

# Paying a price for America's historical blindspots

---

## **Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Seventy-five years ago today, this nation collided with a historic milestone - the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. While the American military had reason to anticipate hostilities with Japan for more than a decade, most people were shocked that Sunday to hear of the massive loss of life and the destruction of much of the nation's Pacific fleet.

The attack ended all debate. Isolationism was over. The country was galvanized into waging and winning World War II. From then on, America would be a force in the world.

Features that changed the direction of American life to this day are etched into our collective history: President Franklin Roosevelt's declaration of war ("Yesterday, Dec. 7th, 1941, a date which will live in infamy ... "). The black-and-white newsreels of the USS Arizona burning to death. A disputed quote attributed to the attack's architect, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto ("I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve ..."). And all of it was bound up in the popular culture, from "From Here to Eternity" to "Tora! Tora! Tora!"

Unfortunately, this is a country with few markers - Valley Forge, Gettysburg and Pearl Harbor - with a lot of historical blindspots in between.

We don't "Remember the Maine." We're a little hazy on the Civil War. Ask us to put World War I in the right century or name the countries who waged it, and many of us would come short.

So when it came time for the U.S. to draw upon inspiration during the 9/11 attacks, it resorted to one event it knew.

Like Pearl, 9/11 involved a horrendous assault on America's home front. The loss of life was staggering. The people were stunned - momentarily - into a shared destiny.

Certainly Sept. 11 awakened the sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve. But to what end?

Read FDR's declaration message and you will see references to Japan's unrelenting challenge to U.S. interests in Wake Island and the Philippines. Pearl Harbor was no isolated event. It was part of a coordinated military campaign fought by one nation against the other.

This was a war of national survival, dictating a united home front. Everyone understood it would end with the winners dictating surrender terms to the vanquished.

After Sept. 11, where was the next Doolittle raid, Midway or Guadalcanal?

What would be the equivalent of Leyte Gulf or Iwo Jima?

We weren't fighting a nation-state with defined features.

Sept. 11 proved to be a single strike waged by the terrorist band al-Qaida. There was no Mount Suribachi on which to plant the flag.

We planted one anyway, first routing the Taliban and dispersing al-Qaida from Afghanistan. Then we turned to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, who had even less to do with the Sept. 11 attacks.

In the intervening 15 years, there have been no surrender terms, no victory parades and no united home front.

In Afghanistan, it feels like we're stuck there, fully aware that once the Americans leave, the Taliban in all likelihood will return.

Saddam is dead. So is Osama bin Laden and much of the al-Qaida hierarchy. In its place is an ISIS organization more brutal, more technologically savvy and more menacing in scope.

Terrorism strikes are part of the new normal. The goal of fighting these wars - securing the home front - has proven elusive.

That is not the legacy of Pearl Harbor.

But it is what comes by relying on a fragment of history you know to define another that you don't. To conflate waging conventional war against a nation to battling an unconventional enemy was to invite military quagmire in one of the most volatile regions in the world.

One can only imagine the outcome had the U.S. left its military at home and instead resorted to counter-terrorism, infiltration and surgically targeting key members of the terrorist network.

Doing so would have required the prescience to see 9/11 for what it was, a brutal act of terrorism committed by a criminal conspiracy - and what it was not - an act of war.

Such a bitter lesson to learn and it comes at a monstrous price..- M.T.