

UNTYING THE KNOT

by Fred Hobbs

Alexander the Great, who lived from 356 until 323 B.C., was the Macedonian general who conquered most of the known world. As Sarah Albee, writer and publisher primarily of children's books, points out in one of her blogs, "Alexander's empire included Persia, Syria, Phoenicia, Phrygia, Arabia, Egypt, most of the eastern Mediterranean coastline and a good part of northern India."

Alexander was not only a "first class" conqueror, but according to legend pretty good at finding answers and solving problems that occurred during the build up of his empire. As one story goes, Alexander stormed and tore apart the city of Gordium in Phrygia (wherever that was). In the process he encountered a carriage with a yoke strapped down with a large tightly tied knot, impossible to unravel.

A local oracle had predicted that whoever untied the knot would rule Asia. At least one version of the tale claims Alexander gave it the equivalent of an ancient college try with no success. Finally, in exasperation, he drew his sword and cut right through the knot. Ever since that time, the term "untying the Gordian knot" has been used as a symbol for successfully finding answers in order to solve difficult problems.

In ancient as well as in more contemporary times, untying the knot has been a major undertaking, especially for political and military leaders.

In World War II, two "knots" were bedeviling the Allied forces ... Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Two American generals, Eisenhower and McArthur, two presidents, Roosevelt and Truman and the legendary prime minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill were principals in the quest to find the answers to victory in that terrible conflict.

The marshalling of America's industrial might, the combination of "Yankee Ingenuity" and British grit and determination served as the symbolic sword to cut the knots that threatened the peace and security of the world at that time.

President Truman in particular faced two important "knotty" problems. Should the atomic bomb be used to end the stubborn resistance of Japan to surrender, thus ending the bloodshed? And in the Cold War days, how to solve the problem of the Russian/East German blockade of Berlin?

Truman found answers to both dilemmas, one with a heavy price of destruction and death for the Japanese, yet saving the lives of the many American men and women who would have had to continue to serve in combat in Japan. The other, the Berlin Airlift literally saving the lives of the men, women and children of that city who could have suffered from starvation, lack of coal to heat their homes and medicine to treat diseases and physical ailments.

Regrettably, the more recent conflicts ... Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan ... pose problems not fully solved even today. Unlike using Alexander's sword, finding answers to untie *those* knots eludes a simple solution.