

Directions:

1. Show evidence of a close reading.
2. Answer the questions at the end of the text.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN.

When Basic Survival Trumps Civil Liberties

On Sept. 12, 2001, it is highly doubtful that any member of Congress was worried that our government would be too harsh in its treatment of terrorists. When countries are threatened, basic survival trumps civil liberties not just for enemy combatants but for citizens as well. Our priorities change.

We saw that with the attack on Pearl Harbor. Days before Japanese warplanes destroyed the U.S. Pacific fleet on Dec. 7, 1941, 80% of Americans did not want to go to war against either Germany or Japan. The day after the attacks, those numbers reversed themselves. Over the next four years, the United States did things it would never do in normal times -- Japanese-Americans were placed in prison camps, press reports and the mail of American soldiers were censored by the military, and the FBI tapped phones without court orders.

In peacetime, a country can deliberate the balance of its security and civil liberties. It can even apologize for actions that were clearly wrong. When a nation is in peril, however, a forceful defense takes priority.

Following Pearl Harbor, this country asked its military leaders to commit acts that, when taken out of context, can be viewed as war crimes today. Between March and August of 1945, 38-year-old Gen. Curtis LeMay ordered the deaths of more civilians than any other man in U.S. history. No one else comes close, not William Tecumseh Sherman, not George S. Patton -- no one.

On the night of March 9, 1945, LeMay sent 346 huge B-29 bombers loaded with napalm from the Mariana Islands (Guam, Saipan and Tinian) to Tokyo. The first planes dropped their incendiaries on the front and back of the target area -- like lighting up both ends of a football field at night. The rest of the planes filled in the middle. More than 16 square miles of Japan's capital city were gutted, two million people were left homeless, and 100,000 were dead.

It didn't end there. Washington gave LeMay the green light as his bombers burned 64 more cities. He used the World Almanac and just went down the list by population. Altogether, an estimated 350,000 people lost their lives. Anyone hearing this for the first time in 2009 would be hard pressed to defend such an action.

Yet at the time, newspapers across America heralded the event as a tremendous achievement -- not unlike the moon landing 24 years later. The New York Times ran the story of the bombings on its front page for 10 straight days. Its lead editorial on March 12, 1945, warned the Japanese that if they didn't give up more was on the way. The New Yorker magazine ran a glowing three part series on LeMay. Time magazine put him on its cover.

Today Japan, which has been one of the most successful and responsible nations on earth for the past 64 years, doesn't seem like it should ever have received such punishment. Without understanding the context, some people would argue that the U.S. was just a wild, racist nation bent on payback after Pearl Harbor.

What many Americans today do not know was that for almost 10 years prior to LeMay's bombing, Japan was on a genocidal tear throughout Asia. There was a second

Holocaust in World War II that most Americans are unaware of -- one that killed upwards of 17 million Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos and other Asians.

So when LeMay finally figured out a way to bring the war to a faster end, there was jubilation not just in the U.S. but throughout Asia. LeMay also knew that both the U.S. and Japan were preparing for what would be the largest invasion (and most horrific bloodbath) in history.

With the fighting becoming more ferocious as the Americans came closer to Japan, Washington focused its attention on landings scheduled for November 1945 and March 1946. Combat troops who had survived the war in Europe were being brought home, given a one-month leave, and then shipped to staging areas in the Pacific. The Japanese were also getting ready by mobilizing old men, women and children into suicide squads. Squadrons of kamikaze planes were set aside to hit U.S. ships. The atomic bomb would not be tested until July 16. No one could be sure it would work.

In the strange calculus of war, LeMay helped prevent an estimated one million American casualties and upwards of two million Japanese by helping push Japan's Emperor Hirohito to surrender before the invasion. Killing large numbers of people to save even more lives is not a decision most of us would want to make. But at the time, the majority of Americans were thankful that LeMay was willing to do it.

Today, some question whether the ends justified the means. In 1945, no American with a husband, brother or son serving in the military did. For them, the speediest end of that horrible conflict was the only goal.

Source: Warren Kozak, *The Wall Street Journal* 5.15.09

Possible Writers' Notebook Topics:

- Do you agree that “our priorities change” when we are threatened? Explain.
- On Memorial Day, did you actually stop and consider the sacrifice others have made for the country? Why? Why not?
- In honor of Memorial Day, reflect on a veteran in your life and what that person means to you.