

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

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TRENCH WARFARE IN WASHINGTON

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One hundred years ago in France, trench warfare defined how military adversaries engaged one another on the battlefield. Two sides, entrenched in the relative safety of reinforced dugouts, both afraid to go “over the top” for fear of enemy machinegun fire. Both scared to even pop their heads above the trench for fear of getting a sniper’s bullet between the eyes.

That relative safety, however, had its own dangers -- exposure to harsh elements, not to mention shelling and poison gas. Personal survival in the trenches depended on doing as little as possible, on not engaging the enemy unless forced to by their officers. The conflict that was ballyhooed as “the war to end all wars” and waged to “make the world safe for democracy” became a war of attrition, not so much by design as by default.

In the end, the side that was better able to sustain the human and material losses prevailed. Thus, there was no real victory, just an armistice that allowed both armies to go home and mourn their dead. In addition, the vanquished faced crippling reparations. Twenty years later, Europe again was embroiled in war, this time even more destructive, with a twisted cruelty and civilian atrocities on a scale unseen in human history.

Today we witness trench warfare in Washington with both political parties dug in the relative safety of an election process that strongly favors incumbents. Both are afraid to go “over the top” -- to muster the courage to find ways to end the gridlock -- for fear of abandonment by their own base constituency and attack by their rivals. Or getting a political bullet between the eyes.

Both parties deploy their own snipers: political strategists, pollsters, party operatives, cable-TV attack dogs. Their ammunition is a rhetoric intended to kill or disable: *reign of terror, class warfare, fat cats, culture war, womanizer, not a real American, appeaser, death panels, nonbeliever in American exceptionalism, fish rots from the head, doesn't pass the smell test*. Even more telling, *battleground states, target your enemies, don't retreat: reload*. And, in far too many instances, outright lies.

In the House of Representatives, one party presents a budget – a battle plan -- and gets it approved along a largely party-line vote. In the Senate, one party citing legislation passed last year insists it has a budget, the other party says that it does not. Nothing happens. The House’s battle plan is thrown aside. Both sides are resigned to fighting in the trenches, not by design but by default.

In this Washington trench warfare, the poison gas of co-dependency ties the voters with entitlement benefits they cannot do without to the politicians who promote those entitlements in order to get re-elected. Never mind the cost, the unfunded liability. Shelling in this beltway battlefield involves the use of regulatory powers and the tax code to protect one side's constituents and hammer the other's.

One deeply entrenched party adamantly insists on limited government and tries to cut expenditures, the other just as deeply entrenched and just as committed resists those cuts because they would balance the budget on the backs of the poor and elderly. One party stands for liberty, the other holds fast to security, much as in WWI where one side defended democracy, the other the fatherland.

Trench warfare continues year after year, and for all intents and purposes has become the "new normal" in Washington. Both sides in desperation agree to continuing resolutions in order to avoid a complete shutdown of government services. Nonetheless, those resolutions assure the continuation of the usual partisan bickering – sniping -- about the role and scope of the federal government because today those resolutions mean a continuation of big government.

Having learned to keep their heads down and hold on to the old battle plan, the old men in the trenches get even older and less inclined to bring an end to trench warfare. Truth to tell, it's working for them. It keeps them and their supporting troops in office.

As for crippling reparations – payment for the deferred cost of trench warfare -- consider the public debt that the Me Generation is passing along to future generations.

Trench warfare will end in November or, more likely, go on for another two to four years. Much depends on whether those old men are willing to rally their troops by sticking their own heads above the trenches. On whether there are enough difference-making foot soldiers left in Washington who later it can be said "more than self, their country loved."

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