

Saving Face: Hackworth's Troubling Odyssey

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A Review Essay on *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior*. By David H. Hackworth and Julie Sherman. Simon and Schuster, 1989.

There is much to dislike about this memoir, starting with the narcissistic photograph of the author that adorns the dust jacket. Granted, readers of *About Face* may decide that the photo strikes the right note: certainly the vanity it conveys matches the smugness of the text. And the anomalous image of a self-described warrior so splendidly coifed and manicured sets the stage nicely for the contradictions that pervade the narrative.

During a career spanning some 25 years and two wars, David Hackworth proved himself to be an inspired troop leader, a brilliant trainer, and a fighter of remarkable courage and tenacity. Such qualities do not guarantee that any would-be author can produce a book worth reading.

We should note up front that *About Face* is miserably written. As a prose stylist, Colonel Hackworth is unoriginal, his notion of vivid writing running toward sentences like "They were strange dudes, the Chinese . . ." His penchant for dated Army slang and Vietnam-era clichés, contrived no doubt to provide a tone of authenticity, serves only to make a military reader wince. The truly curious will overlook these stylistic shortcomings and concentrate on substance. In this regard, we can evaluate the book from several points of view.

At its pettiest, *About Face* is a celebrity memoir in olive drab. Rule one of this kiss-and-tell genre projects retail sales in proportion to the nastiness of the author's judgments about former colleagues. Thus, among the reasons for Colonel Hackworth's decision to recount his career, one finds an evident desire to settle old scores. The author goes out of his way to take mean-spirited swipes at the "wimps" and "prancers" who failed to live up to his version of the warrior ethic. His victims include many notables of the post-Korean War Army: Goodpaster, Westmoreland, Haig, DePuy, Cushman, Ewell, and so on.

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Hackworth saves his most venomous—and most effective—attack for S. L. A. Marshall. Hackworth had been one of Marshall's favorites and had prospered under his sponsorship. Now Hackworth lambastes the late journalist-historian as a hustler, phony, and "military ambulance chaser." Whether Marshall, in fact, was a "power-rapt little man who threw his weight around shamelessly" matters little. That he may have been an intellectual fraud, as Hackworth devastatingly maintains, matters a great deal to those who turn to Marshall's writings for insights into the behavior of soldiers in battle. Others had already begun to cast doubt upon Marshall's methods. Hackworth delivers the coup de grace.

At its most audacious, *About Face* represents an elaborate effort to claim the mantle that Hackworth believes to be rightly his—the one he would have worn had his career not ended ignominiously in Vietnam. Hackworth yearns to walk among those who adhered to the warrior's code yet rose to high rank: the Gavins, Ridgways, Bruce Clarkes, and others less well known. To bolster his claim of belonging in this circle, Hackworth refers to himself repeatedly as a "legend." Those who reserve that term for the likes of DiMaggio, Garbo, or Hemingway may consider Hackworth's use of it impertinent. Indeed, it is chutzpah of the highest order. Patton and Rommel are legendary soldiers—years after their last battles, they retain prominence in the popular memory. The public legend of David Hackworth, by comparison, traces back to an interview on network television in 1971, recalled in his book in reverential tones and reprinted verbatim. In that interview, the warrior broke with the Army and the war, winning the 15 minutes of fame that Andy Warhol promised each of us in the media age. Less than two decades later, the reputations of Patton and Rommel remain intact, the Hackworth interview lies forgotten (rightly so—no Rosetta Stone there on why we lost the war), and one doubts that even among serving officers more than one in a hundred could have identified Hackworth, at least before the splashy appearance of his book with its attendant publicity tour, cover story in *Parade* magazine, etc. And this notoriety too will be fleeting. So much for legend.

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At its most presumptuous, *About Face* serves as a vehicle for promoting Hackworth's credentials as a trenchant critic of military affairs, someone to whom his fellow citizens might turn for counsel on complex issues of national security. Key to Hackworth's hopes of assuming the role of wise man is that he reaffirm the correctness of his views on Vietnam, the central episode of his career and the setting of his professional demise. Hackworth must convince his readers that he was justified as a serving officer in criticizing publicly both US policy in Vietnam and the US Army—"the rotten whore I'd been madly in love with." He argues his case on two levels, in both instances without success.

