



British poster from Second World War by unknown artist, October 1943. Chinese text reads, “This is the only war, regardless of where the British war is, that is determined to defeat the abusive forces of Japan.” Source: The National Archives (United Kingdom), via Wikimedia Commons.

# BEARING THE BURDEN

BY ALAN W. DOWD

“It’s important to make sure our alliances are as strong as they possibly can be,” a presidential candidate declared not long ago. He promised to “work with our European friends” and explained that “building a durable peace will require strong alliances.”<sup>1</sup>

Striking a similar theme, another candidate promised “to work in concert with our allies,” criticized “unilateral action,” vowed “to rebuild and construct the alliances and partnerships necessary to meet common challenges,” and warned that America “should not go it alone.”<sup>2</sup>

Both candidates would become president, by the way. Despite the convergence of their pre-presidential promises and the divergence of their policies once in office, both President George W. Bush and President

Barack Obama left key U.S. allies disenchanted, disappointed, and distressed.

Like every president since World War II, Bush and Obama learned that the United States must sometimes go it alone, lack of allied participation is not necessarily the result of U.S. diplomatic failure, and allies are hard to come by when the bullets start flying. However, that doesn’t mean allies are unimportant. With the Middle East on fire, Europe on edge, Russia on the march, and China on the rise, America’s interlocking

system of alliances is more important than at any time since the beginning of the Cold War.

## OUR SO-CALLED COALITION

Much has been made about the number of allies that joined the fight against ISIS. “Obama Enlists Nine Allies to Help in the Battle against ISIS,” a *New York Times* headline sneered in 2014. *Newsweek* jabbed, “A broad-based coalition?” *The New Yorker* mocked “Obama’s Coalition of the Willing and Unable.” After reporting that “five Arab nations” would



contribute to the effort, the BBC quizzically noted, “It’s not clear what roles they are actually filling.”

If the stakes weren’t so high, one could forgive Obama’s critics for enjoying a measure of *schadenfreude*. After all, he peppered his speeches with references to the “lackluster diplomatic efforts” of the Bush administration, and he vowed “to garner the clear support and participation of others.”

That’s easier said than done. Underscoring U.S. frustration with the halfhearted participation of many allies, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter described America’s partners in the counter-ISIS campaign as “our so-called coalition.”<sup>3</sup> A glance at allied contributions in Iraq and Syria explains Carter’s frustration.

From August 8, 2014, through August 22, 2016, coalition air forces conducted 14,602 strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. conducted 11,239 of those airstrikes. That’s 77 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Another way to look at the coalition is to tally up its membership. Obama emphasized that he “mobilized 65 countries to go after ISIL.” However, only a fraction of that number have, in the Pentagon’s words, “participated” in airstrikes: Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE. That’s just 12 countries, and even that figure is a bit deceptive. Only six countries have participated in airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, but again, that figure is also a bit deceptive. Canada ended its participation in the air campaign in February 2016. Even claiming that five allies

are contributing to airstrikes is disingenuous: “The Arab allies, who with great fanfare sent warplanes on the initial missions,” *The New York Times* explains, “have largely vanished from the campaign.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Britain, France, and the Netherlands account for 70 percent of non-U.S. airstrikes.<sup>6</sup>

That data-point underscores that some allies are contributing. As of late August, France had conducted 789 airstrikes against ISIS targets—25 percent of non-U.S. airstrikes.<sup>7</sup> The aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* has served as the command center for the naval task force targeting ISIS. In addition, French commandos are fighting ISIS on the ground in Libya. Britain has conducted 927 airstrikes against ISIS targets—second only to the U.S. Turkey has sent ground troops, tanks, and fighter-bombers into Syria. Denmark has sent fighter-bombers, transport planes, and commandos to fight ISIS.<sup>8</sup> Italy has deployed strike aircraft, midair refuelers, and troops to protect engineers at the Mosul Dam.<sup>9</sup>

## HEAVY LIFTING

What’s happening—or more accurately, not happening—inside the counter-ISIS coalition reflects the way coalition warfare has looked in the post-World War II era. Again, the numbers tell the story:

