Liberty's Steamroller

A cultured, perceptive man of principle, General George S. Patton fought for freedom as one of America's greatest military geniuses.

by William Norman Grigg

O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary....

My soul followeth hard after thee. Thy right hand upholdeth me. But those that seek my soul, to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword.... But the king shall rejoice in God; every one that sweareth by him shall glory, but the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped.

— From Psalm 63
General Patton's favorite Bible verse

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"Piety" is not a word commonly associated with the memory of General George S. Patton, also known as "Old Blood and Guts" — a man quite properly regarded as the embodiment of America's martial tradition. The late George C. Scott's Oscar-winning film portrayal of Patton, which was as much caricature as tribute, has immortalized the general as a human juggernaut to whom everything, including worship, was subordinated to an all-consuming passion for war. But as his posthumously published memoir *War As I Knew It* documents, Patton was a cultured and perceptive man of principle for whom war was a means of protecting freedom.

Although his granite-willed determination to destroy the enemy's capacity for warfare is well known, Patton's capacity for melancholy reflection upon war's ugliness is not. Upon arriving in Normandy, Patton noted in his journal that he attended a Field Mass "where all of us were armed. As we knelt in the mud in the slight drizzle, we could distinctly hear the roar of the guns, and the whole sky was filled with airplanes on their missions of destruction … quite at variance with the teachings of the religion we were practicing."

George Gosselin, a much-decorated veteran of

"I am a strong believer in prayer. There are three ways that men get what they want: by planning, by working, and by praying. Any great military operation takes careful planning.... But between the plan and the operation there is always the unknown.... Some people call that getting the breaks; I call it God."

— General Patton

Patton's army, observed that while the general was a "taskmaster" who demanded exemplary order and discipline within the ranks, he was also a man of profound and sincere faith. It should not be forgotten, wrote Gosselin, that "this man, who was so hard on himself and others, was totally soft on God." "I am a strong believer in prayer," declared General Patton on one occasion. "There are three ways that men get what they want: by planning, by working, and by praying. Any great military operation takes careful planning. Then you must have well trained troops to carry it out. But between the plan and the operation there is always the unknown. That unknown spells success or failure. Some people call that getting the breaks; I call it God. God has His part or margin in everything. That's where prayer comes in."

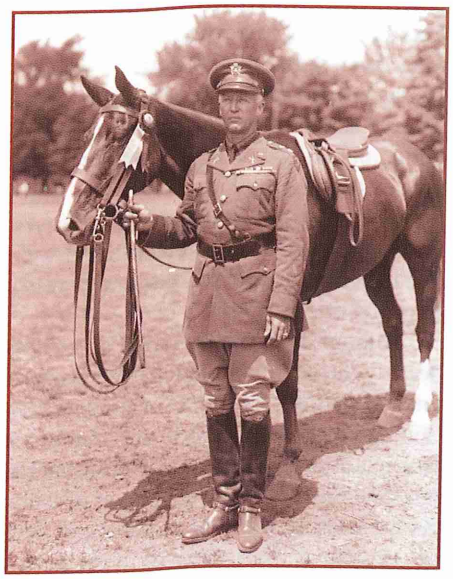
As a believer, Patton's God was Christ, not Mars. As a master strategist given to fits of tactical genius he couldn't explain, Patton understood the need for focused ruthlessness in confronting an insurgent foe; as a Christian, he understood and practiced the virtue of mercy in dealing with a conquered enemy. These complementary aspects of Patton's personality were on display during an interview with the Vicar of Sicily after Patton's forces routed the Italian Army. "I assured him," wrote Patton, "that I was amazed at the stupidity and gallantry of the Italian Army; stupid, because they were fighting for a lost cause, and gallant, because they were Italians." Patton asked the Vicar to call upon the Italians to surrender in order to prevent needless bloodshed. "As a matter of fact," wrote Patton, "I called off the air and naval bombardments we had arranged, because I felt enough people had been killed, and felt that with the drive of the 2nd Armored Division we could take the place without inflicting unproductive losses on the enemy."

