



Icons of American Memory

Patriotism and posters. By Steven L. Thompson

The text accompanying 17 official American World War II posters rolling around the Internet included these words:

“These were our parents. What in God’s name have we let happen? I guess we are the last generation to see, or even remember, anything like these! Whatever happened? Political correctness (or ‘re-education’) happened. Lack of God’s name happened. Lack of personal responsibility happened. Lack of personal integrity and honesty happened. Lack of respect and loyalty to our country happened. Lack of being an American happened. Did all of these things die along with common sense? I for one am still proud to be an American! If you are, too...pass this along, so others can show their pride.”

The sense of loss of something vital, something uniquely American, something that holds society together is clear in this lament. Many people believe that the something is gone, maybe forever. However compelling the words are to many people, they are not supported by our history.

The key to the lament is the rhetorical question, “What in God’s name have we let happen?” The implication is that there is an almost tribal American “we,” and that this we failed to act as our parents acted in World War II and in its aftermath. But even a cursory examination of the posters shows that many Americans of World War II had to be prodded by what are in effect propaganda posters to act in certain ways to win the war. Work harder; buy war bonds; don’t forget what the war is about and why our

boys are fighting it; watch what you say because somebody might be listening; and so on. Because the warfare did not touch the contiguous 48 states, even with tens of millions of men and women in uniform, for many people the war remained remote, something that the 1946 movie, “The Best Years of Our Lives,” made clear as the returning sailor, airman and soldier struggled to readjust to the world they left behind when they went to war.

The truth is that Americans have never been a tribe. From the moment the first colonists established a foothold on the continent, eventually to displace the native peoples (who themselves we know now to have been in a state of continuous strife since their ancient ancestors arrived on the continent), those colonists disagreed among themselves about God and man and politics.

What made Americans a unique sort of we is the nation-state founded after the Revolution by the crafters of our Constitution. That we—the disparate politically, religiously, philosophically, ethnically different citizens of the United States—have always been quarreling over issues large and small, as the tragic but necessary Civil War showed in stark and terrible terms.

The list of “lacks” in the lament appended to the posters is really a list of human failings, not a tally of defining characteristics unique to any of the postwar generations. In every generation, from the first Paleolithic people who trekked or floated to our shores to the Pilgrims, there have been exemplars of bravery, loyalty, honesty, faithfulness, and

their opposites. The Founding Fathers’ genius was to establish a nation that recognized the human condition of eternal imperfection, and that to make it possible for profoundly differing ideas about how best to govern ourselves to be negotiated and reconciled with politics and not with warfare.

There have of course been profound changes in the nation since 1945. The ideas of Marx and Lenin that captivated so many in our institutions of higher education beginning in the 1930s continue to be promulgated overtly and covertly in those halls. Former Marxist David Horowitz called them “tenured radicals” of the 1960s, and though the collapse of the Soviet Union more than 20 years ago seemed to signal the end of the communist era, the tenured radicals in American and European universities continue to preach the Utopian egalitarianism at the heart of socialist and communist beliefs.

Does this preaching disguised as teaching signal the end of American exceptionalism? Does it support the lament of the email? To some, certainly. Nevertheless, the most fundamental difference between the era in which those posters were made—and made necessary—and today is that America is not fighting a desperate total war in which the entire nation is mobilized to sustain the struggle. The United States is of course engaged, willy-nilly, in a struggle to maintain peace in an era in which the conflict between Islam and the non-Islamic world, which began more than 1,300 years ago, has again flared into conflagrations everywhere. And that threatens to grow even more dreadful as the most radicalized Islamic states acquire nuclear weapons. Americans have been fighting in that extended war for more than a decade, but our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are not forgotten or marginalized by society at large, as far too many of us who served during the Vietnam War were.

The writer of the lament states that he or she is proud to be an American. Despite the acrimonious politics of our era, despite the fault lines in our society, despite everything that might suggest to the perpetual pessimist otherwise, millions of Americans are still proud to be citizens of the United States, and millions more aspire to join us. The American Experiment is far from over. ■

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