

OREGON AT WAR

BY ECKARD V. TOY, JR.

"To embark on war (is) to launch oneself on an irresistible current sweeping into darkness."

~GARRETT MATTINGLY

"We bring to this new and dark landscape predictable habits of mind that seek out historical analogies — be they appropriate or not."

~EDWARD T. LINENTHAL

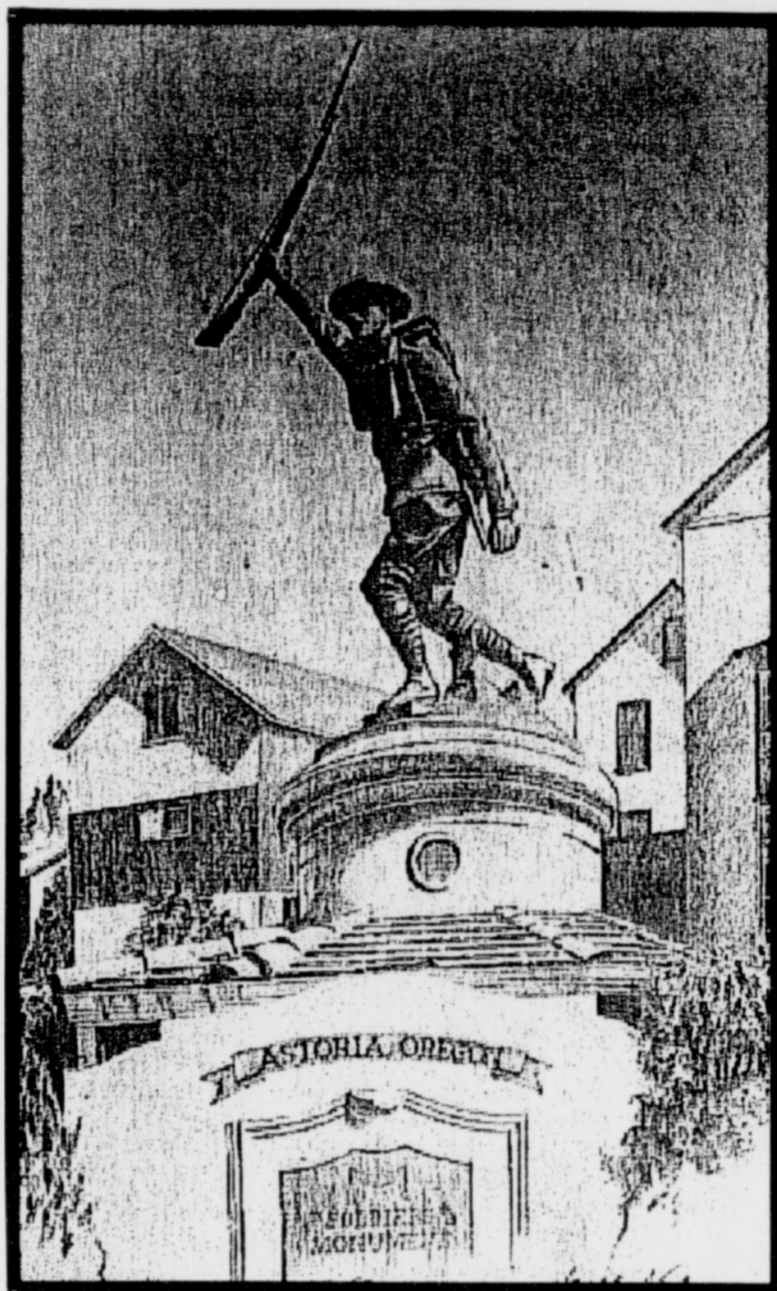
War spares few innocents, and truth and civil liberties are among its first casualties. The terrible events of September 11, 2001, resurrected those truths and added a memorable new date to American history. The appalling images of sudden death and the terrifying sounds of monumental destruction seared the senses as hijacked jetliners crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. Death embraced diversity and made no distinctions of nationality, religion, age, and gender. Almost simultaneously with the attacks, television and the Internet spread graphic images worldwide. With the toll of casualties mounting rapidly into the thousands and representing more than sixty countries, viewers throughout the world reacted with shock and disbelief.

Terrorism typically targets visible symbols and exploits fear, and if some viewers celebrated, others found it difficult to stifle feelings of anger and horror. Distance was no protection from emotion and loss, and many Oregonians had friends or relatives living, working, or visiting near the disaster sites. The attacks, in the words of University of Oregon president Dave Frohnmayer, "awakened (a) sense of personal vulnerability — that the distant terror we read about in the daily paper can now become a terror we experience in our daily lives."

Not surprisingly, the first news reports of the attacks were confusing, and analysts and public officials added to the dysfunctional chorus of competing voices. The public's attention soon focused on terrorism, however, and presidential rhetoric proclaiming a war between good and evil resonated with echoes of earlier times and other wars. Declaring a cause as just and the opponent's actions as evil establishes a simple dichotomy and a rationale for war. Successfully characterizing enemies as evil can unify a nation or a cause, particularly when they are portrayed in Satanic images or comic caricatures. Osama bin Laden, for example, has been easy to label in this way, but he is simply the newest on a long list of enemies. Similar characterizations of the enemies of earlier generations are common: a murderous Captain Jack in the Modoc War; the cunning Emilio Aguinaldo during the Philippine Insurrection; Kaiser Wilhelm in World War 1; the inhuman Hitler, the comical Mussolini, and the simian-like Hideki Tojo in World War 2; Fidel Castro of Cuba, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and Muammar Gadhafi of Libya; or more recently, Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Similar denigrating characterizations have been attached to countries, peoples, or specific groups. Twentieth-century propaganda efforts and common slang expressions merged in descriptions of the brutal German "Hun" of World War 1; the sadistic Nazi and the subhuman "Japs" of World War 2; the generic "gook" of many Asian and Pacific Island wars; the "Red Chinese hordes" of the Korean War; and the "wily" Viet Cong of the war in Vietnam. Similar expressions surfaced during the Gulf War and in Bosnia and Kosovo. In Afghanistan, we have been introduced to the socially backward Taliban. Descriptions that depict the enemy as culturally inferior or uncivilized are the wartime equivalent of the denigrating labels that nativist and racist groups have attached to new immigrants throughout American history. Muslim and Arab Americans in Oregon experienced few overt acts of violence after the September 11 attacks, but private and public expressions of support did not soften the prejudice of jokes and slang.

