

George S. Patton, Jr. Speech to the Third Army

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I. About the Author

According to Charles M. Province, founder of the George S. Patton Jr. Historical Society and author of several books about General Patton under whom he served with great pride, George Smith Patton Jr. (1885–1945) was a man of many—even self-contradictory—ways: “He was a noted horseman and polo player, a well-known champion swordsman, and a competent sailor and sportsman . . . an amateur poet . . . a rough and tough soldier . . . a thoughtful and sentimental man. Unpredictable in his actions, [yet] always dependable . . . outgoing, yet introverted.” Hailing from a military family that traced its lineage back well beyond the American Revolution, Patton was already determined during childhood to become a hero. After graduating from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1909, he received a commission in the United States Army and never left it. He began as a cavalryman and swordsman, but soon became aide to General John J. Pershing, first in Mexico and then in World War I in Europe. There he became an early expert in a new form of battle machine—the tank—which he later used to full effectiveness as commander of the Third Army during World War II.

Though they often referred to him as “Old Blood and Guts” (a description he disliked), most of the men who served with Patton regarded him as a charismatic leader and, despite—or, according to some, because of—his copious use of profanity, an inspirational speaker. He commanded respect not only for his technical expertise, but also for his keen understanding of the human psyche (especially in wartime) and his prodigious knowledge of history and warfare. The much-celebrated movie *Patton* (made in 1970) makes evident his complex character, his competence, and his view of history as coherent and contiguous. It begins with his famous speech to the troops—in a much cleaned-up version.

II. Summary

General Patton's speech to the Third Army was given on June 5, 1944, the eve of the Allied invasion of Europe. This third-person account of the speech comes from *The Unknown Patton* by Charles M. Province, who compiled it from innumerable sources. The first part presents the background, the second the speech itself, interrupted by brief comments on the reaction of the troops. Readers will no doubt be struck by Patton's harsh and often foul language, and his profuse reliance on profanity. But they should not make the mistake of thinking that Patton had not carefully rehearsed every word, chosen precisely for its desired persuasive effect. The speech repays careful analysis, and, when one identifies the problems it is designed to address, its genius and power will become evident.

III. Thinking about the Text

General Patton, a lifelong professional soldier born into a family of professional soldiers, addresses civilian soldiers—most of them draftees—the majority of whom had never yet been in battle. We examine the speech mainly to discover how it seeks to accomplish its rhetorical purposes. We are also interested in what it reveals about the nature of leadership in the American democratic republic. On all these matters, comparison with Chamberlain's speech to the mutineers will prove instructive.

A. The Rhetorical Situation

1. What are Patton's concerns about his men?
2. What fears and hopes does he have to address?
3. What does he want to accomplish by his speech?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Patton's speech with Eliot A. Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

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Amy Kass: I think Patton's men are young and untried. They've never been in real battle. Patton is, number one, speaking to their fear of death, and number two, to their fear of killing and being killed.

He is also speaking to their fear of being cowards. He says first of all, "Why are you fighting? You're fighting for your homeland, and for your families." That's duty. "You're fighting for your self-respect." That's honor. "But you're also fighting because you're men, real men."

So he's doing what Chamberlain was doing—he's appealing to the better angels of their nature, but in a very, very different way.

Leon Kass: They have never been in battle. The major rhetorical problem is to address and try to help them curb their fears and also to inspire them to fight and to fight zealously.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at
www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.*

B. The Rhetorical Strategy

1. How does Patton address the fears and hopes of his men? How much does he do directly? How much does he do indirectly? Under similar circumstances, what appeal would best address *your own* fears and hopes?
2. To what does he mainly appeal: honor, duty, manhood and manliness, pride and shame, identification with team or country or himself, desire for glory and reputation, hatred of the enemy, purpose of the war, or American principles and ideals? Why do you think he emphasizes the things he does?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: The very first thing Patton does is he appeals to American manliness, America's love of victory, and Americans' love for their own families and homes, love of their own honor, and love of their own manhood. He tells them that

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America despises cowards.

After that introduction, he directly addresses their fear of death. And it's wonderful. In the first line he says: "All of you are not going to die. Actually only about two percent of you are going to die. Everyone's scared. Anybody who says he's not scared is lying. But a real man won't let his fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country, or his innate manhood."

Then he goes on to say: "Look, battle is the most magnificent competition. It is where the best comes out; it is where one overcomes all that is base. Americans pride themselves on being he-men, and they really *are* he-men. And by the way, the enemy's just as frightened as you are."

Eliot Cohen: This is basically an appeal to manhood; isn't it? He is speaking to men. He says, "Men, this stuff that some sources sling around about America wanting out of this war, not wanting to fight, is a crock of bullshit. Americans love to fight, traditionally. All Americans love the sting and clash of battle."

