

## September 11 - From the Viewpoint of a Military Historian

*Date: Friday, September 21, 2001 6:06 PM To all addressees, I fully agree with the Author. We must be aware of what goes on around us day and night. Report anyone or any act that you are suspicious of to a law enforcement agency. We must be ready to stay with this effort over the long haul and see it through to the end. Tom (T.J.) Price.*

This is a message from Dr. Tony Kern, Lt Col, USAF (Ret) Former Director of Military History, USAF Academy.

Recently, I was asked to look at the recent events through the lens of military history. I have joined the cast of thousands who have written an "open letter to Americans." Please share it if you feel so moved.

Dear friends and fellow Americans: 14 September 2001 Like everyone else in this great country, I am reeling from last week's attack on our sovereignty. But unlike some, I am not reeling from surprise. As a career soldier and a student and teacher of military history, I have a different perspective and I think you should hear it. This war will be won or lost by the American citizens, not diplomats, politicians or soldiers. Let me briefly explain.

In spite of the what the media, and even our own government is telling us, this act was not committed by a group of mentally deranged fanatics. To dismiss them as such would be among the gravest of mistakes. This attack was committed by a ferocious, intelligent and dedicated adversary. Don't take this the wrong way. I don't admire these men and I deplore their tactics, but I respect their capabilities. The many parallels that have been made with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor are apropos. Not only because it was a brilliant sneak attack against a complacent America, but also because we may well be pulling our new adversaries out of caves 30 years after we think this war is over, just like my father's generation had to do with the formidable Japanese in the years following WWII.

These men hate the United States with all of their being, and we must not underestimate the power of their moral commitment. Napoleon, perhaps the world's greatest combination of soldier and statesman, stated "the moral is to the physical as three is to one." Patton thought the Frenchman underestimated its importance and said moral conviction was five times more important in battle than physical strength. Our enemies are willing—better said anxious—to give their lives for their cause. How committed are we, America? And for how long?

In addition to demonstrating great moral conviction, the recent attack demonstrated a mastery of some of the basic fundamentals of warfare taught to most military officers worldwide, namely simplicity, security and surprise. When I first heard rumors that some of these men may have been trained at our own Air War College, it made perfect sense to me. This was not a random act of violence, and we can expect the same sort of military competence to be displayed in the battle to come. This war will escalate, with a good portion of it happening right here in the good ole' U.S. of A. These men will not go easily into the night. They do not fear us. We must not fear them. In spite of our overwhelming conventional strength as the world's only "superpower" (a truly silly term), we are the underdog in this fight. As you listen to the carefully scripted rhetoric designed to prepare us for the march for war,

please realize that America is not equipped or seriously trained for the battle ahead. To be certain, our soldiers are much better than the enemy, and we have some excellent "counter-terrorist" organizations, but they are mostly trained for hostage rescues, airfield seizures, or the occasional "body-snatch," (which may come in handy). We will be fighting a war of annihilation, because if their early efforts are any indication, our enemy is ready and willing to die to the last man.

Eradicating the enemy will be costly and time consuming. They have already deployed their forces in as many as 20 countries, and are likely living the lives of everyday citizens. Simply put, our soldiers will be tasked with a search and destroy mission on multiple foreign landscapes, and the public must be patient and supportive until the strategy and tactics can be worked out. For the most part, our military is still in the process of redefining itself and presided over by men and women who grew up with—and were promoted because they excelled in—Cold War doctrine, strategy and tactics. This will not be linear warfare, there will be no clear "centers of gravity" to strike with high technology weapons. Our vast technological edge will certainly be helpful, but it will not be decisive.

Perhaps the perfect metaphor for the coming battle was introduced by the terrorists themselves aboard the hijacked aircraft—this will be a knife fight, and it will be won or lost by the ingenuity and will of citizens and soldiers, not by software or smart bombs. We must also be patient with our military leaders. Unlike Americans who are eager to put this messy time behind us, our adversaries have time on their side, and they will use it. They plan to fight a battle of attrition, hoping to drag the battle out until the American public loses its will to fight. This might be difficult to believe in this euphoric time of flag waving and patriotism, but it is generally acknowledged that America lacks the stomach for a long fight.

We need only look as far back as Vietnam, when North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap (also a military history teacher) defeated the United States of America without ever winning a major tactical battle. American soldiers who marched to war cheered on by flag waving American in 1965 were reviled and spat upon less than three years later when they returned. Although we hope that Usama Bin Laden is no Giap, he is certain to understand and employ the concept. We can expect not only large doses of pain like the recent attacks, but! also less audacious "sand in gears" tactics, ranging from livestock infestations to attacks at water supplies and power distribution facilities. These attacks are designed to hit us in our "comfort zone" forcing the average American to "pay more and play less" and eventually eroding our resolve. But it can only work if we let it. It is clear to me that the will of the American citizenry—you and I—is the center of gravity the enemy has targeted. It will be the fulcrum upon which victory or defeat

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