

**THE SAVIOR GENERALS: HOW FIVE GREAT
COMMANDERS SAVED WARS THAT WERE LOST—FROM
ANCIENT GREECE TO IRAQ¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR DAVID TRAINOR*

I. A Classicist's Take on Military Turnaround Specialists

When Apple Computers, Inc. was on the brink of bankruptcy in the mid-1990s, Steve Jobs was called back in to turn the company around.² When the Internal Revenue Service stood accused of targeting political opponents in 2012, the President called in a turnaround specialist to clean up its image.³ When townspeople in Hollywood's version of the Wild West need to be saved, they call on gun-slinging outsiders to turn the tide.⁴ From business to government to popular western films,⁵ Americans are familiar with the phenomenon of the outsider called in to save a seemingly desperate cause. In *The Savior Generals*, author Victor Davis Hanson argues that armies in conflict sometimes need such a turnaround specialist to ride in and save a war. Using a broad range of historical sources he then attempts to profile the type of general who fits that mold.⁶ Part historical survey, part leadership essay, and occasional polemic against politics and bureaucracy in military circles, *The Savior Generals* is an easy read for the casual reader of military history. While it makes a thought-provoking addition to a growing body of literature teaching leadership principles by historical biography,⁷ it is likely not a comprehensive answer to the question of who or what exactly saves lost wars.

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¹ VICTOR DAVIS HANSON, *THE SAVIOR GENERALS: HOW FIVE GREAT COMMANDERS SAVED WARS THAT WERE LOST—FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO IRAQ* (2013).

² *Apple Inc.: The Greatest Turnaround in Corporate History?*, OXYGEN, THE TURNAROUND MAG., No. 6, Autumn 2011, <http://www.endlessllp.com/oxygen/apple-inc-issue6.aspx>; see also WALTER ISAACSON, *STEVE JOBS*, 359–65 (2012).

³ Josh Hicks, *Obama Picks Restructuring Expert John Koskinnen to Head IRS*, WASH. POST, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal_government/obama-picks-restructuring-expert-john-koskinnen-to-head-irs/2013/08/01/bf4a3e30-fada-11e2-9bde-7ddaa186b751_story.html (last visited Aug. 27, 2013).

⁴ DAVIS, *supra* note 1, at 240.

⁵ *Id.* at 238–41.

⁶ *Id.* at 2–7, 253–95.

⁷ *Id.* at 3–4.

Victor Davis Hanson is educated in the classics and has written extensively in that area.⁸ He has been a visiting professor of classics or history at various institutions including Stanford University and the U.S. Naval Academy.⁹ Currently a writer for the *National Review Online*, Hanson has been a contributor of weekly articles for the past decade.¹⁰ In 2007 he wrote at length on the Iraq War and generated a series of articles introducing many of the personalities and concepts found in *The Savior Generals*.¹¹

II. Of What Stuff a Savior General Is Made

In *The Savior Generals* Hanson skillfully interweaves history to provide a glimpse into some common characteristics of generals who proved themselves qualified to fill the important but limited leadership role required of wartime turnaround specialists.¹² Following this theme, Hanson offers an easily understood historical text containing biographical sketches of five generals, ranging from Themistocles of ancient Athens, Flavius Belisarius of Byzantium, William Tecumseh Sherman, Mathew Ridgeway of Korean War note, to present day David Petraeus.¹³ Using succinct and engaging narrative, to the point that the reader can easily visualize battles without the need for much illustration, Hanson details wars deemed to have been “lost” over the course of two millennia. He then sets out what he considers the primary factors in saving these wars—the unique characteristics of Savior Generals who came in at critical moments to turn the effort, the participants, and public opinion around.¹⁴ Despite taking a bit of literary license in attempting to

⁸ Hoover Inst. of Stanford Univ., <http://www.hoover.org/fellows/10529/short-bio> (last visited Sept. 10, 2013).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ THE NAT'L REV. ONLINE, <http://www.nationalreview.com/author/victor-davis-hanson/page/20/0?splash=> (last visited Sept. 10, 2013).

¹¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *Iraq's Savage Ironies*, NAT'L REV. ONLINE (November 21, 2007, 12:00 PM), <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/222892/iraqs-savage-ironies/victor-davis-hanson>.

¹² HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 7.