During NATO’s 2011 intervention in Libya, the U.S. conducted 80 percent of the air-refueling and intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance missions. A post-mission assessment concludes that NATO “depended upon the United States for nearly all of its

suppression of enemy air-defense missions as well as combat search and rescue.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a U.S. drone hit Muammar Gaddafi’s convoy, leading to the elimination of Libya’s dictator.<sup>11</sup>

In the initial phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. accounted for some 80 percent of allied forces deployed in the CENTCOM region. Only the U.S., Britain, Australia, and Poland took part in the initial invasion.<sup>12</sup>

At the peak of coalition operations in Afghanistan, the United States accounted for 71 percent of forces deployed.<sup>13</sup>

During the Kosovo war, NATO flew 38,004 sorties; the U.S. Air Force flew 30,018 of those sorties (79 percent).<sup>14</sup>

In the initial phase of the humanitarian mission in Somalia, the U.S. accounted for 25,400 of the 38,000 deployed forces (67 percent) and the entire enabling force.<sup>15</sup>

In Desert Storm, the U.S. contributed 80 percent of the combat aircraft and 72 percent of forces deployed.<sup>16</sup>

During the Korean War, the U.S. accounted for 88 percent of non-ROK combat forces.<sup>17</sup>

In short, less-than-fulsome allied participation is nothing new, and media mantras notwithstanding, this condition doesn’t seem to be a function of who sits in the Oval Office.

Consider the past 16 years.



U.S. allies bristled at Bush's insistence that "Every nation... has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."<sup>18</sup> UN types were bothered by his blunt declaration that "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country."<sup>19</sup> By employing the black-and-white rhetoric of World War II and consigning the likes of North Korea and Iran to "an axis of evil," Bush offended the postmodern sensibilities of 21st-century Europe. All of this explains why, according to the multilateralist narrative, Bush couldn't win the UN's blessing, why France and Germany stayed on the sidelines during Iraq, why, as Candidate Obama put it, America didn't have "the resources or the allies to do everything that we should be doing."<sup>20</sup>

Obama, on the other hand, always spoke the nuanced language of multilateralism, endeavored to disengage from Afghanistan and Iraq, tried something called "leading from behind" in Libya, avoided intervening in Syria until the eleventh hour, and promised the likes of Iran and North Korea to "extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."<sup>21</sup> Yet the multilateral cavalry never really materialized, as evidence by "our so-called coalition" in Iraq and Syria.

Perhaps this is simply a reflection of the world as it is. No matter how hard presidents try to share the burden, America does the heavy lifting of international security. It was true during the with-us-or-against-us Bush administration; it was true during the lead-from-behind Obama administration; it will be true during the next administration. As a blue-ribbon commission predicted in 1999, "The United States will increasingly

find itself wishing to form coalitions but increasingly unable to find partners willing and able to carry out combined military operations."<sup>22</sup> Whether this is an outgrowth of Europe's fecklessness, the UN's systemic inadequacies, or a kind of engagement atrophy among America's allies after decades of deferring to Washington, the heavy burden doesn't change.

One factor Americans overlook in the disparity between U.S. and allied contributions is the sheer size of the United States. The U.S. has a GDP of \$18 trillion, a population of 321 million and, owing to its victories in World War II and the Cold War, a global constellation of military outposts.

Compare those figures with America's closest allies: Japan's GDP is \$4.8 trillion, its population 126 million; Germany's GDP is \$3.8 trillion, its population 80 million; Britain's GDP is \$2.7 trillion, its population 64 million; France's GDP is \$2.65 trillion, its population 66 million; Italy's GDP is \$2.1 trillion, its population 61 million; South Korea's GDP is \$1.85 trillion, its population 49 million; Canada's GDP is \$1.6 trillion, its population 35 million; Australia's GDP is \$1.4 trillion, its population 22 million. None of these nations have the global reach of the United States. In fact, owing to their defeat in World War II, some are constrained from projecting military power. Yet many of them really do "punch above their weight," as Obama was fond of saying.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, some allies can do more. Hence, NATO is asking each member to devote at least 2 percent of GDP to defense. China's aggressive actions are goading America's Pacific partners to move in a similar

direction. However, expecting our allies to contribute to international security to the same degree as the United States seems unreasonable.

