

AlbertMohler.com

Completely Portable Pleasure — The Annual Summer Reading List

Friday, June 5, 2009

Summer represents a golden opportunity for reading — at least in theory. Most of us create stacks of books we hope to read over the summer months, and summer tends to define a certain kind of reading intended for pleasure. Thankfully, good books can be both pleasurable and enriching. This particular summer reading list is intended especially for men, and it is written in the hope that men and older boys will find this list particularly helpful and interesting.



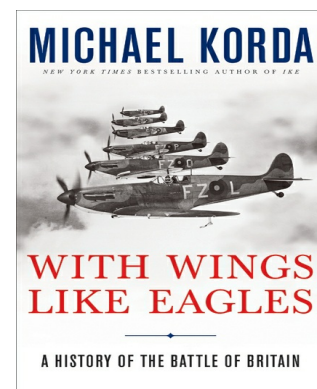
Books represent one of our greatest and most convenient means of escape. By means of the book, the reader can make his way into any number of historical ages and fascinating places.

Always ready to be read, the book is the very essence of availability. As one book lover commented: “Books are quiet. They do not dissolve into wavy lines or snowstorm effects. They do not pause to deliver commercials. They are three-dimensional, having length, breadth and depth. They are convenient to handle and completely portable.” What more need be said?

Michael Korda, *With Wings Like Eagles: A History of the Battle of Britain* (Harper).

The Battle of Britain is one of the most well-known phases of World War II. Even so, it remains as compelling as ever. Those relatively few men who flew with such bravery were, for a time, all that stood between Adolf Hitler and his domination of Great Britain. Had Britain fallen, Nazi Germany would have controlled virtually all of Western Europe. Beyond this, a defeated Britain would have left the United States vulnerable on the seas and around the world.

Though several good books have been written about the Battle of Britain, Michael Korda brings a distinctive and thorough approach to this phase of the war. With Adolf Hitler rebuilding Germany’s power in the air, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin fatalistically predicted, “The bomber will always get through.” In the summer of 1940 fewer than 2000 young fighter pilots proved the Prime Minister wrong. Those pilots and their crews saved Britain and gave hope to free peoples around the world. The Battle of Britain, named as such by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, stands as one of the greatest moments in the history of any democratic people. As Korda explains, “Like the defeat of the Spanish Armada and Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar over the combined fleets of France and Spain, it is etched deeply into the national consciousness as a moment of supreme danger when Britain, alone, courageous, defiant, without allies, defeated a more powerful and warlike enemy in the nick of time.”



With Wings Like Eagles is an accurate and well-written account that takes the reader into the drama of those days and the lives of the pilots. Korda places the Battle of Britain within the larger context of the war and, in the end, makes clear that, had Britain fallen, the world we know would be a remarkably different place.

An excerpt:

Hitler was not wrong in thinking that many people in England, on the left as well as the right, would still have preferred a compromise peace to a continued, all-out war. As late as May 26, 1940, more than two weeks after Churchill took office as prime minister, Lord Halifax, the British foreign secretary who George VI and most of the Conservative Party had hoped would replace Neville Chamberlain as prime minister instead of Churchill, revealed to the War Cabinet that he had been talking to the Italian ambassador in London about the possibility that “signor Mussolini” might agree to inquire of the Führer what his terms would be for peace with Britain. This démarche dismayed Churchill when he heard of it—his own opinion, as expressed later to the members of the larger cabinet, was, “We shall go on, we shall fight it out here or elsewhere, and if at last the long story is to end, it were better it should end, not through surrender, but only when we are rolling senseless on the ground.” Halifax’s chat with the Italian ambassador, however much it alarmed and displeased Churchill, must have kindled optimism in Berlin. Hitler himself had thrown the British what he intended to be an olive branch, in the form of a long speech in which he offered to guarantee the continued existence of the British Empire and fleet in return for a free hand for Nazi Germany in Europe. So far, the results of this were disappointing, to be sure, but who could be certain that in the face of invasion the British might not come to their senses and replace Churchill with, say, Halifax, or Lloyd George, and agree to sit down at the bargaining table like sensible people? The British were defeated, Hitler believed—the fact of their defeat had simply not sunk in on them yet.

Simon Baatz, *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder that Shocked Chicago* (Harper).

