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Chapter 16
American Wars

Circumstances continued to abet my writing about war. I grew up in the so-called cradle of liberty, Philadelphia, and as a teenager toward the close of World War II worked after school in an establishment once the site of Ben Franklin’s home. I was too young for that war but not for the next one, Korea.

I had written about my own wartime experience decades earlier. I had been activated as an army second lieutenant the week after President Truman had sacked General MacArthur and ordered him home. Although I missed involvement in MacArthur’s flawed oversight of the Korean War, arriving after his sacking, everything I experienced had the clinging fingerprints of his unsteady hand. I had long wanted to write about the earlier wartime months I had missed. The outcome, when I was closing a long immersion in the Victorian years, was MacArthur’s War. Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero (2000). It was a war we did not lose, although at the time of the general’s ignominious exit we were close to that, and I was looking back. Rather than make it a personal reflection, although my biases are evident from the first page onward, I went to military archives for documentation, particularly the MacArthur Memorial and Museum in Norfolk, Virginia.

The site seemed peculiar for a general in three wars who was born and raised elsewhere; however, the general had no home in the U.S. other than military post addresses until he had been gifted, after Korea, a suite in Manhattan at the Waldorf-Astoria, where Herbert Hoover was a friendly neighbor. From abroad, during his earlier quests for the presidential nomination, as he needed a domestic domicile, he listed a room in a Milwaukee hotel. Yet even his birthplace was a military
post—his father’s, at Little Rock Barracks, Arkansas, now part of Little Rock. His long-time supporters and fund-raisers exploring an appropriate setting for the memorial and museum knew that Washington was unavailable. As his mother, Mary Pinckney Hardy, was the daughter of a Norfolk cotton broker, and the city sought the distinction for its tourism possibilities, a site was offered there—the former City Hall, with its impressive rotunda, which was in need of a tenant and renovation. In 1960 MacArthur himself accepted, designating the rotunda as appropriate for his interment, which would happen, after elaborate funereal ceremonies that he had planned, in April 1964.

When Rodelle and I were in Norfolk for research in the middle 1990s, the space set by his side for Jean MacArthur’s bier was still empty. She died at 101 in January 2000. MacArthur’s War was published in June.

That enterprise would lead me to another project, the American war which imperial Britain lost. I wanted to examine a war we fought, but entirely from the losing side. That would become Iron Tears: America’s Battle for Freedom, Britain’s Quagmire (2005).

MacArthur’s War closed with the botched handling of his removal from his shogunate, which despite careful instructions to presidential subordinates, resulted in the general’s first learning of his long-anticipated recall orders on the radio. I had opened with his self-glorifying speech to Congress on his return, which a foolish Republican representative characterized as the voice of God. When an audio version of MacArthur’s War was planned, I insisted that however expert the reader was—it would be Edward Hermann, who had played FDR on TV—the speech to the joint session of Congress would have to be in the authentically stentorian voice of MacArthur himself. It had been broadcast live, and was available. After his “old soldiers never die” address I flashed back to how and why his home-
coming had happened. He had not been in continental United States since 1937.

The narrative had involved, throughout, General George C. Marshall, who had been, ostensibly, MacArthur’s superior in Washington as chief of staff during the world war, and again, during the Korean War, as Secretary of Defense. In the earlier world war, MacArthur and Marshall, close contemporaries, had served in France, MacArthur leapfrogging to one-star general while Marshall, recommended for a star, was denied it by the Armistice and reduced to lowly peacetime rank in postwar downsizing. While MacArthur became commandant at West Point, and then Chief of Staff of the Army under the Hoover presidency, Marshall began a slow climb up the greasy pole. A generation below them was Dwight Eisenhower, a novice tank commander in training whose orders to France, and a potential service future, were canceled by the Armistice. In the late 1920s, hanging on as a captain, he became a staff assistant and speech writer in Washington to MacArthur, and then an assistant to him during the general’s post-retirement appointment to head the Philippine Army, hardly then more than boy scouts.

When, with war approaching, Eisenhower left Manila to resume his climb to command, he would say privately that he learned dramatics under MacArthur. As nothing remains private, and MacArthur was peeved by Ike’s later stardom, he observed to reporters that Eisenhower was the best secretary he ever had. Both would aspire to the presidency. As postwar secretary of state under Harry Truman, before a constitutional amendment provided for an appointive vice president, Marshall in the senior Cabinet office was a heartbeat from the White House, but had no ambition for it.