On another occasion, Patton referred reproachfully to what he called "the seemingly barbaric bombardment of the centers of cities" during the war, a practice that did not comport with Patton's sense of martial chivalry and the moral principles of just warfare. "Kill all the Germans you can," urged the general during the Third Army's unprecedented drive across Europe, "but do not put them up against a wall and kill them. Do your killing while they are still fighting. After a man has surrendered, he should be treated exactly in accordance with the Rules of Land Warfare, and just as you would hope to be treated if you were foolish enough to surrender. Americans do not kick people in the teeth after they are down."

George Smith Patton was born in California in 1885, and at the age of five he informed his parents of his intention of becoming a "great general." "When he learned to read, the first book he bought was a history of decisive battles," recounted Colonel Robert S. Allen in *Lucky Forward*, his memoir of serving in Patton's Third Army. "In school he was always organizing sham battles. On his honeymoon in France, he took his young bride to historic battlefields and fortresses. Later, when stationed in Hawaii, he and his wife and young children would stage assault landings while on sailing trips. Even when playing his beloved polo, and fox hunting, he played at war." Patton received his Cavalry commission in 1909. After representing the U.S. at the 1912 Olympic Games, Patton took part in General John J. Pershing's punitive raid into Mexico in 1916. Pershing took Patton to France in 1917 as a staff captain, and Patton finished World War I as a commander of a tank brigade.

During a mere 13 months of combat command in World War II — a little more than a month in northern Africa, 38 days in Sicily, 318 days in northwest Europe — Patton gradually showed himself to be America's greatest fighting general. Under his command, the Third Army killed or captured 1.4 million soldiers of the Third Reich, while enduring the lowest casualty rate of any Allied army in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). A strategic assessment of Allied generals compiled by the German *Oberkommando Herres* (high command) described Patton as "the most modern, and the only, master of the offensive" among Allied commanders: "Patton is the most dangerous general on all fronts. The tactics of other generals are known and countermeasures can be effected against them. Patton's tactics are daring and unpredictable. He fights not only the troops opposing him, but the Reich."

This ironic tribute from Patton's enemies is made more ironic still in light of the post-war smear campaign, mounted by Soviet sympathizers in the press and acted upon by a pro-Soviet political establishment, depicting the general as a covert



Know the past: Through diligent study of military history, Patton was able to get inside the head of an enemy, even predicting in 1937 a Japanese sneak attack against Pearl Harbor.

Nazi sympathizer. "It is not an exaggeration to state that Patton fought two wars in the ETO: one against the enemy and one against higher authorities for the opportunity to fight the enemy," notes Colonel Allen. After Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945, Patton realized that our Soviet "allies" — who had begun the war as co-aggressors with National Socialist Germany — were in fact our enemy, and he urged his superiors to evict the Soviets from central and eastern Europe.

In a conversation with then-Undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson that took place in Austria shortly after the Nazi surrender, Patton complained that the "point system" being used to de-mobilize Third Army troops was destroying the Third Army, and creating a vacuum that the Soviets would exploit. "Mr. Secretary, for God's sake, when you go home, stop this point system; stop breaking up these armies," pleaded the general. "Let's keep our boots polished, bayonets sharpened, and present a picture of force and strength to these people [the Soviets]. This is the only language they understand." Asked by Patterson — who would become Secretary of War a few months later — what he would do, Patton replied: "I would have you tell the [Red Army] where their border is, and give them a limited time to get back across. Warn them that if they fail to do so, we will push them back across it."

Patton knew that the Red Army was weak, under-supplied, and vulnerable, and that if Europe were to be freed from totalitarian despotism, the West would have to act before the Soviets consolidated their position. "Oh George," came the condescending reply from Patterson, "you … have lost sight of the big picture."