The 1920s represented a time of social foment in America. Old ways of thinking were giving way to new patterns of life and thought. A nation that considered itself morally innocent in the aftermath of World War I had to face some stark and dark realities about itself in the next decade. One of the darkest events of that decade took place in 1924, when two wealthy young men of privilege callously murdered a 14-year-old boy named Bobby Franks — just for the thrill of it.

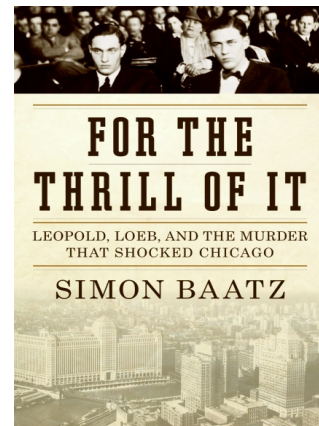
Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were friends, homosexual lovers, and self-styled intellectuals. They came from some of the most well-established Jewish families in Chicago and they had received educations of the highest quality. No one could claim that these two young men came from difficult backgrounds. They had suffered no deprivation. Nevertheless, they proved themselves to be depraved and cruel murderers who kidnapped, tortured, and brutally murdered a 14-year-old boy just because they wanted to know what the experience would feel like.

When Leopold and Loeb came to trial, the crucial question was not their guilt, but whether the two would face the death penalty. The legal proceedings that allowed these two murderers to escape execution became a model for the sensational criminal trials that would follow in subsequent decades. Into this scene stepped Clarence Darrow, soon to be famous as the attorney for the defense in the Scopes trial. Darrow’s defense would throw into question everything Americans believed about guilt, personal responsibility, and moral action.

Simon Baatz tells his tale with the skill a reporter and the skill of a historian. *For the Thrill of It* is one of most compelling criminal legal thrillers of our times. Readers of this book will gain an understanding of America in the 1920s even as they follow one of the most interesting criminal investigations and trials and the nation’s history. Beyond this, the reader will have to think through some of the most difficult moral and theological issues that arise when we are confronted with the darkness of human depravity.

An excerpt:

The denial of free will and evil intent and the rejection of punishment as a response to crime necessarily assumed a radical revision of courtroom procedure. All three of Darrow’s psychiatrists—White, Healy, and Glueck—subscribed to a medicalizing ideology; all three hoped to extend and expand the influence of psychiatry within the courtroom in a way that would challenge the authority of the legal profession. The legal framework that determined the judicial process in the American courtroom was, according to White, hopelessly outdated; it relied on nineteenth-century concepts and methods that, because they took no heed of modern science, were entirely unsuited to the present day.

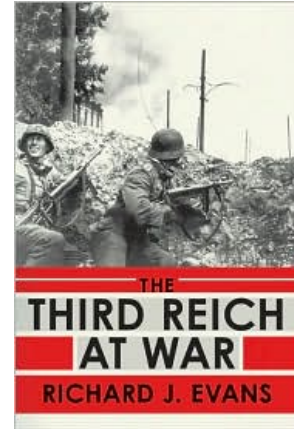


White's animus toward contemporary legal procedure found its focus in the concept of insanity. The court customarily could find a defendant not guilty by reason of insanity; in the American courtroom, the accepted definition of a defendant's insanity was the inability to distinguish right from wrong. But insanity, according to White, was solely a legal concept; it had no basis in medical science. Moreover, this legal concept took no account of the complex character of mental illness. According to medical science, the dichotomy between sanity and insanity simply did not exist; an individual might have any one of any infinite degrees of mental illness, all of which lay on a continuum.

Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (Penguin Press).

World War II holds a special place in the American mind — and for good reason. This global cataclysm represents one of the greatest dramas in human history. Richard Evans, Regius professor of modern history at Cambridge University, has now completed a massive three volume work that represents one of the most comprehensive and accessible accounts of Nazi Germany and World War II. In *The Third Reich at War*, Evans completes his history of Adolf Hitler's Germany, tracing the rise and fall of Hitler's military machine.

The book begins with the invasion of Poland in 1939 and ends with the downfall of the Nazi regime. *The Third Reich at War* is a large book, for it has an enormous story to tell. Richard J. Evans' achievement is to tell this massive story in a way that maintains the reader's attention and provides detail missing from other accounts. The Third Reich "continues to command the attention of thinking people around the world," Evans states. For this reason, thinking people will be especially appreciative of *The Third Reich at War*.



