Many Won’t Be Home for Christmas

The December 7 commemoration of the 66th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack brought to my mind a flood of memories and emotions. There were, of course, my memories of December 7 itself, which I have recounted before in this space. There were also memories of the next three years and nine months, when it seemed as if the entire nation was involved in World War II in some way. I think about those times and contrast them with today, when the United States is once again fighting a war. But this time, only a small fraction of our population is directly involved in a conflict that future historians may judge to be quite pivotal and just as important as World War II.

It is hard for young people today to understand the total impact of World War II on daily life in America. Hundreds of thousands of able-bodied men and quite a few women volunteered to join the armed forces. The federal Selective Service System conscripted eligible men who did not volunteer under a program most people called “the Draft.” Women, most of whom had been homemakers in those simpler times, rolled up their sleeves and went to work in factories making aircraft, ships, tanks, guns, munitions, and other war materials, taking the place on the nation’s production lines of all the men who were heading off to the battlefronts.

I was nearly eight years old when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor and can remember the chaos of the day and the weeks that followed. Martial law was declared in Hawaii on December 7, even as the smoke was still roiling into the sky. Civilians were fingerprinted and had to carry ID cards. Long-distance telephone calls and mail to the U.S. mainland were censored. Windows were painted over, so no light could escape during the nightly blackouts, which were designed to make things more difficult for enemy ships and planes that might attack again. There was an 8 p.m. curfew. Barbed wire covered the shoreline all around Oahu, including Waikiki Beach.

It is embarrassing now, but understandable, that my younger sisters and I were primarily concerned about whether there would be a Christmas tree with presents on December 25. Since the ship carrying Christmas trees from the northwest was either canceled or turned back, we decorated the branch of an ironwood tree and waited for St. Nick’s arrival. Miraculously, our makeshift tree was surrounded by presents on Christmas morning, 1941.

My mother, sisters, and I were evacuated to Los Angeles in February 1942. There, we found a huge camouflage net covering the entire Douglas aircraft factory and shortages of almost everything. Our family was given ration booklets containing sheets of little stamps. Those stamps determined what you could buy at the grocery store. Most basic commodities, such as meat, sugar, butter, and coffee required not only cash, but also the surrender of a stamp. Ketchup required several stamps, and to my great disappointment, we rarely “splurged” to buy any. If you ate in a restaurant, you also paid with cash and ration stamps.

Gasoline was tightly rationed. A sticker on our car indicated how many gallons of gasoline we were allowed to purchase. The average vehicle whose driver could not prove special need was allocated only three gallons a week! Automobile tires were very hard to find.

Some 20 million families, including mine, planted “victory gardens” to provide vegetables for the household. We kids took a little red wagon around the streets of Los Angeles collecting bits of scrap metal and tin foil from cigarette packs to help in the war effort. Activities like these were strongly encouraged in a government public relations campaign, which included posters like those shown on this page and on pages 1 and 6.

Contrast all that with today. While a small corps of dedicated men and women, all volunteers, is directly involved in the war against radical Islamofascism (not to be confused with the religion of Islam itself), the rest of the nation is going about business and leisure as usual. Right now, most of us are filling shopping malls and supermarkets. Millions are making plans to visit friends and family, often hundreds or even thousands of miles from home. For others, the holidays will mean a round of parties with plenty of good food and drink.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops are risking their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan and will continue to do so on Christmas Day and throughout the holiday season, without letup. Others who are in U.S. military installations, such as the Kaneohe Marine Corps Base Hawaii and Fort Carson, Colorado, are packing up their gear and getting ready to deploy to the war zone, possibly in the next few days. For some, this will be their third overseas deployment.

Whether or not you agree with our political leaders about Iraq and Afghanistan, these brave men and women need our support. Let’s be sure to send them our heartfelt thoughts and prayers, and any other kind of encouragement we can because, sadly, while their job is to make the holidays safe for the rest of us, they won’t be home for Christmas.