

Political Booknotes

Soldiers' Stories

By Thomas E. Ricks

READING DAVID HACKWORTH'S new book is like spending an evening drinking in a bar with a smart, talkative U.S. Army sergeant. You'll learn a lot. You'll have some fun. And, when he turns belligerent, you might get a punch or two thrown at you.

I was prepared to trash this book. If anyone has demonstrated that it is possible to stuff 10 pounds of bull into a five-pound bag, it is David Hackworth—or, as it says at the top of every other page in this book, "Colonel David H. Hackworth." When he blows, he blows hard. "One burst from an AK-47 or an incoming RPG could turn the Grungies into colanders and anyone in them to salad dressing," he writes at one point in his inquiry into the October 1993 firefight in Mogadishu that killed 18 American soldiers. And I laughed at his description of his "Deep Throat" source in Haiti who dished the inside skinny. I'm pretty sure from his description that this inside man was the same guy I and a dozen other journalists interviewed over beers in the garden of the Hotel Montana, up in the plush suburbs overlooking Port-au-Prince. It is unlikely that there was more than one garrulous Canadian advising the Haitian junta and talking to reporters.

But once you get past the swaggering persona, Hackworth, who retired spectacularly from the army 25 years ago, makes a lot of sense. He is at his best when he is talking about, and talking to, the soldier in the trenches. Listen to him describe the first U.S. troops in Bosnia in December 1995, from the 1st Brigade of the Army's 1st Armored Division: "During the time I spent with them I never saw a soldier out of uniform, a dirty weapon, an

unalert warrior, and I never heard a leader raise his voice." I was there with those troops, and that is a better description than I was able to write at the time. It hits the key points of how soldiers behave, and how they are com-

manded. I was aware that the 1st Brigade, commanded by Col. Gregory Fontenot, had about the most crackerjack chain of command I'd ever seen. Hackworth's precise description reflects his knowledge of what is important to notice in a military operation. He is similarly good at pointing out how badly run the

U.S. 10th Mountain Division was when it was in Haiti, undercutting its morale.

He also hits the nail on the head in underscoring the single greatest scandal in our military, the continuing imbalance between the resources devoted to acquiring high-tech gear and the resources devoted to improving the lot of the infantryman. Stealth bombers (costing \$2 billion a pop) and the like get all the attention, while the soldiers who actually carry out most of today's missions tote outdated equipment. Our satellites can see license plates from outer space, but our mine detectors can't see the mines under our soldiers' feet. It amazed me in Bosnia last winter that every reporter wore better body armor than did the American troops they were covering. (Ours, available from the store that outfits the Washington, D.C. police, can stop some bullets; theirs really only protect against shrapnel and other bits of flying metal, hence the name "flak jacket.") My boots were warmer than Col. Fontenot's; CNN's communications capabilities, in the house the network rented on the bank of the Sava River, also outclassed the Colonel's.

Given his bias for the grunt down in the mud, Hackworth also provides a surprisingly fair infantryman's assessment of Colin Powell, who is his polar opposite in military culture, the staff

weenie who never strayed too far from the flagpole: "General Colin Powell is a fine political officer with a distinguished career as a military bureaucrat. . . . He was never a romping, stomping, war-fighting general." Powell may disagree with that assessment—but not the soldiers out on the pointy end of the stick.

But then it is as if another round of drinks arrives at the table, and your drinking buddy's focus wavers. The further Hackworth gets from the front lines, the less sure his touch becomes. His media criticism, for example, is perplexing. There is a lot to criticize, but he misses the target altogether when he calls for more stories about Pentagon spending on projects like the Milstar satellite, the early Bradley fighting vehicle, and the B-1 bomber. As I recall, a generation of Pentagon reporters put bread on their tables precisely by grinding out encyclopedic stories about those projects. His recommendations on large-scale defense policy are just as tired. "Inter-service rivalry" is a familiar target, and he fires at it predictably, as have a dozen previous authors in rip-the-lid-off-the-Pentagon books. But inter-service rivalry is underappreciated. It may produce redundancies (which, in fact, aren't always bad in war), but it also introduces an element of competition and truth-telling in the services. The Marines really do operate differently than—and frequently better than—the Army. And the Navy really quietly believes that its radar can detect more of the Stealth bomber than the Air Force lets on.

