

comfort his patient by concealing the moral and physical ugliness of the abortion. When Widdicombe tries to train Freiman in second-trimester abortions, he recoils in revulsion at a severed fetal arm, "suddenly thinking about Nazi Germany." He tells her he can't do the procedure, but she refuses to accept his refusal. "We're here for the *women*," she cries. "[W]e should be willing to endure the hardest part so they don't have to."

When Widdicombe becomes pregnant, she resorts to the same denial. She explains to Gorney that she and her husband "looked at what the quality of our life was like. It was good. And we decided," on that basis, to get an abortion. Afterward, says Gorney, Widdicombe mourned briefly, "[b]ut she never wavered when she talked about it. This was a decision we made: that was how she would describe her abortion." In this way, by defending her decision as an act, Widdicombe avoids having to defend its content. Indeed, this has been the rhetorical strategy of the whole abortion rights movement: to transform the issue from abortion to "choice," thereby competing with pro-

lifers to control, as Gorney puts it, "the one-word distillation of the morally complex."

Ultimately, this determination to oversimplify makes pro-life and pro-choice activists oddly compatible. Each side finds the war exhilarating. Upon being hauled away from a clinic entrance in handcuffs, a pro-life demonstrator exults, "The first time you try to prevent [an abortion] is an experience you'll never forget."

In their zeal for the war, Gorney's chief protagonists lose touch with their humanity. Widdicombe's marriage collapses, and she weeps as she realizes that her personal life has become "withered and wrong," with "no person left over once the workday was finished, no real inside Judy at all." Lee becomes so preoccupied with saving babies that he quits his job without consulting his wife, who is at home taking care of his own baby. She asks him how they will pay the rent. "We don't have any *money*," she pleads later, in a panic. "How are we going to buy the *milk*?"

When Lee and Widdicombe are finally discarded by their colleagues, Widdicombe muses on the irony of their common fate. "All that solemnity, that blinding moral certainty, it must grow tiresome after a while," Gorney writes. "Zealots, Judy thought to herself with a small lurch of recognition: crusaders, martyrs, pigheaded people, we make useful leaders but exhausting colleagues, we *know* we can see what is right."

But Widdicombe has drawn the wrong lesson. She and Lee have been ousted from their movements, not for their zeal, but for tempering that zeal in heretical pursuit of political compromise. She has become disenchanted with pro-choice activists who find "exhilaration in the combat" and "don't know how to do anything else." Lee has soured on the "repellent" anger of Randall Terry, the "self-absorption" of pro-life purists, and the indecency of a pro-life lobby that expects him, as its full-time advocate, "to solicit donations in order to buy groceries for his family." Together, they have transcended the dogmas of their faiths. They, too, must now be denied.

WILLIAM SALETAN is a columnist for *Slate* magazine.

The Lessons of Chechnya

by Thomas E. Ricks

TALKING ABOUT WHAT SORT OF wars the U.S. is likely to face in the coming decades, Gen. Charles Krulak, the commandant of the Marine Corps, likes to ask, "Are we going to have Son of Desert Storm or the Stepchild of Chechnya?" His answer: "I feel it will be Stepchild of Chechnya."

That grim prediction is one reason this journalistic history of the recent Chechen war has been attracting attention from the U.S. military even before being published in the U.S. (In fact, it was recommended to me by a smart Marine colonel who read the British edition that appeared last year.) If Gen. Krulak is correct and we face encounters like the Chechen War, the U.S. military is in for a rough time. One example: At one point in this book, a group of Chechen fighters moving through a dark sewer en route to an ambush run smack into a group of Russian commandos. "A furious gun battle lit up the pitch-black tunnel as half a dozen rifles opened up," sending bullets ricocheting along the walls and ceiling of the sewer.

As Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, the two young British reporters who co-authored this account, tell it, "The conflict in Chechnya started imperceptibly." Chechnya declared independence in 1991. Russia disputed that claim, but President Boris Yeltsin at first said there would be no military response, and in fact Russian troops were withdrawn from the area in 1992.

