



Book The Soul of Battle

From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny

Victor Davis Hanson
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Recommendation

While Napoleon declared that God favors the side with the most battalions, author Victor Davis Hanson suggests otherwise. Hanson reasons that the side marching to preserve a great moral cause - e.g., the defense of individual freedoms against the agents of human oppression - possesses the true soul of battle. Seen in this light, war becomes far more than a duel of logistics, technology and strategy. Hanson believes that victory's first seeds are sown in the human spirit, and the terrible battlefield harvest is collected later. He provides three historic examples: Theban general Epaminondas' destruction of Sparta, Union General William Sherman's march through Georgia and U.S. General George Patton's demolition of the Third Reich. In this well researched and almost poetically written volume, Hanson reveals the basis of democratic countries' military dominance. *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to military professionals, students of military history and those who seek a deeper understanding of the strength of democratic societies.

Take-Aways

- Successful military operations depend not on tactics, weaponry or training - but on the spirit that motivates the soldier.
- When threatened, democratic societies have demonstrated the ability to rouse citizen-soldiers to their defense.
- A totalitarian regime's forces are often hollow.
- Great commanders such as Epaminondas, William Sherman and George Patton inspire troops with the vision of a greater moral cause.
- These leaders were misfits in peacetime but thrived in command.
- The leader of a democratic force must motivate soldiers to overcome their deep-seated moral reluctance to slaughter. Patton mastered this challenge.
- Epaminondas' victory over Sparta changed the course of Grecian history.
- Although Sherman is remembered as cold and heartless, he preserved his men's lives and liberated thousands of slaves.
- Patton believed victory lay in pushing his armored columns relentlessly forward.
- Patton scorned the idea of slowing down to consolidate territory and protect his flanks.

Summary

In Defense of Democracy

Writer D.H. Lawrence described Americans as "natural-born killers." The outcomes of the major 20th-century conflicts seem to support him, but they reflect a democratic phenomenon, not an American one. Armies defending democratic peoples have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to impose horrific levels of military violence when threatened, perhaps because they nurture a moral cause that provides the soul of battle. Consider three examples: Theban general Epaminondas destroyed Spartan hegemony. Union army General William Sherman liberated more than 50,000 slaves. General George Patton demolished the Third Reich. These leaders from different eras shared several common characteristics:

- Each followed an arcane code of honor and was unsuited for peace.
- Each was a closet intellectual, widely read in literature and in the scholarship of war.
- Each put his life in danger by stalking along on the front lines to encourage his men.
- Each transformed armies of peace-loving amateurs into effective fighting forces of deadly precision, ultimately more dangerous than the armies of militaristic societies.
- Each proved that armies of democratic societies, while unorthodox in their use of mobility and logistics, could succeed despite nay-saying conventional wisdom. Their armies dispersed as quickly as they formed, once need for the soul of battle had passed.

Epaminondas on the Dance Floor of War

You can visit nearly every significant battlefield in Greece in a single afternoon: Plataea, Tanagra, Oinophyta, Coronea, Delium, Haliartus, Tegyra and Chaeronea. However, visitors rarely come to arguably the most important battlefield of all, a single spot in the middle of a grain field. Here, in Leuctra, in the Greek region of Boeotia, a stark, white marble column commemorates the day in 371 when the general Epaminondas and his army from Thebes demolished Sparta's elite warriors. The monument marks the spot where Epaminondas irreversibly altered Grecian history by finally defeating the great army of Sparta.

“What, then, is the soul of battle? A rare thing indeed that arises only when free men march unabashedly toward the heartland of their enemy in hopes of saving the doomed, when their vast armies are aimed at salvation and liberation, not conquest and enslavement.”

In Greek, Boeotia translates literally as "cow pastures," so the Thebes of Boeotia rising up to throw off Spartan aggression was the equivalent, for instance, of the dairy farmers of Iowa marching on Manhattan. Flat, accessible Boeotia was such a popular battlefield that Epaminondas called it "the dancing floor of war." Sparta's famed warriors, who were used to enslave hundreds of thousands of people, dominated that bloodstained plain for centuries, but the Boeotians gradually nurtured a soul of battle that led them to victory.

“These marchers of a season must be led by ruthless and gifted men who are often of little use in a peacetime democracy but find their proper authoritarian and aristocratic calling only as absolute rulers of an armed citizenry.”

Unlike Grecian and Spartan societies, the democratic Boeotian union was comprised of people who did not need to own property to be full citizens. To the Greeks, land was everything, and men without land neither voted nor fought. The Boeotians followed a radical practice: wealthy horseman voluntarily shared power with average farmers and the poor. This increased national unity and added to the number of men available to be soldiers. Sparta underestimated the importance of heavy infantry, which tended to draw men from the less wealthy classes. In Boeotia, strategy - not social class - determined the order of battle.