Leon Kass: Patton couldn't get away with making such a speech today, but I would imagine there are lots of young men, for better and for worse, who would respond in the same way as the people spoken to in this speech. There really is something about the appeal to courage and the appeal to using your courage in the service of something honorable.

Eliot Cohen: I think that's right. It is what inspires a lot of people, particularly young males, to volunteer.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

3. What is the function of Patton's profanity? What are its effects on the men—and why is it effective? How might these effects contribute to attaining Patton's overall purpose?

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IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: This is a very different sort of speech than that made by Chamberlain. It is a profane and vulgar speech with a lot of scatological references and a number of sexual references.

Amy Kass: We also know that Patton was not really a profane speaker. He didn't speak like that normally. He actually used to practice in front of a mirror. And the other wonderful thing he does with this speech is the gift that he leaves them with at the end, which is what they can tell their grandchildren. "When you're old and your grandchild is sitting on your knee and asks you, 'What were you doing during the war, the big war?'"

Eliot Cohen: Right, and part of it is about the great Third Army, and part of it is about George S. Patton.

Amy Kass: No, Georgie Patton. He doesn't even refer to himself with the proper title.

Leon Kass: This is another instance of what we talked about with the Chamberlain speech. Patton is trying once again to dissemble his superiority and make a team of which he's also a member. It is not just that they're going to remember that they fought with Georgie Patton, but they're going to swear like Georgie Patton when they're talking to their grandchild. That's what he has them say. What he wants them to say is to refer to him in the same way that he refers to everybody else. The profanity is a way of cutting the tension, reducing the fear, and making them feel like a team with him. They laugh uproariously. They slap their thighs in all of those places, and he makes them a team even before he starts speaking of the army as a team. And it's a team in which he is the star player.

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C. Analysis of the Speech



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Imagine yourself in the audience of soldiers. Pause after each paragraph and try to assess what he said, why he said it, and what effect it would have had on you.

1. The Opening Paragraph (3): How does Patton begin? To what does he first appeal? Are the reasons he suggests that the men are gathered, ready to fight, plausible to you?
2. Second Paragraph, a direct address to the fear of dying (4): Here Patton makes many separate points. Why so many? Why this order? Which appeal is most powerful: to honor, to duty, to country, or to manhood? Does he succeed here in quieting your fear of death? Why or why not?
3. Third Paragraph, about alertness (4): What is the point? Why make it here?
4. Paragraphs Four to Eight, about the army as a team (4–5): Trace the several stages in this presentation of the army as a team, with each person having a crucial part to play. How does this section help address the men’s fears? Does the laughter at the beginning help make the men a team?
5. Paragraph Nine, about keeping Patton’s presence a secret (6): Why is this here?
6. Paragraph Ten, the purple-prose paragraph about the mission—to clean up the German mess and to clean out the Japanese nest, “before the [*^#%^] Marines get all the credit” (6): In the next paragraph, Province remarks: “This statement had real significance behind it. . . . [The men] knew that they themselves were going to play a very great part in the making of world history.” Do you see that deep meaning in what Patton said and in how he said it?
7. Paragraphs Eleven to Fourteen, about advancing and pushing hard (7–8): How do these paragraphs speak to the fears and hopes of the men?
8. Last Paragraph, on what you will be able to say after the war (8): What is accomplished by this closing? Notice especially the very last sentence and the speech Patton invents for you to make to your grandson: What is the effect of that closing, both for your fears and hopes and for your relation to your team and its leaders? Why does he have you speaking in imitation of his own profanity-laced speech?

D. Comparison with Chamberlain’s Speech

Chamberlain and Patton were addressing different sorts of soldiers, under greatly different circumstances and requiring different rhetorical appeals. Nevertheless, some comparisons are fruitful.

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1. Unlike Chamberlain, Patton never mentions the causes of the war or the reasons that Americans were fighting it. Why not? Given the circumstances, is this a significant omission?
2. Also unlike Chamberlain, Patton never seems to appeal to specifically American principles and ideals in trying to inspire the men. Why not? Given the circumstances, is this a significant omission?
3. Is Patton's appeal for manly courage in battle, and the arguments he uses to make it, independent of the cause for which the men are being summoned to fight? Could the same speech have been made by a German or Japanese general to his soldiers?
4. Compare the ways in which Chamberlain and Patton attempt to gain the confidence and trust of their men. What is to be said for and against the ways of each?
5. Would either of these speeches work today? Could the speakers get away with their high-minded appeals to manliness or national greatness and superiority? Their degradation of the enemy? The use of profanity? Even if they were allowed to make these appeals, in these ways, would they be successful with contemporary auditors without consciously being more cynical or ironical in their speech and thought? Whose speech—if either of them—would be most at home in our modern era?—or are they both simply relics of a bygone past?