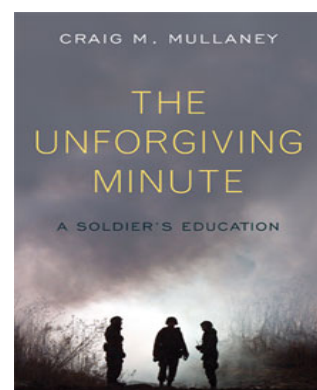
An excerpt:

Hitler's hostility to Christianity reached new heights, or depths, during the war. It was a frequent theme of his mealtime monologues. After the war was over and victory assured, he said in 1942, the Concordat he had signed with the Catholic Church in 1933 would be formally abrogated and the Church would be dealt with like any other non-Nazi voluntary association. The Third Reich 'would not tolerate the intervention of any foreign influence' such as the Pope, and the Papal Nuncio would eventually have to go back to Rome. Priests, he said, were 'black bugs', 'abortions in cassocks'. Hitler emphasized again and again his belief that Nazism was a secular ideology founded on modern science. Science, he declared, would easily destroy the last remaining vestiges of superstition. 'Put a small telescope in a village, and you destroy a world of superstitions.' 'The best thing,' he declared on 14 October 1941, 'is to let Christianity die a natural death. A slow death has something comforting about it. The dogma of Christianity gets worn away before the advances of science.' He was particularly critical of what he saw as its violation of the law of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. 'Taken to its logical extreme, Christianity would mean the systematic cultivation of human failure.' It was indelibly Jewish in origin and character. 'Christianity is a prototype of Bolshevism: the mobilization by the Jew of the masses of slaves with the object of undermining society.' Christianity was a drug, a kind of sickness: 'Let's be the only people who are immunized against the disease.' 'In the long run,' he concluded, 'National Socialism and religion will no longer be able to exist together.' He would not persecute the Churches: they would simply wither away. 'But in that case we must not replace the Church by something equivalent. That would be terrifying!' The future was Nazi, and the future would be secular.

Craig M. Mullaney, *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education* (Penguin Press).

Greg Mullaney is a most unusual writer. In *The Unforgiving Minute* he tells the story of his experience through four years at West Point, training as an Army Ranger, studies at Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar, and his experience as an officer commanding a platoon in Afghanistan. *The Unforgiving Minute* is fascinating at every turn, revealing the inner thoughts and remarkable experiences of a young man emerging as a leader in battle. The book will be of interest to a wide variety of readers, all of whom will learn a great deal as this young man reveals his own experience and reflections.

The Unforgiving Minute is in account that mixes courage with intelligence and deep patriotic commitment with a reflective mind. This book is an account of education, growth into manhood, and the demands of leadership. It unites the intensity of battle



with the anguished thoughts of a young man who desperately wants to be worthy of the trust invested in him.

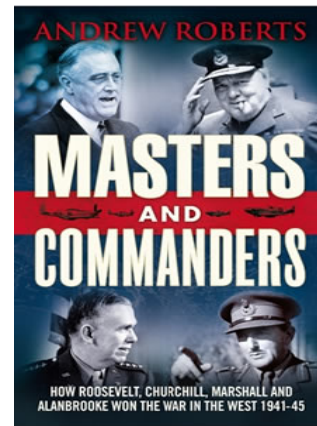
An excerpt:

Only perfection was acceptable. Attention to detail was beat into my head with the regularity of a jackhammer. A loose belt buckle, and undone shoelace, dust on the brim of my service cap, all resulted in the same ominous rebuke: You just killed your platoon.

During those first few months, the connection between battlefield leadership and attention to detail was hard to make. Seven years later the link would be obvious. Military command, perhaps unlike any other profession, demands that its practitioners see with absolute clarity both the forest and the trees. Any number of missed details could compromise a mission, from forgetting to bring an extra battery for the tactical radio to skipping the maintenance for the one tiny piece of a machine gun that fails in a firefight. Miss a digit on a GPS coordinate, and an artillery round could land on friendly troops. One mistake really could kill your platoon.

Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941 — 1945* (Harper).

Andrew Roberts is a writer who evokes the style and magisterial scope of Winston Churchill as historian. It is no accident, for Winston Churchill has been a fascination of this author and, to a considerable extent, it is Churchill's worldview that shapes Andrew Roberts' understanding of World War II. In *Masters and Commanders*, however, Roberts is not looking only to Winston Churchill and his leadership of the war. To the contrary, Roberts makes the case that the Allied conduct of World War II came down to an absolutely unprecedented partnership between Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alan Brooke, and George C. Marshall.



