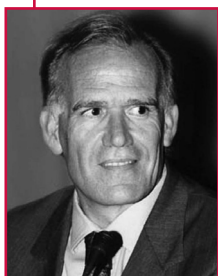


# Imprimis

October 2004 • Volume 33, Number 10

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## What Would Patton Say About the Present War?

**Victor Davis Hanson**

Author, *Between War and Peace: Lessons from Afghanistan to Iraq*

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**VICTOR DAVIS HANSON** is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a fellow in California studies at the Claremont Institute and a distinguished fellow at Hillsdale College. He received his B.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and his Ph.D. in classics from Stanford University. He has authored, co-authored or edited fourteen books, including *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*; *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*; and *Ripples of Battle: How Wars of the Past Still Determine How We Fight, How We Live, and How We Think*. He has written for several newspapers and journals, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary* and the *Weekly Standard*, and has appeared on the PBS Newshour, FOX News and C-SPAN's BookTV. Currently, he is a weekly columnist for National Review Online and serves on the editorial board of *Arion*, the *Military History Quarterly* and *City Journal*. In August and September 2004, Dr. Hanson taught two history courses on the Hillsdale campus, "The Peloponnesian War" and "Great Captains: Profiles of Leadership."

*The following is adapted from a lecture delivered on July 23, 2004, on board the MS Heidelberg during a Hillsdale College cruise on the Rhine and Moselle rivers.*

**W**hat can we imagine a George Patton might say about the present war? Lots. Based on what he himself said and wrote, his record in the field, and what scholars have written about him, I think we have some reasonable ideas. I'll begin with Patton's strategic thinking, then follow with suppositions about tactical and operational doctrine.

Patton was not merely a great tactician, as Eisenhower seemed to think in deprecating his larger advice about the nature and purpose of World War II. Indeed, he understood far more about strategy and global politics than either Eisenhower or Bradley. A fine illustration of his superior insight arose over disagreement regarding the "endgame" in Europe: When the so-called Big Four — Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin and Chiang Kai Shek — apparently decided in late 1944 and early 1945 that the allied demarcation line was to be at the Elbe River rather than Berlin or the Polish border, news quickly leaked out. As Patton was barreling through southern Germany, he sensed quickly that the German armies in April and May were preferring to surrender to Allied troops and thus fleeing toward the Western front. Would an Allied capture of Berlin ahead of Russian troops really become Eisenhower's and Bradley's predicted bloodbath if Germans were assured that the city would end up in the American sphere of postbellum influence?

Patton listened to the BBC almost nightly; he spoke pretty good French; during the war he read Rommel, the memoirs of Napoleon and Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. He was a learned person despite purportedly being dyslexic. In any case, based on his extensive studies of European history, news reports, and meetings with those who had worked with the Russians, he believed firmly that the Allies were making a horrible mistake by not driving on to Berlin to bring all of Germany behind Anglo-American lines. If we could paraphrase his thinking it might go something like this: We had fought World War II in part to ensure that Eastern Europe, i.e., Poland and Czechoslovakia, did not remain under the domination of Hitler's totalitarian regime;



yet our policies at war's end were guaranteeing that those countries would fall under Stalin's equally evil domination.

In 1945, the U.S. was providing annually the equivalent of several billion in today's dollars to the Soviet Union. Patton had no problem with the idea that in war, one is forced as a matter of practicality to make such odious alliances. But postwar peace, whose future parameters would be adjudicated while the war was still on, was an entirely different matter. The idea of a United Nations organization was developing; and although many in the U.S. knew that Stalin had institutionalized mass murder, such concerns were muted because it was thought at worst that he was an aberration in an otherwise peaceful — and currently allied — Soviet system. Patton wanted nothing of that naïveté, and instead loudly reminded all that decisions made in 1945 would alter the future security of the U.S. Montgomery in this case was in agreement with Patton, as was Churchill, who likewise saw that the end of World War II might be the beginning of a possible World War III. They all shared a common desire: to take Berlin and extend democratic government to the Russian border.

