

Victory and the Savior Generals

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What factors decide wars? Luck? Fervent ideology? Preponderance of material resources? Or is advantage achieved by superior manpower and morale? In modern times, is victory found largely in lethal cutting-edge technology?

All these factors in varying degrees have in the past explained military success. Hernan Cortés's destruction of the Aztec Empire (1521) was predicated on the vastly outnumbered, but well-led Spanish conquistadors alone possessing arquebuses, artillery, steel swords, metal breastplates and helmets, horses, and crossbows. That monopoly allowed a few hundred mounted knights to end an empire of millions in roughly two years.

The industrial might of the United States often ensured that American forces in the distant Pacific during the Second World War simply had far more food, weapons, medical care, and military infrastructure than did the imperial Japanese in their own environs. Nazi Germany's *Wehrmacht* was often outnumbered through much of 1939–41; nevertheless, in those three years, it managed to maintain greater fervor, morale, and conviction of purpose than did its surprised French, Soviet and disorganized British opponents.

Yet sometimes generals and the leadership single individuals instill matter as much as all these seemingly larger inanimate factors. Often the fates of millions, both on the battlefield and to the rear, hinge on the abilities of just a few rare commanders of genius. They are perhaps the military equivalent of civilian airline pilots, whose skill or ineptness can determine whether hundreds of passengers live or die, regardless of the weather or the condition or model of the aircraft or the nature of the passengers on board.

We usually attribute such powers of leadership to history's recognized great captains of the battlefield. An Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, or Ulysses S. Grant by sheer force of genius could sometimes decide the fate of thousands of soldiers on both sides of the battle line. Or sometimes we grant



such importance to less flashy, but sober and judicious organizers. Marcus Agrippa, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John J. Pershing, Alfred von Schlieffen, and Isoroku Yamamoto so mastered the planning of war and the mustering of forces at the general staff level that they often seemed to predetermine the subsequent course of battle. Even brilliant military bureaucrats at home entrusted with mobilization and armaments, such as George Marshall or Samuel Pepys, sometimes ensured that forces at the front were likely to win battles before they started.

Yet war on the ground rarely translates into such a clear-cut and foreordained enterprise where supply, prewar strategy, and tactical doctrine can trump the chaos of battle. Victory or defeat also emerges ad hoc, and is sometimes predicated on luck, chance, inexplicably bad decision-making, and the unforeseen—the sudden German decision to switch to the carpet bombing of British cities just when it had almost ruined enemy airfields and radar during the height of the Battle of Britain, or Hitler’s suicidal decision to attack his nominal ally, the Soviet Union in June, 1941, when all of Europe except Britain was his and the war in the west almost over. Often in war, today’s sure winner can be tomorrow’s doomed loser. No one anticipated that the armies who plowed through Russia in summer 1941 would be nearly ruined by winter 1942, or that MacArthur’s forces surging toward Manchuria in October 1950 would be fleeing for their lives southward a mere two months later.

Radical changes in fortune during the course of a war often immediately precede a final verdict. Sometimes deliverance at the eleventh hour arrives from savior generals who manage to win—just when most at home deem the war irrevocably stalemated or lost. These are the few commanders who are asked to salvage a seemingly hopeless situation that others of often superior rank and prestige have created—a crisis in confidence in which the general public of a consensual society may already have favored retreat or even acceded to capitulation.

How did the savior generals win on the battlefield, when so many others failed to stave off defeat?

Grant certainly was felt to have been such a figure by spring 1864 when he came eastward to assume direct command of Union forces in Virginia that had been bled white since 1861 under Generals McDowell, McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker. And yet by late summer 1864, Union dreams of ending the Civil War in the spring under the miracle worker of the West, Grant, had been wrecked with the near destruction of the Army of the Potomac in a series of horrific battles in Virginia—leading to doubt not only about the reelection of Abraham Lincoln, but also for a



while the president's very re-nomination by the Republican Party.

In general, resentment arises through the higher echelon of the officer corps at the selection of an outsider such as a William Tecumseh Sherman or Philippe Pétain to restore order to the battlefield. After all, a fresh change in command is inherently a harsh verdict on all that preceded it. The qualities in a military leader necessary to galvanize dispirited troops and resurrect national will—outspokenness, self-promotion individualism, even eccentricity—are sometimes precisely those that naturally incite suspicion and envy. Creighton Abram's successful "hold and build" efforts to turn around the war in Vietnam (1968-1972) through Vietnamization and a change in tactics were inevitably interpreted as rebuke of his predecessor William Westmoreland's "search and destroy" strategy.