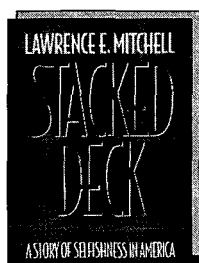
Then Moscow began supplying the pro-Russian opposition with arms. Escalating its involvement as it grew more exasperated with the breakaway republic, Russia in the fall of 1994 sent 40,000 troops to the Chechen border — a move that provoked the interesting charge from Jokhar Dudayev, the Soviet general turned president of Chechnya, that Moscow did indeed head "the evil empire."

President Yeltsin is the villain of this book. Seeking a quick resolution through intimidation, he sent a tank brigade and attack jets into the Chechen capital of Grozny in an ill-

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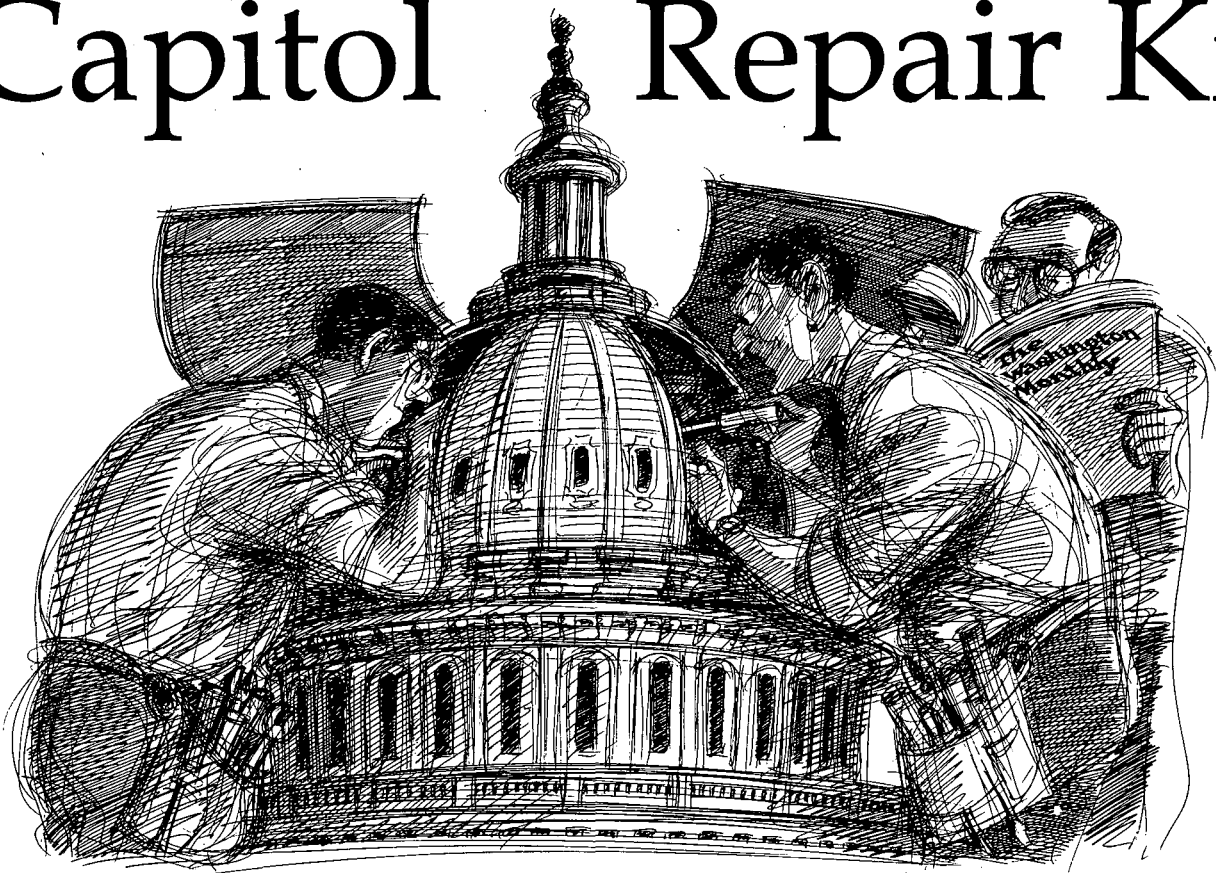
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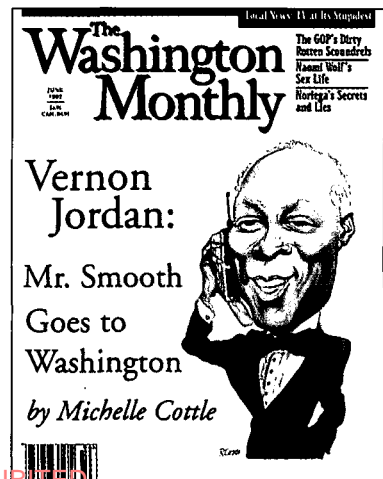
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considered show of force that actually permitted the Chechens to display their own guerrilla-like military prowess. By day the tank column was swarmed by civilian protesters; that night it was smashed by the rocket-propelled grenades of Chechen fighters. It was spirit, not numbers, that counted: The authors estimate that at first the Chechens were able to counter the 40,000-strong Russian invasion force with only about 1,000 fighters. Purposely permitted by the Chechens to penetrate to the center of the city, the Russian Maikop Brigade was first surrounded and then destroyed.

