

Edge Left Recalls Pearl Harbor by David McReynolds

December 24, 2014

It is hard for me to realize that 73 years have passed since December 7th. Three generations, and most of those who were alive on that day are now gone. I was 12. The day is clear in my mind. We were sitting in the living room of my parents' home in Los Angeles. My father, mother, my younger brother, Martin, and my sister, Elizabeth Ann.

We had just returned from church. Pearl Harbor had been hit at 7:48 a.m., Honolulu time - which meant early afternoon for us. Radio was broadcasting the stunning news of an attack on Pearl Harbor - details not at all clear. My mother was very close to her three sisters, one of whom, Mary, lived in Honolulu. Long distance phone calls were, in those days, a big deal - expensive and not immediate, as you had to go through a special operator. The phones to Hawaii were so overloaded that it was impossible for my mother to find out if her sister and her family had survived.

We went for a long afternoon car ride. When I tried to say something, my mother said to be quiet, our father was thinking. (He would, within a few days, volunteer for service. He had a Second Lieutenant's commission in the reserve but with a wife, three children. and well into his thirties, he would never have been called up).

On Monday, when I went to Jr. High School, I watched with solemn pride as the flag was raised. By then word had reached my mother that her sister and her family had not been injured. Of course we were all glued to the radio when the President asked Congress for a Declaration of War.

People in Los Angeles had no idea if Pearl Harbor would be followed by an invasion somewhere on the West Coast. Our next door neighbors sold their property and moved East for safety.

I did not realize that Japanese in California would soon be rounded up and sent to concentration camps. There were no Japanese living in our all white working class neighborhood - and none in our local schools.

There were, that first year, alarms when search lights lit up the sky at night, trying to locate rumored Japanese bombers. There were rumors that Japanese planes had been shot down. All of us knew someone who knew someone who had seen the wreckage. (It had never happened).

Ration books were issued. All the good things were rationed: butter, sugar, bananas, meat, gasoline. The things I thought, as a child, should have been rationed - honey and carrots - were not. Gasoline was tightly rationed - a real hardship in Los Angeles, with its weak system of public transportation. There were no cars or durable goods produced until the end of the war. (Not as great a hardship as it may sound - things in those distant days were made to last).

Some of the rationing may not have been absolutely necessary but it did drive home the fact we were at war. During the Korean or Vietnam Wars, the population could, for the most part, only observe. But during the Second World War we all took part - not just from the impact of rationing, but from the efforts every family made to collect grease, aluminum and newspapers, all of which were collected and put to some military use.

In Los Angeles the city was blacked out at night, with wardens in every neighborhood to check for stray light. (On the West Coast the need for the blackout was not that imperative, as few, if any, Japanese submarines patrolled the coast. But along the East Coast a heavy price was paid at first, as German submarines had an easy time picking off merchant

marines which were clearly visible against the background glow of the city lights, until the whole Eastern seaboard went dark when the sun went down.

Of course we had only radio, no television, but there were frequent news broadcasts, at least once an hour, not resented by the public, eager for word. The movie theaters were our chance to watch the war itself, where the newsreels of The March of Time were exciting, stashed in between the double bill of films. We could see the London Blitz, the war in North Africa, the Nazi advance into the Soviet Union (there was a general feeling the Soviets would be out of the war in eight weeks), the bloody struggles on the Pacific Islands.

We had odd little gadgets that came with the war and vanished with peace. Troops had "V Discs"- 78's, produced for shipment to the front lines, so that troops could hear music from the home front on portable players. And there was "V Mail", single page letters on which the troops wrote, which were censored (there would often be black lines blocking out anything that might be strategic), the letters were photographed and sent home as small negatives, which were then enlarged and sent on to the families. V Mail made it possible for tons of letters to be reduced to one shipping bag

While as a child I wouldn't have noticed it, the unemployment rate, which had been 17.2% in 1939, dropped to 1.2% by 1944. One remarkable result was that the vast influx of Southern whites and Southern blacks, drawn to the West Coast by the aircraft and shipping industries, largely managed to avoid racial riots - everyone was too busy working. Women, of course, were drawn into the work force, their new (and temporary) status celebrated by the song "Rosie the Riveter." Wages and prices were frozen for the duration.