¹³ *Id.* at 8–237. Based on the author's theme, David Petraeus is a logical contemporary choice for this study. However, the paucity of protracted wars fought by consensual societies in the last half-century where victory could be said to have been snatched from the jaws of defeat leaves little choice of other examples. Without belittling Petraeus's accomplishments or character, a reader of this book who is also familiar with the recent war in Iraq, might be forgiven for thinking that Hanson's treatment of Petraeus's value and virtues is a bit more stylized than historically complete.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 1–7.

correlate his generals' professional success with their personal and moral traits,¹⁵ Hanson generally succeeds in providing a useful historical profile of the strategic and tactical capabilities of these Savior Generals.¹⁶

At the outset Hanson limits his biographical pool to generals from "consensual societies."¹⁷ Although done at the expense of a more robust empirical analysis, his restrictive data pool makes his thesis more useful to readers from those societies.

While he offers a moralistic basis for picking consensual societies, this restriction ultimately allows him to neatly frame a definition of wars as lost when a free nation's people lose interest in them or see no way to achieve a desirable end.¹⁸ Hanson then argues that these lost wars can be saved by military leaders who find ways to reverse public opinion with short-term battle wins, while simultaneously implementing new strategies allowing others to achieve the nation's overall war aims.¹⁹

These Savior Generals often come into a theater facing civilian disillusionment²⁰ or despair²¹ and generally following a string of recently lost battles or men.²² They quickly generate battle victories by flexibly adopting new tactical methods and using a combination of charisma and leadership to boost Soldier morale.²³ For this theme of tactic adoption and morale building, Hanson's most persuasive and logically consistent example is the Athenian general, Themistocles. In the Athenian-Persian wars of the early 5th century B.C., years of infantry tradition and a recent ground victory at Marathon convinced Greek strategists to prepare solely for infantry engagements with Persia.²⁴ Against the Persian navy and the huge numbers of soldiers it was capable of bringing to Greek shores, that strategy soon proved to be a miserable failure.²⁵ Following the Greek defeat at Thermopylae, the Athenian national defense strategy devolved into one of simply surviving as a people on a piece of land.²⁶ Using a

¹⁵ *Id.* at 238–41, 249.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 241–49.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 76.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 4, 7, 247–48.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 246.

²⁰ *Id.* at 192.

²¹ *Id.* at 148–49.

²² *Id.* at 26–29, 108–11.

²³ *Id.* at 40, 91, 247–49.

²⁴ *Id.* at 16–17.

²⁵ *Id.* at 24–25.

²⁶ *Id.* at 12, 26.

broad slate of references,²⁷ Hanson adeptly describes Themistocles's tactical prowess at Salamis in the naval victory that saved the Athenian state from annihilation.²⁸ Hanson then persuasively argues that Themistocles's strategic foresight in building a peacetime navy to counter a return of the Persian navy,²⁹ his personal charisma in convincing Athenians to abandon their city to Persian attack,³⁰ and his ability to understand enemy weaknesses³¹ explains why he was the pivotal factor in saving the war for Athens.

Hanson next introduces his readers to Flavius Belisarius, a 6th century A.D. Byzantine general.³² Campaigning far from Constantinople and outnumbered by his enemies on their own territory, Belisarius successfully reclaimed for Constantinople vast North African and Italian lands from Vandal and Goth control.³³ Using accounts from Belisarius's personal biographer and later historians, Hanson paints a persuasive picture of a soldiers' general able to rally his men by dint of personal charisma, willing to adopt successful battle tactics such as archery, and having the foresight to create relations with indigenous people by coopting rather than subjugating them.³⁴

Hanson convincingly casts William Tecumseh Sherman in the same light, explaining how his ability to connect with his soldiers on a personal level, willingness to avoid large battles, and understanding of the utility of property destruction in the Deep South allowed his soldiers to break the back of the Confederacy when many of his countrymen had given up hope of winning the war.³⁵ Finally, and equally as adroitly, Hanson explains how Mathew Ridgeway's and David Petraeus's ability to personally connect with scared and sometimes disaffected soldiers and their willingness to use contrarian tactics turned the Korean War in 1950 and the Iraq War in 2007–2008 away from seeming imminent loss.³⁶

²⁷ Though Hanson draws liberally from Herodotus, Thucydides, and Diodorus, there are understandably few contemporary sources to draw from.

²⁸ HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 29–34.

²⁹ *Id.* at 19.

³⁰ *Id.* at 40–41.

³¹ *Id.* at 14.

³² *Id.* at 49.

³³ *Id.* at 66–79.

³⁴ *Id.* at 90–93.

³⁵ *Id.* at 136–39.

³⁶ *Id.* at 140–237.

After detailing the tactical miracles wrought by his Savior Generals, Hanson nests their battlefield successes in a broader explanation of the value their strategic vision gave to their respective nations. This, he argues, is how they saved their respective wars. Themistocles's use of close quarters and heavy ships at Salamis certainly saved Athens on that fateful September day in 480 B.C., but the existence of an effective Athenian Navy was from then on a deterrent to Persian kings seeking to repeat imperial advances into Greek territory.