As by the close of 1944, after the struggling success of D-Day in Europe, all three were among the first five-star-general appointments made by FDR, it occurred to me that a triple, dramatic biography was possible—a book I would call *15 Stars: Eisenhower, MacArthur, Marshall: Three Generals Who Saved the American Century* (2007). I wanted to subtitle it, as my contract established, *MacArthur, Marshall,*
Eisenhower. Intersected Lives. Of course, my editor found a more pompous and inaccurate subtitle.

The research would prove a huge undertaking, not because of the difficulties in obtaining documentation but because there was so much of it. The National Archives were bursting with data. The Marshall and Eisenhower correspondences were being published in multiple volumes, and the unpublished letters could be accessed. MacArthur’s papers were being assembled by the surviving cabal of his staffers, who had raised funds to establish a MacArthur Memorial and Museum.

My biographical dilemmas were in part a plethora of information, how to access it, and how to balance the three intersecting lives. I wanted to make the intersections crucial. Also in the balance were events in peace and war. And authenticity. Fawning, elegiac perspectives would be out—although they would please adherents of the three and ensure splendid reviews.

All three were human. They were ambitious. They were prone to error. They were secretive. They were not, in the familiar critical cliché, larger than life. MacArthur, who lost the Philippines through prewar neglect and utter blindness thereafter and was a stateside god via self-promotion and sheer lies, was awarded the Medal of Honor, as America needed in its darkest days a hero. Marshall wrote the fulsome citation for the honor—the only fiction he ever authored. Later, Marshall told the imperious—and imperial—MacArthur that the latter kept a court rather than a staff; in any case, few of his decisions were ever overridden.

Overly loyal to future generals who had served under him in peacetime at Fort Benning, Marshall overlooked (in part) their later failings. For example, Lloyd Fredendall, whose cowardice in Tunisia required his replacement, was promoted to three stars and sent home to a “training command.” Dwight Eisenhower, whose oversight of his theater was secondary to his affair with his British driver-secretary, was ordered home from Algeria “to see your wife” after claiming press of business, but Marshall then approved an army commission for the lady, who later contributed to Eisenhower’s aloofness about the German buildup that led in December 1944 to the “Bulge.” Still, I felt that Marshall, who unselfishly relinquished the opportunity for the D-Day command when FDR wanted him near the White House, and later was twice in
the Cabinet and a Nobel laureate for the Marshall Plan, remains our greatest general since Washington. The elderly Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, who had first held the office under President Taft in 1909, declared on V-E Day in 1945 that he “had seen a great many soldiers in my lifetime and you, sir, are the finest soldier I have ever known. I may not live to see the end of the war with Japan but I pray that you do.”

A purveyor of falsehood in three wars, MacArthur wrote his own communiqués and in vanity rarely mentioned another soldier, from general to private. They were merely “MacArthur’s men.” Insubordination to presidents came easily to him while rebukes were loftily ignored. Nevertheless he was named overlord of the Japanese occupation, his imperial manner successfully substituting for Emperor Hirohito, who retained only his perquisites and his palace.

Already an icon while still in uniform, in 1945 Eisenhower replaced Marshall as Army Chief of Staff, then commanded the new NATO, serving briefly between posts as a nearly honorific President of Columbia University. At a campus Christmas party in 1950, Ike joked that he couldn’t offer a sermon because the (university) chaplain was present, and couldn’t address “scholarly things”—which were beyond an aficionado of Westerns—because scholars were present—and “certainly I’m not going to talk about politics—I never have.” Yet backed by big bankrollers, he was already covertly campaigning for the 1952 presidential nomination, which, when he was back in uniform with NATO, was expressly forbidden. While maintaining a public pretense of resisting candidacy, he claimed to his brother Milton that the country might be “overtaken by socialism” without him.

I had already written about how in the months leading to D-Day a possible land mine lurked in Eisenhower’s upward ambitions: Kay Summersby. The affair had long ago leaked to the self-censored press, and Kay was now in the U.S. Ike refused to see her and claimed to his adherents that he could weather allegedly unfounded personal abuse. Eager, too, for the nomination, MacArthur reportedly scoffed: “That boy will back out in the final showdown.” There would be no showdown, as newsmen backed away from scandal and liked Ike. Learning more about him as I wrote, I did not. When that became clear to John Eisenhower, who knew his father’s failings, he ceased writing to me.
MacArthur had not faded away, as he had forecast insincerely to Congress. A year of welcoming parades was misconstrued by the general and his friends into wide public esteem. Old acquaintances writing hefty checks were more eager for dour Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, who had been coveting the White House since 1940. Several urged MacArthur to announce, instead, for the vice-presidential nomination on a geriatric ticket with Taft. It seemed a possible back door to the White House. To ignite delegate interest, the Taft brokers offered the general the convention keynote address, which he accepted, but he proved dreary and long-winded. The strategy failed.