In a famous exchange, Eisenhower asked, of Patton's request to move eastward immediately, "What in the world for?" Patton without hesitation replied, "You shouldn't have to ask that. History will answer for you, Ike." Bradley protested and offered up the standard American fear of taking 100,000 casualties. Of course, the Russians did take over 100,000 casualties storming Berlin, a fact later used to argue for Eisenhower's prescience. But again, the Russians suffered such casualties because the Germans were fighting ferociously in order that everybody behind them might surrender to the West. Had the Germans known that the Allies were going to take Berlin, the city might have fallen after brief resistance in the manner that other German strongpoints had fallen in the west. What later became West Germany would have extended to Berlin, the allies would probably have occupied Czechoslovakia where the Third Army finished the war, and we would not have had to make later concessions to Stalin to save Austria and Greece.

Patton had the further idea that after defeating the Nazis, we should not destroy Germany's armored forces and dismantle its strategic forces, but instead use them as a basis to re-arm the Wehrmacht for the purpose of stopping the Soviets, who enjoyed an enormous superiority in respective land forces on the continent. This was blasphemy to most experts in the U.S., made worse by Patton's often puerile and offensive slurs about Russian primitivism and barbarity. As a result of his uncouth pronouncements, Patton's otherwise astute and vocal anti-communism found little support, and indeed gave him very little margin of tolerance when his proconsulship of Bavaria later ran into trouble. Yet this very idea of German rehabilitation would — within months after his dismissal — turn out to be the basis of NATO.

Patton always realized that armed forces serve political ends, and create an immediate reality on the battlefield that politicians argue over for years — that there are times when audacious commanders can create favorable diplomatic situations impossible to achieve by politicians even after years of negotiations. Well before Roosevelt or Eisenhower, he understood that the new Germany was an ally, and the old Soviets were now the new enemy of freedom.

Applying Patton's thinking to today's situation, we can first recognize the so-called "war on terror" as a misnomer. There has never really been a war against a method other than something like Pompey's crusade against the pirates or the British effort to stifle the slave trade. In fact, we're no more in a war against terror than Patton was fighting against Tiger and Panzer tanks. Patton, who understood the hold of a radically triumphalist Nazism on a previously demoralized German people, would have the intellectual honesty to realize that we are at war with Islamic fascists, mostly from the Middle East, who have played on the frustrations of mostly male, unemployed young people, whose autocratic governments can't provide the conditions for decent employment and family life. A small group of Islamists appeals to the angst of the disaffected through a nostalgic and reactionary turn to a mythical Caliphate, in which religious purity trumps the material advantages of a decadent West and protects Islamic youth from the contamination of foreign gadgetry and pernicious ideas. In some ways, Hitler had created the same pathology in Germany in the 1930s.

Because of the Internet and globalization, Islamic youth have first-hand knowledge of the U.S. — its splendor, power and luxury — that both attracts and repels them, creating appetites forbidden in traditional and tribal society. Thus the fascist terrorists, to be successful, cognizant of this paradoxical envy and desire, offer a mythical solution in lieu of real social, political, and economic reform that in short order would doom the power of the patriarch, mullah and autocrat: blame the imperialist Americans and the Zionist Israelis who cause this self-induced misery. Even those who don't join the extremists, like most Germans of the late 1930s, don't mind, albeit on the cheap, seeing their perceived enemies take a fall, as long as the consequences of terrorism are mostly positive in a psychological sense without bringing them material suffering in recompense.

Patton would also agree that the remedy for this disease includes aid and reconstruction — helping the defeated to re-build under democratic auspices that would allow real reform. In fact, he was sacked as proconsul largely because he was said to be too interested in jump-starting German reconstruction at the price of accommodating Germans once affiliated with the Nazi party. But Patton would insist that it is only by military defeat and subsequent humiliation *first* that the supporters of terrorism against the West will understand the wages of their support for Islamic fas-

cism. Once people in the Middle East, like the Germans, see that the Islamic fascists are defeated – and that everybody who supports and condones that ideology are synonymous with it and thus must pay for their complicity through some measure of sacrifice and suffering – radical bellicose Islamicism really will end. Patton was quite clear about defeating, humiliating, and then helping Germans – the proper order of such a progression in attitude being absolutely critical.

