

Afghanistan Is a Lot Like WWII

I really enjoyed last week's [WWII in HD](#) mini-series on the History Channel. Ten hours of *color* footage from World War II, all of it digitally restored, and the series was narrated through the voices of soldiers, Marines, and journalists, all of whom had written books about their time in combat -- my Christmas reading list is set. So when I did a bloggingheads debate with Cato's Malou Innocent on Friday afternoon, the battles of Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa were fresh in my mind. The video of this debate was lost to technical difficulties that could not be overcome, but I don't think Innocent would object if I attributed to her the view that America would be stronger for retreating from Afghanistan. I argued the other side -- that the war in Afghanistan is, in the words of President Obama, a necessary war.

As soon as I started comparing the war in the Pacific with the war in Afghanistan, Innocent jumped all over me. "You're not comparing Imperial Japan to al Qaeda?" she asked. "No, of course not," I assured her. Respectable people can't compare the wars America is fighting now with the Great and Good War America fought against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

But, you know what? On second thought, Imperial Japan and al Qaeda have a lot in common -- and so do the Second World War and the war in Afghanistan. The Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor, killing more Americans than any attack on U.S. soil until al Qaeda launched its own sneak attack on 9/11. The Japanese and al Qaeda also share the same fanatical devotion to their "cause." The Japanese had kamikazes and al Qaeda has kamikazes -- with hundreds of passengers on board. Our enemies in both wars shared a suicidal commitment to an impossible delusion of world domination. The war in the Pacific was a bloodbath as a result. Women and children threw themselves off of cliffs on Saipan rather than surrender to U.S. Marines. Only 1,000 Japanese surrendered on Iwo, the other 22,000 died fighting or were buried or burned alive in the island's caves. On Okinawa the Japanese sacrificed 100,000 men in the service of a lost cause.

The American people braced for the invasion of Japan, but Truman wasn't prepared to see a million Americans killed or wounded when there was a chance to end the war quickly with the Bomb. Truman would use nuclear weapons against civilian populations, so committed was his government to total victory and so costly would that victory have been if it was pursued by conventional means.

In Afghanistan today, against a fanatical enemy who attacked the United States and murdered 3,000 civilians, the president and his party seem to be looking for a way out. No more pay any price, bear any burden. They would have us surrender rather than spend another \$50 billion to provide McChrystal with the troops he needs. They would have us leave Kandahar and Kabul to the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies rather than lose hundreds, maybe thousands, more American soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Maybe the great mistake in Afghanistan was to treat it like it was a different kind of war than World War II. If there was a chance to get bin Laden in the caves of Tora Bora, we should have sent in the Marines with flame-throwers just like we did on Iwo. Now the President of the United States considers abandoning the fight against an enemy that attacked America and is determined to attack America again. We could leave and hope for the best, but Truman could have done the same in June of 1945. "We'll contain them from Okinawa, Iwo Jima and the Philippines, we'll use airpower to disrupt their operations, we'll send the boys home and maintain a flexible, over-the-horizon strike force," Truman might have said -- and that's essentially what the Democrats are proposing, and Obama is now considering.

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