

They Were a Great Generation of Americans

It was a great generation, certainly—and largely because great leaders enabled it to be so.

by Conrad Black



The 78th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Saturday was widely observed and brought back to public discussion the achievements of what has been called “The Greatest Generation.” This was the term popularized, I believe, by NBC newscaster Tom Brokaw to describe the generation of Americans that came through the Great Depression, World War II, and the comparative peace and prosperity that followed for 20 years. It should be remembered that the reason this generation was so successful was largely because of the outstanding leadership that conducted it to such immense accomplishments.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office on March 4, 1933, near the bottom of the most horrible economic catastrophe in

modern world history. Unemployment numbers were not then compiled by the Department of Labor and not all states could report them accurately. But historians of the era agree that unemployment was between 25 and 33 percent or approximately 17 million jobless people in a population of 125 million. There was no federal direct assistance for them.

On Inauguration Day, when the new president said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," there were machine-gun emplacements at the corners of the great federal buildings in Washington for the first time since the Civil War. All stock and commodity exchanges had been closed for some time, *sine die*. Banks were closed in 46 states and withdrawals were severely restricted in the two states where banks were still open.

Roosevelt raised the minimum wage, reduced the working week, replenished the money supply, re-opened the banks by lending money to those in need of it and sponsoring mergers where appropriate, through the Federal Reserve and the Reconstruction and Finance Corporation, and by guaranteeing bank deposits. It wasn't flawless economics but it was genius disaster avoidance, and industry began to reemploy the unemployed.

To hasten the process, Roosevelt devised a great many imaginative workfare programs mainly devoted to what today would be called infrastructure and environment. As many as 7 million Americans each year were enrolled in programs as varied as writing stage plays, saving the whooping crane, building the Tennessee Valley Authority, the state capitol in Montana, the Triborough Bridge, the Lincoln Tunnel, part of Chicago's waterfront, hundreds of national parks and airports and thousands of miles of roads.

It is one of the unjust anomalies of most histories of that

era, that those employed in these programs were deemed to be unemployed while the vast masses of people conscripted into the armed forces and defense production industries of Europe and Japan in the 1930s were judged by economists to be employed, and the employment record of the Roosevelt Administration suffered comparatively.

Challenging Times, Bold Measures

As war loomed in Europe and Asia, and unemployment even by normal measurement steadily declined in the United States, Roosevelt launched the largest naval construction and air construction programs in world history. This enabled him to assist Britain, Canada, and Australia to carry on the war on behalf of the democracies after the fall of France in June 1940.

To this end, he brought in the first peacetime conscription in American history, loaned Great Britain 50 destroyers in the middle of his unprecedented campaign for a third term as president, and in February 1941 passed the Lend-Lease Act, which effectively gave Britain and Canada all they wanted to conduct the war and they could pay for it when circumstances allowed.

When war came to America at Pearl Harbor, the country was already commissioning new warships and had already increased military aircraft production to nearly 50,000 aircraft a year—five times the production of Germany. It was the only time in American history that there was near-absolute unanimity in support of a war that had been so brutally forced on it.

The generation that Roosevelt had saved from a hopeless, jobless future by putting it to work in useful public projects at bargain cost to the taxpayers was now fully absorbed by the immense military effort. The United States Army rose from five to more than 140 divisions, the Army Air Corps (as it was then

called) grew from a few hundred to 125,000 aircraft, a completely unheard of scale of air operations, and the United States Navy became the greatest fleet in the history of the world. When the whole Pacific Fleet sailed in the last months of the Pacific war, led by 25 battleships and 100 aircraft carriers, it carried 400,000 men to sea.

It was a war that not only enjoyed essentially universal popular support, it was the ultimate just war, where our enemies were the hideous genocidal Nazi regime of Germany and the treacherous and bloodthirsty imperialists of Japan.

Roosevelt promoted to supreme command a peerless group of senior officers. The principal military coordinator was General George C. Marshall, one of the great military figures and statesmen of American history. The American theater commanders, Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur, and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and the Air Corps commander, General H.H. Arnold, were all regarded then and since as representative of the highest possible level of military leadership in supreme command positions. Though the death toll for the Armed Forces of the United States was about 416,000, and each one was an individual tragedy, it was a relatively low casualty rate in an armed forces of 14 million men engaged in intense combat across Europe and the vast Pacific.

This was the generation that emerged from World War II and enjoyed Roosevelt's final installment of his New Deal: the G.I. Bill of Rights (also called Servicemen's Readjustment Act), which gave all veterans one year free tuition in an American university for each year he had served in the Armed Forces, and provided almost interest-free loans for the acquisition of small businesses or farms.

The generation of the Great Depression and World War II was now educated and funded to enjoy the peace and prosperity that they as warriors and their leaders as commanders and statesmen

had wrought. That generation has known economic fear and deliverance, the virtues of work, the strength of comradeship in a just war, and had seen sacrifice, tragedy, triumph, and adventure, and were well-launched into a newly normal world.

No generation of any nationality has had such a thorough preparation to be great and they made the most of it.

That Great Generation's Legacy Endures

The Cold War which followed began advantageously. Where in 1940, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and the USSR were all dictatorships hostile to the British and Americans, in 1945 all except the Soviet Union were liberated or occupied by the British and Americans and on their way to becoming flourishing democratic allies. And 90 percent of the casualties and 95 percent of the physical damage, as between the big three Allied powers (the United States, the USSR, and the British Commonwealth), had been absorbed by the Russians. It was masterly statesmanship as well as combat command genius, producing a more favorable outcome for the West than could have been imagined in 1940.

And as the Great Generation aged, they had the satisfaction of seeing Roosevelt's strategic team, (Truman, Marshall, Eisenhower, MacArthur in new roles, along with Dean Acheson, George Kennan, Charles Bohlen and others), execute the strategy of containment, continued by the junior officers of those leaders, such as John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. They were all graduates of the Great Generation. The Soviet Union disintegrated and international Communism evaporated, without the Great Powers exchanging fire against each other.

It was a great generation, certainly, and largely because great leaders enabled it to be so. (And some of America's allies, such as Winston Churchill, Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, and Margaret Thatcher, were pretty distinguished,

too.)

In President Roosevelt's war message to Congress 78 years ago Sunday, he said: "We will make very certain that this form of treachery never again endangers us." No nation since that time has dared to attack the United States directly. The closest America's enemies have been able to come has been cowardly terrorist attacks officially unsponsored by any other country. They are terrible and tragic and rarely occur, but they are the desperate acts of forces so evil and aberrant they can't get hold of a real government and skulk between hiding places until they are caught and exterminated like Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

They are, in their macabre way, a testament to the success of the Greatest Generation and its leaders.

First published in