Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory

David Hoogland Noon
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Abstract

Since 1999, George W. Bush has consistently evoked the legacy of the "greatest generation." Moreover, since September 11, 2001, Bush's use of World War II analogies has intensified. Such analogies capitalize on post-Cold War historical memory and lend credibility to the war on terrorism, yet they characterize the world in a simple, dualistic fashion that evades a critical engagement with history.
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All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic anamnesis. Out of such obliations, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.

—Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities

Since fall 2001, George W. Bush has enjoyed countless opportunities to summon the legacy of World War II as the sanctifying touch for his global campaign against terrorism. In the months immediately following the attacks, the president’s speechwriters, attuned to all the appropriate rhetorical tones, saturated his public appearances with reminders of the moment’s historical gravity. Like the seventeenth-century Puritans who vetted the Old Testament for evidence prefiguring their own struggles and forecasting their eventual triumph, the president regularly invokes the “lessons of history” to insinuate that the United States has been reliving the tribulations of the “good war.” If September 11, 2001, represented “our” Pearl Harbor, the analogies have been extended (and distorted) in every imaginable direction by the administration and its supporters. Thus, the “liberation” of Kabul or Baghdad has been likened (albeit awkwardly) to the liberation of Paris or the capture of Berlin; the accumulating disarray in Iraq and Afghanistan is optimistically compared with the slow postwar reconstruction of Germany and Japan; the unusual bond between Bush and Tony Blair is regularly measured against that gold standard of Anglo-American relations, the Roosevelt-Churchill alliance; and during the buildup to the war in Iraq, critics of the impending war were chastened

David Hoogland Noon is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau, Alaska.

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