

PATTON

Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner
Produced by Frank McCarthy
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Historically, the United States has tolerated the military, but has never been entirely comfortable with it. The First Congress, of 1789, to ensure that the oppression of British troops not be repeated, proposed Amendments II and III to the Constitution, which secured the right to bear arms, and circumscribed the use of private dwellings for military lodging, respectively.

U.S. Army officers were nothing like their European counterparts; the ruling classes of Europe embraced the military as their honorable ruling right, while in America the roughest and the poorest looked to West Point as an equalizer of opportunity. America was usually slow getting into a fight, but quick to win, once an army was resurrected by an infusion of draftees, weapons, and patriotism. A free-standing army was tolerated, but anything more than a skeleton force was seen as a harbinger of tyranny.

With the end of World War II, rapid demobilization began once more, but with the realization that the mighty Soviet Union would be a long-standing concern, a large permanent army was accepted as a necessary evil in a world of 'police actions' and nuclear strikes. America's preference for a wait-and-see military posture brought it to the edge of defeat in 1942. No longer would there be any room for error.

The Korean War ended in a stalemate that the American people generally welcomed as the way out of a messy business. Viet Nam was, of course, a whole new kind of crusade. A combination of television, poor military P.R., and a skeptical press brought the horrors of war into American living rooms. What America saw was little different than before, except this war lasted longer, and seemed to count for less. A lot of people just did not want to face up to men killing each other. But that's the reality of war. War is waste.

That doesn't mean it's not necessary. World War II is remembered as a just war, a time of extraordinary sacrifice and unprecedented national unity. But there was a lot hidden from view. The government censored news of battle losses and continually propagandized to compel harder work and greater esprit-de-corps. War bonds, scrap drives, victory gardens, blackouts, meatless Tuesdays, and gasoline rationing were the order of the day. Everyone knew somebody in the fight, and just wanted to see his safe return.

But there are some men who long for a fight, the warriors—those who feel trapped in the prosperous cocoon of peacetime. George Patton was born to fight. His unrelenting ego, critical eye, and jingoistic temperament drew him to conflict like a moth to flame. But he was a brilliant tactician, a brave soldier, and a tireless leader. And while he loved America, she did not always love him back. He was tolerated for a necessary time.

The citizenry only fought because they had to. Only as far as necessary, and no more, would they go. But Patton wanted to take the fight to the Russians, and settle all scores with the world in one go. Patton probably didn't consider the political consequences for more war,

how war may not settle a conflict, but may yield more. He didn't think about how a country could be driven to fiscal ruin by the debts of war, how a populace suffers as death, pain, and privation multiply. For him, war was a path to immortality. Just as the battles of ages past held him so enthralled that he felt himself reliving them, if he could just fulfill his destiny, if he could succeed where others had fallen, surely he would take his place in history. In a time of peace he'd be nothing but wasted potential.

He wasn't so much of a different time as of a different nation. He was steeped in the lore of the Antebellum South, of the great doomed Cause and the ancient ideals of chivalry embodied in Virginia's ruling class. Honor was all that mattered. In his heart, a man would only know his worth if he were tested, and there was no better place than a field of battle. It was the supreme human endeavor. There, life was simple, physically dirty but spiritually purifying; war divided winners from losers, the brave from the cowardly. It was thrilling, and it's what he was best at—facilitating destruction. Maybe he wasn't what America wanted, but he proved to be what America needed, in 1944.

And though Patton was tolerated, and often despised, the enemy he fought was a scourge upon the earth, and would have conquered were it not for men like himself—men with the tenacity to hold on to hope when others falter, men not afraid of death, men willing to accept the cold truths of a broken world, a world that requires death to forestall self-destruction.

Patton once remarked, "It is an unfortunate and, to me, tragic fact that in our attempts to prevent war, we have taught our people to belittle the heroic qualities of a soldier." But from time to time, America remembers what it is capable of, both good, and bad. And just like Patton relived the epic struggles of yore, we will need, ourselves, another Patton on a future day of national reckoning.