A Lesson from History for the War on Terror

The 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the largest of the Nazi death camps, offers an occasion to evaluate our present thoughts about war. There is a striking similarity between some of the current opinion about the war against terrorism and the outlook of many Americans prior to our involvement in World War II.

During the recent election (and during the confirmation process of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice), we heard anti-war rhetoric that directly paralleled attitudes prior to World War II. Among most religious and academic leaders of that era, there existed strong opposition to any military involvement in World War II. Anti-war speeches, peace talks, and an obsession with America’s failures flowed from those who later proved to be morally and politically naïve.

Tragically, while these leaders held peace conventions, Hitler was feeding an insatiable appetite for war and death. In 1939, he occupied what was left of Czechoslovakia and invaded Poland. In 1940, the Nazi regime invaded Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, and France. Later he attacked Britain and began bombing London. In 1941, he invaded Yugoslavia and Greece. Finally, he sent three-fourths of his military to attack the Soviet Union.

Historian Robert Ross noted that, “…wherever Hitler went, his hatred of Jews went with him– from one end of the European continent to the other. Each in its turn became victim, not only of German and Nazi occupation, but of the…persecution, transportation, and extermination of Jews from these countries. No conquered nation escaped.”

Yet, as Joseph Loconte observed in his perceptive new book, The End of Illusions, “…even as Hitler’s panzer divisions laid waste to much of the continent, religious leaders were blaming the outbreak of hostilities on America or the Allied nations.” Our nation was held hostage to an isolationist mindset– similar to the thinking of many today. In January 1939, Franklin Roosevelt finally rejected this simplistic view when he addressed Congress and the nation. He said, “We have learned that God-fearing democracies of the world which observe the sanctity of treaties and good faith in their dealings with other nations cannot safely be indifferent to international lawlessness anywhere.”

In October of 1938, Winston Churchill had warned the House of Commons that, “There can never be friendship between the British democracy and the Nazi power; that power which spurns Christian ethics; which cheers its onward course by a barbarous paganism; and uses, as we have seen, with pitiless brutality the threat of murderous force.”
But, as Loconte noted, “The claim that greedy capitalists states were the
greatest obstacle to peace rested on the grotesque assumption that the differences
between the German Reich and Anglo-American democracy didn’t really amount to
much.” The National Council of Churches naively opposed American intervention
as “nothing more than a clash of selfish national interests.” They reflected the
typical attitude when they stated that, “The war arose chiefly as the result of deep-
rooted economic competition to control the raw materials and markets of the
world.” Others accused America of an ambitious imperialism that will “inevitably
bring to focus against itself the jealousies and hatreds of all the other nations and
races on earth.”

Church leaders and academics then, like many now, refused to open their
eyes to what Churchill described as “armed and resolute wickedness.” Churchill’s
description fits radical Islam as much as it did Nazism. Yet the fantasy idealism of
these leaders necessitated “sentimental illusions about the character of evil” and a
“resolute unwillingness to face known and indisputable facts.” They deceptively
painted “a softer portrait of life under Nazi rule than the known facts demanded.”
As the Nazis terrorized the world, they convened peace conferences, demanded
American neutrality, and called for negotiations with Hitler.

Loconte observed that, “False dogma about human nature, shared by
Americans and Europeans, had produced a failure to understand the stubbornness
and persistence of the tyrannical will.” Sadly, the United States almost waited until
it was too late when it joined Britain’s opposition to Hitler.

Although also late, many religious leaders began to recognize the threat of
Hitler and recanted their anti-war position. One admitted that, “The alternative to
successful resistance to Germany is the extension of the darkest political tyranny
imaginable over the whole of Europe.” They began to view the preference for
American neutrality as a preference for tyranny over liberal democracy. Another
stated, “Christians who seek to be responsive to the demands of love must recognize
their responsibility for saving others from tyranny, for restraining of violence which
is already let loose on the world.”

The well-known Swiss theologian Karl Barth fled Germany after the
occupation of the Ruhr. Since he had seen the demonic forces up close, he had a
realistically understanding of fascism and what must be done to overcome it.
According to Barth, “It was the God-given role of the state to uphold basic
standards of morality. This is why government ‘bears the sword’ of a police force
and a military: to prevent human societies from being engulfed by the chaos of
lawless men.”

“The State would lose all meaning,” he wrote, “and would be failing in its
duty as an appointed minister of God...if it failed to defend the bounds between
Right and Wrong by the threat and by the actual use of the sword.”

When Britain declared war on Germany, Barth said, “It acted as a just
government upholding Christian standards. The cause which is at stake in this war
is our own cause, and we Christians first and foremost must make our own the
anxieties, the hardships and the hopes which this war demands of all men. The
Christians who do not realize that they must take part unreservedly in this war
must have slept over their Bibles as well as over their newspapers.”
One of the more prominent leaders of this time was Reinhold Neibuhr. He spoke candidly about “the distasteful methods required to fight and win a war against Germany—the undermining of civil liberties on the home-front, the economic and human costs, the killing of innocents. But the nature of totalitarianism seemed to leave freedom-loving people no choice” (Loconte).

Neibuhr stated that, “Ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history.” He then appealed, “Let those who are revolted by such ambiguities have the decency and consistency to retire to the monastery, where medieval perfectionists found their asylum.”

The war against terror offers greater ambiguities. Who, for example, was responsible for the 9/11 attack on America? Who supported their cause? Where do we find them? How did our engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq relate? We know Saddam was a terrorist who inflicted mass destruction on his own people. We also know he desired to destroy Israel and hated Americans. It is a good thing for everyone that he is removed. But how should we think about Iran? And North Korea? We live in a different world from the World War II era. Our times demand greater vigilance. The war against terrorism is an unfortunate necessity for the safety of civilized humanity. If we care about our safety, we cannot afford an isolationists approach to terrorists.

Thankfully, the current administration understands and is acting preemptively to stop terrorism. Radical Islam has been very clear about its intentions. Their stated aim is “to murder massive numbers of civilians in order to rock the foundations of Western democracies.” Those who argue for neutrality and are obsessed with the faults of America should take a lesson from history before it’s too late. Unfortunately, like Nazism, we face organized killers with global reach. Be assured that they plan to inflict unmitigated global evil that can only be stopped by military action.

Since we will probably be a nation at war for many years, this is a time to be profoundly grateful for the bravery and sacrifice of our young men and women who volunteer to defend justice and liberty. Pray for them. Write to them. Pray for those who lead them to have wisdom, strength, and courage. They all deserve our deepest gratitude and respect.

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