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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

“Peace in Our Time”

Much has been said and written of President Barack Obama's second inaugural address. Most of the commentary from the Right focused on the uncompromising tone and the theme that the “Era of Big Government” is back - big time. What struck me, though, was the president's discussion of military matters - matters of war and peace.

“We are also heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war, who turned sworn enemies into the surest of friends, and we must carry those lessons into this time as well.” I'm sure he refers to World War II and its aftermath. How, then, did we win the peace? How did we turn our sworn enemies into friends?

First, and this is critical, we won decisively. We forced implacable enemies into unconditional surrender. But then we did not collect the victor's traditional spoils or exact revenge. We did not rape and pillage, require reparations, enslave the defeated population or annex territory. We treated the vanquished with magnanimity and helped them rebuild - and thus they became our allies.

But our WWII enemies were motivated by territorial and economic expansion and by hyper-nationalism. Our situation today is very different. Arguably the major driving force for those who have declared jihad against us is, by definition, a religious imperative. In fact they are willing, even anxious, to die for their cause. It is doubtful we could ever turn such “sworn enemies into the surest of friends.”

Notice that Obama said “we must carry those lessons (from WWII) into this time as well.” But if the WWII model is correct, winning the peace will first require a total victory and unconditional surrender. This is hard to picture, since our stated goal is not victory but bringing the troops home.

A few sentences later, the president said, “peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity; human dignity and justice.” As noble and uplifting as it sounds, is that really what is required to secure peace in our time?

A fourth century Roman military strategist wrote, "If you want peace, prepare for war." And Roman Emperor Hadrian's "peace through strength" is the same doctrine President Ronald Reagan followed, which resulted in the end to the Cold War. Not peace through tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice. Strength discourages aggression, perceived weakness invites it.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has warned that defense cuts have left a bare-bones military and that the cuts looming from sequestration will be crippling. Obama has tried to blame this on Congress: "First of all, the sequester is not something that I've proposed. It is something that Congress has proposed." But journalist Bob Woodward writes that the president has mis-remembered the truth; in fact, that it's just the opposite: it was the administration that originated sequestration and proposed it to Congress, not the other way around.

President Obama is not an enthusiastic or even a willing budget cutter, except when it comes to defense. In the final debate, he said, "You mention the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers and planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines."

Undignified though it was, the president's display of sarcasm was better than his understanding of warfare. A British corporal was awarded the Military Cross for leading a bayonet charge against the Taliban in October 2011. While U.S. forces have not had to mount a bayonet charge in 70 years, bayonets remain an essential infantry weapon. Retired Major General Ed Usher, president of the Marine Corps Association and Foundation, says, "The bayonet remains part of the individual Marine's equipment issue and Marines are trained to use it." In his book "Horse Soldiers," Doug Stanton describes that early in the Afghan conflict our Special Forces rode horseback in a series of battles against the Taliban, culminating in the capture of the strategically essential city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

But let's set aside the problem of a wrong-headed approach: peace through the advancement of the principles of "our common creed," rather than peace through strength. Let's consider the president's use of that phrase "peace in our time." Where does that come from?

It comes from British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who used it in September 1938 to describe what he had achieved by making an accommodation with Adolph Hitler. The result, of course was not peace; it was World War II. That phrase, and even Chamberlain's own name, have become emblematic of naiveté, appeasement and failure.

Is the president of the United States so ignorant of the historical context of his unfortunate statement? Presumably he has speech writers or at least reviewers - are they, too, so ignorant? A sorry prospect.

Worse yet - was this intentional? Did he actually mean to echo Chamberlain's naiveté, weakness, appeasement? How will this play in Pyongyang and Teheran? What will it mean for our future?

John Littig can be emailed at jslittig@aol.com.