That "big picture," as leftist historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. explained in the July/August 1995 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "was to commit the United States to postwar international structures before [victory] … could return the nation to its old habits." In order to keep our nation entangled in the growing network of international bodies, a credible foreign menace was needed, and the Soviets were perfectly cast in the part. "It is to Joseph Stalin that Americans owe the 40-year suppression of the isolationist impulse," wrote Schlesinger with approval.

NARA

Rommel (standing, front), like other German generals, knew Patton was the Allies' only "master of the offensive." Heading the 2nd U.S. Corps., Patton proved it, whipping the vaunted Afrika Corps.

Had Patton been permitted to drive the Soviets from Europe, millions of people would have been spared decades of abject oppression, and the criminal elite that continues to dominate most of eastern and central Europe might never have come to power. Patton understood, and warned his superiors, that if the Soviets were allowed to consolidate their grip, "we have failed the liberation of Europe; we have lost the war!" Patton, an honorable and patriotic man, was apparently unable to accept the fact that while he and his soldiers fought to liberate their fellow men from tyranny, those above him in policy-making positions were seeking to control the world, not to emancipate it. Thus Patton was traduced in the servile press as a covert "Nazi sympathizer" and stripped of his command shortly before his fatal automobile accident on December 9, 1945.

Patton "was a man who trained and disciplined his mind and body nearly every day of his life for the role he had always known he was to play," recorded Patton's nephew, Fred Ayer, Jr., in his book *Before the Colors Fade: Portrait of a Soldier*. "[He was] a man who believed in the aristocracy of achievement and in the sanctity of his country's course. He was conceited, sometimes ruthless, often inconsiderate and outwardly very, very tough. He was often too much the impetuous showman and yet a deep and careful thinker. But he was also magnificently well-read, deeply religious, softhearted, emotional and easily moved to tears."

It is quite likely that Patton possessed the finest military mind our nation ever produced, and that mind was the result of a deep and expansive study of history. "Papa always told me that the thing was to be a good soldier," recalled the general. "Next was to be a good scholar." It was Patton's scholarly exertions that made his soldierly exploits possible. "To be a successful soldier you must know history," Patton advised in *War As I Knew It*. "Read it objectively. Dates and even the minute details of tactics are useless. What you must know is how man reacts. Weapons change, but man who uses them changes not at all.... To win battles you do not beat weapons — you beat the soul of man, of the enemy man." Because he was a diligent student of the past, noted Ayer, Patton "would accurately be able to foretell much of the future."

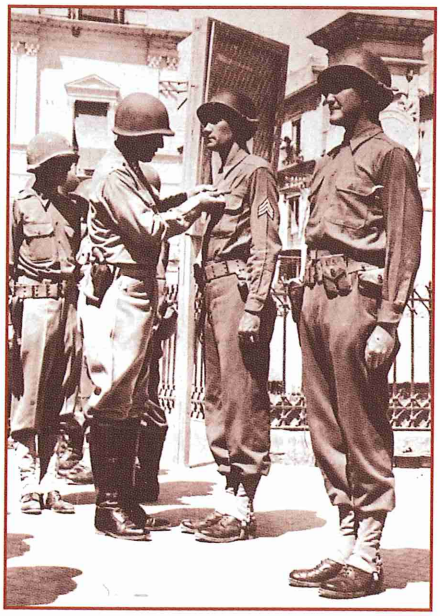
Not only was Patton an omnivorous

reader, he was blessed with uncanny powers of retention, and could quote extensively from nearly anything he read — the Bible, military history, Shakespeare, even the Koran (which he read as preparation for his arrival in northern Africa). While Patton was stationed in Hawaii as a colonel, he maintained a personal library containing hundreds of books — histories, biographies, memoirs, and political works — nearly all of which had been read and annotated with margin notes.

