

The Forgotten Members of the "Greatest Generation"

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This weekend President Bush was in Europe, celebrating the 60th anniversary of D-Day. He was joined by thousands of American, British, Canadian, and French veterans of World War II, members of the so-called "Greatest Generation," as well as the Queen, the UK's Tony Blair, France's Jacques Chirac, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Germany's Gerhard Schroeder, all of whom converged [on Normandy for extravagant commemoration ceremonies](#). As Schroeder [duly noted](#), the fact that all the leaders of these former allies and enemies could finally come together to celebrate D-Day for the first time means that "the post-war period is finally over."

Many other US leaders, from Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney to John McCain and John Kerry, have also recently tried to associate themselves with the valor and sacrifices of American veterans in our increasingly long list of foreign wars. Their tributes have been similar, whether the veterans in question fought in wars that were short or long, one-sided or evenly matched, just or unjust -- and whether or not the politicians in question had ever spent even a minute on an actual battlefield.

This year, such martial rhetoric is flying thicker than usual because of a coincident of several events. In late April, the long-awaited \$190 million memorial to America's World War II veterans was finally unveiled in Washington DC. Its architectural reviews have been decidedly mixed, especially by comparison with the beautifully-understated Vietnam War memorial. But this is certainly is a long-

overdue tribute to the 16.4 million Americans who served in that objectively “good” war and the 405,000 who lost their lives in it.

We are also in the middle of an unusual US Presidential election race, which is proceeding while the country fights two wars at once – the war in Iraq and the less visible, potentially much more dangerous “war on terror.” Both key Presidential candidates are vying hard to be viewed as stalwart defenders of national security and close friends of the veteran community.

Indeed, the whole period from Memorial Day to July 4th has become a kind of high season for pro-veterans celebrations. Those who happen to part of the majority of Americans who are neither veterans nor members of the “Greatest Generation” may feel a bit uncomfortable – sort of like non-Christians at Christmas.

I don’t happen to share this discomfort. To begin with, my family has done more than its share of fighting for the nation since it arrived in Virginia in the 1620s. We’ve volunteered for almost every single “good” American war in history, from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 to the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Korea War. As for the “Greatest Generation,” we also supplied several authentic members, including my father, a World War II veteran who served four years with the Navy in the South Pacific, and my uncle, one of General Patton’s tank commanders who helped to liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp.

It is also not the fault of subsequent generation that almost all the wars that the US has chosen to fight since Korea in the early 1950s have been one-sided affairs against more or less defenseless Third World countries like Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Granada, Panama, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Except for Afghanistan, where the Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to build training camps, none of these countries ever attacked us or our allies, posed a serious direct threat to our national security, or even had air forces or navies, much less nuclear weapons.

From this standpoint, our wars with these countries were basically neo-imperialist adventures in gunboat diplomacy, which proved to be vastly more lethal to the hapless natives than to our troops. For example, while the US lost about 58,000 killed and 2300 missing in Vietnam, the Vietnamese lost an estimated 1 million combatants killed, 4 million killed and 200,000 missing in action, most of them to our relentless bombing campaigns.

While those American veterans who have served in “good” wars certainly deserve to be honored, our political leaders do no service by oversimplifying their contributions. As the history of Germany indicates, excessive militarism and the idealization of martial values like “honor, duty, and blind obedience to one’s superiors” may help to encourage still more aggressive wars, which creates more veterans, which creates more glorification, which encourages still more wars.....

So, in the interests of letting a little air out of this venomous cycle, we offer the following critique of “**Greatest Generation**” mythology – and pay homage to the **members of the Greatest Generation whose contributions have largely been forgotten.**

REALITY CHECKS

The conventional image that most Americans seem to have of the US role in World War II is we – or, at most, the US and the UK – **basically won the war.**

In this view, the majority of the “Greatest Generation” volunteered courageously to fight against the Axis Powers. The US military played a decisive role in defeating not only Japan but also Nazi Germany and Italy, and the Normandy invasion was critical to the German defeat.

Unfortunately, it was not quite that simple.

- **Draftee Predominance.** To begin with, of the 16.4 million US veterans who served in World War II, only about a third were **volunteers**. The rest were drafted. Even in this “best of all possible wars,” therefore, where the lines between good and evil could not possibly have been any clearer, compulsion, not volunteerism, was the main motor force. In fact, volunteerism was even less in evidence during World War II than it was during the Vietnam War. Just a quarter of the 2.6 million Americans who served in the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973 were draftees – notwithstanding the role that the draft played in stimulating opposition to that war.