Applying these lessons to the first Gulf War, Patton perhaps would have thought it mindless to mobilize an entire expeditionary army – a rare event for a democracy – and then confine it to the Kuwaiti theatre of operations, given that the problem was never merely the occupation Kuwait, but the tyrant in Baghdad who had a prior record of frequent aggression. From the moment he took command in Normandy, Berlin was on Patton's mind as the only ultimate goal.

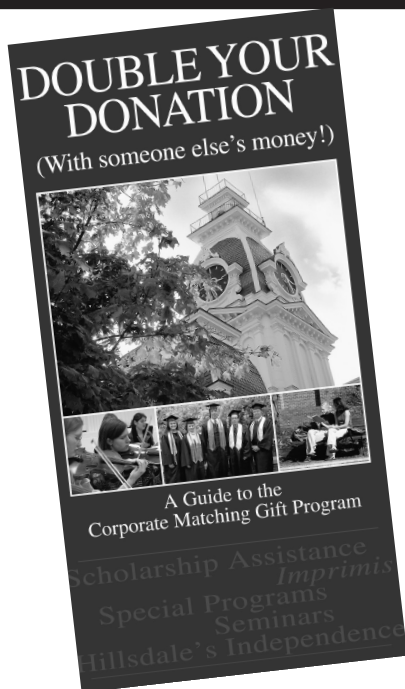
As far as encouraging allies to go along, again, Patton always talked more in terms of a fait accompli: The general's job is to create favorable conditions on the ground that his politicians can deal with from a position of strength, rather than vice versa – an American army that achieves victory will have more allies than it knows what to do with. Go to Berlin if Berlin is the problem. Confront the Soviets if the Soviets are the problem. Don't refuse to take Berlin and then try to negotiate with the Soviets over Berlin. Hesitancy does not earn advantage. Similarly in Iraq today: If our goal is to give President Bush leverage with the Europeans and the tyrannical Middle East, then we should continue to destroy the power of the insurgency in Iraq, proving to friends and enemies alike the consequences and advantages of American power.

## “Always Audacity”

In matters of tactics, Patton was famous for believing that American armies, being militias of the season, were not equipped immediately to go head-to-head in the hard slogging with veteran professional militaries such as the German Wehrmacht of World Wars I and II. Speed, victory, and firepower were our forte – not slow wars of attrition. Patton had nothing to do with the three greatest American disasters in the European theater in World War II – Market Garden, the Hürtgen Forest and the Ardennes – and expressed worries over our response in all three instances, inasmuch as Allied countermeasures offered few avenues for mobility and attack on the flank.

Patton grasped that air power had revolutionized armored warfare, a sort of mobile infantry at the beck and call of land forces. Thus the old infantry doctrine – that the infantry incrementally goes ahead to clear mines and pockets of resistance, and then the tanks follow, fanning out in a large triangle with the flanks protected – was a recipe for disaster. It meant that the enemy might retreat on a broad front – as the deflation of the bulge in January 1945 attests – harvesting a continuing crop of frontline troops. His idea was rather to have rapid armored wings sweep out, bypass points of resistance, and cause psychological turmoil from the rear that could collapse enemy fronts. American Sherman tanks – poorly armed and protected – nevertheless were faster, lighter, used less fuel and were more easily maintained than German armor. Speed, audacity, and numbers might allow them to achieve results impossible even for their individually superior German counterparts. The way war had evolved in 1944 made this possible: Sherman tanks had radios that were connected with

*continued on page 6*



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# Rhine Moselle River

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*Victor Davis Hanson discusses the Battle of the Bulge at the top of the Mardasson Monument, in Bastogne, Belgium.*



*The MS Heidelberg river past the Remagen, looking towards Cochem.*



*Barbara Gordon walks in St. Avold Lorraine American Cemetery, near St. Avold, France.*