Naturally savior generals were often suspect outsiders before their appointments. Even after their successes, most did not necessarily enjoy the acclaim and tranquility that the record of their military brilliance otherwise might have ensured. Heroes like Themistocles, Scipio, or Belisarius—and in the modern age a Pétain or Grant—died either in poverty, obscurity or near disgrace. Mavericks of real genius like a George Patton and Curtis LeMay ended up as caricatures of their once brilliant selves. National laurels and a quiet retirement did not meet a triumphant Matthew Ridgway when he returned from Asia. A forced retirement and endless controversies instead marked the next four decades of Ridgway's long life. General William Slim almost single-handedly saved the Burma Theater in 1945; within two decades few recognized either his name or his victories.

What traits allowed such rare generals to save a war when the general consensus was that the situation was already lost? There is certainly no typical profile of shared age, class, or political point of view. More important are commonalities of character and disposition that encourage contrarianism. Too often, sober examination of the facts on the ground is lost in the general public hysteria that arises from unexpectedly depressing news from the front.

When Ridgway arrived at Korea, he quickly discovered, contrary to the general consensus, that an invincible Chinese enemy had not crushed the outnumbered and outgunned Americans led by the once brilliant Douglas MacArthur. The American army was not so much beaten militarily by Chinese and Korean forces, as poorly equipped for winter weather, panicked, terribly led in the field, and without confidence in the nature of its mission. Thus in less than 100 days, Ridgway went on to address those issues, and ended up back across the 38th Parallel, with the Chinese invaders as exhausted and over-extended as the Americans had been in the



north during November 1950.

Less than a third of the American public by late 2006 thought a surge of troops could salvage the Iraq War when David Petraeus was given command of all ground forces in Iraq—to the consternation of politicians back home and many senior military commanders abroad. Yet Petraeus, seemingly almost alone in the active military, understood that after four years of warring, Islamic insurgents were tired, had suffered terrible casualties, alienated the Sunni population, and were now vulnerable to new counter-insurgency tactics.

Savior generals are often controversial figures: LeMay could be coarse and brutal, Themistocles often a rogue, Patton deemed crazy.

This need to reject past conventional thinking, of course, is critical for savior generals. The newly appointed Curtis LeMay came soon to the conclusion that the XXI Bomber Command's high-altitude, high-precision bombing of Japanese industrial centers from the distant Marianas Islands was not diminishing enemy industrial resources—and had to be jettisoned altogether in favor of radical low-level, nocturnal incendiary attacks entirely contrary to existing B-29 flight doctrine and the original intent of the revolutionary bomber.

Equally important for these leaders is the willingness to bring in new personnel and adopt different tactics. To convince superiors that the war is neither necessarily stalemated nor lost requires a political temperament and mentality not always conducive to consensus. That paradox may explain why these saviors experienced controversy both before—and after—their brief moments of destiny. Certainly, a Sherman or Ridgway was not an easy figure to know or, at times, even to be around.

Most of the savior generals were keen students of war. If while in the shadows they garnered little notice, they nevertheless used their time in obscurity to systematically master contemporary tactics and strategy. Yet in their prior tenures, they were still open to innovation and experimentation without the burdens of supreme military command. As outsiders in their ideas about sea-power, logistics, total war, or counter-insurgency, they earned neglect when the war went well—only to receive a sudden call to arms at a time of near defeat, when more conventional choices were exhausted.

Long before Themistocles took control of the Athenian fleet in 480 BC, he had



been the architect of Athenian naval supremacy. David Petraeus literally wrote the book on counter-insurgency before applying those principles in blanket fashion as supreme ground commander in Iraq. Most of what Sherman accomplished in Georgia and the Carolinas had their roots in earlier, smaller raids prior to spring 1864. The emperor Justinian called forth Belisarius to end the Vandal Empire in North Africa only because of the general's prior success in restoring the eastern Byzantine front and crushing insurrectionists during the Nika riots at Constantinople.

Savior generals are not so easily caught up in the hysteria of apparent easy victory. In the general euphoria over successful prior conventional strategies—hoplite triumph at Marathon, Fabius's delaying tactics after Cannae, the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, MacArthur's stunning victory at Inchon and race to the Yalu, and the brilliant three-week removal of Saddam Hussein—the savior generals resisted doctrinaire conventional wisdom. Instead they preferred to get to the front, reconnoiter first-hand, and dispel convention wisdom that did not accord to what they saw and heard from men on the ground.