On the one hand, Hackworth depicts the American cause in Vietnam as not merely imperfect, but altogether evil. Thus he characterizes the Cambodian invasion of 1970, an undertaking that "violated all the principles" upon which the United States had been built, as no "different from the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor." Hackworth equates American methods in Cambodia to those "the Nazis used to invade Poland." Having gorged himself on reckless analogies, Hackworth becomes abruptly and inexplicably timid, concluding that the Cambodian operation's *real* defect was that it was "five years too late in coming." The reader is left wondering whether Hackworth's critique rests on matters of principle or questions of timing.

Worse still, nowhere in his rendition of shoddy American motives, corrupt Vietnamese officials, and lazy ARVN officers does Hackworth contemplate the fate of Indochina since US involvement there ended. To assert that American efforts in Vietnam "had shown our Nazi side" while failing to note the consequences of communist victory—genocide in Cambodia and repression in Vietnam so severe as to create the phenomenon of the boat people—suggests a moral and historical shortsightedness that is positively breathtaking.

On another level, Hackworth attributes American failure in Vietnam not to flawed policy but to the Army's self-seeking, incompetent leadership—an indictment from which he excludes warriors such as himself. There is little new in his account of how the officer corps botched the war—the lack of consistent strategic vision, the penchant for large-unit operations, the excessive use of firepower, the meddling of senior commanders in small-unit actions, the reliance on false or misleading statistical indicators. Only in denouncing the quality of training provided to Vietnam-bound recruits does Hackworth add something fresh and important to the standard litany.

The secondhand character of his critique compels Hackworth to venture beyond simply bashing senior American leaders for their mishandling of Vietnam. Hackworth boldly asserts that *he* knew how to win the war, basing this claim on his five months as a battalion commander in the Mekong Delta in 1969.

Hackworth is at his best in describing how he turned around a listless, undisciplined unit and invested it with savvy and fighting spirit. He is less

persuasive in contending that the way he fought his battalion provided a blueprint for victory. Hackworth says that he taught his battalion to “out G the G,” to beat the guerrilla at his own game, abandoning the wasteful, counter-productive practices of the apostles of firepower and centralized control. The proof? The author describes in proud detail an action in which his unit killed 143 of the enemy, thanks to 13 airstrikes that Hackworth himself directed from his orbiting command and control ship. According to Hackworth, this tactical success demonstrated that “our unbeatable firepower would always turn the tide of battle in our favor.” Indeed, his battalion had shown how “our superior firepower could be used not just to destroy our foe but actually to preserve American lives.” Readers with even a passing knowledge of the war will have understandable difficulty in determining how, if at all, Hackworth’s methods in this instance differed from those of other units. As for his ostensibly profound conclusion, contemporary defenders of the Army’s standard tactics in Vietnam were saying precisely the same thing throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Not content to rest his case on this single battle, Hackworth argues that his battalion’s performance throughout his tenure in command proved that he had solved the riddle of counterinsurgency. His chosen measure of success? The much-maligned but ever-useful body count. During his months in command, Hackworth tells us, his unit’s “body count figures were more than 2500 Viet Cong killed in action in exchange for 25 battalion lives. 100:1. *Even with a hefty rate of inflation taken into account* [emphasis added], these were damn good numbers.” How would “damn good numbers” have led to victory? Hackworth explains that if other units had racked up comparable scores, the United States would eventually have pierced the enemy’s threshold of pain. “And in that way, the war could have been won. . . .” Sounds good. Only we tried it. And we killed lots of people. And we lost. Can Hackworth not understand that?

In the book’s closing chapter, Hackworth offers a sampling of the sage advice he hopes to share regarding defense issues generally and the Army in particular. It is an embarrassing effort—barely coherent, superficial, and marred by inaccuracies. An ungenerous reader might surmise that during his years of making money in Australian exile Hackworth relied solely on an occasional issue of *Time* magazine to keep up with the contemporary debate over American defense policy.

