

POWERED BY  
BNET.com

[FindArticles](#) > [New York Times Upfront](#) > [Nov 12, 2001](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)

## **Is this WWII: in a shadowy, new kind of war with a new kind of enemy, how will we know who's winning?**

R.W. Apple, Jr.

WORLD WAR III? NOT REALLY. WORLD War I was essentially a struggle for Western Europe, fought primarily by massed infantry formations, in France and northern Italy and at Gallipoli on the Dardanelles. World War II covered the whole world, involving enormous fleets of ships and armadas of warplanes, with airborne drops and tank battles and amphibious landings on or near four continents.

President George W. Bush's campaign against terrorism will be nothing at all like that. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld was busy recently trying to banish any such images from the minds of the American people. "There's not going to be any D-Day as such," he said. The American response would develop in a "measured" way.

This war will be more ambiguous, more shadowy. In at least one respect, it will resemble the French and Indian War of the 18th century, fought in the wilderness by small, mobile forces. It will be more like the war on drugs, or the war on poverty, or the ongoing war against crime, in that it is unlikely ever to be won decisively. Unconditional surrender by the terrorists is an unreasonable expectation, and the defeat of "every terrorist group of global reach," as promised by Bush, is a hugely ambitious goal.

In fact, this is a new kind of war against a new kind of enemy, and Washington unsurprisingly is still pondering how to fight it. Western European policy makers were similarly stymied for a time in 1938 and 1939. Janet Flanner, the great New Yorker foreign correspondent, wrote at the time that Hitler's "unpredictable mental processes and moves, being unlike anything that the chancelleries have for centuries considered part of the game, have left diplomats foolishly standing ready with bats and no ban."

This time the diplomats must figure out how to forge new alliances (with Pakistan, most importantly, but perhaps later on with Iran) and how to maintain old ones (with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example, where most of the suspected terrorists grew up). Placating Montgomery and de Gaulle during World War II was as nothing compared with the complications that might well arise in the Middle East if Bush decides to pursue terrorists beyond Afghanistan into other Muslim nations, as at least some of his aides have been advising. World War II finally lifted the United States out of the Depression. But this time there is every possibility that in the short term, at least, the country is heading in the opposite direction, into a recession. Some defense contractors will flourish by making helicopters, Kevlar, and ammo, but American industry will not be reorganized to turn out thousands of new planes and ships and tanks. They will not be needed; Rosie will not be asked to rivet.

Nor will a draft reach into the ranks of civilians to send hundreds of thousands to war. The war will be fought mainly by professionals, which is to say volunteers, although as in the Persian Gulf, their ranks will be swollen by handfuls of skilled reservists and National Guard members.

### **A PUBLIC BOUND TO THE WAR EFFORT**

The public, every bit of evidence suggests, stands squarely behind Bush and his pledge to strike back at the terrorists. But so far at least, it's not clear to most people what they can do to help. By January 1942, as a kid of 7, I was collecting tin cans and scrap paper. My father, classified 4-F in the draft, was running the local rationing board and patrolling our neighborhood at night with an impressive-looking "CD" brassard (for Civil Defense) on his arm. My mother was learning to cook without butter and sugar and meat some days.

None of us thought we were playing any big part, of course; the point was that we were all doing our little bits, which bound us

to the war effort. Not quite the same as standing 30 minutes longer in security lines at airports.

We were unified, too, by the broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow from London and the dispatches of Ernie Pyle from foxholes everywhere. We cheered when the tide turned in Africa at El Alamein and in Russia at Stalingrad and in the Pacific at Midway. We could see progress on the maps where we moved the pins each night.

But this time, the prize will not be territory or enemy capitals, and it will be hard to tell who's winning. We may hear about an assassination here, a terror attack there, a special forces operation that succeeds, a bombing mission that doesn't, but it will not be easy to tell what it all adds up to.

The government will tell us, of course, but those with long memories will recall the notoriously unreliable government accounts of progress in Vietnam and wonder. There, the body count or the number of pacified hamlets was said to hold the answer, but it didn't. What will the new measure be? Bank accounts closed? Terrorist cells smashed?

#### FINDING THE BEST WAY TO FIGHT

There are other potentially troubling parallels with Vietnam. There, too, it was often all but impossible to tell which little man wearing flip-flops was a peasant and which was a Vietcong. There, too, American policy makers labored under the handicap of inadequate knowledge of the historical and cultural and linguistic context. There, too, Washington's first instinct when things went badly was to reach for weapons better suited to another sort of conflict altogether, like the giant B-52 bombers used to carpet bomb Vietnamese jungles, to little effect.

Most important, will the American people stay the course, or will they grow weary when tales of collateral damage and civilian casualties (to say nothing of American KIA, MIA, and WIA) begin to come in? World War II was seen as a battle for national survival--indeed, a battle for the survival of Western civilization. The same cannot yet be said of the current fight. A fight for national honor or freedom from fear, maybe, but not survival.

So keeping the country united will be one of the biggest challenges for Bush, especially if he can supply no dramatic and credible evidence of success. Especially if the struggle drags on.

For Lyndon B. Johnson, maintaining public singlemindedness about a difficult war proved impossible. Jack Valenti, one of his aides, recalled that he had cited a passage from de Tocqueville while working with the President on a big speech.

"The line was, 'The people grow tired of a confusion whose end is not in sight,'" Valenti said. "Johnson buried his head in his hands and said, 'That's sure as hell right.' Could be right again, unfortunately."