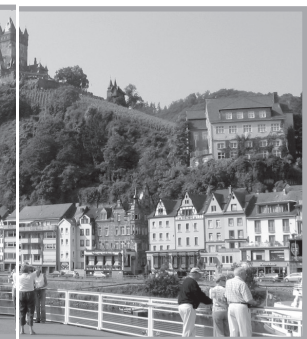
*Hillsdale College students listening to a speaker at the beginning of a D-Day remembrance event.*



# River Cruise Photos

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*sculls along the Moselle  
Richsburg Castle in  
(Germany).*



*Hillsdale cruiser David Leffler, with wife  
Kathy, returns to Utah Beach, where he land-  
ed as a member of the U.S. Army in 1944.*



*History professor Thomas  
Pegasus Bridge, at the  
three-day post-cruise  
memorance tour.*



*Hillsdale cruisers on board the Heidelberg*



*continued from page 3*

airborne P-47 anti-tank dive-bombers — tactical air power now being worth an entire armored division in Patton's eyes.

When Patton went operational on August 1, 1944, he traveled nearly 400 miles in little more than 30 days. Bradley and Eisenhower complained that he was bypassing resistance, was violating pre-Normandy planning, and was not part of the strategic effort to hit German industrial centers in the Ruhr. Patton answered back that his success was having a psychological effect in causing the collapse of entire armies and offering new potential alternatives — with only brief windows for critical exploitation — that might change accepted realities and vault the allies across the Rhine before the shortened days, poor weather, stiffening German resistance and extended Allied supply lines could come into play to stifle the American advance by autumn. His lesson? When there is an opportunity for exploitation — one-quarter of Fallujah taken or Mr. Sadr reeling — hesitancy and conventional thinking can forfeit unforeseen advantages and offer a collapsing enemy a reprieve that will end up costing far more casualties later. Beware of a false sense of forbearance that can turn deadly.

Patton had two phrases that he used almost ad nauseam. The first, from Danton, was: “Audacity, always audacity, still more audacity.” The second was “the unforgiving minute,” a phrase from Kipling that referred to certain times in war when the collective will of a people or an army can without warning collapse — critical moments that must be capitalized on. Unlike Eisenhower and Bradley, who thought the August 1944 collapse of the German army was likely and thus the war would end before Christmas, Patton knew that if the Panzers were saved from near death, they could be ready to kill again and under far more favorable circumstances. That is exactly what happened at the Falaise Gap. Later at the Seine River, near the Siegfried Line, and when attacking the Bulge, Patton saw that a sweeping hook, rather than a head-on assault might bring on a total collapse, but only if risks were taken and old plans ignored in light of new realities. Again, the conservative, doctrinaire approach of cautious attack proved the far more costly tactic.

These lessons too apply in recent times. In the first Gulf War, Saddam put almost 250,000 Iraqi troops in bunkers in the sand, and even after weeks of U.S. bombing they were still operational. In response, General Schwarzkopf marched hundreds of miles around the flank, leaving many of the entrenched Iraqi positions behind and headed toward Basra, his long flanks covered by air support. But although we copied Patton's tactics, we forgot their purpose — stopping at the so-called Highway of Death because of the television images of “thousands” of enemy dead. Pentagon staffers worried at the time that 20,000 enemy soldiers had been killed, thus causing a global uproar. We know now that the real number was in

the hundreds — and that when we stopped before Basra, fleeing Iraqis did not, and killed thousands of mostly defenseless Shiites and Kurds over the next few weeks. And over the next twelve years, Anglo-American pilots flew thousands of missions in the Iraq no-fly zones, all as a precursor to the second Iraq war. In short, we forgot Patton's most important lesson: *the purpose of outflanking the enemy is to demoralize and annihilate the enemy, thus removing the reasons to go to war in the first place.*

In the 2003 Iraq War, on the other hand, Americans drove 400 miles from the Kuwaiti front up to Kurdistan, often bypassing resistance on the way to Baghdad. Never has an armored column traveled so quickly with so few casualties. It was comparable to Patton's march from Normandy to the Siegfried Line. And the same institutionalized army critics of such Patton-like tactics emerged, decrying vulnerable flanks, oblivious to the protection offered by 1,000 planes in the sky. Indeed, Patton was often evoked as we moved quickly, creating conditions of shock and awe, demoralizing the enemy who crumbled and fled. But again, these are fluid, not permanent situations. If an enemy is demoralized but not destroyed, he may well come back encouraged and with less respect, interpreting magnanimity as weakness or incompetence. Fallujah and Najaf are proof enough of the tragedy that can follow when a defeated enemy is not completely crushed.