In Roberts' fascinating account, Roosevelt and Churchill emerge as the great political strategists who are able to work together to forge a united effort among the Allied powers. They were complemented by General Sir Alan Brook and General George C. Marshall, who brought military genius to bear on the daunting challenge of defeating Nazi Germany. *Masters and Commanders* is an absolutely compelling read as a work of history. Roberts has done the hard work of the historian in digging out correspondence and historical records in order to fill in significant gaps in our knowledge of the relationships between and among these four significant leaders. The strength of this book is that, in making his case, Roberts allows us to meet each of these four men in a whole new way.

An excerpt:

Because Nazi Germany was an autocracy, Hitler was able to impose a grand strategy on his generals that a few at the beginning, but many by the middle and almost all by the end, thought suicidal. Subservient subordinates such as Jodl and Keitel failed to ask searching questions, and few other German generals had the access or the courage to criticize their Fuhrer's plans to his face, on the rare occasions that they were given the opportunity to be apprised of them beforehand. Flawed strategies, such as the 'no withdrawal' policies in Tunisia, Russia and Italy, were therefore not subjected to the kind of unsparring analysis that would undoubtedly have halted their adoption in a democracy. By complete contrast, the strategies of the Western Allies had to be exhaustively argued through the planning Staff, General Staff, Chiefs of Staff and then Combined Chiefs of Staff levels, before they were even capable of being placed before the politicians, where they were debated in microscopic detail all over again. As we have seen, the British and American Chiefs of Staff spoke their minds without fear or favour, in a way that Hitler's lieutenants could not. Even Stalin, as the war progressed, gave more and more autonomy to the members of the Stavka (High Command) in Moscow, as well as to commanders in the field.

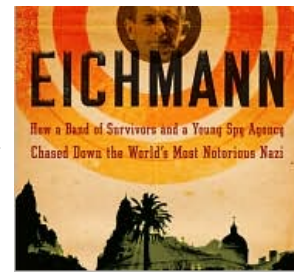
Neil Bascomb, *Hunting Eichmann* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

The arrest and trial of Adolf Eichmann took place almost a half-century ago now, and though his name lives in infamy, the story of his capture and its significance is largely lost to the current generation. Now arrives *Hunting Eichmann* by Neil Bascomb, and the



story comes alive again.

Bascomb has written the only full account of Eichmann's capture and its aftermath. He tells the story with great skill, and he sets the record straight on a number of questions. The most interesting fact about the search for Adolf Eichmann in the years after World War II is the fact that he was not even on the top list of wanted Nazi criminals at the war's end. Eichmann's central role in administering the "Final Solution" and the murder of millions of Jews in Germany and central Europe became evident only in the years after the war.



Eichmann's eventual capture and arrest owed much to a German prosecutor, who sent Israeli officials word that Eichmann was living in Argentina with his wife and sons. From there, the Israelis took over the investigation and search. Bascomb writes the story like a spy thriller — which it certainly is. But this story is much more than a thriller, it is a much needed reminder of the necessity of moral judgment, legal justice, and personal accountability. Bascomb's account of Eichmann's capture is an adrenalin-laced read. His account of Eichmann's trial in Israel is shorter, but very important.

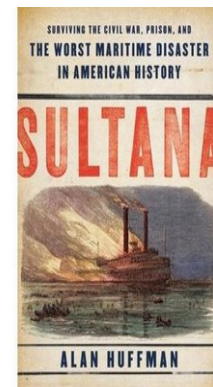
Eichmann was executed in Israel on May 31, 1962. He was the first and, so far, the last person executed after trial in Israel. *Hunting Eichmann* serves as a reminder of why the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann remains one of the most important events of the twentieth century.

An excerpt:

As dawn broke the next day, Harel turned over the last page in the thick dossier. He was deeply unsettled by the portrait he now had of Adolf Eichmann. Here was a man, Harel surmised, who had assembled the apparatus to kill millions of people, who had separated children from their mothers, driven the elderly on long marches, emptied out whole villages, and sent them all to the gas chambers. All the while, he had been beating his chest in pride for being faithful to the SS oath, a soldier and an idealist. It was clear to Harel that Eichmann had killed without compunction and was an expert in police and intelligence methods. Of this he had no doubt. If Eichmann was still alive, he had managed to elude his pursuers time and again and had removed all traces of his existence over the past dozen years. This new information from Germany, solid as it appeared to be, might be yet another false lead. Nevertheless, given what he now knew about Eichmann, Harel set about finding out if that was the case.

