCESS FACTORS

What was the secret of the Allies' success and Eisenhower's success as an Allied Commander? My conclusion is that Eisenhower's approach towards the various strategy controversies was to assume that regardless of nationality, people would reason their way to similar conclusions. In the various command controversies, he assumed that everyone, British and American leaders alike, having accepted the basic aims implied by the "unconditional surrender" policy, would come together behind the key elements of grand strategy that stemmed logically from the policy.

The remarkable D-Day exhibit here allowed us to try and imagine what the First Division soldiers went through on the morning of D-Day. All the exhibits bore reminders that the First Division of the time was comprised of citizen-soldiers--citizens who, as fate would have it, were obliged to endure great trials.

In 1982, my wife and I toured the invasion zone in southern England and northwest France. Along the Normandy coast, we hiked through the remnants of the Atlantic Wall in the Omaha Beach area and visited the cemeteries. We strolled through Ste-Mere-Eglise and along Utah Beach and the British and Canadian beaches that stretch eastward to Caen. These sites stand as monuments to the ingenuity, the bravery, and the highest ideals of citizenship which the soldiers of D-Day exemplified.

We continued on to southern England, which had been one large military encampment in late May-early June 1944. We visited the 101st Airborne bivouac area where Granddad had dropped in on the troops to wish them Godspeed hours before the attack. We saw Southwick House, still an active Royal Navy station, where Eisenhower and his deputies met continuously in the days and hours before D-Day.

The hills surrounding Portsmouth are peaceful, yet the mind's eye can imagine the sights and sounds of 1944 described by the people who were there, the caravans of vehicles streaming south towards the docks, winding past quaint country homes with "tea for sale" signs posted, through the narrow streets of the towns where villagers stepped out to wish the troops good luck.

A vivid story of the time describes British Admiral Bertram Ramsay, commander of the Dunkirk evacuation, who by the spring of 1944 served as commander of the Allied Naval forces on D-Day. One evening, a week before the attack, Ramsay and his driver pulled over to the side of a road on a promontory overlooking Portsmouth where they could see the convoys passing and the ships loading in the distance. Ramsay looked on pensively for what seemed a long while. Had everything been done? What would the next few days bring? "It is a tragic situation that this is a scene of a stage set for terrible human sacrifice," he remarked, "but if out of it comes peace and happiness, who would have it otherwise?"

FREE CITIZENRIES

I believe in the power of speech as both a window on history and an important tool of citizenship. Each semester at Penn, I review perhaps the greatest such example, the oration by Pericles in honor of the fallen Athenians. His famed Funeral Oration is a classic description of citizenship, and it is addressed to perhaps the first *polis* in history to resemble our own, to an assembly of free Athenian citizens during the first winter of the Peloponnesian war.

In it, Pericles acknowledged a fact that may seem strange, but one that Americans may confront today: that the sheer dynamism of a free society can--and in the case of Athens did--result in such an expansion of power and reach of influence that challenge and reaction become inevitable. Yet in responding to those challenges, the free citizens of Athens had a choice. Would citizens enjoying the fruits of success in so favored a country risk all for something so ephemeral as honor? "Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on courage," Pericles declared. "Let there be no relaxation in the face of the perils of war."

"Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbors. It is more of a case of our being a model to others. . . . Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority, but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but ability. . . .

Here each one of our citizens in all the manifold aspects of life is able to show himself the rightful lord of his own person, and do this, moreover with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility. . . .

Here each individual is interested not only in the in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well.. this is a peculiarity of ours. we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say he has no business here at all"

Thus Pericles spoke in 431 BCE, at the beginnings of the Peloponnesian war, which is but a short interlude in ancient history. Athens inspires, and it warns. As the ultimate defeat of Athens shows, political eras and empires come and go. The permanence of any country or of any institutionalized way of life is best seen as an "aspiration." How long the United States can retain its considerable stature and favored way of life is a question we ask often these days. In reply, Americans can derive confidence from the fact that unlike emerging Athens and its city-state allies, the principles espoused by Americans have a large and global following, whether American sponsorship of those principles is welcomed or not.

The story of WWII demonstrates kinship and the toughness of free peoples everywhere, freely choosing the path of citizenship. To paraphrase Eisenhower's address at Guildhall, he was not expressing a hope that Abilene, Kansas and London, England were linked by a common dedication to freedom of worship, equality before the law, the liberty to act and speak as one saw fit; or that a Londoner would fight for

these principles as would an Abilener. He was stating these things as proven facts, facts proven on D-Day, in Normandy and in the dozens of other battlefields in dozens of theaters from Burma to the Po River Valley.

Trends since 1945 affirm strong movement in the direction of these principles. The story of WWII provides a vision of the world we say we want and the world we are moving towards. For these and other reasons, we need to study and teach the war that as a practical matter helps explain our world today. If the demands of citizenship in our world are less vigorous than they were sixty years ago, we should remember that it was planned that way. Those who fought in WWII wanted to leave a better world for those to come, and they succeeded in doing so. If the qualities necessary in war are less in evidence, maybe we are less in need of them. Yet our independence and ability to govern ourselves depend, ultimately, on respect for

our country's traditions and on a strong sense of citizenship and on the readiness to accept the responsibilities of citizenship.

CONCLUSION

In sum, WWII was a decisive event with an outcome that has moved us towards a better future. It should be taught and studied in order to comprehend not only its warnings but the insights it offers into American strengths and those inhering in a free society.

I believe the history of WWII will always be taught and studied, whatever the current fashion. Whatever the view of publishers and some educators these days, the popular demand for these subjects shows that they answer a deep-felt need. History should inspire and inform.

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