

# Another splendid moment

**W**hat do we celebrate as we gather for V-E Day 50 years later? Above all, we remember the "last good war"—a war of unblemished morality, a cosmic battle with the right ending. The greatest evil in human memory—Nazism—was crushed, and it stayed buried; there were no second thoughts and no loose ends. World War II was when "the free men of the world," as Dwight D. Eisenhower told the troops, were "marching together to victory."

Indeed, the luster of that grandiose victory would shine ever more brightly in the decades to come as America, Britain and France slid into a host of lesser wars whose endings were neither neat nor noble. France suffered ignominious defeat in Indochina and Algeria. Britain struggled between India and Egypt, only to lose one piece of empire after another.

And the United States? In Korea, it could fight only to a standstill; in Vietnam, the nation battled for its soul and almost lost. Lebanon and Somalia most Americans would rather forget, and even the gulf war has left a bitter aftertaste. With Saddam Hussein still in power, "real" triumph has eluded America, and a new round remains an ever present reality.

Not so the "splendid moment in our great history and our small lives" Winston Churchill celebrated on May 8. V-E Day did not just mark an interlude on the way to a vastly more horrifying encore, as had Armistice Day in 1918. The "last good war" also ushered in the longest period of peace in the history of Europe.

**Great powers, small wars.** Yes, there was the cold war, pitting the West for 40 years against the other great totalitarian monster, the Soviet Union, without which Hitler might not have dared launch World War II. (Bill Clinton, please take note when in Moscow on May 9.) Yes, there was an endless string of "small" wars from Indochina to Kuwait. But none of them threatened the existence of the great powers like America and Russia.

Was V-E Day the birthday of wisdom among the nations? Not really. Three months later, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ultimate horror unfolded in a double flash. The bomb burned into our minds that "victory was no longer a truth," as Lyndon B. Johnson would proclaim in 1964. "It is only a word to describe who is left alive in the

ruins." The nuclear apocalypse has stayed our hands.

Still, there is more to this story than just the fission of the atom. On V-E Day, the adolescent American republic reached the age of maturity. Though millions of American GIs went home, America as a whole did not turn its back on the world. This time, the Hardings, Coolidges and Hoovers did not call the heady tune of isolationism; this time, a sobered-up nation listened to Truman and Eisenhower, who pronounced the stern moral of global responsibility.

Had America turned a deaf ear, the world would not be what it is today. Not only did America enforce the peace, as it had refused to do—with tragic consequences—in the

aftermath of Armistice Day. It also stood for a *magnanimous* peace, one that would set aside the evil Germany and Japan had wreaked and bind victors and vanquished in a community of the democracies.

If most Germans feel today that May 8, 1945, was indeed a day of liberation (and not a "stab in the back," as in 1918), the United States can claim most of the credit. First, the Americans brought chewing gum, then Marshall Plan aid, then a free-trade system, finally alliance and acceptance. Secured against want and fear, the Germans could dare another experiment in democracy—and this time democracy won, as it also did in Japan.

And so, V-E Day '95 marks an even more splendid victory than did May 8, 1945. We, the West, have also won the *peace*—the peace we lost to the totalitarians, and to millionfold mayhem, some 20 years after Armistice Day 1918.

Indeed, we can double the celebration today. Because America, because the entire West, did the right thing after V-E Day, we may now, six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, quietly savor another "splendid moment": the victory of freedom in all of Europe.

Quietly, because the "free men of the world" halted their march at the Elbe River in 1945, leaving in thrall those millions of East Europeans forced to trade one totalitarianism for another. For them, V-E Day came only in 1989, almost half a century later, and for them, democracy's final triumph is not yet assured. Bosnia and Chechnya remind us even as we celebrate that peace is not a given but a gift of grace. And grace does not come to the smug. ■



Nazism crushed. U.S. and Soviet soldiers meet at the Elbe River.

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