The long struggle against Eritrea continues to spread famine.

Ethiopia pays price for war

By Thomas L. Kirkpatrick

On May 12 Ethiopia opened its latest offensive against its northern neighbor Eritrea, an assault that quickly reclaimed some of the territory lost along their ill-defined common border in May 1998.

The new onslaught reignited battles on three fronts: around the towns of Badme in the west, Zalambesa in the central highlands, and Bure in the east. Ethiopia promised a speedy end to the conflict this time. They had set a tentative victory date for May 24.

The disputes date back to 1962, when Eritrea's Red Sea ports of Assab and Massawa caught the eye Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie. The emperor declared Eritrea's parliament in Asmara null and void, then claimed the country for his own. Eritrea reacted in kind, and the fight for independence was on.

The battle outlasted the remaining 12 years of Selassie's reign, which ended in coup, then stretched into the 14-year rule of his strongman successor, Mengistu Haile Miriam. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) finally gained control of their home turf, a turn of events that sent Mengistu out of Ethiopia into Zimbabwean exile and set the stage for the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE).

In accordance with a U.N.-monitored referendum held in 1993, the PGE yielded to a duly elected government completely independent of Ethiopia. Relations between the new administration in Asmara and shifting political forces in Addis Ababa remained at a relative standoff until the ever-present border skirmishes erupted into a full-scale conflagration in 1998.

The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, famously compared to the trench warfare of World War I, has since claimed the lives of 70,000 combatants. Reports from the front tell the story of almost incomprehensible slaughter amid a disagreement so vitriolic that it has defied all diplomatic initiatives by the Organization of African Unity, the European Union and the UN Security Council. The two nations have little of the ethnic and religious differences characteristic of these types of conflicts worldwide in recent years, and much analysis has centered on cartographers' uncertainty. Just where does Ethiopia end and Eritrea begin?



PIER PAOLO CITO/ Associated Press

Ethiopian soldiers celebrated the liberation of the town of Zalambesa on Friday.

Addis Ababa's latest initiative demonstrates an all-out resolve to finally bend the will of a nation it outnumbers in population by more than 14 to 1, but has yet to subjugate. The history of conflict has taught Ethiopia the error of Haile Selassie's ways.

Officially, Ethiopia has no quarrel with Eritrean independence. The real issue pertains to Asmara's failure to grant Ethiopia access to the ports on the Red Sea and a lopsided trade policy that shuts out Ethiopian goods while guaranteeing the free-flow of inventory headed south.

Ethiopia's decision to play its Eritrea card with a vengeance after a 10-month break in the fighting attests to the landlocked nation's desperate circumstances. Drought-induced food shortages throughout the Horn of Africa strike Ethiopia the hardest, with 8 million people deemed at risk of famine. Reports of food relief diverted to military purposes promise an even larger human disaster than expected. In the domestic battle for political supremacy, the opposition to the ruling government isn't strong enough to make much of a difference. Lawlessness in the southeast and frequent rebel attacks mounted from Somalia and Sudan add to the uncertainty. A number of international agencies have pulled their staffs out of the country rather than have them face kidnapping for ransom, or worse.

The BBC quotes estimates of $1 million per day spent by each country since going to war in May 1998, money channeled into the pockets of arms suppliers in Bulgaria, China, Italy, France and Russia. The stockpiling of weapons over a two-year period has elevated hostilities from the limits of trench warfare to artillery battles and air combat. In the perverse calculus applied across most of Africa today, Ethiopia's leadership counts on rallying the people around the banner of a war they can't afford as the best means of maintaining a grip on power.

Addis Ababa has Eritrea's forces on the run at the moment, but history shows that this 38-year conflict yields no permanent victories, for combatants and peacemakers alike. May 24 has come and gone and the war continues to spread as steadily as the blight of famine.

Asmara will stage a comeback, and the true cost of battle will be measured in the numbers felled by hostile fire at the front and the mounting casualties brought down by hunger at home.

Thomas L. Kirkpatrick writes frequently for the Commentary Page.

Memorial Day: Listen to those whose words are often forgotten

By Elizabeth McGinley

One thousand a day.

A statistic I read a few weeks ago keeps echoing in my mind this Memorial Day: Veterans of World War II, most now in their 70s and 80s, are dying at the rate of about 1,000 a day. Having seen a United States flag spread over the coffins of my father, father-in-law and an uncle in the past several years, I have no trouble believing it. But the numbers don't tell the complete story: We're also losing a generation of women — uncounted, unacknowledged women who have their own war stories to tell. If we'll listen.