Reflecting his experience as an anti-nuclear activist in Australia (he modestly credits himself with helping to “illumine a nation to the most critical issue humankind has faced to this day”), Hackworth begins with the pronouncement that “the stakes of war have grown too high [for war] to be a viable problem solver.” This banality has been kicking around at least since World War I with events disproving it just as routinely ever since—a fact that in no way affects the popularity of such sentiments among aspiring politicians, academics, artistic types, and their journalistic camp followers.

Hackworth *knows* that his claim is nonsense. So having paid obeisance to the “war is obsolete” school, he immediately disavows it. He declares that war lurks just over the horizon and fixes its likely location as Latin America. Convinced that “the United States remains fundamentally underdefended,” Hackworth advocates a number of steps to prepare for this impending conflict. A few of Hackworth’s recommendations have merit, though none are original. Too many of them suggest that Hackworth is out of touch. “Training exercises must not be controlled,” he counsels, “but instead be completely free play [so that] soldiers can discover for themselves that war is not a series of canned problems.” Anyone offering that as an innovative proposal is ignorant of the way the Army trains today. In criticizing the quality of modern weapons, Hackworth takes aim at the M1A1 Abrams tank. According to Hackworth, the M1A1 has a range of 56 miles on a load of fuel (wrong), is “battle-ready far less frequently” than the M60 tank it replaced (wrong), is kept running by civilians (wrong), and is out-gunned by the Soviet T-80 (wrong, unless diameter of the bore is the sole measure of a tank cannon’s effectiveness).

Finally, some of Hackworth’s suggestions are just downright goofy. He advocates an immediate return to the draft, not because the volunteer soldier is unsatisfactory but “to make every American aware and prepared to pay the price of admission to life in a land of freedom.” Hackworth would offer his draftees an early chance to pay that price in Cuba. Although the United States has managed to accommodate itself to Cuba, albeit with clenched teeth, since the missile crisis of 1962, Castro has Hackworth in a tizzy. Hackworth insists that Cuban support of Latin American insurgents be stopped now. As “America’s only chance of getting on top of a situation otherwise deteriorating day by day,” Hackworth advocates an immediate air and naval blockade of Cuba. He does not explain why such a provocation would be decisive or what actions he would support if it were not.

Such views make it unlikely that Hackworth will make much of a dent in the world of consultants, pundits, and talk-show regulars. Yet withal, he remains in his way a compelling, if enigmatic figure. Despite its manifest deficiencies, some military readers will no doubt come away from *About Face* persuaded that Hackworth is heroic, noble, and worthy of emulation. Of all the potential baleful consequences of this book, this would be the most pernicious—that would-be warriors might view Hackworth as a role model.

Who in today’s Army would deny the importance of nurturing the warrior spirit? Can anyone be unaware of the tide of factors threatening that spirit? As military life becomes progressively more bureaucratized, centralized, and standardized, traditional concepts of command responsibility and authority lose definition. Leaders satisfy themselves with process at the expense of outcome. (“It’s on valid requisition.” “I sent him to the counselling center.”)

Officers worry excessively about negotiating the latest career “gates,” most of them remote from the cutting edge. Opportunities to serve with troops and to wrestle first-hand with the challenges of preparation for war become rarer.

Those unhappy with such influences would normally welcome a book celebrating the primacy of the warrior ethic. Yet those concerned about the American Army’s future will reject Hackworth’s chest-thumping portrayal of what it takes to be a real soldier—in his idiom, a “stud.” While few would dispute Hackworth’s emphasis on sticking close to the troops and on marching to the sound of the guns, beyond that he has it all wrong.