## Mobilizing Public Support

Finally, Patton had very strong views about the character of the American soldier. On the one hand, he appreciated that Americans grew up driving cars, that they were mechanical and practical, that they were highly individualistic, that they liked to move, that they were restless — thus that they were ideally suited for mechanized warfare. Yet he conceded that Americans also had a limited attention span, easily became impatient, were averse to standing in place, and required constant encouragement about the larger purposes that had brought them so far from home.

Patton's own general sense was that his Third Army took greater casualties when immobile, not simply because of stiffening enemy resistance, but also because his soldiers were singularly ill-equipped for a war requiring rote, method, and patience. In the present context Patton would advise us, in view of our national character, constantly to be on the advance, seeking to surprise and storm enemies rather than being merely reactive. If we are in a real war, Americans must move quickly on Fallujah and Najaf rather than “contain” such “no-go” zones. Syria and Iran should be warned that their continued sanctuary and aid to terrorists are synonymous with a state of war with the U.S. Patton would advise us that static occupation, negotiations with undefeated insurgents,

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and mild rebukes to neighboring terrorist sponsors are not only futile, but against the American character of decisive advance and unconditional surrender once war is upon us.

Patton was sometimes asked where he was going. Berlin was always his answer, along with quips about Hitler soon to be in chains. This was no mere braggadocio, but revealed strategic insight that there could be nothing less than unconditional surrender, the occupation of the enemy heartland, and the humiliation accruing from taking the German Fuhrer — that only in that way might Nazism be discredited. We bristle at such Manichaeism in the present postmodern war, forgetting that we shall not be through with Islamic fascism until the governments of Iran and Syria cease their support, al Qaedaists are killed or in cuffs, and the greater Middle East autocracies are terrified of offering succor to terrorist offshoots. Anything less as our goal and we will be in a perpetual quagmire of reactive warfare.

Like Thucydides, Patton appreciated that the emotions that sophisticated people sometimes think are so unimportant — such as fear, pride and honor — are in fact what drive us humans, and therefore must be addressed in any total war. We chuckle at his attention to dress, protocol, medals, speeches and theatrics; but this obsession was not vanity as much as acceptance that soldiers are proud and sensitive beings, and must be rewarded and punished in visible ways, war being the essence of human emotion. By the same token, military operations are more than just ground

taken and held. They are powerfully symbolic, conveying to third-parties either hope or dejection when they see armies routed from the battlefield.

Today, millions in the Islamic world are watching the West struggle against Islamic fascism. Perhaps deep down inside they prefer, logically and with some idealism, to live under Western-style freedom and democratic auspices. And yet nationalism, pride, religion, and ethnic solidarity war with reason, combining to produce far greater resentment against a powerful America, even when it brings the very freedom that the Arabs for decades have said they wished. A modern Patton would not be bothered by such inconsistency, but rather would make sure that he had not only defeated the terrorists and their supporters, but had done so in such damaging fashion that none in the Middle East might find such a repugnant cause at all romantic, bringing as it did utter ruin as the wage of the wrath of the United States.

Patton, who was both learned and yet not smug about the power of the primordial emotions, understood perfectly the irrational nature of warfare and the effect that utter defeat or glorious victory have upon an otherwise rational people. No wonder he hated war defined as a purely bureaucratic enterprise or a purely material and industrial challenge, inasmuch as neither can change the hearts of men that need to be changed. Instead, they usually increase the body count and rarely lead to lasting peace. We should remember wild-eyed George Patton in our Fallujahs to come.



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