



# Men in Arms

*Autocratic generals and democratic armies.*

BY TOM DONNELLY

**T**he relation between a democratic nation and a democratic army is paradoxical. Democratic peoples are reluctant to go to war, and yet, when roused to fight, they often reveal a surprising martial spirit and skill. “A long war,” as Alexis de Tocqueville put it, “has the same effect on a democratic army as a revolution has on the people themselves. It breaks down rules and makes outstanding men come forward.”

This is the grand theme of the classicist Victor Davis Hanson’s latest volume, *The Soul of Battle*. Linking the sto-

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ries of Theban general Epaminondas’ Peloponnesian campaigns in the fourth century B.C., the Union general William Tecumseh Sherman’s sweep “from Atlanta to the sea” in 1864, and George S. Patton’s dash across France in 1944,

**The Soul of Battle**  
*From Ancient Times to the Present Day, How Three Great Liberators Vanquished Tyranny*  
 by Victor Davis Hanson  
 Free Press, 544 pp., \$30

Hanson celebrates three democratic “armies of a season” that ended the great affronts to human liberty of their day: Spartan helotage, Confederate slavery, and German Nazism.

Hanson’s aim is essentially moral rather than military. The Soviet Red Army arguably did more to destroy the German army than Patton achieved, just as Ulysses S. Grant arguably did more to bring the Civil War to its end than Sherman managed. Yet it was the

American army that produced the free Germany of today, just as it was Sherman’s march that destroyed the cultural and political basis of slavery. Likewise, Hanson makes a convincing case that it was Epaminondas who should be hailed as the great champion of Greek political liberty in place of Pericles (whom Hanson regards as an agent of Athenian imperialism).

**B**ut by making an explicit link between political ideology and the performance of soldiers, Hanson helps restore an essential element to discussions about the military. Individual conscience contributes as much to “unit cohesion” as fear of dishonor or love of one’s comrades; “combat effectiveness” has a moral component. Sherman’s men were rough Midwesterners, bred largely to small-farm life and reared to self-reliance. And though they shared the racial prejudices of their day, exposure to the realities of a slave society made them merciles in their contempt of Southern aristocrats and almost gleeful in their pillaging.

The argument in *The Soul of Battle* weakens, however, when the author attempts to connect democratic morality not just to the question of military effectiveness, but to the question of tactics as well. Hanson believes that the preference for maneuver rather than battle uniquely suited Epaminondas, Sherman, and Patton to their task: “All three generals agreed that grand envelopment was the proper paradigm for an army that was a reflection of a restless, if not fickle, democratic citizenry ever eager to abandon the fray should the war be prolonged or go bad.”

This is at best a false dichotomy. There has never been a successful general who would not prefer to maneuver. Even Grant, whom Hanson constantly denigrates in comparison to Sherman, maneuvered as best he could within the confines of his mission, the terrain, and his logistics. Conversely, it would be difficult to find more daring tactical leaders than Lee or Stonewall Jackson, though they served the cause of slavery.

In his eagerness to draw the lesson of his narrative, Hanson styles himself an apostle of the “indirect approach” as

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advocated by the eccentric British strategist and journalist Basil Liddell Hart, a man who claimed the brilliant Nazi maneuverists of the blitzkrieg as his disciples. Fretting repeatedly about democracies' aversion to casualties, Hanson also shares some of Liddell Hart's revulsion at the reality of warfare as killing. Liddell Hart never recovered from his experience of trench warfare in World War I, and the result of his influence was British generals and British politicians unprepared for Hitler's challenge. Thus, Hanson's paean to his three great liberators concludes with the dark thought that "the great danger of the present age is that democracy may never again marshal the will to march against and ultimately destroy evil."

If the American record of the past fifty years is anything to go on, the will power of democratic peoples can be a more constant force than Hanson imagines, and democratic armies can endure in the cause of freedom for more than "a season." One can wish with Hanson that Sherman rather than Colin Powell had been the architect of the Gulf War, but could even Epaminondas have achieved more from Operation Allied Force in Serbia than NATO commander General Wesley Clark? By every account, the mercurial Clark bullied superiors and allies alike in pursuit of victory over evil; since the war, he has suffered a similar fate to that of Epaminondas, Sherman, and Patton—cast aside by his political masters.

Perhaps the "soul of battle" is never entirely extinguished from democratic armies. The actions of America and its allies in opposing evil over the past decade suggest that the martial spirit of liberty may be stronger and more varied than even Hanson can admit. It expresses itself now more mutedly, in the brief appearance of American troops in Kosovo, Bosnia, East Timor, or the skies over Iraq, rather than so grandly as in the epics of Epaminondas, Sherman, and Patton. Democratic armies, wrote Tocqueville, enjoy hidden strengths "which no other armies ever possess; and these advantages, which attract little notice at first, cannot fail in the end to give them the victory." ♦