Some stories, like a few veterans' escapades, might be funny: A dear friend and mentor once told me that, during the early days of WWII, when she was about 16, she and her best friend decided to spend their summer vacation "doing their bit for the boys overseas." As I remember the story, they were hired by a Philadelphia factory that made precision optics for the military. But their teenage efforts were less than precise. "Think Lucy and Ethel," said my friend, "but somehow we got through that first shift."

At closing time, the forewoman met my friend and her comrade in chaos at the punch clock. "Thank you, girls, you've done enough," my friend recalled the forewoman saying as she handed them their day's wages — and pink slips.

Other women's stories would be of loss, betrayal, loyalty and courage. Through the years, my mother rarely discussed the politics of the war, but she dropped clues about the feelings it evoked — the sadness she and other friends experienced when spouses, brothers, cousins or friends never returned. A few who returned were, as she put it, "never the same after the war."

And not all women waited patiently. I overheard Mom talking once about an acquaintance whose marriage was annulled when her soldier husband discovered that it was his insurance policy that had won her heart. But most women, good women, my mother made clear, waited. Twenty-five years after V-J Day, she explained one lively, attractive friend's single status to me: "She was engaged once, but he died in the war."

My mother talked about the war in generalities, saying "it was hard on people," never "it was hard on me." Her reticence was matched only by my father's. He preferred to concentrate on the present, keeping most of his war memories, funny or painful, to himself. But he did honor those memories and the part my mother played in them. Shortly before his death last year, I found a box of V-mail letters he had carefully saved from his wartime Navy days in New Guinea. My mother, his fiancee then, wrote one of these 4-by-5-inch letters to Dad nearly every day. Her notes were cheerful, sometimes starting with a breezy, "Hi, Sailor." They centered on family, church and her efforts on the home front — knitting sweaters for the Red Cross, making novenas for peace, buying War Bonds. She usually closed with an admonition to "be good and say your prayers."

But the ending of one letter, written in early January 1944, helped me understand better why she and other women of that era didn't dwell on their war stories. She explained that she had gone to a friend's house for a Christmas party ("there were 11 girls and one man — wouldn't you have liked to be the one?"). A friend had reminded her how "her Jim" had surprised her under the mistletoe. She wrote, "I forgot for a moment and said that it was last year. But Catherine corrected me and said it had been two Christmases ago .... See? That's how we'll forget these years apart when you get back. Must be getting sentimental talking that way. It's the radio playing South Sea island music."

Women served, too.
They lost, suffered and waited.
Remember them, too, this day.

Today, many will honor our war dead with church services, parades or a silent prayer. They deserve our tribute. Maybe later, because life goes on — and in part our veterans fought so it would — we'll head for the pool or a party, or, take advantage of a red-hot, white-and-blue sale. But as evening falls and we put away the flags — if we've bothered to put them out — perhaps we should remember those who can still remember what WWII felt like. Why not ask your mother, grandmother, aunt, great aunt or the maiden lady down the street to share her story? Do it, before that generation fades away, and only statistics, yellowed letters, and regret remain.

Elizabeth McGinley lives and writes in Philadelphia.

Tomorrow: The Mayor and 40,000 cars; Religion and politics in the U.S.; E-incivility.

A marriage and a partnership: Two Reagans and a revolution

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

"My life didn't begin until I met Ronnie," Nancy Reagan once said of the nation's 40th president.

"I can't imagine life without her," Ronald Reagan said of his wife.

Sandwiched in between these two quotations was a partnership singular in the history of the presidency. While other presidential couples may have been as close, the Reagans, whether acting separately or together, always came across as parts of a single unit. It was in their marriage that they invested the bulk of their energies and through it that they derived much of their identities. Now in its 48th year, their partnership stands as one of their most enduring achievements.

Ronald Reagan meant it when he said that he felt that he and Nancy were like one human being. Other presidents used the *we* form to describe the aspirations and attainments of their administrations; when Reagan employed it, he usually had only two people in mind.

The persona that became Ronald and Nancy Reagan emerged from hardships they knew as children.

The son of an alcoholic father and a kindly but strong-willed mother, Ronald Reagan learned how to withdraw from conflict. "I lived in a world of pretend," he would say. Reagan let his imagination — in his thoughts and in the books he devoured — create for him a world completely divorced from what he observed or experienced. He learned to control his emotions and managed to hide his inner feelings.

Couples

Standout pairs who embody the 20th century

Another thing he managed to conceal was a burning ambition. He recalled that, in the middle of Illinois of the 1930s, he could not go around saying, "I want to be an actor." Yet when he designed bookplates for a high school printing class, one depicted the gates to a Hollywood studio, while the other included a director's chair and a movie camera.