They realized that previous and accustomed victory often leads to arrogance and in turn complacency, ending in catastrophe—the classical devolution from *hubris* (overweening arrogance) to divine retribution (*nemesis*). Nothing in war is static; yet few in the moment of triumph grasp that fundamental truth about conflict. Overconfidence blinds the winning side to the need for constant reassessment and readjustment to meet the always changing conditions on the battlefield. What is striking about a Sherman or Petraeus was that each warned of festering problems at precisely the time when most were convinced that early victories presaged a short and successful war. If Fabius for a time had saved Rome by his delaying tactics and the notion that Hannibal could no longer be faced in pitched battle, it was Scipio who demanded an invasion of Carthage to force Hannibal home and end the threat of Punic aggression for good—despite the prior failures of offensive Roman tactics.

How did the savior generals restore their country's preeminence on the battlefield, when so many other replacement commanders usually failed to stave off defeat? Not by publicly faulting the prior generals who had nearly lost the war. Instead, a Themistocles or Ridgway praised those whose ideas were ensuring defeat, even as they quietly proceeded to reject them. When Curtis LeMay assumed command of a failing B-29 bomber campaign in the Marianas, he offered no criticism of his predecessor General Heywood Hansell. A Scipio or Sherman gave much credit to predecessors, even as they adopted policies antithetical to them. David Petraeus said nothing critical of his predecessor George Casey.



These leaders were often men of action, who looked restless, appeared to relish combat, and were as vigorous and warlike as their troops.

Such magnanimity in turn allowed even greater leeway for needed radical innovation, as colleagues became invested in the success of the maverick, whose failures were his alone, and whose successes were to be shared by others. By 2006, bullet-headed General Ray Odierno was unfairly caricatured by the media as the “Old Army” supposedly held culpable for the unimaginative shoot-‘em-up tactics that supposedly had helped lead to open insurgency in Baghdad; by 2007, he was reinvented as newly appointed General Petraeus’s right-hand man, and considered an adept practitioner of the sophisticated arts of counter-insurgency.

The savior generals were sociologists of a sort too. They understood concepts such as national character and what their own forces were best—and worst—at. As leaders of democratic societies, they knew especially the constraints of public patience. The proverbial people were for or against the war not solely on ideological grounds, but more often as a result of perceptions of losing or winning. Unpopular wars turned popular with quick victories—but turned into sure defeat with continued stalemate. Time in democracy was of the essence. That incessant demand for success in turn required aggressive tactics—Themistocles challenging the Persian fleet, Scipio taking the war home to the Carthaginians, Sherman methodically driving into Georgia to capture Atlanta before the election of 1864, Ridgway going on the offensive in Korea and Petraeus surging in Iraq. Many generals ultimately come to distrust, if not despise their civilian overseers; savior generals singularly understood and dealt with the public constraints which limit their masters’ options.

Regardless of their class upbringing or the exalted status of their rank, savior generals adopted the profile of an egalitarian on the battlefield to lead by example. No Persian could distinguish a Themistocles from any other trireme commander at Salamis. Curtis LeMay promised his B-17 crews that he would fly a lead plane on their most dangerous missions. The wealthy Scipio looked like a legionnaire. Sherman, of course, was scruffier than most of his subordinate officers. Ridgway, with live grenade and medical pack hung on his chest, appeared indistinguishable from a sergeant. All this was contrived—but not wholly contrived. Often a savior general was a man of action, who looked restless, appeared to relish combat, and was as vigorous and often as warlike as his men. Petraeus often challenged officers and enlisted men half his age to outrun or out-exercise him. If such generals were to ask their men to take new risks to salvage victories, then they must be willing to



share the ensuing dangers.

Unexpected successes won these visionaries public acclaim. But they also raised their statures from minor theater commanders into national political figures. Radical change in fortunes often clouded perceptions of why these contrarians had been suspect for most of their careers, and thus explains why in the calm of peace that their reexamined careers would so often end in controversy and their lives sometimes in unhappiness. Democracy can be unkind to successful military commanders—but especially unkind when the conditions of peace encourage collective amnesia about how the rather coarse sorts among us in times once brought delivered victory on the brink of defeat. America was not only shocked that Curtis LeMay ran as Vice President on the George Wallace ticket in 1968, but had forgotten as well LeMay’s prior heroic career as a World War II general who shortened the war and saved thousands of American lives. By 2010 David Petraeus—stricken with prostate cancer and once again invested with the mission of saving a collapsing American theater of war—was no longer always associated with the salvation of Iraq in 2007.

When we are safe, we value consensus and resent troublesome gadflies who claim the enemy is on the horizon, our strategies wrong and prescriptions for defeat, we are spending too little on defense, or that a dangerous complacency has set in among the populace. But when war is upon us, we blame yesterday’s timidity, borrow what we do not have—and *in extremis* seek out a different sort who can ensure us victory when few others dare.