His preternatural gifts of retention and recall proved indispensable during the Third Army's mad dash across Europe. "He collected maps the way some men do art treasures," recalls Colonel Allen. "He knew the entire road net of France and Germany by memory, and the details of every major battlefield." Before his arrival in Normandy, Patton devoured Douglas Southall Freeman's *The Norman Conquest,* paying particular attention to the roads used by William the Conqueror during his campaigns in Normandy and Brittany almost nine centuries earlier. Using those ancient roads, explained Patton, provided his army with valuable avenues of attack "when the enemy resorts, as he always does, to demolition."

Patton's diligent study of military history could have spared our nation one of its most painful defeats, had Patton's superiors been willing to listen to him. In 1937, during his assignment in Hawaii, then-Colonel Patton composed a detailed report predicting, in unsettling detail, the sneak attack by Japan against Pearl Harbor four years later. Taking note of the fact that Japan's 1904 sneak attack upon Russian forces at Port Arthur began the victorious campaign in that war, Patton warned that "an attack like that is perfectly feasible if we're off guard.... They haven't forgotten how well it worked." Patton's astute assessment, if followed, may have saved countless American lives, but his superiors had a different agenda. "I turned [the report] in to the ranking naval officer of the command and he just put it in his safe," Patton recalled later. "Nobody else had the combination except his own houseboy, [who] was, of course, a good loyal Japanese. Nobody ever saw the report again — not on our side, anyway."

As this incident illustrates, Patton's devoted study and his intuitive gifts allowed him to get inside the head of an enemy, in this case the Japanese. He proved to be an equally pellucid student of the German military as well. "I have studied the German all my life," reflected Patton in *War As I Knew It*. "I have read the memoirs of his generals and political leaders. I have even read his philosophers and listened to his music. I have studied in detail the accounts of every damn one of his battles. I know exactly how he will react under any given set of circumstances. He hasn't the slightest idea what I am going to do. Therefore, when the time comes, I'm going to whip the hell out of him."



Badge of courage: Patton believed, "All men are frightened.... The courageous man ... forces himself, in spite of his fears, to carry on."

"Throughout his life, [Patton] completely dominated every unit he commanded," recalled Colonel Allen. "Yet in dominating, he did not domineer. Patton always led men. He did not rule them. This vital distinction explains many things about him. It explains why the troops called him 'Georgie.' Why his men and units were always the most soldierly, the most efficient, the most aggressive, and cockiest. Why he always got so much out of them." "I served with General George S. Patton," proudly recalls military historian Porter B. Williamson in his book *Patton's Principles*. "No man served *under* Gen. Patton; he was always serving *with* us."

Patton's well-publicized contempt for soldiers who professed to suffer from "battle fatigue," or who had dodged combat through self-inflicted wounds, was the obverse of his respect for personal courage. In *War As I Knew It*, the general recalled that whenever he would come across a soldier with self-inflicted wounds, "I would ... say, 'Now, all of you other soldiers listen,' and would use about three lines of choice profanity and state that, by wounding himself, he not only showed he was a coward, but also added to the labor and risk of the brave men who did not use this means of getting out of battle."

While Patton certainly understood the horrors of combat, he also understood that it was useless to "take counsel of one's fears" when there were battles to fight. "I don't admit the existence of battle fatigue, because in war you can't admit the existence of things like that," he explained. "Once you concede its reality, you admit the reality of demoralization. You can't win battles with demoralized troops." Nor did he allow himself ever to display even the slightest hint of fear or doubt in the midst of battle. "Patton was scared, discouraged, and weary on many occasions, as he would frankly admit *afterward*," notes Colonel Allen. "He never claimed to be devoid of fear. It was not unusual for him to return from the lines and relate that he had been frightened."

"If we take the generally accepted definition of bravery as a quality which knows no fear, I have never seen a brave man," reflected Patton. "All men are frightened. The more intelligent they are, the more frightened they are. The courageous man is the man who forces himself, in spite of his fears, to carry on. Discipline, pride, self-respect, self-confidence, and the love of glory are attributes which will make a man courageous even if he is afraid."