IV. Thinking with the Text

Patton's speech, like Chamberlain's, invites questions about the importance of courage and self-sacrifice, as well as the difficulty in obtaining them. It also raises interesting questions about leadership and about the military in American society. (Many of the following questions were asked also in the Shaara/Chamberlain Discussion Guide.)

A. Encouraging Courage and Self-Sacrifice

1. What is courage? What makes it so difficult? Is Patton's definition of courage—fighting even though scared—correct? Is there more to courage than this definition?

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IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: “Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base.” Do you believe that?

Leon Kass: Do I believe that’s simply true? It’d take some discussion, and I’d probably wind up saying no.

But there is a sense in which battle is where a person has a chance to put his entire life on the line with his own valor and his own prowess and serve something greater than himself and serve the people next to him.

Amy Kass: It’s also not an accident that ancient epics were all about battle.

Leon Kass: Or that the Greek word for courage, *andreia*, is the virtue of the male, of the he-man, as if there is something about rolling your entire life up into one moment and asking yourself how will you stand with respect to your own finitude, and will you distinguish yourself, conquering your fears and doing your duty, or will you fail?

Eliot Cohen: But what do you think he denounces in all this? He denounces a view of courage. He denounces the idea of individual heroism. I don’t think this is simply about courage in the narrow sense. He wants everyone to understand that everyone has an important role to play. What is the one heroic example that he talks about? It is the guy who is shimmying up a telephone pole to fix a wire. It is not somebody who is actually going out and killing a German. It is someone who is doing his duty despite fear, and he is doing it well.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

2. How can one get ordinary citizens—especially in a republic dedicated to safeguarding their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to risk their lives in the service of the nation? Conversely, how do you temper a

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- martial spirit and the love of war and glory? Which is the bigger challenge in modern American life?
3. How exactly does one encourage public-spiritedness and self-sacrifice? How effective can speech be toward this goal? What sorts of speech? By whom?
 4. How important—and effective—are honor and duty for inspiring men to fight? Is there a difference between fighting for your honor and manhood—to avoid being a coward—and fighting for a cause or for public service? Which is more likely to inspire people today to fight?
 5. Is patriotism—love of country—necessary for the common defense? How can it be instilled in ordinary citizens? How can it be summoned?
 6. Should military service—or some other form of national service—be a civic duty? Why or why not?
 7. What is the difference between military courage (and military service) and other sorts of courage (and public service)? Give concrete examples of civic courage not related to war. Which sort of courage do you regard as most important? Why?

IN CONVERSATION

Eliot Cohen: Isn't there as much need for civic courage, including, frequently, individual courage?

As I was reading through it, I was reflecting on the television series that had a huge impact on me growing up, *Profiles in Courage*, which was a television version of John F. Kennedy's award-winning book. I was very struck by the number of cases in the show of people showing enormous courage, which usually meant standing alone against their own crowd—John Adams, for example, being willing to defend the soldiers accused at the Boston Massacre. Isn't that kind of courage as necessary for the continuation of the republic as martial courage?

Amy Kass: Definitely yes. Courage is necessary in civilian life. Part of the reason we have martial courage here is that one is literally putting one's life on the line, so what is at stake is something a bit different.

Leon Kass: Well, it's not just that the stakes are different. What are the virtues

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that citizens are called upon to display? The first thing called upon is to practice some sort of self-command and to earn some self-respect, if they have their own house in order. Second, they're obliged to be law-abiding and also have some care for the doing of justice. But then there is the question of what happens when the polity as a whole is threatened, and therefore the question becomes: Don't we need people who are willing to make the sacrifice and to display courage against the fear of great evil, the fear of death, when the polity itself and its own existence and safety are on the line?

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B. Leadership and the Military

1. What are the virtues necessary for leaders in a democratic republic? Are the virtues needed for military leaders different from those of civilian leaders?
2. On the one hand, we Americans want excellent leaders, people whom we can admire and follow. On the other hand, we Americans do not wish to be led, and we do not believe that some people are really better than others. What does this tension imply for leadership in America? Which of the two military commanders, Chamberlain or Patton, would you rather follow? Why?
3. The United States maintains civil control of the military. It also has a volunteer army, comprising mainly citizens who serve for only a short time, who are not and will not become professional soldiers. These citizen-soldiers are, however, ruled by a cadre of professional soldiers whose entire career is spent in uniform. What special challenges of leadership do these arrangements produce?