“Epaminondas, not King Philip, not Divine Alexander, not wild-eyed Pyrrhus and not one-eyed Hannibal, who all led hired thugs, was the real modern military thinker of the ancient world.”

Sparta made the blunder of motivating their enemy's soul, by seizing control of the sacred Cadmea, the spiritual and political center of Thebes. Over the years, the Thebians developed a near fanatical hatred of the Spartans. Using these advantages, Thebes routed the

Spartans on the plains of Leuctra in 371. But that wasn't enough. Epaminondas insisted that Thebes press its advantage and actually invade Sparta to carry the war to the enemy. Using a modified phalanx - giving his army more depth but a potentially exposed flank - he destroyed the Spartans and freed Sparta's Messenian slaves. Sparta never regained its hegemony. Roman orator Cicero proclaimed Epaminondas, "The First Man of Greece," the general whose small, determined army felled an empire built on slavery.

Sherman and the Army of the West

In 1864, the northern states' victory in the U.S. Civil War was far from certain. If the southern Confederacy fought well enough to force a stalemate, its "peculiar institution" - slavery - would continue. President Abraham Lincoln understood that this put the burden on the North. His Army of the Potomac advanced the cause fitfully, as southern Generals Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson kept the North off balance with a series of skillful campaigns.

“Even in the modern age of industry and technology, George Patton was convinced that victory still hinged upon the warrior soul of his army. Spirit could prompt soldiers to accomplish things far beyond their apparent material limitations; in turn, the absence of audacity might allow well-equipped and plentiful troops simply to quit in dejection.”

Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's invasion of Atlanta and his subsequent March to the Sea were designed to bring the cruel facts of war home to the southern plantations. Though Southerners spoke of fighting to defend their way of life and hold onto their property, Sherman believed the North was truly defending noble ideals, including liberation of the slaves. As one of his soldiers wrote, "The more I learn of the cursed institution of slavery, the more I feel willing to endure, for its final destruction."

“Democracies for a season can produce the most murderous armies from the most unlikely of men, and do so in the pursuit of something spiritual rather than the mere material.”

Sherman described his march as "piercing a hollow shell," because he met less resistance than expected. Sherman, who was vilified by generations of Southerners, explained, "Those people made war on us, defied and dared us to come south to their country, where they boasted they would kill us and do all manner of horrible things. We accepted their challenge, and now for them to whine and complain of the natural and necessary results is beneath contempt." Sherman expelled Atlanta's civilians after his troops took the city on September 2, 1864. When he left on November 16 to begin his march of destruction, he ordered his troops to set fire to shops and warehouses that had supported the war effort. Without a citizenry to contain the inferno, Atlanta was virtually destroyed. Sherman's army marched southeast, away from the towering columns of dark smoke, but their fate was terribly uncertain.

“We military historians, if we claim a morality in our dark draft, must always ask not merely what armies do, but rather what they are for.”

The Union had sent 1,000 railcars of supplies to Atlanta to keep its troops from starving, yet with the approval of his superiors, Sherman now cut himself loose from his supply lines and raced through hostile territory. Once his troops reached coastal Savannah, the Union's dominant Navy could provision them. But, meanwhile, the North's hungry men descended on the Georgia heartland, leaving only desolation behind them. Sherman took tremendous risks, knowing that when Lee's soldiers - still stationed to the north - learned that his troops were burning their farms, the news would devastate morale.

“It is a dangerous and foolhardy thing for a slaveholding society to arouse a democracy of such men.”

Because any substantial delay caused by battle could destroy an army that had severed its own supply lines, several of Lincoln's advisers believed Sherman's march was reckless, the product of an unstable mind. Yet, Sherman's tactics were straightforward, and included avoiding a direct assault on enemy forces wherever possible. Sherman was able to transmit his ideological fervor throughout his army, and freed of logistical concerns, his 62,000 men moved unpredictably through the countryside, foraging and pillaging in a great swath, and still traveling 10 to 15 miles a day toward Savannah. In part due to these logistics, Sherman divided his army into a left and right wing. Each wing further subdivided itself. To keep the army alive, teams of foragers spread out six or seven miles. Consequently, in some places the path of devastation spanned as much as 60 miles with a simple mission: consume and destroy.

“Modern historians publish endlessly on the eminence of Alexander the Great, the greatest thug that the ancient world produced, a man who in his sheer propensity for killing the innocent - over a million were to die in his swath to the Indus - was a kindred spirit to Hitler.”