Alan Huffman, *Sultana: Surviving the Civil War, Prison, and the Worst Maritime Disaster in American History* (Collins).

The explosion and sinking of the Mississippi riverboat *Sultana* is one of the least known events of the most tragic period in American life. In April 1865, with the war won and the nation exhausted, the *Sultana* moved up the Mississippi carrying hundreds of Union soldiers. An estimated 2400 passengers were on the vessel when it exploded and sank in a fiery disaster that cost almost 1700 lives.



Adding insult to injury, most of the passengers aboard the *Sultana* were newly liberated prisoners of war who were finally headed home. Though unknown to most Americans today, the sinking of the *Sultana* represents the worst maritime disaster in this nation's history. *Sultana* is a book that makes for compelling reading that reaches the heart.

An excerpt:

Perry Summerville awoke to find himself flying through the air. His first thought was that the Sultana had been running close to shore and he had been swept off the deck by an overhanging limb. When he hit the water he plummeted into the depths, came up about a hundred feet from the boat, and began swimming back toward it, calling for help, only to see that it was on fire. He instinctively turned downstream and swam away, which was not easy on his bum leg, with his shoulders and chest severely bruised by the blast and fall, and his back scalded by the steam. He found a section of the boat's railing to hold on to, and he glanced back in wonder at the terrible scene, at the silhouettes of people clamoring on the decks, some being consumed by flames, while hundreds dove into the water, in most cases to drown.

Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of U.S. Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan* (Scribners).

Every war constitutes a collection of human stories from the edge of courage and the extremes of existence. Author Doug Stanton tells the story of a small group of U.S. Special Forces soldiers who went into Afghanistan shortly after September 11, 2001, and then went after the Taliban. In *Horse Soldiers*, Stanton follows the experience of these soldiers as they experience the euphoria of an immediate victory only to find themselves ambushed, outnumbered, and in an apparently hopeless situation.

Horse Soldiers is a story that demands to be told and Stanton tells it well. No one reading this account will believe that the establishment of a lasting peace in Afghanistan will be anything but unspeakably difficult — and unquestionably important.

An excerpt:

In reality, everyone had already decided that they would not be taken alive, if a gun battle came to that. They'd sat on their cots and written what they called their "death letters"—last missives home to wives and family about last thoughts. One Special Forces soldier had poured his heart out. He truly expected not to come home at all. "If you are reading this letter," he wrote to his family, "things are not well for me. And I [had] so many things I wanted to do with you both. I love you and think of you as often as possible. You made me the happiest man in the world." He had told his fellow soldiers, "Look, we're in this together. And we need to know that coming back isn't really an option for us. If we get killed in the process, we get killed. I don't want [us] to shy us away from what we have to do."

After writing their letters, the men removed wedding rings and emptied wallets of any possibly incriminating photos of family and friends (images and information that could be used against them in a torture session) and dropped these tokens of identity in large manila envelopes provided for the occasion. These were sealed and handed for safekeeping to the chaplain.

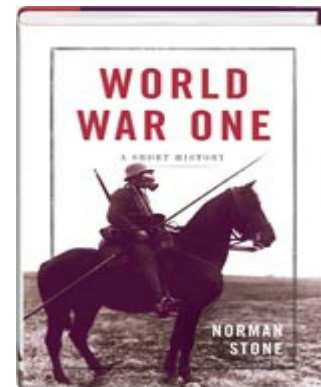
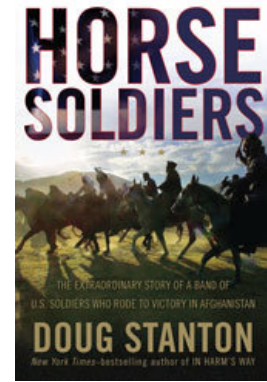
Norman Stone, *World War One: A Short History* (Basic Books).

Though World War II is a matter of almost constant fascination for modern Americans, the same cannot be said in the same sense for World War I. For most Americans that first world war appears so distant from our modern historical consciousness. At the beginning of that war, Europe was governed by crowned heads who ruled as if history would never sweep them away. In *World War One*, Norman Stone does what few historians would even attempt to do — he tells the story of World War I in a brief 200-page account that puts the disaster of this global war into an understandable context.