Just when increased security measures and a flurry of patriotic celebrations seemed to cushion the initial shock of terrorism, a new threat with a long history suddenly emerged.



Dozens of cases of anthrax and several deaths caused by the disease introduced known and only imagined dangers. Media attention to bioterrorism confused and frightened as it informed. Abroad, a bombing campaign in Afghanistan cheered supporters and angered opponents of military actions. Reports of mounting civilian casualties and a flood of hungry refugees fleeing Afghanistan added urgency to the disagreements. In Oregon and elsewhere, peace groups rallied on college campuses and in many communities, questioning current actions and the legacy of American foreign policy. This debate about war took on new significance with the realization that the battlefield and the homefront had drawn closer together.

Historians seek to analyze and explain. Today, Americans are facing another undeclared war with unknown limits and uncertain consequences, and we must add historical perspective to understand what is happening. The path to that understanding is not always clear, but the effort to find it will provide substance for our discussions today and may help guide our actions in the future.

Oregon has been a Euro/American outpost on the Pacific Ocean for more than two and a half centuries. During Oregon's early maritime history, violent conflict between Native Americans and Euro/American mariners was not uncommon. As contact between these groups increased, racial and cultural differences and competing economic interests led to sporadic clashes. It was a violence without any formal style or declaration of war, and Native casualties often numbered in the dozens. More skirmishes erupted in the first decades of the 19th century as fur traders established posts at Astoria and inland along the Columbia River.

Disease added a significant and fatal element to the conflict between cultures and contributed indirectly to American

control of the Oregon country. A measles epidemic among the Cayuse Indians, the fear of losing their land and culture, and deep-seated cultural differences with Marcus and Narcissa Whitman motivated a few Cayuses to kill the Whitmans and twelve other whites at the mission at Waiilatpu in late November 1847. In addition, two others died of exposure, and the attackers took 47 captives, including 37 children. Oregonians and Indians had fought before, but the murder of the Whitmans was a signal event in its consequences and in the way Oregonians responded to it. Religious and political leaders denounced the attack as an evil act and were especially outraged at the allegation that the Indians had sexually violated the female captives. The response in Oregon was immediate. The provisional government, under Governor George Abernathy, quickly mobilized a small volunteer military force and embarked on the so-called Cayuse War (1848-1850).

As news of the attack on the mission reached the East Coast, public anger compelled Congress to pass legislation creating Oregon Territory and to send federal troops in 1849 to protect the settlers. Abandoned by other Indian tribes, the Cayuses found themselves in what historian Earl Pomeroy described as a "desultory" little war. Weakened by disease and battle and without allies, the Cayuses were largely dependent on the goodwill of Oregonians, who were confident in their cultural and racial superiority and outraged at the "massacre" and the alleged indignities visited on the captive women. The Cayuses eventually surrendered the five men who had allegedly murdered the Whitmans. The Indians faced trial in Oregon City, their fate virtually certain. A jury quickly convicted them, and the Judge condemned the five men to hang on June 3, 1849. This symbolic justice — which featured capture, trial, and hasty execution — established a precedent that Oregonians followed faithfully in later battles with Indians.

The pressure of new settlement and divide-and-conquer approach by the federal government signaled the virtual end of Native independence in the Pacific Northwest by the mid-1850s. Wars and the threat of wars forced most Native American tribes to sign treaties and move to reservations. New sources of conflict speeded the process. Earlier in the 1850s, the discovery of gold in southwestern Oregon had led volunteer militias to conduct a brutal campaign that historian William G. Robbins has characterized as "akin to race war." The rationale and the result demoralized local Indians, forced the survivors onto reservations, and destroyed much of Native American culture in that corner of Oregon.

The quest for Oregon statehood took place in a time of national turmoil over slavery, which resulted in the secession of southern states from the Union. Oregonians exhibited considerable interest in the 1860 presidential election, partly because of the slavery issue but also because former Oregon senator Joseph Lane was the vice presidential running mate of John C. Breckinridge on the pro-slavery Democratic ticket. The Civil War began in 1861, barely two years after Oregon achieved statehood. "In Oregon," according to historian David A. Johnson, "the war had profound political effects. After it began, politics in the state narrowed to a single question: loyalty or disloyalty."

Oregon remained loyal to the Union; but many Oregonians sympathized with the South, if not always with slavery. Beyond that, the federal government initially had difficulty recruiting volunteers from Oregon for the Union forces. There were some military moves. The Union Army established coastal defense batteries near the mouth of the Columbia River, and several military officers who had served during the Indian wars in Oregon would make their reputations as leaders in the Union and the Confederate armies. Noting Oregon's distance from the battlefronts, Democratic governor John Whiteaker recommended a "policy of defense only." In this context, defense of the Union generally meant military campaigns against the Indians.

In the decades after the Civil War, new waves of settlers assured the displacement of Indians in Oregon. More farmers moved to the south and east of the Willamette Valley, and railroads and steamboats extended their economic influence to outlying areas. As communities developed, the last in a series of conflicts between whites and Indians confirmed the end of tribal independence. The Modoc War in 1873, which ended with

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