

AlbertMohler.com

Flyboys and the Price of Freedom: A Reminder

The American people seem to be somewhat uncertain about our military action in the War on Terror and concerned about how the administration should respond to the hard work of rebuilding a stable post-war society in Iraq. Perhaps this is a good time to look backwards and remember a time when America was more certain about our military aims and the high cost of keeping the peace.

Tuesday, October 14, 2003

The American people seem to be somewhat uncertain about our military action in the War on Terror and concerned about how the administration should respond to the hard work of rebuilding a stable post-war society in Iraq. Perhaps this is a good time to look backwards and remember a time when America was more certain about our military aims and the high cost of keeping the peace.

In *Flyboys*, James Bradley offers an absolutely compelling story of heroism, horror, and humanity as America fought the Empire of Japan in the closing months of World War II. Bradley, author of the number one best-seller *Flags of our Fathers*, has written a blockbuster of a book, and it would do every American well to read this story and be reminded of the true cost of freedom.

In *Flags of our Fathers* Bradley recounted the history of World War II by focusing on the marines who raised the famous flag on Iwo Jima. Bradley had a personal stake in this story because his father had been one of the men who raised that flag after victory in one of America's costliest battles. Returning to the Pacific War, Bradley offers what is, if anything, an even more compelling story.

Iwo Jima may be more famous than its neighbor, Chichi Jima, but the story of what took place on the ground and in the skies over Chichi Jima tells a great deal about what was at stake in World War II and what is required for freedom to be purchased in every generation.

Like every good historical narrative, *Flyboys* offers the reader an opportunity to enter the world of those who experienced one of history's most formative events. Readers of *Flyboys* will be transported back to 1945, when the Japanese Empire had been defeated and had no realistic hope of victory, but still resisted surrender. One can almost imagine being in the cockpits of the Avengers and Corsairs over the Pacific as the war moved into its bloodiest stages.

Bradley writes with a vivid style and with a keen sense of historical context. He begins his story with Commodore Perry's engagement with the Japanese—an historical event with repercussions Perry could never have anticipated. Bradley also resists the postmodern attraction of cultural relativism. He describes the worldview held by the Japanese in stark terms. He describes the “spirit warriors” who were driven by the Japanese mythology of Samurai and Bushido. The culture of Japan was militaristic to the core and driven by a sense of imperial destiny. Fueled by an ideology of racial superiority, the Japanese were absolutely convinced that their Emperor was god and that the sun rose for Japan and only later traveled around the world.

But Bradley also demonstrates that the Bushido ethic was horribly corrupted into a suicidal determination to avoid surrender at all costs. Human life was devalued from the onset of Japan's war effort and the lives of Japanese soldiers were wasted by the millions—even when any hope of victory was lost. The same devaluation of human life was evident in Japan's assault upon China in the infamous “rape of Nanking”, and in the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war. According to the Japanese mentality, one who surrendered to the enemy had lost all basis for respect or human rights.

At the same time, Bradley is also honest in his assessment of the complicated and often hypocritical ethics of war.

Americans condemned the Japanese bombing of Chinese cities as atrocities. Within just a few years, America would shower Japan's cities with napalm, causing mass civilian casualties.

Flyboys recounts the famous raid on Tokyo by Jimmy Doolittle and his intrepid pilots, who flew their bombers off of aircraft carriers and over Japan knowing that most would never return. As an author, Bradley is able to combine the big picture of historical context with the fascinating anecdote and material of everyday life as individual soldiers experienced battle in war.

But Bradley's main focus is on the horrific events that took place on and over the island of Chichi Jima. Long noted by mariners for its twin peaks, the island had been turned by the Japanese into a fortress and broadcast center. American pilots were sent to bomb Chichi Jima in hope of knocking out the communication center. As Bradley tells the story, nine navy and marine airmen were sent in the closing months of the war to bomb Chichi Jima. Most were shot down over the island and eventually became prisoners of war. One pilot had his plane virtually shot to pieces and eventually parachuted into the Pacific, later to be rescued by a U.S. Navy submarine.

The situation on the island fast became a portrait of unspeakable horror. The American prisoners were eventually executed by beheading and then dissected and cannibalized. The Japanese ate the liver and portions of the thighs of the American pilots as a way of degrading their memory and with the hope of gaining strength and warrior spirit from eating the flesh of their defeated enemy.

The fascinating twist in the story is the identity of the pilot who bailed out just beyond the island. This young pilot, just 20 years old, later became President of the United States. The only survivor of the air raid on Chichi Jima became the Commander in Chief of America's armed forces and the 41st President of the United States.

George H. W. Bush was a part of that generation of heroes who signed up for freedom's cause as teenagers. Most of the pilots killed in action in World War II were in their late teens or early twenties. The pilots Bradley found so fascinating were not only called "flyboys," they were quite literally just boys. As one of them remarked, "We were all teenagers or barely into our twenties, totally naive to the ways of the world." They would grow up fast.

Bradley was able to write his book only after materials related to the events on Chichi Jima and the war crimes tribunals on Guam that followed had been declassified. An e-mail from Iris Chang, author of *The Rape of Nanking*, directed him to Bill Doran, who had been one of the observers at the secret war crimes trials held in 1946. The participants and observers had been sworn to absolute secrecy. It was only in 1997 that Bill noticed a newspaper article announcing that government documents from 1946 had been declassified. Those documents included the reports of the trial on Guam and the events on Chichi Jima. In Bill's words, "I thought, maybe I can do something for these guys now."

Flyboys is a fascinating story and the book is almost certain to become a best-seller. In every generation, America seems to undergo a fluctuation of moral conviction when it comes to the fight for freedom. As Bradley makes painfully clear, America has committed its own share of atrocities in war. By the time World War II was over, those engaged on both sides of the struggle recognized that war was, at its very base, a matter of irreducible horror.

The release of *Flyboys* is well timed for the American mind as we consider our responsibility in Iraq and around the world. Reports of casualties in Iraq and the difficulties of establishing a stable regime in that newly liberated country seemed to be prompting many Americans to wonder if the war had been worthwhile in the first place.

A quick look at *Flyboys* will remind us all that war is never over in a hurry and that freedom has always faced its enemies. The sentimentality and false optimism held by those who thought American forces could enter Iraq and be home by Christmas needs to be tempered with the reality that every generation of Americans has been called upon to put lives on the line in defense of freedom in America and around the world.

My guess is that *Flyboys* will be must reading at the White House this season. It should be required reading at your house as well.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.