Center of Military History

"Talk with the troops," Patton demanded of his officers. "They know more about the war than anybody. Make them tell you all of their gripes."

Among Patton's keys to victory were preparation and discipline. "A pint of sweat saves a gallon of blood," he noted in his memoirs, and he had the advantage of inheriting an exceptionally well trained Third Army from Lt. General Courtney H. Hodges. He also demanded that his army meet the highest and least forgiving standards of discipline and comportment, because it is through discipline that men overcome their fears on the battlefield.

"All human beings have an innate resistance to obedience," wrote Patton. "Discipline removes the resistance and, by constant repetition, makes obedience habitual and subconscious. Where would an undisciplined football team get?... Battle is more exigent than football. No sane man is unafraid in battle, but discipline produces in him a form of vicarious courage which, with his manhood, makes for victory. Self-respect grows directly from discipline. The Army saying, 'Who ever saw a dirty soldier with a medal?' is largely true."

Patton also displayed "intense loyalty to his men," recalled Colonel Allen, and he gave personal attention to men of outstanding courage. On one occasion he came across a soldier who had been run over by a tank and nearly cut in two. The general personally administered morphine and tended to the injured man as he succumbed to his fatal injuries. According to Patton, nearly 80 percent of an army commander's mission "is to arouse morale in his men." Patton's carefully cultivated image — the spit-shined cavalry boots, ivory-handled revolvers, the bulldog demeanor — was not merely an exercise in vanity, but a reflection of his leadership strategy.

Patton was also "the only army commander in the ETO who was briefed by enlisted men," notes Allen. "He listened to them as attentively as he did to officers." Patton demanded that the officers "talk with the troops": "They know more about the war than anybody. Make them tell you all of their gripes. Make sure they know we are doing everything we can to help them. The soldiers have to win the war. We cannot do it." Williamson points out that while Patton understood and strictly enforced the discipline of rank, he readily mingled with his men. "He talked with all of the soldiers," writes Williamson. "He touched the soldiers with a handshake or a slap on the back." Although Patton's insistence upon obedience to uniform regulations was legendary, he also respected those soldiers who had dirtied themselves in combat, and no soldier "was so dirty or greasy that Gen. Patton would decline to shake his hand.... If a man deserved a compliment, Gen. Patton would snap to attention and salute the man for his work." Patton was also "the only senior ETO commander who always thanked and commended his troops upon the completion of a campaign, not with a merely perfunctory 'well done' statement, but a heartfelt message that he wrote himself," recalls Colonel Allen.

Williamson testifies that the respect shown by Patton to his troops was heartily reciprocated: "When we were in the dust and dirt of the desert and the salute was not required, I have seen soldiers try to form a straight line and salute Gen. Patton when he would drive past their area." The devotion of Patton's men, summarizes Colonel Allen, was the product of "three deep-seated beliefs: That he was invincible in battle; that he was loyal to his men and always looked out for their interests; that he was as courageous as he demanded others should be."

Following the Allies' disastrous loss to Rommel's German-Italian Panzer army at Tunisia's Kasserine Pass in February 1943, Patton was appointed to replace Lt. General Lloyd Frendenall as head of the 2nd U.S. Corps. Upon taking command of a demoralized force that had suffered great losses in men, matériel, and momentum, Patton —