Implicit in Hackworth’s thesis is the proposition that warriors are not bound by the rules that guide the conduct of lesser mortals. *About Face* is laced with anecdotes boasting of Hackworth’s propensity for flouting regulations, laws, and commonly accepted moral standards. While a young officer at Fort Benning, he shacks up with the wife of a brother officer fighting in Korea. As a commander, he recruits his sergeants to participate in a scheme to cover up the loss of a weapon. (“I’d stayed out of the whole operation.”) In the late 1950s, he diverts “excess” training ammunition to an ex-Army buddy now running guns to an aspiring Cuban revolutionary named Castro. (According to Hackworth’s version of history, Castro was a good guy in those days; “It was *American* policy that sent Castro into the Soviet camp.”) Years later, in a similar gesture of goodwill, he supplies a truckload of cheap PX beer to an acquaintance running a Saigon bar. Hackworth’s friend, in turn, sells the beer at a huge markup—mostly to GIs. (“Strictly speaking the transaction made me a black marketeer, too, but my conscience was clear.”)

Hackworth also ran a lucrative whorehouse on the compound of his last command in Vietnam. (Since the French had maintained field brothels in Indochina, “There was no reason why we shouldn’t. It was the regulations that were wrong.”) Did he profit from the operation personally? He says not. Yet as his departure from active duty approached, he packed his own golden parachute at the expense of his soldiers. “I needed a grubstake and I needed it fast,” he explains. To get it, Hackworth gambled with the troops, won big, and then cajoled subordinates into smuggling the cash illegally out of Vietnam. Hackworth also subverted the urinalysis required of his homeward-bound soldiers, condoned the use of marijuana by his officers and NCOs, and toward the end admitted to drug use himself.

Each of these escapades, indiscretions, and illegalities Hackworth justifies—at times, even celebrates—by virtue of his being a true warrior. He alleges that all warriors have voracious sexual appetites, for example, making it acceptable for Hackworth to sleep with another officer’s wife or to cheat on his own without compunction or remorse. As a warrior, Hackworth responded to his own “Code of Conscience, the rules of which were based on the needs of my men versus regulations, or the desires of my higher ups.” That

code made Hackworth the sole arbiter of right and wrong, a prerogative he exploited to the hilt. By the time of his final year in Vietnam, he would claim that "I *did* have my own Army. . . . And I *was* the law."

Those with the temerity to suggest that Hackworth occasionally trimmed the cloth of that conscience to suit himself simply didn't understand. Thus the soldier who accused Hackworth of using drugs "saw . . . what he saw, but without any perspective." The needed perspective? "I was . . . absolutely knee-knocking drunk at the time, and when that joint was passed to me, I probably would have taken it if it had been cow dung. So I had a few puffs." For warriors, being in an alcoholic stupor apparently suffices to excuse misconduct. (And why not? As Hackworth asserts elsewhere, drinking was like sex: "the more you could put away, the more macho you were among your buddies.")

Should readers conclude from Hackworth's chronicle that to be a warrior is to be a renegade? One might as well conclude from the evening news that all basketball stars use cocaine or that all congressmen are crooked. Apart from exposing his individual character, Hackworth's testimony proves nothing and means nothing.

For all its apparent candor, Hackworth's accounting of his life remains at root false. Absorbed by the trivial story of his own undoing and by the frustration of his ambitions, Hackworth is blind to the larger drama in which he played a modest but essential role—the drama of the Army's painful involvement in the long, brutal, and unwon conflicts of the Cold War. Historians may eventually conclude that America demanded more of her soldiers during this period than she ever had of earlier generations. Especially was this the case in Vietnam, where by the end simply to do your duty was to be labeled a fool and a cretin, at odds with the rest of society, or at least with its most vocal and self-righteous members. Soldiers who gave of themselves far less than did Hackworth had difficulty understanding the point of it all: enduring hardships about which few at home seemed to care; carrying on with meaningless operations in an atmosphere of decay and disintegration; suffocating under a blanket of moral anomie woven of hypocrisy, contradiction, sanctimonious posturing, and self-serving chatter.

To most soldiers of today's Army—by every outward measure confident and healthy—all of that may seem about as relevant as someone else's bad dream. Yet survivors of that period might justifiably wonder whether the Army has come to terms with its past or merely buried it. An attempt to answer that question might have saved *About Face* from the oblivion to which it is otherwise destined. And a warrior's warrior such as David Hackworth should have been the one to help the Army examine its long ordeal of Cold War from some useful perspective.

How regrettable that Hackworth once again has kicked away a golden opportunity. □