## THE MYTH OF MULTILATERALISM

Whatever the cause, low or non-existent allied support is not proof of the wrongness of a policy. After all, upon France's surrender in June 1940 and until America's entry in the war in December 1941, Churchill stood virtually alone against Nazi Germany. Should he have waited for an insular America or a supine League of Nations?

Closer to our time, President Ronald Reagan launched unilateral military operations in Libya and Grenada, and he was right to do so, as was Obama in ordering SEAL Team 6 to eliminate Osama bin Laden and in authorizing the initial counterstrikes against ISIS. Whenever possible, the U.S. should work in conjunction with partners, but when necessary it must act alone. On those rare occasions when it does, unilateral action on the part of the U.S. generally serves the wider interests of the international community, as it did in the bin Laden raid, airstrikes against ISIS, and Reagan's handling of Libya and Grenada.

Still, many Americans believe that multilateral efforts are innately more legitimate and/or more likely to succeed than unilateral efforts. Yet the U.S. was part of the UN-blessed multilateral coalitions in Lebanon in 1983, Somalia in 1993, and Libya in 2011. All three well-intentioned missions turned into disasters. Thirty-seven countries contributed police, peacekeepers, and/or observers to the laughably misnamed UN



Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which stood aside, Pilate-like, as the Serbs mangled Bosnia in the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup> The low point came when Serbian militia surrounded UNPROFOR's "safe haven" in Srebrenica and murdered 7,000 Bosnian-Muslim men. Neither multi-lateral participation nor UN authorization saved them.

As to the legitimacy of U.S. military action, that is determined by the Constitution—not the UN or CNN.

Given the fact that many allies lack the will or the capabilities (or both) to assist, it's unfair to criticize Washington for acting unilaterally at times—or for taking the lead most of the time. Certain things simply won't get done in the world without Washington leading the way. As President George H.W. Bush observed, "The U.S. alone cannot right the world's wrongs. But we also know that some crises in the world cannot be resolved without American involvement and that American involvement is often the catalyst for broader involvement in the community of nations."<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, after the Indian Ocean tsunami, Washington promptly dispatched swarms of helicopters and cargo planes to deliver food and medicine; an armada of warships, many capable of producing fresh water; and 15,000 troops to assist in recovery and rescue. Just nine days after the disaster, the U.S. had already delivered 610,000 pounds of water, food, and supplies.<sup>26</sup>

When an Ebola outbreak in West Africa threatened to mushroom into a pandemic, America's military raced to the region to set up mobile labs and treatment facilities; deliver



Allies Day, May 1917 by Childe Hassam, 1917. Source: National Gallery of Art.

medicine and aid; and smother the spread of the killer virus.

When ISIS was on the verge of wiping out Iraq's entire Yazidi minority, U.S. warplanes dropped bombs to halt the ISIS blitzkrieg and pallets of food to help the friendless Yazidis.

In each instance, America's allies helped. But in each instance, the U.S. served as the catalyst.

Given the headaches of coalition warfare, one could forgive Washington if it simply chose to go it alone.

In 1943, for example, 450,000 Allied troops squared-off against perhaps as few as 230,000 Axis troops encamped on the island of Sicily.<sup>27</sup> In his history of World War II, Gerhard Weinberg details how the Allies made "horrendous errors" as a result of poor coordination.<sup>28</sup> The Allies allowed the Axis to hold the island for over a month, at which time Germany evacuated the bulk of its army onto the Italian mainland. By the end of the

Sicily campaign, American and British commanders (Patton and Montgomery) were at each other's throats. "Seldom in war has a major operation been undertaken in such a fog of indecision, confusion and conflicting plans," General Omar Bradley would later say.<sup>29</sup>

During NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo, Washington's initial target list was whittled down by NATO's less-hawkish members. Greece and Italy called for a bombing pause. Germany dismissed Britain's suggestion of a ground invasion. Hungary vetoed the use of its territory for a ground assault. Greece temporized about allowing U.S. troop carriers to land. And again, British and American commanders—this time it was U.S. General Wes Clark and British General Michael Jackson—came to verbal blows. When Clark ordered Jackson to block the Russian military from seizing Pristina Airport, the British general retorted, "I'm not going to start World War III for you."<sup>30</sup> The result of such disputes was a war that



took weeks rather than days, and a peace that was almost lost.

