

The Seeds of Victory Gardens

*The years since September 11 have tested a generation's resolve.
How are we doing so far?*

O

n September 15, 2001, with Lower Manhattan still smoldering, I was invited to appear on CNN to discuss whether the young Americans who lived through the placid 1990s would know how to respond to the testing of a time of war. Twenty-six years old and having recently written a book that was, in part, about how my generation viewed the world, I agreed to pass myself off as some sort of expert on a situation no one clearly understood.

Pointing to the heroes in their twenties and thirties who had already lost their lives in the World Trade Center, I said I was confident that today's Americans would rise to the occasion because, after all, it has "really been the lesson of American history that, in every moment of crisis, a generation that has had the responsibility to step up to the plate has done that."

Nearly five years later, it's clear that, thus far, when it comes to this generation's moment of crisis, I was wrong.

ANDREI CHERNY is the Co-Editor of Democracy: A Journal of Ideas.

In 2001, Americans were victims of a vicious attack perpetrated by those committed to stopping the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world. Immediately after, we seemed ready to take part in a massive response. But we have not, at least not in any way analogous to the scale of the efforts of previous generations.

Our national discomfort in dealing with September 11 was highlighted with this April's release of Universal Pictures' *United 93*, the first Hollywood movie to deal directly with the terrorist attacks. Despite a massive publicity campaign, widespread press coverage, and overwhelming critical acclaim, Americans steered clear of the film at their local multiplex. In advance of the premiere, a Manhattan theater pulled the movie's trailer after patrons complained; the manager told *Newsweek* that "I don't think people are ready for this." In Los Angeles, audience members viewing the trailer at Grauman's Chinese Theatre shouted, "Too soon!"

That the charge that *United 93* had come "too soon" hit such a chord among many says more about America and September 11 than about the speed of moviemaking. Historically, the timing of Hollywood movies about major national traumas has reflected America's confidence in and comfort with the nation's response to the threats. In instances when we are proud and optimistic about our answer, Hollywood sounds the trumpets; when we are uneasy with ourselves, Hollywood is silent.

Almost immediately after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Hollywood began churning out movies dealing with the attack and the war. When Republic Studio's *Remember Pearl Harbor*—the first film to fictionalize the attack—premiered less than six months later, reviewers didn't criticize the timing; instead, they harped on the wooden acting and the plodding plotline. "Guess we'll just have to accept it as the first of the Far Easterns," wrote *The New York Times* in naming the genre of movies about the war with Japan. "There'll be more." There were. And they came quickly. In the three years after Pearl Harbor, Hollywood released more than half a dozen films dealing directly with the attack, part of a flood of World War II films made while the conflict still raged. Production for *Casablanca* began just weeks after Pearl Harbor, and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* was released on Memorial Day 1942.

Hollywood's response to World War II mirrored our sense of national purpose, national unity, and confidence in the cause. A generation later, the war in Vietnam elicited a very different response on and off the screen. During the entire span of the conflict, only one major film addressed it directly: the abysmal 1968 John Wayne offering, *The Green Berets*. When Robert Altman wanted to depict the sadness and absurdity of war, he set his 1970 black comedy, *M*A*S*H*,

in the Korean War, two decades earlier. It was not until the late 70s that *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now* appeared, and another decade would pass until Hollywood produced films that dealt with Vietnam directly, such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

The roiling public debate over *United 93*—movie industry market studies revealed that an unusually high percentage of moviegoers characterized themselves as “definitely not interested” in seeing the film—underscored Americans’ ambivalence over what has and has not occurred since September 11, 2001.

Forty-three months after December 7, 1941, President Harry S Truman rode triumphant in an open car through the rubble of conquered Berlin, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill all but danced through the debris of Adolf Hitler’s command offices. This March, 55 months after September 11, President George W. Bush snuck into Afghanistan with Osama bin Laden still at large and his ideology of anti-democratic fanaticism a growing power in the Middle East. Our military is weaker and our nation’s esteem in the eyes of people around the world has been diminished. The deaths of those on *United 93*, as well as those elsewhere, have not yet been avenged; the story that began that day still does not have its ending—and the uncomfortable fact is that this ending does not seem to be in sight.

Previous generations would have shuddered at the thought of our national honor being so disgraced; we seem to shrug our shoulders. When the *Lusitania* was sunk by a German U-boat in 1915, killing 100 Americans, 16,000 young men from around the country—many of them Wall Street bankers and the flower of the Ivy League—walked away from their careers and enrolled in Army camps to train for a conflict the United States would not even enter for another two years. After Pearl Harbor, every American—in uniform or at home—took part in a total response that entailed personal sacrifice as well as national dedication. Today’s men and women serving in the military are more disconnected from the fabric of America—and from daily life on the home front—than in any previous global conflict in our history.