- **Casualties.** On D-Day, June 6, 1944, the US suffered a grand total of 6603 casualties, including 1345 killed in action. Our other non-Soviet Allies added another 3646 casualties. For the entire Battle of Normandy, the US suffered 126,847 casualties, including about 30,000 killed, and the UK and other non-Soviet allies added 83,045 casualties.

For World War II as a whole, as noted, the US suffered 405,000 American deaths, about 290,000 of whom were due to combat – the rest were the victims of accidents and disease. These were impressive losses, by comparison with other American wars. Only the Civil War recorded a larger number of total fatalities, but those included a huge number who died from disease; the number of fatalities *due to combat* for World War II was the largest for any US war.

Despite these records, the fact is that all these US and non-Soviet Allied casualty statistics **pale by comparison** with those suffered by the key Ally on the Eastern Front, the Soviet Union.

All told, the USSR lost [8.7 million](#) to [11 million troops](#) killed in combat against Germany, Italy, Rumania, and the other Axis coalition members from 1941 to 1945. This included [500,000 troops](#) killed at the **Battle of Stalingrad alone** from September 1942 – January 1943. There were also 440,000 Soviet troops killed at the Siege of Leningrad from 1941 to 1944, 250,000 at the decisive Battle of Kursk in June 1943, and 450,000 on the march to Berlin in 1945.

In addition, there were also another 12-18 million civilian casualties in the Soviet Union during World War II, compared with the 60,000 civilian casualties that the British lost to Germany air raids, and the almost non-existent US civilian casualties.

Despite all this, the commemoration speeches given this weekend by Western leaders failed to even mention the Soviet contribution to the war effort.

■ **Strategic Role – Germany.** Most important, far from playing a decisive role in defeating Hitler, the fact is that the D-Day invasion came so late in the war that even if it had been turned back by Hitler, the chances are that this would have only delayed the Soviet advances into Berlin by six months to a year, without fundamentally affecting the outcome of the war.

During the 1944 Normandy invasion and the Battle of France, the key battles involved, at most, about 15 Allied and 15 Germany divisions.

On the Eastern Front, by comparison, from 1941-44 more than 400 Germany and Soviet divisions battled each other along a 1000-mile front, and the Soviets succeeded in destroying more than 600 Germany divisions. (Overy, **Why the Allies Won**, 321). Even as the

Normandy Invasion was proceeding, the much larger Soviet Army was driving towards Berlin, destroying Germany's main army group and costing the Axis powers nearly 4 million casualties.

Without this Soviet effort on the Eastern Front, therefore, the Normandy invasion could not have succeeded, and Hitler would probably have prevailed in any case. Combined with the successful invasion of Normandy, by the time it came, the main effect was to shorten the war in Europe.

Nor did the "Lend-Lease" aid provided to the Soviet Union by the US and the UK during the war prove decisive. Much more important was the fact that Soviet industry, relocated to the east, was able to out-produce Germany several times over in aircraft, tanks, and artillery pieces throughout the war.

■ **Strategic Performance – Japan.** As for the war with Japan, it has long been recognized by military historians that it was distinctly less important than the war with Germany. Without the victory over Germany, the victory over Japan would have been impossible; with it, given Japan's relative weakness, V-J Day was basically just a matter of time. Accordingly, estimates are that the war with Japan only consumed about 15 percent of the total US war effort. After Germany's demise in April 1945, the US and the Soviet Union turned their attention to Japan, and quickly swept it out of China and the Pacific. By August 1945, when the US dropped its two atomic bombs, the Japanese were already on the verge of surrender. As Gar Alperowitz, the leading historian of Truman's decision to drop the bomb has argued, that decision was largely undertaken to impress Stalin, not because of military necessity, or to save American lives.

IMPLICATIONS

All this should not be to say that American World War II veterans do not richly deserve all the honors that have been bestowed on them. Millions of them fought valiantly, at D-Day and elsewhere.

However, especially in these times when the US has given in to the temptation to launch a war largely alone on its own, it is important to remember **how much assistance the US really needed from allies** like the Soviet Union, the UK, and China (against Japan) in its most important victory ever -- and how it achieved its best results when it was fighting **a clearly justified defensive war.**

This viewpoint offers a helpful perspective on several other myths that have sprung up about World War II. These include (1) the myth that British intelligence breakthroughs like "Ultra" – a program that broke German encryption codes -- was critical to the war's outcome; (2) the myth that US economic capacity provided the decisive edge; and (3) the myth that the atomic bomb had to be used to force Japan's surrender.