Reagan's genial nature, clean-cut American demeanor and reputation for being reliable and well-disciplined landed him many parts, including the presidency, which one Reagan biographer called "the role of a lifetime." In a town and an industry filled with prima donnas, Reagan was the kind of fellow others instinctively wanted to help. One who did was Nancy Davis.



The daughter of a divorced actress, Nancy spent her early years with relatives. She did not experience the stability she observed in the family lives of her playmates until she was 8, when she went to live with her mother and new stepfather, Chicago neurosurgeon Loyal Davis, who eventually adopted her. Security within a loving relationship became her ambition.

That came her way when her agent sent her to see the charismatic young president of the Screen Actors Guild. Nancy was concerned that she might be mistaken for another actress who harbored communist sympathies and might be blacklisted. Offering his help, it was Reagan who found a protector.

In choosing a spouse, Reagan seems to have applied the same criteria later used to select principal aides: find the best people; let them do what they do best; don't interfere. As he rose from actor to G.E. spokesman to governor to president, his wife became his principal enforcer. She saw to it that his image, staff and schedule (the latter with the help of an astrologer) furthered his objectives.

If he saw only the good in people, she stood guard against bad apples, self-promoters and incompetents. If he made decisions based on instinct and ideology, she explored countervailing options and alternatives. She was one of the few willing to take the heat for a president said to have glided through the controversies of his administration in a suit of Teflon. Her primary venture into policy produced what remains the most effective campaign to reduce the demand for illegal and harmful drugs ever attempted.

As his wife looked out for his personal and political interests, Ronald Reagan, serenely and seemingly free from distraction, set about achieving the goals he had set for his presidency. He cut taxes, arrested the growth of government, rebuilt America's defenses, restored American confidence and brought down an evil empire — without, as Margaret Thatcher said, "firing a shot."

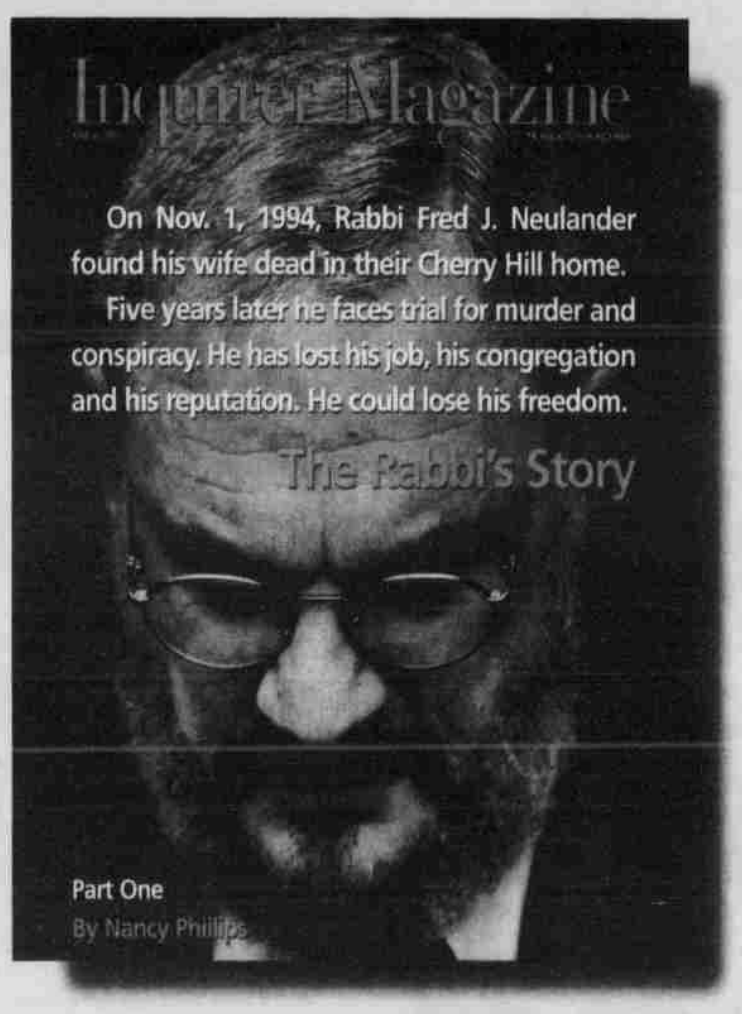
Actor Jimmy Stewart speculated that had Nancy rather than Jane Wyman been Ronald Reagan's first wife, he would never have gone into politics: "She would have seen to it that he got all the best parts.... won three or four Oscars and been a real star."

History remains grateful that never happened.

Alvin S. Felzenberg, visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, writes and lectures on the American presidency.

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