By the time the NATO allies intervened in Afghanistan, they still hadn't learned how to wage war by committee: Germany, Italy, and Spain avoided Afghanistan's restive south. Denmark refused requests for additional fighter-bombers. Italy wouldn't permit its fighter-bombers to carry bombs.<sup>31</sup> German forces were required to shout warnings to enemy forces—in three languages—before opening fire.<sup>32</sup>

"There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies," Churchill observed, "and that is fighting without them." After fighting Hitler alone, he knew from experience the benefits of having allies. And after suffering the headaches of Sicily, Normandy, Potsdam, and NATO's early years, he knew the burdens of having allies.

## THE MYTH OF UNILATERALISM

The American people's wariness of alliances is part of their DNA. "It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world," President George Washington explained, using his farewell address to caution against "foreign alliances, attachments and intrigues."<sup>33</sup>

Yet the U.S. pursued alliances from the very beginning: The nascent American Republic sought French assistance against the British. Before his presidency, Thomas Jefferson proposed a U.S.-European coalition "to compel the piratical states to perpetual peace."<sup>34</sup> But as historian Gerard Gawalt explains, "Jefferson's plan for an international coalition foundered on the shoals of indifference."<sup>35</sup>

Following Washington's counsel, President Woodrow Wilson insisted that the U.S. maintain its independence as an "Associated Power," bluntly declaring, "We have no allies."<sup>36</sup>

World War II marked a dramatic change for America. In 1940, FDR opened the "arsenal of democracy" to help Churchill fend off the Nazis. In early 1941, FDR's envoy to Britain, Harry Hopkins, rose during a dinner with Churchill and quoted from the Book of Ruth: "Whither thou goest I will go, and whither thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," he declared, adding, "even to the end." Churchill wept openly.<sup>37</sup> Later that year, Churchill and FDR crafted the Atlantic Charter, committing their nations to a liberal international order and the defeat of militarism. Ever since, America and Britain have stood together, fought together, and bled together.

After the war, U.S. presidents jettisoned General Washington's advice and committed the U.S. to a vast network of alliances: NATO, SEATO, ANZUS, bilateral guarantees for South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, the Rio Pact for the Americas.<sup>38</sup> As President John F. Kennedy reminded the America of 1963 (and re-reminds us today), "We put ourselves, by our own will and by necessity, into defensive alliances with countries all around the globe."<sup>39</sup>

Far from diluting American power or diminishing American security, these alliances enhanced both. The postwar alliance system created lines of defense well beyond America's shores, buttressed the liberal international order envisioned by the Atlantic Charter, served

as force multipliers for the U.S. military, deterred Moscow and thus prevented great-power war, and generated sources of support—moral, political, material, diplomatic—for American leadership. All of this holds true today.

"America's great power has been more than tolerated," Robert Kagan observes. "Other nations have abetted it, encouraged it, joined it, and with surprising frequency legitimated it in multilateral institutions like NATO and the UN, as well as in less formal coalitions."<sup>40</sup>

Those "less formal coalitions" have proven more effective than the UN. Yet American presidents keep trying to make the UN work, further underscoring Washington's preference for partnerships.

President Harry Truman turned to the UN to defend South Korea. The only reason it worked was Moscow's short-sighted decision to boycott a meeting of the Security Council. Even then, 96 percent of the troops under "United Nations Command" came from South Korea or the United States.<sup>41</sup>

Reagan answered the UN's call for peacekeepers in Lebanon, as did Bush 41 in Somalia. The sacrifice of hundreds of Americans in Beirut and dozens in Mogadishu proved to be in vain.

Bush 41 used the UN to build a coalition to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, but that proved to be an aberration of the immediate post-Cold War period.

President Bill Clinton's determination to enforce UN resolutions related to Iraq's WMD program found only one supporter inside the UN Security



Council: Britain. The rest of the Security Council shrugged, so the U.S. and Britain enforced the resolutions alone. Clinton's desire for international authorization to protect Kosovo found more intransigence at the UN, so Clinton used NATO to provide cover for the mission.