Keeping to himself and tending to his tomatoes at his home in Virginia, Marshall, who had never cultivated any electoral office, offered Eisenhower congratulations on the “fine victory.” Ebulliently, Ike responded that had he predicted in early 1942, when he was Marshall’s one-star assistant, that if what had just happened could happen, “you would have had me locked up as a dangerous character.” Although Marshall had saved Ike from self-destruction before D-Day, and relinquished command of the operation to him at FDR’s plea, I found the ambitious Eisenhower now efficient at betrayal. As Marshall had been crucial to Harry Truman’s cabinet, he had been slandered by the demagogic Robert Welch of the far-Right John Birch Society and by the ultra-demagogic Senator Joe McCarthy as an un-American enemy. To promote Communism, according to the bizarre Welch, Marshall would “sell out his grandmother.” Both Welch and McCarthy are now in the rubbish pit of politics, but Eisenhower, who was to make a campaign appearance in McCarthy’s home state of Wisconsin, intending to back Marshall’s patriotism, instead backed down. With preliminary speakers throwing Rightist red meat to the audience, Ike skittishly dropped the lines, already available to the media in his prepared address. Pressmen were astonished, yet McCarthyite anti-Communism drew votes. Eisenhower’s fake alibi for his cowardice took twelve years to materialize.

After Ike’s election, Marshall wrote privately to Adlai Stevenson, who had been sweepingly defeated: “You fought a good fight. In my opinion your political speeches reached a new high in statesmanship. You deserved far better of the electorate and you will be recognized increasingly as a truly great American.” Yet publicity derails prophecy. Even Marshall’s immense and selfless achievements appear to be fad-
ing while Eisenhower’s failings are overlooked. His reputation, relative to presidents who succeeded him, continues to rise.

He remained aloof from Marshall, who died in October 1959. Eisenhower did look in at Walter Reed Hospital but the dying general failed to recognize him. At his subdued obsequies in the National Cathedral, Eisenhower and former President Truman were both present and exchanged a chilly handshake. A bugler played taps at Arlington. “He was the greatest of the great in my time,” Truman wrote. “I sincerely hope that when it comes my time to cross the great river, Marshall will place me on his staff, so I may try to do for him what he did for me.” MacArthur, increasingly frail in his eightieth year, remained at the Waldorf inventing his memoirs on yellow legal-sized ruled pads. As he wished, he would have a state funeral in April 1964. Of the three in my 15 Stars, only Eisenhower, who died in 1969, would close his career at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

I referred to George Marshall as the greatest American general since Washington. That led to my beginning to research the American Revolution. Although the infant nation wanted him to become king, Iron Tears was to close as Washington stepped down from power. When expatriate American painter Benjamin West explained to George III that Washington only wanted to return to his farm, the king was astonished. If Washington did that, His Majesty said, the general will be the greatest man in the world. As that concession came from imminent defeat, my narrative view would employ that perspective. How did the futile quagmire look from the losing side? An opposite conclusion to that of the king came from a Loyalist New York judge from postwar exile in London:

“Can Washington be called the conqueror of America?” asked Thomas Jones.

“By no means. America was conquered in the [defeatist] British Parliament. Washington could never have conquered it. British generals never did their duty.”

In Parliament, Edmund Burke, a member for Bristol, spoke for the opposition when he warned against shedding “iron tears”—cannonballs and musket shot—in the “wickedness and folly” of subduing the distant and irascible rebel colonies. Burke gave me my title and theme.

Iron Tears was a joy to research and write. A residency at Yale’s Lewis-Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut, opened up print resourc-
es obtainable nowhere else, and the political and personal cartoons by the striking eighteenth-century English caricaturists in the British Museum’s Department of Prints and Drawings evoked the atmosphere of wry disillusion with imperial colonization. Only a few miles from my home in Delaware, where I had relocated after retirement, was the DuPont-founded Winterthur Museum and Library, which displayed among its riches one of the most memorable paintings in American history. The canvas achieves its dramatic resonance in part because a third of its space remains empty. Few great pictures better illustrate the observation that “victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan.” The seven persons Benjamin West intended to represent as negotiating the preliminary treaty of separation included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Jay, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin, the sage’s grandson and secretary to the commission appointed by Congress. The British had painful difficulty finding representatives willing to negotiate openly for the losing side and being associated with the national embarrassment.

I would research other narratives with an American military dimension, largely focused upon Christmas, but *Iron Tears* lingers in my mind as a major achievement. A blow-up of its cover art—the dismantling of a gilded equestrian statue of George III in Manhattan’s Bowling Green by the “Sons of Liberty”—is on the wall of my study, now in Jenner’s Pond, Pennsylvania, as I write.