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Lessons Learned from the Past will Help Win the War on Terrorism

An opinion piece by Sander Diamond, professor of history, Keuka College

As the November election approaches and the fear of a repeat of 9/11 preoccupies an already anxious nation, millions of us are searching for an answer to the central question of our time: “Is the war on terrorism winnable?”

President Bush and candidate Kerry may offer different approaches to fighting this type of war, but they agree that the war will continue, not for years, but for decades. When you think you are at the mercy of the terrorists and the only light that is coming from a dark tunnel is that of an exploding bomb, you can’t possibly know when the horror will end or whether the war is winnable in the traditional sense with the surrender of your opponent. Complicating this picture is the nature of an enemy that has absolutely no use for the rules of war, *Jus Bellum*, which have been codified over the centuries to prevent the Gates of Hell from fully opening.



Al Qaeda has the ability to take war directly into our streets, as we learned on that fateful, sunny morning three years ago. However, we have faced formidable challenges before and we prevailed. Even in these unsettling and anxious days, the past provides instruction and some comfort as we move into an uncertain future. However frightful a situation may appear at the start of a long and difficult road, one needs perspective.

In the darkest days of the Civil War, when Lincoln was searching for a general who would engage the enemy head on and when it was feared the insurgents would infiltrate our northern cities, the future seemed bleak. The pundits of the day feared the war would continue for a decade or more and some called for compromise. At a great and horrible cost, it ended four years after it started—in April 1865—and through it all, we adhered to our constitutional instrument despite Lincoln’s effort to suspend some civil rights, which were struck down by the high court.

Forty-nine years later—in August 1914—the German Imperial Army crashed through

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Belgium into France. It soon departed from the rules of war with the use of unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant shipping, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and the introduction of poison gas at the Battle of Ypres. In the darkest year of the war—1916—no one could have imagined that World War I would end in November 1918 and with it the end of the German, Austrian, Russian, and Turkish Empires.

Twenty-one years later, Europe was once again at war. In December 1941, it became a world war with the attack on Pearl Harbor. In that war's darkest year—1942—the swastika flag flew from Vichy, France to the gates of Moscow. From the ground and air, the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe left a path of destruction, while behind the lines the dreaded SS exterminated entire populations and slaughtered 3 million Soviet POWs. Inside a conventional war was an unconventional war of state-sponsored terrorism on an unimaginable scale. The death mills of Auschwitz did their work almost to the end. On the other side of the world, the Imperial Japanese Army continued on its rampage and it was feared India and Australia would fall. The civilian population of China was murdered on a scale unrivaled by the work of the SS. However, in May 1945, the Germans signed the document of unconditional surrender and Germany was in ruins. In September, General MacArthur declared the end of the Pacific war on board the *USS Missouri*.

Today, we are fighting an enemy whose soldiers are disguised as civilians. Like moles, they have bored their way into the fabric of society, where they wait to be activated by a cell phone or the turn of a word in a message on the nightly news from the man who is hiding along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Whether in civilian dress or wearing black ski masks, these warriors appear to make few mistakes, which has elevated them to near superhuman status. But they are human, and their war will be brought to a successful conclusion through careful planning on our part, patience, perseverance, and outwitting them at their own game.

Osama bin Laden believes he can drain the West's economic resources through terrorism. He delights in the fact that that 9/11 cost the U.S. economy \$7.6 trillion and the market went into a freefall. And, with oil at nearly \$50 a barrel, the cost of fighting this new type of war is beyond our ability to calculate. Small wonder millions question if the war is winnable. But it is, although it won't be easy and we must be prepared to foot the bill as we did in World War II.

Furthermore, we need a worldwide coalition that includes the European Union, Russia, China, Far East, and the Middle East. That is why the first item on our national agenda, no matter who wins in November, must be rebuilding the frayed relations caused in part by the war in Iraq. However contradictory our interests may be and despite whatever had divided us in the past, each understands that the preservation of the world order is preferable to universal chaos in an increasingly interdependent world.

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Just as the United States and the USSR forged an alliance in 1941 to defeat Marxism and fascism, the world's nations must do the same today. Since history is prologue, alliances born out of self-interest bring wars to an end, not in decades but in years.

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