Every home or apartment that had a member in the service displayed a silver star in their window. The gold stars were displayed with pride and sadness - it meant the death of a family member in the war.

What is harder to convey to those who remember our later wars, from Korea on, was the virtually total support the war had.

One reason was the well coordinated propaganda effort run through the OWI, Office of War Information. This resulted in a slew of patriotic films from Hollywood including a remarkable one, Mission to Moscow, which was intended to soften the previously hostile image of Soviet Communism.

Dissenting voices fell silent, or supported the war. The pacifist movement did not feel it was right to try to disrupt the war effort - there was a realization that, between the Axis Powers and the Allies, there was a choice. And the left, which had tended to be anti-war, fell into line with full support of the war. This was true for almost all of the left, but particularly true of those influenced by the Communist Party because of the Soviet involvement. There was an effort at a political trial of some far-right elements, but that fell apart and in the end the residual fascist elements weren't bothered. So far as I know there were no efforts from once-active Nazi supporters to engage in sabotage.

My sense was one of "consensual totalitarian support." I suspect the situation was much the same in Britain. I would be curious if those Germans who survived Hitler can recall the attitude there from 1939 on. I know that Hitler had, in the beginning, massive public support, but the concentration camps held more than Jews - they held socialists and communists as well.

This is perhaps the inevitable support when the nation has been attacked, its very survival a stake. I remember, when I was in Hanoi, in 1971, in the midst of that war, no sense of a population living under military control. (When I asked our hosts if we could walk around the city the answer was, "Yes, just please don't get lost").

Compare this with the Korean War, where the pro-Soviet left went into opposition, the McCarthy period began, and (I know this from having been there as a radical student) dissent was possible even if pacifists and Communists were being jailed. If one's memories only go back to the Vietnam War (which means if you were born not only after World War II, but also after the Korean War) your memory is hardly one any kind of "consensual support" for the war, rather a memory of riots and demonstrations.

There is another comparison to be made - we were spared the remarkable hysteria of World War I, about which we know only from reading, the last living links being long broken. It was known then as "The Great War" (no one thought we would be able to give them numbers). There had been real opposition to that war - the Socialist Party, then a mass organization, voted against support, its leader, Eugene Debs, was tried and sent to prison. It became "the war to end all wars . . . the war to make the world safe for democracy". Sauerkraut became victory cabbage, hamburgers were renamed Salisbury steak, the teaching of German ended, German books were burned. In some sad cases handsome German shepherd dogs were killed. The playing of German music was virtually banned - Bach, Beethoven!!

But there is a similarity with the end of the first World War, which dominated European and American politics. This was a profound reaction to war itself. If the British and French were slow to confront Hitler, it was because the pain of "The Great War" haunted them. And while the loss of life among American troops was much less, there was a widespread feeling the US had "pulled Britain's chestnuts out of the fire", (anti-British feeling lasted until well into the Second World War). The US public wanted to withdraw from the world - not to dominate it. Isolationism was the powerful reaction to the war.

After the end of the Second World War, punctuated as it had been by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no political leader in either major party would have dared to use the kind of military rhetoric so common today. There was the belief, with the founding of the United Nations, that war was part of the past. One cannot easily conceive of how little support the military had, how strong was the belief that peace would be a permanent condition. That was all to end, of course, as the Cold War began.

Those of you who want a sense of what life was like during the war can get a good feeling of it from the BBC series, Foyle's War, particularly the first episodes, when the English expected a German invasion at any moment, and when the restrictions of war began to touch every aspect of life. It may be strange to think a British series could recall the American experience, but as an American who saw our war in my childhood, I recognized the climate at once.

What came later, the chill of the Cold War, and the conscious rise of the American Empire came soon enough and will be taken up in a kind of "part two" - the rise and fall of an Empire.

Edge Left are occasional posts from David McReynolds,
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