It was also a springboard from which Athenians could exercise their own imperial ambitions.³⁷ Belisarius's positive treatment of indigenous populations in his various theaters saved Byzantine lives and won battles during his campaigns.³⁸ Strategically, this practice also heightened the chances for a lasting achievement of Byzantium's ultimate goal, acceptance of Byzantine rule over the conquered lands.³⁹ Sherman's execution of total war in Atlanta tactically broke Lee's supply line, but more importantly, it finally brought the war home to the Deep South, convincing its citizens to "cease the production of war material and contribution of men to the cause."⁴⁰ In the darkest hours of the 1950–51 Korean winter, Ridgeway's singular understanding of Chinese supply constraints and American capabilities allowed American troops to push Chinese soldiers out of South Korea and over the 38th parallel which likely acted as a strategic deterrent to Russia and China from further Asian or European expansion.⁴¹ In the same way, putting more American soldiers on Iraqi streets during the 2007–2008 surge was tactically successful when it physically took thousands more insurgents off the battlefield and reduced fighting.⁴² From a strategic perspective, though, the surge secured breathing room so nation-building efforts could sow seeds for a viable democratic nation in the heart of the Middle East, the ostensible American endgame.⁴³

Hanson also successfully argues that his Savior Generals are willing to steer clear of outdated tactics and aggressively pick battles while avoiding significant casualties.⁴⁴ This instills loyalty and confidence in

³⁷ *Id.* at 47.

³⁸ *Id.* at 68, 81–82.

³⁹ *Id.* at 82, 91.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 131, 134.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 165–66.

⁴² *Id.* at 221.

⁴³ *Id.* at 217–21.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 136–37, 247.

troops and generates civilian support at home.⁴⁵ Hanson also makes a compelling point when he argues that his generals are effective because they understand the crucial role played by civilians on both sides of the conflict.⁴⁶ At home, his generals cultivate relationships with civilians, either the civilian leadership or the populace as a whole. This allows them to move forward with innovative tactics even though military peers or superiors disapprove of them.⁴⁷ Themistocles used the Athenian assembly to build a navy when his fellow generals saw no need for it.⁴⁸ Ridgeway remained loyal to Truman's war aims despite being subordinate to General MacArthur who was often opposed to Truman.⁴⁹ Petraeus worked in a bipartisan fashion with Congress and the President's office to maintain support for a surge that his peers and superiors believed doomed to fail.⁵⁰ In theater, these generals recognize that sustaining a strategic win requires acceptance of the winner's strategic aims by the losing civilian populations. Belisarius and Petraeus defused civilian populations by coopting them using counterinsurgency techniques,⁵¹ while Sherman used property destruction to convince southerners to accept the reality of northern military superiority.⁵²

III. A Thesis Perhaps a Bit Overplayed?

Though Hanson's themes are supported by his sources and his thesis is generally analytically sound, he sometimes moves away from his role as military historian and attempts to illuminate personal or psychological characteristics he considers common to Savior Generals.⁵³ Unfortunately, as he attempts to correlate social, psychological, and moral makeup with saving lost wars, his data sometimes moves from the reasonably empirical to the anecdotal, and occasionally ends up in the realm of somewhat fanciful.⁵⁴ While writers of social science self-

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 244–46.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 20–21.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 168–69.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 226–27.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 59, 227–28.

⁵² *Id.* at 133.

⁵³ *Id.* at 238–41.

⁵⁴ Neither Ridgeway, Petraeus, nor Sherman took their leading roles in the face of widespread approval for their predecessor's tactics or lack of previous contact with their particular conflicts. Rather than consensus that past practice was working, all arrived at a time when it was recognized that something different needed to be done. *Id.* at 242.

realization tomes are due some factual latitude, Hanson's credentials as a historian and the book's professed purpose of identifying Savior Generals of the future⁵⁵ demand a bit more rigor in choosing the facts underpinning his conclusions. At some points, Hanson's evidence even hints of romantic musing or social moralizing. This is particularly true when he describes the "retreat into the shadows"⁵⁶ of his "mavericks and loners."⁵⁷ Themistocles's possible desertion to Persia and rumored suicide after being ostracized by class conscious conservatives angered by expanding Athenian citizenship to common sailors,⁵⁸ Belisarius's fabled retirement mendicancy⁵⁹ and equally real political drama with Theodora,⁶⁰ and Petraeus's CIA career brought short by infidelity,⁶¹ lend little to understanding how these men saved wars, even though they make for a more interesting story.

