



## American Soldier

[by James Fant]

With literature on the war in Iraq piling up, one of its most prominent figures, General Tommy Franks, weighs in with his memoirs, which include detailed descriptions of war strategy for both the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In an election year in which the two hopefuls battle for supremacy on the basis of their credentials or experience to don (or retain) the mantle of War President, comes the memoir of a professional warrior who spent a storied career fighting America's battles at the far edge of the world. A career crowned by the conquest of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the concomitant destruction of their respective regimes. Debate rages about the prosecution of the "War on Terror" nearly as hotly as the war itself: this book lands in the middle of the fray like a bombshell with a perfectly timed fuse.

American Soldier begins conventionally enough with General Franks's childhood in Oklahoma and Midland, Texas. An adopted child, he grew up in a loving home where money was often scarce. His father, a talented mechanic and a "dreamer" always bouncing from one failed enterprise to another, stands out as a sympathetic, fundamentally American character. His mother is less well drawn, but from his description, obviously kind-hearted and supportive. Both of his adoptive parents are more compelling than the author in his early years, who appears as a feckless youth waiting to be redeemed by a purpose. His aborted career as a student at the University of Texas -- filled with beer, hotrod racing, and girls - is not worthy of more than a paragraph. So far, this sounds like many childhoods of a particular era in the heartland, and it reads that way. There seems to have been a conscious attempt to dramatize the arc of his character as he developed from a callow youth to a victorious military leader, but rarely is life so neat in its progression. The best memoirs are haunting-

ly honest throughout. Franks's is honest, and at its best it is searingly so, such as when he relates his heartfelt anguish (in retrospect), at once telling his father "he was not proud of [his] name." Of such painful memories are great memoirs made.

Next came the "crucible" of Vietnam. The feckless Franks was tempered by combat into a warrior, and into a leader. The future general learned how to keep cool under pressure from his admired commanding officer, Captain Eric Antila, as well as how important it is to demonstrate loyalty both up and down the chain of command. In one especially gruesome scene, Franks and his comrades must use ponchos to collect the scattered body parts of blown-up comrades and friends; we learn that the improvised explosive devices or "IED's," which are responsible for much of the recent carnage in Iraq, were deployed against American troops in Vietnam as well, where they also took a bloody toll. For those who buy this memoir for its war stories, the descriptions of various battles and hostile encounters may be worth reading: in Vietnam, these are of course at the tactical level, from the perspective of a foot soldier. There are, however, other, better Vietnam memoirs than this. That may be because this story is being told by a famous general for sale to a mass audience, giving his Vietnam account a partly bowdlerized feel, and much of the good stuff (and in particular the bad stuff) that make for a truly compelling read have been filtered out. Perhaps we will never learn what was elided. What remains, however, is worth reading.

It is part of the genius of the American

system that a talented lad from the provinces can rise, through merit, to lead its military forces to victory (one thinks of Eisenhower, Grant, and many others from American history), and then retire from a military role. Franks mentions the savior of Rome, Cincinnatus, specifically as the exemplar of this noble tradition. This makes for an interesting and important point of departure from Franks's (and America's) adversaries in combat, whose military commands are often awarded by tribal politics as opposed to smarts or battlefield valor.

It would be easy to portray General Franks as the gruff "soldier's soldier" that he purports to be, and undoubtedly is. But there is more to him than that. In addition to organizational brilliance, and prowess as a "war fighter," there must be a strong dose of political savvy in his make-up. While generals and politicians are often privately (and not-so-privately) at one another's throats, it is surely impossible for the former to advance through the upper ranks without some of the skills of the latter. Anyone who has climbed the summit of the American military must therefore be, in some ways, a politician - for the Army has politics just as any organization does that contains two or more people. Virulent politics, in fact. In short, it is impossible to advance in such an environment without making enough of the right friends, and as few as possible of the wrong enemies. This undoubtedly involves holding one's tongue repeatedly throughout one's career, sometimes until it bleeds. Now, with his military career over, the ex-General had the opportunity to fire a broadside against his enemies without fear of risking his career prospects.



So it is interesting to see where this former artillery officer's shells land. In large part, he seems to hold his fire.

Franks does fire a salvo at "intellectual arrogance" in some civilian corners of the Pentagon (that he notes spanned the current and former administrations), and the bitter, internecine services rivalries that threatened unity of purpose among the Joint Chiefs before he quashed them. But the apparent animosity, much reported in the media at the time, between Rumsfeld and Franks was apparently a media delusion. Yes, Rumsfeld was a tough, impatient taskmaster, and at one point Franks offered to resign his command. But he claims, contra the reports, that the two are actually friends. Friends do not make nearly as good a drama as enemies.

Nevertheless, there is a divide as deep as a fissure that separates those who supported the war in Iraq and those who opposed it. As casualties mount and memories of the fear that inspired it recede (or collapse altogether after the failure to find WMD, which Franks was convinced were present and in danger of imminent deployment against his troops in the field), a number of the former have crossed with the benefit of hindsight over to join the latter. And there is one prominent individual, at least, who professes a magisterial ambivalence about the whole affair. But it seems that even those who supported the war, as General Franks did, do not necessarily fall into the same camp. The supporters of the war have often been lumped together as "neocons" - a term as loose and ill-defined as one can imagine -- yet it seems abundantly clear from this memoir that the General could not accurately be characterized as such.

Most people will buy this book for its engrossing account of the defeats of the Taliban and of Saddam Hussein. There are detailed battle plans and blow-by-blow descriptions of how both countries were invaded with a speed that will go down in military history. Like Hitler, surrounded by sycophants and

duped into guarding Calais for an invasion that landed further south, Saddam was snookered by a double agent into throwing his best divisions in a defensive cordon to the north. Meanwhile, a mobile force scythed through the soft underbelly and to the heart of the regime in Baghdad in record time. Clausewitz will have to be updated - as Franks notes, "speed" has a "mass" all its own.

It is curious indeed that the general who invaded Iraq should publish his memoirs while that war is still being fought (in the form of an insurgency), though that may say more about the military system of rotation and retirement than anything else. Imagine Xenophon penning the *Anabasis* while his troops were only part-way through their epic march to the sea. The timing of Franks's retirement may have been his shrewdest career move of all. In this view, having won the war to defeat Saddam, he had no intention of sticking around to see the peace lost. He is, after all, a "war fighter" through and through.

In a time of war and insecurity, it is worth reading this memoir of an accomplished, dedicated veteran who has served his country with distinction. Hopefully, there is a new generation of Tommy Franks-like soldiers rising rapidly through the ranks.