

Military memoirs cash in on tragedies of US wars

Colman McCarthy | Feb. 18, 2013

Commentary

One after another they surface: bemedaled generals coming out of well-pensioned retirements to salute themselves for their military careers of duty-honor-country-valor. They write books, shifting from the martial arts to the literary arts -- aka cashing in.

In 2004 we beheld *American Soldier* by Tommy Franks. In 2008 it was *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* by Ricardo Sanchez. The latest self-lionizer is Stanley McChrystal, deploying to the bookstores with *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*. Before him was Colin Powell, cosmetizing himself twice with *My American Journey* in 1995 and *It Worked for Me: Lessons in Life and Leadership* in 2012. He followed H. Norman Schwarzkopf in his 1992 self-promo, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, which earned him a reported \$5 million advance. Still to toot his own bugle is David Petraeus, assuming a literary agent can convince a publisher to see his sex scandal as a minor slip-up not worth a day in the brig.

Schwarzkopf, the commanding general in the 42-day Persian Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, became a master of bluster that could soar into crazy talk. He suggested warning Saddam Hussein that if he used chemical weapons, "we're going to use nuclear weapons on you." He labeled those who criticized the Iraq invasion as "military fairies." In *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War*, Rick Atkinson, a *Washington Post* reporter, describes how Schwarzkopf's main deputy quickly became "weary of the tirades, the histrionic, the regal trappings."

Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993, had his own brand of swagger. Before the invasion, he said that his forces had "lots of tools. And I brought them all to the party." The partiers including U.S. pilots engaged in saturation bombing that saw 73,000 sorties in a month that dispatched missiles into what was called a "target-rich environment." The targets? Among others, electrical generating plants, water purification and sewage treatment systems, and Baghdad shelters where civilians sought safety from the merciless bombing.

The result was what a Harvard medical team called in May 1991 "a public health catastrophe" in which the child mortality rate tripled from diseases caused by the effects of the military violence. At the war's end, Powell called it "a clean win." One result of the cleanliness was increased hatred for United States foreign policy by Middle East militants, a vehemence that has bloodily persisted until this day.

In 2001, Powell, after doing well on the lecture circuit that earned him fees well into six figures, became the secretary of state for George W. Bush. Teaming with the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Rice cabal and assorted neocon chickenhawks, he strategized the invasion of Afghanistan and a second go-round in Iraq. Little in his books or podium pontifications comes close to statements of regret or sorrow over the uncounted loss of life to civilians or the effects of the two wars on U.S. domestic programs that went begging for nickels and dimes while Bush's military spending soared.

Powell, complicit in helping close the nation's eyelids that led to the moral blindness behind the double wars, now presents himself as moderate Republican -- a voice of reason contrasting with the rabids of the party's shrill right. Much of the media go along with the pose, as on a recent "Meet the Press" interview when the fawning David Gregory posed no hard questions.

McChrystal was one of eight generals who came and went as top commanders in the still lost cause of Afghanistan. A lesser light than Schwarzkopf or Powell, he is likely to be remembered for the July 2010 story in *Rolling Stone*, "The Runaway General," in which his immediate staff, hanging out, mocked and belittled the Obama administration. The mouthing off led to McChrystal's resignation.

For a detailed and objective view of military life at the top, a worthy antidote is *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, written late last year by seasoned reporter Thomas Ricks. American generalship in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, he concludes, "is too often a tale of ineptitude exacerbated by a wholesale failure of accountability." If it were merely an issue of executive incompetence or men with oceanic egos who saw themselves as four-star demigods, it might not matter that much. But their decisions helped cause death, suffering and wreckage beyond estimate. For the retired generals, their cushioned lives and prospering go on. McChrystal is teaching a leadership seminar at Yale and Franks is on the board of directors at Chuck E. Cheese's.

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