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Hanson, Victor Davis *PERSPECTIVES FROM A FIELD AND AFAR: Ripples of Battle: How Wars of the Past Still Determine How We Fight, How We Live, and How We Think*. Doubleday, \$27.50 ISBN 385504004

Wildfires of History:

The transforming power of battle

Classical historian and syndicated columnist Victor Davis Hanson's most recent investigation of war and culture is a triptych of sorts. **Ripples of Battle** is built around three chapters, each devoted to a single major engagement that was strategically indecisive but profoundly consequential to the minds of contemporaries and to the memories of subsequent generations: Okinawa in the summer of 1945; Shiloh in the early spring of 1862; and Delium in the fall of 424 BC. As in many triptychs, the central panel—here an oversize chapter on Shiloh—dominates and establishes the themes of the whole, cueing our response to the complementary side panels and leaving it to us to infer the principles that unify the ensemble. Not that Hanson fails to tell us what he's up to; however, his explicit rationale for bringing together three battles spanning nearly two-and-a-half millennia seems less satisfying than the book's overall harmony of detail and design.

Hanson's reliance on his skills as portraitist and storyteller comes as a relief because it disobliges him from mounting another defense of the controversial idea for which he is best known: that there is a distinctively Western way of war that in no small measure accounts for the rise and dominance of Europe and its cousin, the United States. Liberated from this burden, he ranges widely in personal, military, and cultural history, highlighting the contingencies of war and indulging freely in counterfactual speculation, confident that his reader will return from each excursion still more impressed by the book's focal proposition that [b]attles really are the wildfires of history, unpredictable vortices that sweep up and transform individuals who in turn transform their world. It is as if, after a

series of books advancing ever more ambitious claims about the way culture influences the conduct of war, Hanson has turned his attention to the complementary question of how battle shapes cultural life. As Hanson writes on page 16, battles should matter to historians more than the familiar subjects of social history because battles involve *some* fundamental and important consequences beyond other more normal occurrences, given the unnatural idea of men trying to kill each other in a few hours in a relatively confined space. The original italics on the indefinite *some* convey the degree to which Hanson is tempted to comprise his three compellingly-drawn panoramas of battle within the bounds of a single grand idea. Moreover, a grand idea so elastic and undefined will do little to bring around Hanson's professional academic critics, in particular those practitioners of history-from-below at whom he throws an occasional polemical elbow.

Hanson's exposition of his three chosen case studies more than meets a standard of proof prepositioned within such easy reach. From the savage fighting on Okinawa, Hanson explains, grew the conviction that led to the use of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American military's body-count approach to Asian conflicts, and the illusion that kamikaze tactics could be effective along with the fact that suicide warfare does not succeed against a determined foe. Shiloh renewed the career of Sherman and made possible the campaign that both hastened the end of Civil War and witnessed perhaps the first deliberate prosecution of total war in the modern sense. Defeat and failure at Shiloh were no less fertile than victory. Hanson traces the birth of the South's myth of the Lost Cause—the most consequential contrary-to-fact fantasy in American history—to the death of Albert Sidney Johnston from a survivable leg wound. Nathan Bedford Forrest's rearguard heroics at Shiloh began a legend so compelling that it both magnetized the resentment of the southern white working class and helped to legitimize the Ku Klux Klan. The story of Lew Wallace's well-intentioned choice of the wrong road, his fateful decision to reach the battlefield of Shiloh via the Shunpike rather than by the road to Pittsburgh Landing along the Tennessee, becomes an evocative metaphor for the fortunes of war and the what ifs—the missed roads—that they inevitably suggest. Wallace's contemporaries never let him forget Shiloh, and Hanson shows how Wallace the novelist alchemized the disgrace of Wallace the general into *Ben-Hur*, a tale of revenge and redemption that has captured the imagination of millions for over a century and established a prototype for the multi-media, mass entertainment phenomena of our own time.

In his discussion of Delium, Hanson maximizes his home-field advantage as a classicist, draws on his virtuoso command of the literary sources, topography, and archology, and exploits the gaps in the ancient evidence to expand the scope of his counterfactual questions. Aware that his audience of non-specialists has probably never heard of Delium, a plain in Boeotia where an Athenian hoplite army on the verge of victory was suddenly routed by a Theban army defending its territory, Hanson springs a kind of trap designed to leave his surprised readers wondering how it is that other ancient historians have not informed them that Delium was as important a battle as Marathon or Salamis. Here especially Hanson fulfills his own defiantly classical ambition to write history as a monument to deeds worthy of rescue from oblivion. Aging members of the Great Generation and their children may turn to Paul Fussell, E. B. Sledge, William Manchester, and others to understand the lessons of Okinawa; aficionados may immerse themselves in the abundance of memoirs, apologetics, and ever-burgeoning popular and scholarly history of Shiloh and the Civil War. But without historians like Hanson who combine daring, imagination, and discipline, the memory of Delium would be lost to the reading public. What came of Delium? The Theban general Pagondas introduced a startling innovation in the phalanx; the Athenian aristocrat and bon-vivant Alcibiades acquired a reputation for daring that sustained his rising political career; the Boeotian town of Thespi lost the flower of its adult male population and in response prompted a new artistic language of grief and commemoration; the Athenian playwright Euripides wrote the best of his so-called political plays, which, Hanson argues, celebrates the core values of Western culture founded on the citizen soldier-farmer of the Athenian middle class. The most important consequence of Delium, however, was that one man in particular survived the chaotic Athenian retreat: Socrates. In the most breathtaking of this book's many what-ifs, Hanson contends that if Socrates had fallen at Delium, Western thought as we know it may never have been born.

Thanks to these rich discussions, by the time the reader reaches the epilogue there is no disputing that great battles yield *some* fundamental and important consequences beyond other more normal occurrences. Indeed, Hanson makes it look so easy that one begins to suspect that the real *raison d'Être* of **Ripples of Battle** has less to do with its announced thesis and more to do with reasserting military history as a major component of cultural history for a couple of generations of teachers, students, and readers disinclined to assign it a prominent place in hierarchy of knowledge. Recently a student griped to me about her

history professor's detailed descriptions of ancient battles: Why, she asked with all the penetrating candor of a serious undergraduate, couldn't he just tell us who won, who lost, and what the real consequences were? I wish I had referred her to **Ripples of Battle**, because the book seems intended to answer this question by showing that what happens on the battlefield is a factor of incalculable importance in history.

An awareness of this agenda helps to explain the presence of Hanson's account of the personal origins of his book. Hanson's uncle and namesake was killed in action on Okinawa in June of 1945, and Hanson writes movingly of his family's grief and of the shadows cast by the unfulfilled promise of his uncle's abbreviated life. In his portrait of himself as a college student in the 1970s, the author personifies contemporary America's moral and intellectual unpreparedness for the shock of September 11. Since the Second World War, the vast majority of Americans have not known war either at first or second hand. Worse yet, our thinking class has led us into a dark wood of social constructionism and moral relativism where we can no longer discern the plain outline of evil. Recent events have reintroduced us to the verities known to the writers of antiquity: September 11, Hanson contends in the epilogue, has returned America to the classical view of war as a tragic, but sometimes necessary, option for humans when unchallenged evil threatens civilization. Yet can the lessons of history ever be so simple as to echo the slogans of our side and to amplify the battle cry of the hour? To speak of the past too much in the familiar, urgent accents of the present undermines the integrity of both the past and the present. More importantly, it may obscure the uniqueness of our historical circumstance and so conceal from us the full range of alternatives that will soon become the missed roads of tomorrow's histories.

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