Hackworth is at his blowziest in the chapter on his role in the suicide earlier this year of Adm. Mike Boorda, who at the time was the chief of the Navy. His self-defense rings hollow, and his words grow mushy: "[H]is suicide was a tragedy. His career needed no embellishment. He should have been as proud of the Navy as it was of him." Hackworth doesn't do himself or his employer, *Newsweek* magazine, any good when he casually charges that *Newsweek's* regular defense correspondent, John Barry, "had been so busy practicing hey-let's-do-lunch journalism that it is small wonder he didn't discover or develop the Boorda story himself." He uses the episode to lecture

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MEDIA & POLITICS

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By

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Barry on the job of a reporter. Then, three pages later, he portrays himself asking Sen. Sam Nunn and senior Army officers to promote an Army friend that Hackworth considers a true warrior—as if lobbying for promotions were a reporter's proper role.

The fact is that Hackworth isn't a professional journalist, but a gifted amateur. This follows on his military career: He was a "warrior," not a professional soldier who manages the violence of others. There is always a tension between the two in American military culture. The distinction tends to be lost on the general population, especially the political and economic elites who know little and care less about military affairs. But it is important. If Hackworth were a professional soldier, he probably would have been able to look at the big picture more insightfully. At the very least, a professional soldier wouldn't have concluded this book as Hackworth does, with this Tarzan-like chest-pounding: "So be warned, all you Perfumed Princes and Propaganda Poets, all you slick political porkers and weapons makers with your hands in the till. I intend to keep sniffing around like an old coyote, chewing on the Military Industrial Congressional Complex and calling 'em as I see 'em."

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Southern Fried Politics

By John Egerton

ONE OF THE GREAT drawbacks of writing biography—or so it would seem to me—is the unavoidable necessity of spending huge blocks of time studying your subject, dead or alive. This could get to be tedious. It could be much worse if the person were someone you didn't particularly like, someone whose philosophy and behavior you found reprehensible, and someone who

was hostile to your biographical intent. The whole experience could be enough to make you swear off writing forever.

All the more reason to admire a scholar such as Dan T. Carter, the Kenan Professor of History at Emory University. For eight years, he labored on a biography of Alabama governor and presidential aspirant George C. Wallace, who to this day has not deigned to speak to the professor. If anything, Carter's admittedly more liberal proclivities and Wallace's cold shoulder made the author bend every effort to be thorough, fair, and honest in his portrayal of the foremost segregationist of the mid-20th century.

First in a full-length biography and now in the series of lectures which comprise his current book, Carter has taken such a lucid and precise measure of the man and his times that a portrait of much greater depth and breadth emerges: not just Wallace and Alabama and the segregationist South, but the sweep and substance of a half-century of American politics.

Carter's *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* received critical acclaim when it was published in 1995 and won the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award earlier this year. Now, in his Walter Lynwood Fleming lectures in Southern History, delivered in 1991 at Louisiana State University, he succinctly summarizes the rise and fall of Wallace as a regional and national figure and goes on to document the Alabamian's profound influence not only on Southern Republicrats but also on Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and the conservative counterrevolution of the past 30 years.

While noting the significant differences between economic and social conservatives, particularly in regard to the politics of race and gender, Carter nonetheless asserts that the two streams "ultimately joined in the political coalition that reshaped American politics from the 1970s through the mid-1990s." What's more,

FROM GEORGE WALLACE TO NEWT GINGRICH: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994

By Dan T. Carter
Louisiana State University Press, \$22.95