Gallipoli A disastrous campaign at the Dardanelles strait, claiming 250,000 Allied casualties, to capture Constantinople (now Istanbul), capital of the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey), which was aligned with Germany.

D-Day In military use, the date for a planned action. For most Americans, D-Day refers to June 6, 1944, when Allied forces landed on the Normandy coast of France to retake Europe from Germany.

French and Indian War France, its Canadian colonies, and its Native American allies fought Britain and its American colonies for control of North America. The Native Americans fought a guerrilla war against both sides, mainly the British.

chancelleries The offices or staffs of embassies or consulates.

Montgomery and de Gaulle Bernard Montgomery was a British field marshal and one of the leading Allied commanders; Charles de Gaulle was the leader of the Free French resistance to the Nazis. Both were noted for their strong personalities and their unwillingness to make the compromises necessary to act in a coalition.

**Depression** The worldwide economic disaster of the 1930s marked by vast unemployment, bank failures, and large-scale homelessness.

**Kevlar** A synthetic fiber, five times stronger than steel, used to make soft body armor such as bulletproof vests.

**Rosie the Riveter** Rosie the Riveter, a popular poster image in World War II, represented women who filled the jobs of men who went to fight in the war.

**Scrap drives** collecting tin cans and scrap paper Scrap drives collected items for the war effort, such as 70,000 tons of aluminum from donated pots and pans, and 5 million tons of scrap steel.

**4-F in the draft** The Selective Service System, through local draft boards, uses classifications ranging from 1-A (available to serve) to 4-F (unsuitable for military service).

**rationing board** Stamp books were issued to civilians, limiting the purchase of items needed for the war, such as butter, meat, sugar, gas, tires, and cigarettes. Shortages were frequent.

**Civil Defense** Millions volunteered to supervise their community's defense effort, including practice blackouts, scrap drives, and the Victory Garden program to encourage home gardeners to raise extra food.

**Edward R. Murrow and Ernie Pyle** Considered the greatest war correspondents of World War II, Murrow was a radio broadcaster famed for coverage of the London blitz and Pyle was famed for covering ordinary soldiers in the trenches.

**El Alamein** A decisive British victory led by Montgomery against Germany's Afrika Korps. The victory opened the way to the Axis's total defeat in North Africa.

**Stalingrad** A complete victory for the Soviet armies over the Germans in 1943 that marked another turning point in the war.

**Midway** Bombers flying from U.S. air. craft carriers defeated a superior Japanese surface force and ended the Japanese advance in the Pacific.

**pacified hamlets** Villages and hamlets in which the Vietcong were said to have been eliminated.

**Vietcong** Communist guerrillas who operated in South Vietnam, dressed in the same type of clothing as the local peasants.

**B-52 bombers** Long-range, high-altitude bombers that can carry conventional bombs, cluster bombs, precision-guided cruise missiles, or nuclear weapons.

**carpet bomb** To bomb in an extensive pattern, so as to uniformly devastate a large area.

**collateral damage** Unintentional civilian casualties and damage as a result of military actions, such as bombs falling outside target zones.

**KIA, MIA, and WIA** Killed in Action, Missing in Action, Wounded in Action.

**Lyndon B. Johnson** President from 1963-69, he deeply divided the nation by escalating American involvement in the Vietnam War. Johnson was unable to devise a strategy either to win the war or to withdraw from it.

**de Tocqueville** Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, came to the U.S. in 1831 and later wrote an insightful study of the American people and their political institutions, *Democracy in America*.

Is This World War III?

FOCUS: The Complex Strategies Needed to Fight Terrorism

#### TEACHING OBJECTIVES

To help students understand the complexity and unpredictability of fighting a war against international terrorism.

Discussion Questions:

- \* Suppose the war on terrorism causes the deaths of large numbers of innocent civilians. Should that cause the U.S. and its allies to modify their military tactics?
- \* Do you think President Bush's declaration that the U.S. will defeat "every terrorist group of global reach" is achievable?
- \* If you were to discuss the war on terrorism with a friend, which key points would you make?

#### CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Critical Thinking/Support: One of the problems writer R.W. Apple Jr. identifies is the potential difficulty of keeping the American people united behind the government's anti-terrorism war.

"Deputize" students as members of the "Homeland Defense Information Committee." Refer them to the observation that, even if President Bush can supply evidence of success in the war against terrorism, keeping the country united will be one of his biggest challenges.

Ask students to suppose that the year is now 2003 and, in spite of the capture and killing of several terrorist leaders, sporadic attacks continue. Since the initial assaults in September 2001, hundreds of Americans and citizens of allied countries have been killed or wounded by terrorists. What message would the committee convey to the American public to persuade them to support the government and stay the course. (Students might write a TV public-service announcement to reassure citizens that the long struggle is working.) What evidence must the government produce to bolster its argument that the antiterrorist strategies are working?

Critical Thinking/Knowledge: Writer R.W. Apple Jr. says that, as in Vietnam, U.S. policy makers are laboring under the "handicap" of inadequate knowledge of the terrorists' history, culture, and language. Why should countries fighting terrorism have to know about the history, culture, and language of the terrorists? How might knowledge of these things aid in the fight?

R.W. APPLE JR. is chief correspondent of The Times. He was formerly chief of the Washington bureau.

COPYRIGHT 2001 Scholastic, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale Group