Stone, an historian who formerly taught at Oxford University, now lives and teaches in Turkey — the site of some of the most intense and disastrous fighting of the first world war. Without flinching, Stone tells the story of the hubris and insane optimism that brought Europe into this disaster and he recounts the blunders and grinding murderousness of this war. Most Americans want to know more about World War I and, most importantly, they want to understand what that war meant. *World War One: A Short History* is a great place to find those questions answered.

An excerpt:

A fire eating diplomat in the Austro-Hungarian foreign ministry called the Archduke's murder 'a gift from Mars'— a wonderful excuse to solve all problems. Austria would be great again, Russia would come to hell, even Turkey might be taken over. In six weeks, a Bismarckian victory. It was, the German emperor said, 'Now or never'. War was to be provoked, and the murder of the Archduke provided a perfect occasion. The Austrians were told that they should use it to attack Serbia, Russia's client, and the means chosen was an ultimatum, containing demands that could not be accepted without the loss of Serbian independence. As it happened, the Austrians were not at all enthusiastic for war with Russia — Serbia, yes, but Russia was too great. The worries translated into delays — the Hungarians to be placated, the harvest to

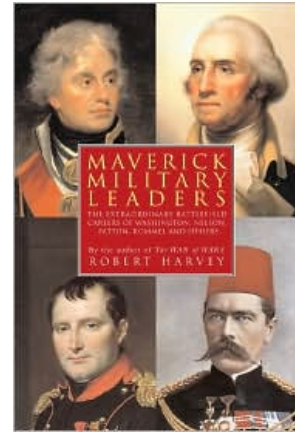


be brought in, and so on. Discreet banging on the table came from Berlin, and on 23 July the ultimatum was sent off. On the 25th, it was accepted but with reservations, and the Austrians declared mobilization – still no declaration of war. There was more banging of the table in Berlin, and war was declared on the 28th.

Robert Harvey, *Maverick Military Leaders: The Extraordinary Battles of Washington, Nelson, Patton, Rommel, and Others* (Skyhorse Publishing).

Robert Harvey, a recognized military historian, argues for what he calls a “golden age of military leadership.” He dates this from 1757 and the Battle of Plassy to 1945 and the defeat of Germany and Japan. As he considers this era, Harvey argues that a succession of great military leaders redefined war and military leadership in order to produce the modern world and the shape of the military we know today.

In calling military leaders “mavericks,” Harvey points to leaders who had greatness thrust upon them. Many of them came from humble backgrounds and experienced setbacks and embarrassments that would have ended the careers of lesser men. In the end, these men changed the world and their military exploits are the stuff of legend. These men, generals, admirals, and marshals — were paragons of leadership who reshaped both the world and the art of war through their genius. Harvey tells the story through essays that trace the stories of twelve remarkable leaders whose strategies and leadership qualities are studied even today. *Maverick Military Leaders* will be enjoyed by anyone seeking to understand war, leadership, and the shaping of the modern world.



An excerpt:

Douglas MacArthur displayed a thoroughly old-fashioned taste for sharing the risks of the frontline with his men when it had become unfashionable; cool thinking on the battlefield; a huge penchant for seizing military opportunities as they arose as well as a gifted tactical grasp; a devotion to his men; and a desire to keep the numbers of casualties down even among the enemy. He also displayed some skill in selecting officers (although too many were sycophants); superb coordination of command and control in battle; the high intelligence evident in his speeches, his paternalist rule in Japan and his humanist attitude to his profession of war; contempt for disadvantageous odds; and an insufferably charismatic, superior and flamboyant personality. He was almost addicted to insubordination from an early age—towards Pershing, Roosevelt (whom, however, he admired) and then Truman (whom he did not).

Like so many of the mavericks, he became a major political leader and administrator, as proconsul of Japan for six years, following in the footsteps of Clive, Washington, Wellington and Grant. Yet, like all of them except Washington, he was a poor politician on his native soil, failing to understand that military glory, command and proconsular authority abroad cannot readily be transferred to the sphere of democratic politics, with its compromises, half-truths and accommodations with lobbies. In Asia, however, like Caesar, 'he did stride this narrow world like a colossus'. He was a maverick, one of the very last of the great warriors and a genius in warfare.

A special note. *Horse Soldiers* and *The Unforgiving Minute* contain brief episodes of inappropriate language that emerge, in the main, from conversations recounted in the context of battle.

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