This analysis also provides an interesting perspective on the legions of critics who have deplored the "tragedy" of the Russian Revolution and the brutality of Stalin's forced industrialization campaigns during the 1930s.

The fact is that Tsarist Russia had barely held its own against Germany during World War I, and it is very unlikely that a Tsarist regime could have achieved anything like the rapid industrial development that Stalin accomplished during the 1920s and 1930s in such a short time. So we in the West should at least acknowledge our debt to the Russian Revolution, Stalin's industrialization program, his millions of victims, and the long-suffering Russian people. In effect, they permitted the Soviet Union to acquire the huge industrial base that proved to be essential for the defeat of Nazi Germany. This is hardly an apology for Stalin. But if anyone deserves to be called "the Greatest Generation" and deserves to be memorialized, it was ordinary Russians during the 1930s and 1940s.

None of this implies that the Normandy invasion was worthless. What it really accomplished was not the Allied victory, but a more balanced post-war political division of Europe. With the Soviet Army in control of Germany and perhaps even much of France and Italy after World War II, the post-war history of Europe might well have been very different. In that sense, the value of D-Day was less a matter of defeating Hitler than of containing Stalin.

THE FORGOTTEN GREATEST GENERATION

In retrospect, there is indeed one group of American veterans that unquestionably deserves to be included in the "Greatest Generation" - although it is never mentioned in all the veteran tributes, and none of its members qualify for US veteran benefits.

This is the all-volunteer group of **2800 Americans** that journeyed to Spain at their own risk and expense in 1936-39 to serve as members of the **Abraham Lincoln Battalion** in the Spanish Civil War.

A ragtag army, mainly consisting of leftists, union members, and many American Jews, they joined forces with some 56,000 other international volunteers from more than 50 countries, and fought against overwhelming odds to defend the Spain's democratically-elected Republic against General Franco's army, which was openly supported by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

Most of these volunteers were amateur fighters, without any military training. The arms embargo that was enforced by the Allies against the Spanish Republic – but not Germany or Italy – prevented the Lincolns and their comrades from having adequate arms and munitions. As a result, combat fatalities were very high – more than a third of the Lincolns died in battle, even higher than the 22 percent fatality rate recorded by US troops on D-Day.

Meanwhile, the US, the UK, France, and most other European countries except the USSR concocted the “non-intervention pact” that was enforced mainly against the Spanish Republic. Similarly, these Western countries also stood by and watched while Germany, Italy, and their allies aided Franco, seized Ethiopia, butchered China, and occupied Czechoslovakia. Throughout the 1930s, major US, UK, and French firms like GM, Texaco, Exxon, Dupont, Alcoa, and IBM, and Wall Street firms like JP Morgan, Brown Brothers Harriman, and Citibank, also continued to trade and invest, not only with Franco, but also with Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

In the aftermath of the civil war, the Lincolns continued to have to prove their heroism and commitment. After Franco won the civil war in 1939 and the Lincolns returned to the US, they were labeled as “premature anti-fascists” by the US government, prevented from holding government jobs or joining the military. To fight the Nazis, many of them had to enlist in foreign military services. In the 1950s, during the McCarthy era, many more were blacklisted and otherwise persecuted. Despite such pressures, they continued to play a leading role in progressive causes throughout the last fifty years, right down to leading recent protests against the invasion of Iraq.

Ultimately, in the late 1970s, Franco's dictatorship – which was supported by the US Government after World War II for nearly twenty years – gave way to the return of democracy in Spain.

Finally, in 1996, as a tribute to the Lincolns' sacrifices in Spain, the **"Second Spanish Republic"** celebrated the **60th anniversary of the Lincoln's commitment** by welcoming those American veterans who had managed to survive to a commemoration ceremony in Madrid -- an quiet parallel to the ceremonies just this weekend. Spain, at least, recognized that these American veterans were **the forgotten members of the Greatest Generation**, whose courageous efforts were never been properly honored by their own country.

SUMMARY

American veterans like my father and uncle indeed displayed an extraordinary degree pf courage, sacrifice, and heroism during World War II. But, as they would have been the first to admit, in many ways they actually had an easier time of it. This was not only because they had a great deal of help from allies like the Russians, the British, and the Chinese (against Japan). It was also because their war was perhaps the most clear-cut struggle ever fought between good and evil.

The veterans of too many other American wars have had to face the fact they served in wars that were much less virtuous. That in itself requires a special kind of courage and sacrifice.

Still other American veterans had to defy their own country's policies of the day in order to fight for justice, and then pay a very heavy price for being "prematurely" right.

This year, as we honor those who helped to defeat fascism, we should also honor those who were among the very first to take up arms against it.



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