When Bush 43 went to the UN for help disarming Iraq, it took the Security Council eight weeks to agree on a resolution requiring Iraq to comply with existing resolutions. Worse, when Britain and the U.S. returned to the UN for authorization to bring Iraq into compliance, French President Jacques Chirac blocked his erstwhile allies. As a sovereign nation, France should never be expected to fall in line. But as an ally, France should never act like an adversary, which is what Chirac did before the Iraq War. Not only did he vow to veto the use-of-force resolution, he dispatched his foreign minister on a global tour to galvanize opposition against Washington.<sup>42</sup>

Although Bush 43 didn't win UN approval, he most assuredly did not "go it alone" in Iraq. In fact, 37 nations "furnished a total of around 150,000 ground forces from the start of the operation through July 2009," according to the U.S. Army.<sup>43</sup> At the height of their deployments, Britain had 46,000 troops in Iraq; South Korea 3,600; Italy 2,600; Poland 2,400. After four years of war, 20 countries still had troops in Iraq. More than 100,000 British troops, 20,000 South Korean troops, 13,900 Polish troops, 10,000 Georgian troops, and 6,100 Japanese troops cycled through Iraq. They made real contributions: 1,952 coalition troops were wounded and 322 were killed. We can debate the prudence of invading Iraq; we

can debate the thoroughness of postwar planning; but we cannot debate whether it was a multilateral effort.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan was created in 2001, less than a year into the Bush presidency. By 2007, three dozen nations were contributing troops to ISAF.<sup>44</sup> Again, they made real contributions to the Sisyphean mission: 455 Britons, 158 Canadians, 86 French, 54 Germans, 48 Italians, 43 Danes, 41 Australians, 40 Poles, and dozens of others have died in Afghanistan. These numbers pale in comparison to the price our Afghan allies have paid: 20,729 Afghan troops were killed between 2001 and 2015.<sup>45</sup>

Like his predecessor in Iraq, Obama tried to cajole the Security Council into action in Syria, but Russia stonewalled.<sup>46</sup> And so, like his predecessor in Iraq, Obama built a coalition of the willing to fight ISIS without UN authorization.

## MISERY LOVES COMPANY

Donald Trump drew heavy criticism for suggesting he would come to the defense of NATO members under attack—an iron-clad requirement of the North Atlantic Treaty—only if they had "fulfilled their obligations to us." Such a suggestion deserved every bit of criticism it received. Yet it pays to recall that this chill wind in America's approach to allies began blowing during the Obama administration.

It was the Obama administration that offloaded Guantanamo detainees onto the British colony of Bermuda, without consulting Britain. It was the Obama administration that put a time limit on America's commitment to NATO in Libya.<sup>47</sup> It was the

Obama administration that left Poland and the Czech Republic out on a limb by unilaterally reversing NATO's missile-defense plans.<sup>48</sup> It was the Obama administration that invoiced Paris after the French military requested help in Mali.<sup>49</sup> It was the Obama administration's disengagement from the Middle East—the withdrawal from Iraq, the hands-off approach to Syria's civil war, the erased "red line"—that alarmed allies in Europe, Israel, Turkey, and Jordan. It was the Obama administration that employed phrases like "nation-building here at home" and "leading from behind" to encourage America's turn inward.

Like a pendulum, U.S. foreign policy was bound to swing back from the hyperactivity of the immediate post-9/11 era. Indeed, Pew polling reveals that 52 percent of the American people say the United States "should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own"—up from 30 percent in 2002.

However, it seems Obama allowed the pendulum to swing too far in the opposite direction. Along the way, he failed to tend to America's alliance system. Thus, his successor will need to rebuild the trust of old friends, while reminding the American people about the benefits of, and need for, alliances.

The NATO alliance, for instance, is a readymade structure where Washington can build political consensus and military coalitions. In the post-Cold War era, these alliances within the alliance have helped the U.S. defend Saudi Arabia, liberate Kuwait, protect Kosovo, topple the Taliban, remove Iraq's repeat-offender regime, and



fight pirates, al Qaeda, and ISIS. As several former NATO commanders conclude, “There is no hope for the U.S. to sustain its role as the world’s sole super-power without the Europeans as allies.”<sup>50</sup> The generals know what the politicians ignore: Defending the global commons, ensuring the free flow of goods and oil, preserving a liberal international order, responding to natural disasters and manmade chaos, protecting our interests and our civilization—these missions depend on NATO infrastructure in places like Lakenheath, Ramstein, Morón, Aviano, and Incirlik.

