

## Pushing greatness

On every hour of every day over 40 veterans of WWII - the Greatest Generation - will breathe their last breath. And with their deaths goes one more reminder of what Americans are capable of achieving once they put away their differences and band together for the common good. Once we lose the last of these people who rode out America's great depression and fought a war to save Europe and Asia from tyranny, we will have lost perhaps the best of all of us.

We entered the war late but, fortunately for the world, not too late. Perhaps the guilt of not stepping up earlier had something to do with our resolve, but had we heeded the call to arms two years earlier we might have saved thousands if not hundreds of thousands of lives, albeit at the cost of many of our own. Hindsight is always 20/20; it's foresight that counts.

Patriotic fervor always helps with recruitment (as does conscription), and 80 years ago the lines were long. Those that stayed behind to work the machines of wartime manufacturing were the stateside greatest generationals who pledged to do their part to end a horrible war that ripped countless families apart. In 1941, America had less than a decade before suffered mightily with the domestic chaos known as the Great Depression so it was no wonder that the prospect of going to war on another continent wasn't on the top of our list. Still, the country pulled together, forced into doing so by the attack on our fleet in Pearl Harbor.

Greatness is often determined by how we respond to circumstances, and those born in the 1920s and early 1930s had ample opportunity to show their grit. Any society and any people can only handle so many challenges before reaching a breaking point, however. These challenges can come in peacetime as well as in the throes of war and they often test our mettle in ways in which we are not fully prepared. It's how we respond that will determine how we measure up to the generations that have preceded us. Can we hold a candle to the Revolutionaries, the abolitionists, the civil rights marchers and the peacemakers or will we be judged by another standard reserved for less challenging times?

Have Americans gone soft? Are they just tired or resigned to their fate?

We've been through a lot since 1945 and we've seen the world change quickly from dictatorships to democracies and back to dictatorships and authoritarian rule. We've seen liberations and incarcerations of the body, mind and spirit. We've witnessed the rapid march of technology and watched it spread to all four corners of the world. We have seen it open doors and minds and then close them with censorship. Its power is alluring and seductive. Its reach is impressive but worrisome. We have not managed technology well. In fact, we have allowed it to manage *us*, often trailing behind it, mopping up after its mistakes.

Neither have we used technology well enough to truly improve our planet's environment. Instead, we have wasted valuable time debating the mere necessity of saving our planet. We have trivialized the most important goal of every species - that of survival - and relegated it to the 'experts' of the think tank talkers. What is worse, we have abrogated our responsibilities to solving our nation's energy, environmental and economic problems by politicizing the entire argument and making inter-party cooperation nigh on impossible.

Is this attitude and approach of obstruction and ideological intransigence worthy of the generation that was handed a relatively peaceful world eighty years ago? We had the chance to build on the ruins of despotism and only succeeded in ruining those chances through tribalism, greed and ignorance of the world class opportunities that lay at our feet. Instead, we chose to feather our own nests at the expense of others, save our support for the U.N. and treaties with countries that served our domestic interests. We chose 'progress' over planning and self over selflessness not realizing that doing for others always improves the 'neighborhood.'

Our choices had consequences. Our dissatisfaction led to two new Presidents, each representing a different vision for America, but both built on the need for unity of purpose. The "Yes we can" of the idealist Left morphed into the pragmatists' "America First" of the Right and served to further divide our generations. Unlike a domestic terror attack of 9/11 of twenty years earlier, not even a nationwide health epidemic that killed hundreds of thousands of people could bring Americans together. The 'American Dream' of prosperity and opportunity for all was fading into the woodwork of the past. No longer could a crisis convince us that the DNA of the Greatest Generation surged in our veins.

We are adrift as a nation. If manifest crises of national proportions cannot bring us together then what can? Is there anything we can agree on? Perhaps we need to have a long talk with the Greatest Generation for the answers. There's not much time left...for them or us.

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