

1) The Sack of Rome by the Visigoths, A.D. 410. Aided by rebellious slaves, Alaric I and the Visigoths rushed through a city gate unexpectedly. The three-day siege was the first time in centuries that Rome had been sacked and invaded, says Dameron, "and it was a massive political and psychological blow." Non-Christian Romans blamed the sacking on the abandonment of the traditional Roman gods.

The ultimate surprise there, adds Johns Hopkins University military historian Mary Habeck, "was that Rome fell, not that the city was attacked."



2) The Battle of Trenton, 1776. On Christmas night, Gen. George Washington crossed the ice-chilled Delaware River to lead some 2,400 Continental Army troops on an unexpected raid against German Hessian mercenaries garrisoned at Trenton, N.J. The Patriot forces caught the British-sponsored enemy completely off guard, says Brad King, executive director of Battleship Cove naval ship museum in Fall River, Mass. "The lasting effect was that the success raised rebel morale and proved that the most professional army in the West could be beaten."



3) The Battle of France, 1940. [Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations in 2007](#), Ernest R. May, a professor of history at Harvard University and author of *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France*, said that the Germans' "successful surprise attack" on France altered the way the world regarded France and the way that France regarded itself.

Before the Nazi campaign, May said, "almost everyone said that France had the strongest army in the world." But after Germany's victory, he continued, "almost everyone thought this had been an illusion. The French military was accused of a Maginot Line mentality, defeatism, cowardice. The Germans were taken to have been overwhelmingly superior militarily and to have had will to win which the French lacked. These became, and to some extent remain, articles of faith in France."

In drawing parallels between the Germans' victory and Sept. 11, May argued that in fact the French were stronger than the Germans, and the Germans' victory was a product of "guile and luck." The Sept. 11 plot, he added, "is another, and much more extreme, example of an attack by a weaker party."

The plan for the Sept. 11 attack was, like the German plan, "based on knowledge obtained from open sources, not on secret intelligence," May said. And "the analysis underlying the plan rested largely on suppositions about the enemy's standard operating procedures."



4) The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941. The morning assault by the Imperial Japanese Army on the U.S naval base in Hawaii changed the shape of the already-raging World War II "by bringing America in with its freshness and manufacturing capacity," says Brad King of the Battleship Cove museum.

The attack also refocused American foreign policy in profound and everlasting ways. Speaking on National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day in 2008, then-President George W. Bush said, "On Dec. 7, 1941, the enemy nearly destroyed our Pacific fleet, and the United States was forced into a long and terrible war. A generation of Americans stepped forward to fight for our country. Their message to America's enemies was clear: If you attack this country and harm our people, there is no corner of the Earth remote enough to protect you from the reach of our nation's armed forces."



5) The Six Day War, 1967. On the morning of June 5, Israeli planes surprise-attacked the at-rest Egyptian air force, destroying hundreds of planes. Similar strikes hobbled Jordan and Syria. On the ground, Israeli troops marched into the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. They routed Palestinians from the West Bank of the Jordan River, seized the Golan Heights in Syria and continued on to the Suez Canal. The rapid chain of events altered the landscape and the future of the Middle East — and, arguably, foreign policy in state departments around the world.