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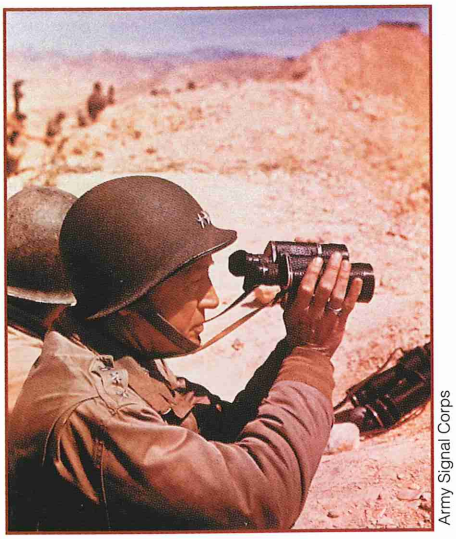
at the time a two-star general — issued what he described as "a simplified directive of war: Use steamroller strategy; that is, make up your mind on course and direction of action, and stick to it." But he understood that strategic inflexibility depends upon tactical flexibility: "[I]n tactics, do not use steamroller strategy. Attack weakness. Hold them by the nose and kick them in the pants."

Few if any field commanders in history have been as tactically adaptable as Patton, and while he was an assiduous student of both warfare and history, he was quite at a loss to explain his gifts. "Whether these tactical insights of mine are the result of inspiration or insomnia, I have never been able to determine, but nearly every tactical idea I have ever had has come into my head full-born, much after the manner of Minerva from the head of Jupiter," Patton reflected. But his tactical decisions always served his overall strategy, which was rooted in Napoleon's maxim that "the purely defensive is doomed to defeat."

"Wars are not won by defensive tactics," he explained. "Pacifists would do well to study the Siegfried and Maginot Lines, remembering that these defenses were forced; that Troy fell; that the walls of Hadrian succumbed; that the Great Wall of China was futile; and that, by the same token, the mighty seas which are alleged to defend us can also be circumvented by a resolute and ingenious opponent," admonished the general. "In war, the only sure defense is offense, and the efficiency of offense depends upon the warlike souls of those conducting it."

"General Patton always hated those military and political leaders who delayed, regrouped, consolidated gains, defended land, dug foxholes, or would permit any act which would prolong the war without any thought of the soldiers on both sides that would die from the delay," observed military historian Porter B. Williamson. "It's a waste of fine young men to stay in fixed positions and see who can send over the most shells," explained General Patton. "It costs too many men to stay in fixed positions where the enemy can strike. We will keep moving and the enemy will always hit where we have been and not where we are. When the enemy is firing at where we have been, we can tell exactly where they have their firepower. We will move fast and destroy the enemy where he can be easily killed." To his Third Army Patton attached the nickname "Hell on Wheels" — an apt summary of his strategic vision. Patton's key tactical insight was, "Never let the enemy pick the battle site. We will fight where we want to fight and not where the enemy wants to fight. We will always keep the odds on our side."



Army Signal Corps

Looking ahead: Patton, shown here in North Africa, recognized not only the nature of the Nazi enemy but of the Soviet "ally." When Germany was defeated, he warned that "the tin-soldier politicians in Washington and Paris … have allowed us to kick hell out of one b****** and at the same time forced us to help establish a second one as evil or more evil than the first." "We're headed down another long road to losing another peace," he predicted.

During his 13 months in combat in WW II, recalls military historian Colonel Paul D. Hawkins, Patton "never issued a defensive order. His theory — attack, attack, attack, and, when in doubt, attack again — shortened the war by never giving the enemy a chance to organize or reorganize enough to make a concerted attack against him." Although Patton, like most men of accomplishment and ambition, had a flair for self-promotion, he readily acknowledged that his successes were not the product of his unaided genius and the disciplined, capable troops under his command. "God has been very good to us," he acknowledged on the eve of his dramatic relief mission at Bastogne. "We have never retreated; we have suffered no defeats, no famine, no epidemics. This is because a lot of people back home have been praying for us. We have to pray for ourselves, too."

By September 1944, the Patton-commanded Third Army had blitzed across France, crushed German defenses, and was poised to strike at the very heart of the Reich. Within sight of the German border, Patton's drive literally ran out of gas and ammunition. Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight Eisenhower had diverted the crucial supplies from Patton's Army to British Commander Bernard Montgomery, who was staging an airborne invasion of Holland. Montgomery's operation was a debacle that cost the lives of 17,000 British and American soldiers, while Patton, immobilized by the diversion, could only watch in impotent frustration. "It was my opinion that this was the momentous error of the war," Patton wrote in his memoir.