Russia responded ferociously. The authors claim that at one point, Grozny was hit with the heaviest artillery bombardment since World War II, which seems an overstatement in light of the firepower used in the Iran-Iraq War. Three months later, the Russians took Grozny. According to the authors, 27,000 civilians were killed

in the process, many of them ethnic Russians who, unlike the Chechens, had no relatives in outlying villages to whom they could flee.

Moving the war southward into the mountains of the Chechen countryside, Russian forces committed a variety of atrocities, from burning villages to terrorizing prisoners by throwing them from hovering helicopters. The Chechens sometimes were equally vicious. Even so, to the Russians the war seemed all but won.

Backs to the wall, the Chechens responded in mid-1995 with what is generally called terrorism, but what contemporary military theorists analyze as an "asymmetrical response": They drove north into a Russian town and took hostage some 1,200 people in a hospital, spectacularly humiliating a Russian government that thought it had resolved the Chechen problem. Months later Chechen fighters roared back out of their mountain retreats. In August 1996 they recaptured the

remains of Grozny from 12,000 under-trained and demoralized Russian troops. A Russian sergeant told the authors, "The (Chechen) fighters aren't scared to move around and we are, that is the difference. They are the bosses here." By the end of the month, Moscow had agreed to recognize Chechen independence, and Russian troops again withdrew.

This book should be read as a companion to the recent *Philadelphia Inquirer* series on the U.S. Army's disastrous firefight in Somalia in October 1993. Both works should be required as cautionary reading for policymakers and pundits prone to underestimating the difficulty of intervening in the cities of the Third World, whether Baghdad, Mogadishu, or Grozny. The two studies also should prove instructive to anyone who thinks future wars will be high-tech, low-sweat affairs.

THOMAS E. RICKS, *The Wall Street Journal's* Pentagon correspondent, is the author of *Making the Corps*.

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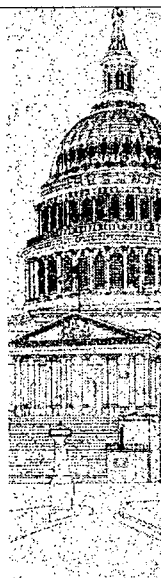
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by Thomas Toch

THE LONGER AMERICAN KIDS stay in school, the further they fall behind their counterparts in other industrialized countries. That's the troubling finding of a big international study of students' math and science skills conducted over the past couple of years. U.S. fourth-graders end up near the top of the global pile in science and above average in math; eighth-graders are slightly above average in science and below average in math; 12th-graders outperform only Cyprus and South Africa among 21 nations in a test of general math and science knowledge. The 12th-grade results, released only a few weeks ago to front-page coverage in the major dailies, explode the conventional wisdom that our top students are as good as those of our economic competitors: U.S. kids ended up tied for last on a special test of physics and advanced math. To add insult to injury, Asian nations, whose students routinely turn