

Put to the Test

September 18, 2001 at 8:00 am

This essay originally appeared on NRO.

We have been, we and our leaders emphatically agree, savagely thrust into a new kind of war that we have no choice but to win. What it will take to defeat the enemy remains a subject of intense analysis. But it is certain that victory will not come quickly or easily or costlessly.

Until recently, with the rise in the 1990s of the bipartisan fantasy of a casualty-free military campaign, it was assumed that wars would not only demand from soldiers the last full measure of devotion but would demand from civilian populations the discipline of sacrifice. That discipline of sacrifice will be indispensable in the pursuit of victory over an elusive, ruthless, and far-flung adversary. Summoning it will test our leaders and us.

Since the morning of that terrible September Tuesday, we have been frequently reminded of the staggering fact that the loss of life caused by the four hijacked passenger jetliners turned into massive manned missiles already greatly exceeds the 2,400 lost in Japan's surprise attack on the U.S. military installation at Pearl Harbor. Far less have we been encouraged to remember that the war that the next day President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare lasted six long years and dramatically transformed the lives of virtually all Americans.

In his address to the nation on September 11, twelve hours after the first jet slammed into the northern tower at the World Trade Center, President Bush delivered a plainspoken and unadorned speech. His rhetoric did not soar and his rage did not run over. But he did invoke the indomitable spirit of the American people:

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorists attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.

And though he made no mention of the sacrifice that this war would entail, indeed though he did not use the term until the following morning, he boldly defined the war he was committing the nation to wage: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." Later, Secretary of State Colin Powell elaborated on just how broadly "those who harbor them" was intended: "Countries that harbor terrorists are no different than terrorists."

By now the president has declared Osama bin Laden the “prime suspect.” And the president has affirmed that the war against bin Laden’s international network of terrorism and the countries that harbor al Qaeda’s many cells will require “a broad and sustained” military campaign, one that will be measured not in days and weeks but in years. The success of this military campaign, as many have pointed out, will depend in part on the president’s ability to organize a broad and sustained international coalition of countries. It will also depend on the president’s ability to organize a broad and sustained domestic coalition of citizens who not only support but are willing on behalf of a new kind of war to make old-fashioned sacrifice.

In his September 15 Saturday radio address, the president connected the loss the country has sustained, the mission our military must now undertake, and the sacrifice that will be asked of the American people:

Now we honor those who died, and prepare to respond to these attacks on our nation. I will not settle for a token act. Our response must be sweeping, sustained, and effective. We have much to do, and much to ask of the American people.

You will be asked for your patience; for, the conflict will not be short. You will be asked for resolve; for, the conflict will not be easy. You will be asked for your strength, because the course to victory may be long.

In assessing our readiness, there is cause for confidence and cause for concern.

As indelible as the images of devastation are the stories of valor: The passengers on hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 who, learning from cell-phone conversations with their loved ones of the decimation of the World Trade Center Towers and the attack on the Pentagon, grasped the dire situation and stormed the hijackers, likely averting heavy loss of life in Washington but also quite probably causing their plane to crash in western Pennsylvania; New York City firefighters and police officers whose professionalism on the day that the towers came crashing to the earth and every moment since has been inseparable from heroism; and the thousands of volunteer rescue workers in New York and Washington who, as the ashes were still smoldering, put themselves in harms way to tend to the injured and to search and search and search for signs of the living. All these extraordinary acts and individuals testify to deep reservoirs of courage and decency in the American people.

Yet remarkably we under the age of 45 — Gen Y and Gen X and even the now graying tail end of the Baby Boom — have never been required to sacrifice on behalf of our nation. We have undergone tragedy in our private lives and faced trade-offs in our professional lives, but never has the country asked us to deny our families or neglect our careers, to tighten our belts or to forgo personal security and comfort and pleasure for the sake of the public good. And sacrifice there will be in the war now underway, beginning with the recognition that

terrorists who unleashed on this country hideous death and destruction before we declared war on them will not refrain from murderous assaults after we unleash on them our military might.

We are children of an unprecedented freedom and prosperity and peace. These blessings have made it easy to forget that a country devoted to securing for its citizens life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has its prerequisites. And now we and our leaders have been put to the test. Among the many demands that this war imposes on the president will be calling us, with clarity, with conviction, and with eloquence to our duty as American citizens. It is a test he dare not fail. But our leaders cannot discharge our duties for us. We each face a test that we dare not fail. It involves taking upon ourselves the sacrifices necessary to maintain a free society.