Similarly distracting is Hanson's preoccupation with painting his heroes as iconoclastic class warriors.⁶² He spends a bit too much of the reader's time eulogizing Themistocles as a mixed-race, low-born

Hanson's argument that Petraeus resigned from the Central Intelligence Agency, rather than being the result of political backstabbing by bureaucrats, is probably attributable to a more pedestrian cause like the difficulty of holding a high security clearance in light of both his personal and electronic indiscretions. *Id.* at 249. In this same vein is Hanson's argument that Belisarius was singled out for Theodora's wrath because of his morality and good character. *Id.* at 87–89, 93. One might read that with a grain of salt. Theodora's mistreatment of her subjects was sufficiently widespread and egregious to merit an entire sixteenth chapter in Procopius's *Secret History*. See PROCOPIUS: SECRET HISTORY, translated by Richard Atwater (1927), available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/procop-anec.asp>.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 250.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 249–50.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 238, 250. Excepting Sherman's brief break from the Army in the 1850s, each general was a lifelong officer. To advance as far as they did in their respective careers, one must question whether they were truly iconoclastic Cassandras in waiting, or were simply good officers who had the right ideas at the right time and the fortune to be in a position to implement them. Likewise, Hanson's portrayal of Petraeus as being fortuitously summoned from the obscurity of the Fort Leavenworth schoolhouse to save the day in Iraq ignores the fact that in the preceding four years he held two and threestar posts in Iraq. As a former division and multi-national forces commander in the middle of the fight, he had not exactly been previously incapable of exercising his strategic vision.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 34–40. Hanson acknowledges the flimsy historical basis for his contentions as well as the idea that Greek generals often met with similar fates. *Id.* at 257–58, endnotes 33–39.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 259–60, endnotes 1 and 2.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 87–89, 93.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 236.

⁶² *Id.* at 248–49.

democrat unjustly punished by landed Greek conservatives,⁶³ Belisarius as an apolitical moral champion tragically whipped about by a weak-kneed emperor and Byzantine court intrigue,⁶⁴ Sherman as an unjustly maligned down-to-earth westerner riding in to save the day from incompetent east coast soldiering,⁶⁵ and Petraeus as the victim of establishment politicians blocking a future presidential run.⁶⁶ Ranging from the purely anecdotal to the admittedly unsubstantiated,⁶⁷ these types of colorful interjections paint a tragic hero in the classical tradition, but they detract from the book's historical credentials and do not help the reader profile future Savior Generals.⁶⁸

Finally, while Hanson consistently argues that Savior Generals are the primary driving force in "saving" lost wars, some of his earlier writings on the Iraqi surge indicate otherwise. In a December 27, 2007, article, Hanson painted a much more diminished picture of General Petraeus's role in the Iraq turnaround, calling the surge simply a "tip" of "the strategic balance" in a war where "[t]ens of thousands of now mostly unknown American soldiers took a frightful toll on insurgents and terrorists between 2003–2007, to such an extent that many enemy groups were increasingly incapable of continuing."⁶⁹ Given these issues, one can and certainly should weigh Hanson's choice of examples and his impartiality in rendering history to support his thesis.

⁶³ *Id.* at 38–39, 13.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 49–51, 83.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 113, 131, 269, endnotes 23–25.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 235.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 49, 87, 89, 94, 249, at 259–60, endnotes 1 and 2. Hanson bookends Belisarius's story by alluding to his mythical downfall, a story belied by Hanson's own admission that this rendition is likely little more than a romantic tale. Even if true, an inordinate number of Byzantium's highest political officials regularly took leave of their respective jobs by being crippled, forcibly tonsured, blinded, exiled, or murdered in myriad gruesome ways. Falling on hard times at the end of a high political life in the East Roman Empire, like biblical rain, was a fate which fell equally on the just and the unjust. See JOHN JULIUS NORWICH, *A BRIEF HISTORY OF BYZANTIUM* (1997) for an engaging treatment of a millennium of murder and dismemberment at the top of the Byzantine political heap.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 42, 248.

⁶⁹ Victor Davis Hanson, *A Long War in a Nutshell, A Look Back*, NAT'L REV. ONLINE, (Dec. 27, 2007, 12:00 PM), <http://www.nationalreview.com/node/223168/print>.

IV. Conclusion

When focusing on the tactical and strategic minds of his subjects, Hanson successfully profiles soldiers' generals who understand strategy, adopt new tactics, change public opinion, and set their nations on a path to achieving strategic end aims. His historical vignettes are quick, pleasurable reads, grounded in a wide selection of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. If read as interesting historical snapshots, *The Savior Generals* is informative, delightful, and well worth the reader's time. However, the author's limited choice of biographies, failure to discuss other factors that possibly saved his lost wars, and focus on the heroic and tragic personal aspects of his subjects make his effort to construct a model of future Savior Generals more thought-provoking than practically useful.