



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

WMU President Diether Haenicke

Office of the President

12-31-2008

Reflections on a nation at war as we look to the beginning of a new year

Diether Haenicke
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke>



Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "Reflections on a nation at war as we look to the beginning of a new year" (2008). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 44.

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke/44>

This Newspaper Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WMU President Diether Haenicke by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.





Reflections on a nation at war as we look to the beginning of a new year

By Diether Haenicke
December 31, 2008

The month of January, which opens the New Year Thursday, owes its name to Janus, the Roman god of doors and gates. He symbolizes new beginnings and new ventures as doors open and new perspectives into the future are gained.

But as gates open both ways, Janus is also the god who looks both into the future and into the past. We have many likenesses of him that show his head with two faces, each one looking in the opposite direction -- toward all of our tomorrows and all our yesterdays. All the gates of Rome were under his care and protection, particularly the gate through which the armies left town to go to war, and the doors of his temple stood wide open as long as Roman soldiers were engaged in action. It is said that in as many as 700 years, the Janus temple gates were closed only three times. Some war in some remote region of the vast empire always kept the gates open.

Today, as we pass through the gate of time into another New Year, the doors of the Janus temple again stand wide open since our country, a military world power such as the Romans once were, finds itself at war in two remote regions of the world -- Iraq and Afghanistan. Remote today means something different than in Roman times. We now can reach the most distant regions of our world by aircraft or cell phone almost instantaneously, but for the family whose son or daughter is fighting in Kandahar or Kirkuk it still seems to be extremely remote and far, far away from Waterville, Maine, or Escanaba.

A visitor from Europe remarked the other day how invisible our two wars are in the daily life of this nation. The war is seldom front-page news, neither in the print media nor on TV. It seldom comes up in conversations among friends and neighbors. Walking

in any major American city, a tourist would not necessarily notice that he finds himself in a country at war.

And indeed that is true. Earlier this year, as the presidential elections started to heat up, the war was one of the major campaign themes. As the race continued, it took a back seat to other topics, and it may not be wrong to say that the devastating economic downturn toward the end of the year concerned voters much more than any other issue, including the war.

I think a great deal has to do with the fact that nowadays we have a volunteer army. In other countries where the draft still exists -- in Europe for instance -- reactions to war and army service are much more fundamental. There it is everyone's issue. Here, if you don't want to get involved directly, don't volunteer to serve. Very few of us realize what an enormous difference volunteer service makes in a nation's fundamental involvement in a war.

I thought much about war when I spent Armistice Day, now known in the United States as Veterans Day and in the British Commonwealth as Remembrance Day, in Canada earlier this year. First I noticed that most people in restaurants, theaters and shops wore poppies on their lapels. I bought one for myself at the hotel desk and wore it in memory of all the people I know who lost their lives in wars during my lifetime. Then, one morning, I sat across a table from an old man decked out in his Sunday best, one side of his dark suit covered with war decorations. He had breakfast quietly all by himself, but everyone in the dining room took note of him and honored in him all the men and women who had fought with him in wars long ago.

And so, on New Year's Eve, I devote my thoughts and wishes to the American men and women who are away from home fighting our wars. Knowing the unspeakable horrors of war times, I abhor all violence and detest war. But I admire and am deeply grateful to those who fight with valor and commitment when their country calls them. My thoughts are with them today while I pray that a time may come when the gates of the temple of Janus may be closed forever.

This column was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette mlive.com/kalamazoo