Why is this? Is it because this generation of Americans has been addled by video games and remote controls and simply cannot rise to the challenge? Has our material prosperity dulled the edges of our ability to rally in a time of danger? Perhaps, yet similar worries were expressed about the Americans who rose to the occasion during every conflict since the Revolutionary War.

The real difference seems to lie in the character of our national leadership. In the aftermath of September 11, America wanted not only national action,

but also to be part of a response—yet no national leader has stepped forward with a call to ordinary Americans to contribute to the nation’s struggle.

Since September 11, too many in both parties have changed the subject from the war on terror. President Bush’s attention, if not his rhetoric, shifted quickly to Iraq; government resources shifted away from the fight against Al Qaeda and the ideological competition with global jihadism. President Bush told Americans to go about their everyday lives—to remember 9/11, but not to do anything about it. Tax cuts took priority over equipping troops and when asked about finding Osama bin Laden, President Bush said he was truly “not that concerned about him.”

And few Democratic leaders still regularly speak about the war on terror either. Instead, they have followed President Bush into the rabbit hole of an obsession with Iraq that crowds out almost every other major issue. From this point of view, many Democrats have begun to see any political references to September 11 as nothing more than a cynical Republican campaign ploy. Linguistics professor George Lakoff, feted as an apostle by some Democrats on Capitol Hill, has claimed that the war on terror is simply a “conservative catchphrase.” The rules of a 2006 State of the Union “drinking game” posted on the Daily Kos website had players take a sip every time President Bush mentioned 9/11 during his address, as if the problem was that he was speaking about September 11 too much, instead of doing too little.

While some Democrats decry the selfish strain of modern conservatism that led President Bush to abandon the post-September 11 sense of national unity and purpose, they themselves have issued no call for action. Their only call for sacrifice is the pledge to roll back a tax cut they opposed in the first place, and their call for energy independence rings hollow when (under pressure from Michigan’s auto workers in 2005) only 28 Senate Democrats voted to raise fuel economy standards by 12 miles over 11 years.

Contrast this with what happened on the homefront during World War II when all Americans were part of the wartime effort. Ordinary citizens became volunteer air raid wardens and were summoned to conserve resources during the conflict. Twenty million Americans planted “victory gardens.” One popular poster showed a sinking tanker ship engulfed in flames and asked “Should brave men die so you can drive . . . ?” Another depicted a weary, muddy GI with the question, “Have you REALLY tried to save gas by getting into a car club?” It is a long way from that sense of national purpose to an America where the White House decries calls for conservation and sacrifice as inimical to the “American way of life.”

There is a real agenda to respond to September 11 that neither party has touched: demanding that Americans make sacrifices in a breakneck transition

to energy independence; ending America's game of footsie with anti-democratic Middle Eastern despots, and actively demonstrating to people around the world that democracy and economic opportunity can provide a better future; making the war on terror and homeland security a higher priority than either tax cuts or domestic spending programs; asking millions of Americans to volunteer part-time in a modern-day civil defense force that would help watch over our vulnerable ports, borders, and chemical and nuclear plants; strengthening our democracy and addressing grave inequalities in opportunity at home to show the world how fair and just a free nation can be; and calling on hundreds of thousands of young people to serve in a military whose size must be greatly increase to meet the threats we face.

I refuse to believe that today's Americans are unwilling to make this type of sacrifice of time and money and lives. We simply cannot answer a call that has not come. More than 60 percent of Americans bought war bonds during World War II. Today, nobody is buying war bonds because nobody is selling them.

On CNN that September day in 2001, I peddled one of our nation's favorite myths: that in every generation, Americans have risen to the challenge with which we were faced. The truth is that, while we wish that this were so, it simply is not. After President Abraham Lincoln's death and the end of the Civil War, Americans' failure to meet the test of Reconstruction sent this country careening off into the tragedy of a century of racial subjugation. In the 1920s, the United States walked away from a complicated world, thereby allowing Hitler to rise and shaky European democracies to fall. Our greatest generations—the ones that met the challenges they were faced with—did not automatically swell up, fully formed. They were summoned forth by leaders who called Americans to the best angels of their nature. The United States did not have those leaders during Reconstruction or the Roaring Twenties. We have not had them yet in the war on terror. There is still time for them; for while it is certainly not “too soon,” it is also, hopefully, not too late. **▀**