In retrospect, only a scorched-earth retreat that left nothing behind to eat could have stopped Sherman's march. Several Confederate leaders urged just such a tactic, but the campaign failed because the plantation class, which defined life in material rather than human terms, was naturally disinclined to lay waste to the very thing they were trying to protect. So Sherman's men marched on, devastating farms, liberating slaves and shooting every dog that crossed their path - because hounds had been used to hunt down runaway slaves and capture escaping Union prisoners. Sherman's egalitarian army (90% of his lieutenants had been enlisted men) was receptive to the cause of liberating slaves, and pursued it with zeal. Sherman reached Savannah on December 10, his army having suffered only about 100 casualties during its month-long march through enemy territory. He telegraphed Lincoln, "I BEG TO PRESENT YOU AS A CHRISTMAS GIFT, THE CITY OF SAVANNAH."

"Epaminondas had the keen, almost uncanny ability, shared with both Sherman and Patton, to sense that the interior of a slave society is not strong, but weak."

Later, Sherman turned north and marched to Washington, D.C. Although excoriated for brutality, he probably saved thousands of lives by bringing the war to an earlier end. History views Lee - who wrecked his army by mounting frontal assaults on an entrenched enemy - as the reluctant knight fighting loyally to defend his homeland. Sherman, who preserved his soldiers and liberated tens of thousands of slaves, is often seen as a murderous, heartless general. Yet Sherman is the one who inspired his troops with the soul of battle.

Patton and the Third Army

General George Patton's writings make one obsession evident: speed. To survive in war-torn Europe, his men must move forward constantly and kill on the run. Patton scorned the idea of slowing down to consolidate territory and protect his flanks. The night before his army became operational in Europe in July, 1944, Patton told his troops, "Flanks are something for the enemy to worry about, not us. I don't want to get any messages saying that, 'We are holding our position.' We're not holding anything. Let the Hun do that. We are advancing constantly and we're not interested in holding on to anything except the enemy. We're going to hold on to him by the nose and we're going to kick him in the ass." He believed his blitzkrieg through Germany's viscera would hasten the war's end and, ultimately, save lives. Along the way, he would liberate those who had struggled against Nazi oppression.

"When the war ended, George Patton was commander in the field of the largest single American army in the nation's history. In contrast, the Third Reich was a shell, and with the arrival of Patton's armor the entire hollow society collapsed."

Patton's path was tortured. He faced frustrating immobility in October 1944. His supply lines were stretched too thin across Europe. When Patton's tanks ground to a halt, the German's were able to muster a credible defense at Metz in the Lorraine region. Then, just as Patton was about to crack the German resistance, General Bradley moved him, sending Patton to relieve elements of the First Army in the Battle of the Bulge. After he helped demolish the German counteroffensive, Patton's official orders were to engage the Germans in the south, while Montgomery resumed a plodding attack in the north. By February 1945, the Third Army faced the longest trek and worst terrain of any Allied army in Germany. Patton intended to send fast-moving armored columns around German strong points and destroy German morale by attacking from the rear, while also saving lives that would be lost in a head-on assault. He personally exhorted troops at the front, racing about in an open car, his face blistered, as his aides huddled behind him to escape the cold.

"Patton proved that the idea of a great democratic march, an ideological trek in which a fiery commander might pour his spirit of vengeance into his citizen soldiers, was not lost, regardless of the sheer magnitude and deadliness of such an undertaking in the murderous new age of mechanized warfare."

In March, more than 80,000 Germans surrendered in four days. The Seventh and First German Armies vanished. On March 23, after his engineers ferried thousands of GIs onto German soil, Patton urinated in the Rhine, hopped into his Jeep and headed east. Under questioning, captured German officers confessed that Patton was their greatest fear. Where would he attack next? What were his tactics? How fast was he moving, and to where?

"Patton's army was thus to be foremost an ideological one, whose brutal fighting was to serve a higher moral purpose."

On April 25, the Third Army reached Czechoslovakia. Patton was shocked as Eisenhower halted his advance, allowing Russian

armies to occupy the Czech capital. An army of 500,000 American men watched as the Russians took over the country, based on diplomatic agreements that Bradley feared would cause complications. "For God's sake, Brad," Patton countered, "...America should let others worry about complications." Patton urged Eisenhower to let his tanks lumber into Berlin. When Eisenhower retorted, "Well, who would want it?" Patton replied, "I think history will answer that for you."

About the Author

The son of a U.S. Army Air Corps Sergeant who served under General LeMay in the devastating firebombing of Japan, author **Victor Davis Hanson** is a professor of classics at California State University in Fresno. He has written or edited several books, and is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Military History Quarterly*. He and his family live in Selma, California, on the family farm where he was born.