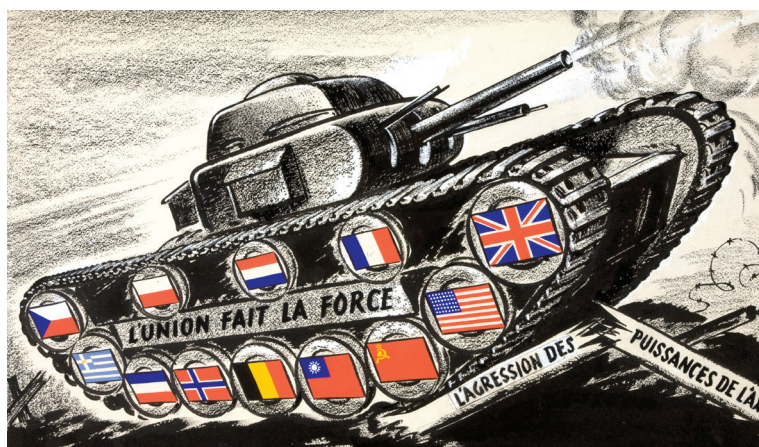
Moreover, we should not forget that some allies are sharing the burden, as evidenced by the British and French in Iraq, Syria, and Libya; the Kurds in Iraq; the Japanese, Australians, and South Koreans in the Asia-Pacific; the Poles, British, Canadians, and Germans in Eastern Europe; the 39 nations with troops still in Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup>

Waging and deterring war, like misery, loves company. The good news is that America—perhaps in spite of itself—has plenty of company.

## A COMMUNITY OF NATIONS

As to alliances and the tapestry of scripture, we must make a distinction between today’s alliances and those cautioned against in the Bible: In most cases, America and its allies share deeply held values—a commitment to liberal democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedom.

Conversely, God’s people, as described in scripture, had few, if any, allies that shared their values, which explains the Bible’s critical view of alliances (see Exodus 23 and 34, 2 Chronicles



British poster from Second World War by unknown artist, May 1940. French text on the tank reads, “Unity makes strength”, and the text on the broken pole reads, “Aggression of the Axis Powers”. Source: The National Archives (United Kingdom), via Wikimedia Commons.

20). God’s consistent message to His people was (and is) to rely on Him for protection and peace. Even so, the Lord allowed for treaties and alliances on occasion: Abraham and Isaac made treaties to protect their interests and to address threats posed by neighboring peoples (Genesis 21 and 26). Joshua made treaties with neighbors, and he honored those treaties despite deceptive dealings on the part of his treaty partners (Joshua 9). Importantly, God stood by Joshua when he followed through on Israel’s security guarantee to Gibeon (Joshua 10).

Moreover, the 12 tribes of Israel were, in essence, an alliance. Yes, since each tribe traced its lineage back to sons of a distant common father, the tribes could call themselves a nation. However, the term “tribe”—defined as “a social group comprising numerous families, clans, or generations”—suggests that the differences between them were significant enough to make each tribe unique and distinct. After many generations, familial connections were diluted. What truly united this alliance of 12 tribes were shared values—a common code of behavior. In fact, as God changed Jacob’s

name to Israel, He said, “A community of nations will come from you” (Genesis 35).

What else is America’s alliance system, if not “a community of nations”?

As to the uneven burden-sharing characteristic of America and its allies, which frustrates so many taxpayers and politicians, this can be traced to something Jesus explained. “From everyone who has been given much,” He said, “much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

Americans are not perfect, but they are generally guided by that admonition. This is the reason why Pope Pius XII, after the Axis war on civilization, concluded, “The American people have a genius for great and unselfish deeds; into the hands of America, God has placed an afflicted mankind.”<sup>52</sup> It’s why Pope Benedict XVI, in the midst of the jihadist war on civilization, used then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to deliver a message to America’s military in 2013: “Thank you for helping to protect the world.”<sup>53</sup>



As civilization's first-responder and last line of defense, that's what America does. Given how much we Americans have been given and entrusted with, why would heaven not expect more of us than of our allies? **P**

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