As journalist Jeffrey St. John wrote in an earlier profile of Patton in THE NEW AMERICAN, "Stopping Patton's army

from a thrust into Germany prolonged the war and cost greater Allied casualties." Patton, who understood that to make war means to sacrifice the lives of good men, found the needless waste of lives unconscionable. Compounding this outrage, observes St. John, was the fact that Eisenhower's decision "gave the Soviets the necessary time to advance toward Germany from the east and to occupy Eastern Europe. Eisenhower's later decision to allow the Soviets to capture Berlin has been defended on the grounds of saving lives — but he threw away lives earlier by halting Patton in August 1944. Keeping Patton from taking Prague proved equally favorable to the Soviets."

In April 1945, the Third Army had crossed the Rhine, rolled across Germany, and were within 50 miles of Berlin, when Patton's superiors issued a nearly inexplicable order: He was ordered to withdraw 100 miles west, over captured territory. The vacuum was quickly filled by the Red Army, which swarmed over Czechoslovakia and eastern Germany.

"This war stopped right where it started," observed Patton during a closed, off-the-record press conference on May 8, 1945. "Right in the Hun's backyard which is now Hitler's graveyard. But that's not the end of this business by any means. What the tin-soldier politicians in Washington and Paris have managed to do today is another story you'll be writing for a long while.... They have allowed us to kick hell out of one b****** and at the same time forced us to help establish a second one as evil or more evil than the first. We have won a series of battles, not a war for peace. We're headed down another long road to losing another peace."

Over the next several months, as Patton's understanding of the betrayal grew, he became resolved to speak out publicly. "I will resign when I have finished this job [as military governor of Bavaria], which will be not later than Dec. 26," wrote Patton in an October 1945 diary entry. "I hate to do it, but I have been caged all my life, and whether they appreciate it or not, America needs some honest men who dare say what they think, not what they think people want them to think."

Unfortunately, Patton's voice was stilled before it could be raised to protest the perfidy of our political establishment. On December 9, 1945, Patton and General Hobart Gay were backseat passengers in a military staff sedan speeding along the autobahn en route to a pheasant hunt. An army truck traveling in the opposite direction suddenly crossed their lane, creating the conditions for a head-on collision. Both drivers swerved to avoid a direct collision, but the side-swiping impact threw the general forward, striking his head on the sedan's interior dome light, and then whiplashing him back. Although both the driver and General Gay were uninjured, Patton suffered crushed vertebrae in his upper spinal column, leaving him paralyzed from the neck down and mortally wounded.

"This is a hell of a way for a soldier to die," protested Patton as he lay paralyzed in an Army hospital bed in Heidelberg. For 12 days the indomitable 60-year-old general fought a rearguard action against death, valiantly battling an injury that would have killed most men within, at most, 72 hours. But on December 23rd the hero finally succumbed to pneumonia while in the company of his wife, Beatrice. "It is too dark; I mean too late," whispered the general as death came to claim him.

"He was buried in the drizzle of a fog-shrouded December morning on the day before Christmas in the American Military Cemetery at Hamm in Luxembourg," writes biographer Ladislas Farago. There he joined 5,076 other fallen Third Army heroes, whose honored remains repose beneath crosses and Stars of David. In death, as on the battlefield, Patton could be found amid his men. "The dead, most of whom had been killed fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, came from all of what were then the forty-eight states, from the District of Columbia, and from Alaska and Hawaii," records Farago.

Given Patton's bottomless courage, his voracious appetite for the written word, and his unyielding sense of honor, his legacy is perhaps best summarized in his favorite quotation from *Pilgrim's Progress*: " 'My sword I give to him that will succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My works and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my rewarder.' So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." ■